Chapter 6

Images of Citizenship: A Content Analysis of Local Government Websites in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Local government websites are the primary place citizens interact with their local governments online. This research presents qualitative and quantitative content analyses of local government websites in the United States. It investigates these websites with respect to the participatory and consumer citizenship roles reflected and structured through their design. The websites are evaluated regarding their usability with respect to consumer and participatory interactions as well as the symbolic content framing users’ interactions. While both participatory and consumer interactions were equally accessible in 2003, longitudinal analysis shows that governments are facilitating consumer interactions without a corresponding increase in participatory usability. Additionally, an evaluation of the symbolic content of the websites reveals that almost universally, they emphasize a consumer mode of interactions over a participatory mode of interactions. A detailed qualitative analysis shows that participatory aspects are subordinate to consumer dimensions and that political content is cast to discourage dissenting political interactions.

INTRODUCTION

As the Internet is becoming increasingly integrated in our everyday lives (Castells, 2009), the construction of local government websites has been a public policy for many municipalities (Drüke, 2005). This chapter is a study of how local government websites perform encourage certain modes of citizenship. As Robert Klotz notes, “cities without websites by 1999 were already being seen as behind the times” (p. 101). During the second term of the Clinton Administration, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government began evolving into electronic government (e-government) strategies with the goal of “putting people ‘online, not in line’” (AccessAmerica: E-Gov., 2001). Alfred Tat-Kei Ho has found that these principles have filtered down to the local level, noting that his survey of munici-
pal websites reveals the web designs emphasize “‘one-stop shopping’ and customer-oriented principles” (p. 434). Mary Maureen Brown and Shannon Schelin note that placing government services online “can potentially lead to advances in government responsiveness and accountability” by improving the “ability to promote visibility and transparency, productivity and efficiency, and horizontal integration” (p. 267). Websites achieve these goals through a hierarchical assemblage of images and text connected through hyperlinks. These link structures form the website architecture while the symbolic elements (text, images, and video) form the content which is ordered by the website architecture. The interrelationship of the website architecture, images, video, and text play an important role in how websites are able to achieve their public policy interests.

This chapter analyses local government websites with respect to their architectures and symbolic content using a sample of American municipalities. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section considers the background literatures relating to controversies in government website construction from which we will build a framework for coding and analyzing local government websites. The second section presents the data collection and analysis of results in response to the issues raised by the current literature on website construction. This section utilizes a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to catalogue and categorize websites. The third section presents conclusions and policy recommendations to improve website designs to facilitate participation and good governance goals.

BACKGROUND

Local government websites provide a rich surface to study the implementation of e-government implementation. They are both a tool of public policy and a policy output in their own right. Additionally, there are a number of audiences addressed by a government website. These may include businesses, other government bodies, organizations from civil society, and citizens. As public policy outputs, local government websites are theoretically important for two reasons. First, e-government portals provide the “cultural interface” between governments and members of a political system through their construction of an online scene of interaction between governments and users (Manovich, 2001). Websites can emphasize, marginalize, or omit certain interactions which can thereby define modes of online citizenship from the perspective of the government. Thus websites serve as an authoritative discourse to normalize citizen-government interactions (Edelman, 2001; Mehta, 1998). Second, in contrast to the kaleidoscope of images we receive from the fragmentary information flows communicated through media, direct interactions with government authorities and other networks, local government websites centralize a set of images and information in one place. Websites therefore project the online “face” of government (Chadwick, 2001). This chapter considers local government websites as a policy output in analyzing the images of citizenship communicated to users. It begins with a review of the approaches and findings of previous content analyses of government websites. It then suggests additional considerations for analyzing the spaces of government websites and the spaces within government websites.

Previous studies of local government websites tend to focus on cataloging functions (e.g. West, 2008; Ho, 2002) rather than the structuring of forms of citizen interaction. Generally, scholars have found, as of yet, little emphasis on the promotion of electronic democracy through e-government (Moon, 2002). Julliet Musso and her colleagues find that local government websites in California tend to prioritize consumer functions over political participation (Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000). Studies of Scandinavian local government websites found similar results with