E-Goverment and Social Exclusion: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, central government’s vision is to deploy all local government services electronically by 2005. Yet recent government and commercial statistics have indicated a widening gap between those who are e-literate and those who are not. This study examines the possibility of social exclusion from e-government implementation. Anchored on two questions—(a) What are the factors influencing the adoption of e-government initiatives? and (b) Is the implementation of e-government likely to result in the social exclusion of certain groups in the community?—the study sampled members of the public from two local authorities in the UK to investigate their dispositions towards the new offering of online government services. The results found that unlike previous research, basic demographic characteristics do not appear to be related to Internet (or e-government) use. This could be a consequence of new and improved technologies reducing access barriers. However, there were clear indications that language, ethnicity, cognitive computer skills and a positive personal attitude towards online transactions are the key drivers for e-government adoption. Of concern is the existence of a hard core of non-users, which will require a proactive policy to provide the relevant facilitating conditions to promote use and experience. This study contributes to a better understanding of the factors required for effective online public services delivery and the ways to direct resources into increasing Internet literacy and use.

Keywords: e-government; social exclusion; online public services

INTRODUCTION

The declining cost of Internet access facilitated by cheaper computers and emergence of digital television, Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) phones and more recently, Broadband connection, is lowering the access barriers to the Internet. For example, by March 2002, 38% of all UK households (9.3 million homes) logged on to the Net regularly. This has led to a rapid awakening by governments around
the world to its potential (World Market Research Centre, 2001). One of them is the UK government. Its stated objective is an integrated, responsive and high quality online local government service delivery by 2005 (DETR, 2001a, 2001b).

E-government has been defined in a number of ways, with some scholars perceiving it as a fundamental transformation of government and governance at a scale not witnessed before (EzGov, 2000a). For others it is the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of public services to benefit the community, business partners and employees (Deloitte Research, 2000a). Yet a recent report by Continental Research (2002) indicated that penetration is restricted to affluent households and white-collar workers with blue-collar workers and adults aged over 65 having little or no access to the Internet. Additionally, the Guardian newspaper (3 July 2002) suggested that even a £600 PC is beyond the means of many. This implies the possibility of sections of the community being excluded and not benefiting from online services offered by the government (‘e-government’). Possible barriers such as a lack of familiarity and high access cost may be preventing lower economic groups (socio-economic groups C2, D and E) to go online. On the other hand, the office environment is the main training ground for higher income, white-collar households (A, B & C1) to go online. In addition, Bucy’s (2000) research on Internet adoption has highlighted that apart from socio-economic status, demographic characteristics and family structure are also important variables influencing Internet access. As e-government adoption is dependent on Internet use, it is vital to investigate the apparent penetration disparity.

This study is anchored on the questions: (a) What are the factors influencing the adoption of e-government initiatives? (b) Is the implementation of e-government likely to result in the social exclusion of certain groups in the community? The research will sample members of the public (collectively as ‘citizens’) from two local authorities in the UK (Tunbridge Wells and Medway) to investigate their disposition towards the new offering of online government services. The results from the study will inform public policy on whether e-government is really an effective delivery channel for public services and to elicit ways to direct resources into increasing Internet literacy and use.

THE RATIONALE FOR E-GOVERNMENT

The perennial challenge for any local authority has been the delivery of high quality services at an affordable cost. Delivering services via the Internet seems a logical way to be cost effective and to increase value to the user. It reduces the need for replication of information by different departments. The pull/push technology of the Internet along with its inclusive principle is an effective medium to cope with large volume enquiries. It allows the community to serve themselves at their own convenience. Additionally, there is a potential of linking communities locally, nationally and globally. This tech-
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