Chapter 7
Citizens, the Internet, and Terrorism Information

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the role that citizens play when using the internet for gathering information. It is vital to understand the use of the Internet by citizens to address the issue of access to homeland security information. This chapter also provides information on how terrorism information is presented online and citizens’ use of this information is discussed. Jones, Hackney, and Irani (2007) believe that the key to the successful development of e-government is its citizens. There needs to be efforts to engage citizens in the adoption of e-government. These authors believe that this engagement will truly create a transformation of e-government that was envisioned by earlier writers in the field. This chapter discusses this level of engagement and shows that citizens are the least likely to use Internet for homeland security information if a terrorist attack occurs.

Existing research on the adoption of e-government tends to focus on the supply of e-government in terms of the breadth and sophistication of government Websites. However, Streib and Navarro (2006) have examined the role the internet plays in public organizations using public opinion data, examining the demand for e-government. There is a need for more research on the demand for e-government and that is the focus of this chapter. The argument made in this chapter is that you need to understand citizens, and why they go online, to more effectively cater homeland security information to their needs.

This chapter first discusses the important issue of the digital divide, the disparity between those that have Internet access and those that do not. This is followed by a discussion of citizen trust and satisfaction with e-government Websites. Followed this, there is a discussion of the citizen-initiated contacts literature as a framework that helps us understand why citizens contact government for information and services. There also is data presented in this chapter from the Pew Internet and American Life Project on the influence of the Internet on individuals for getting information and solving a problem. This is

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followed by an examination of Pew data on sources of information citizens would use in the event of a terrorist attack. The conclusion summarizes the results of the chapter.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Understanding the digital divide, and possible ways of mitigating the divide, are crucial to know in order to provide homeland security information to citizens. According to empirical findings in the United Kingdom, there are several constraints on the adoption of e-government from the perspective of the citizen (Weerakkody and Choudrie, 2005). They are lack of internet access, disparities in computer knowledge, generation gap, lack of awareness, language barriers, security and privacy, and lack of user friendliness of websites. These factors impede citizens from taking advantage of e-government services. These differences in access from individuals that have access and do not have access to information technology such as the Internet is often referred to as the digital divide.

There are several limitations of internet-based applications:

- Difficulty in searching for and locating the right information;
- Low ownership and availability of personal computers to various segments of a population;
- High cost of maintenance of public information kiosks; and
- Low access to the Internet to various segments of a population (Singh and Sahu, 2007: p. 479).

Because citizens have differing abilities looking for information online this can be a challenge for many. In addition, access to technology varies with population group because of the digital divide. As a result, the Internet may not be the ideal medium for providing e-government to all citizens in the world, particularly in developing nations. Therefore, governments should explore other channels of communication, which are able to bridge the digital divide (Singh and Sahu, 2007).

There are three alternatives to Internet-based strategies that Singh and Sahu (2007) identify: (1) Mobile Government; (2) Interactive Voice Response System; (3) Public Information Kiosks; and (4) Government Call Centers. Mobile phones have emerged as the most popular medium for communication during the last decade. Mobile phones have the potential to bridge the digital divide, because they are not restricted to those on the higher socioeconomic status and are more accessible to the general population.

Second, interactive voice response system are found in structured questions such as information about bank account balances, authorizing a transaction, and knowing the position of an application. This provides a method which can bridge the digital divide since telephone access is much higher than Internet access.

Third, public information kiosks are computer-based devices that provide an interface medium between users and a service or information provider. Kiosks in public places provide a convenient place to interact with government agencies and bridge the digital divide by providing access to those that do not have internet access.

Finally, citizens can get information or access services by calling a government call center and choose from a standard menu of options or talk to an operator if they cannot find an answer to their question. Singh and Sahu (2007) conclude that the integration of the Internet, phones, and call centers can enable governments to deliver e-government to all citizens and help them bridge the digital divide.
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