Chapter 9

Transparency and E–Government in Developing Countries: The Case of Latin–American Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become an important tool to be used in order to meet NPM objectives in public administrations, by enhancing information flows and active participation by citizens, constituting a valuable tool for building trust and enhancing government-citizen relations, by identifying, assessing and, thus, satisfying public needs. This chapter focuses on the Internet, one of the tools that is most widely used by the public, and on on-line access to government financial information (Borins, 2002). Concretely, this chapter examines and discusses the approach taken by local governments in developing countries to using the Web as a means of making government disclosures, thus combating corruption and enhancing accountability by means of information transparency. To achieve this aim, a series of aspects to provide an overview of the degree of on-line information and the accessibility of this information in Latin-American capital cities are analyzed. This way, this chapter discusses the e-government process and its implications on democracy, accountability and information transparency and describes the state of the art of e-government initiatives and legislation in the sample governments. The results obtained and the main conclusions of the research indicate that Latin-American capital cities are still not fully aware of the potential importance of the Internet in enabling the achievement of e-democracy initiatives. Indeed, the Internet is still not an important means by which sample governments disclose their local government information to the public.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, governments all over the world have reformed their public administration in accordance with NPM tenets. Under this framework, most national governments have inexorably moved from a system of bureaucratic organization to a professionally managed one (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993), placing, among other major initiatives, greater emphasis on citizen satisfaction and more transparent information. In fact, it is now recognized that good governance in public administration depends upon transparent and publicly accountable institutions (MAC, 2004).

This process has led public administrations to search for tools which could be adopted from the business sphere, enabling them to provide greater transparency and involvement of citizens in the decision-making process (Bonson et al., 2006). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become an important tool to be used in this process, which is particularly aimed at satisfying the citizen and at enhancing citizens’ engagement in public policy-making (OECD, 2003a). Public administrations could adopt these new technologies in order to meet NPM objectives, thus meeting social demands efficiently and effectively (Welch & Hinnant, 2002).

In this context, the question of e-government has become one of today’s most important issues on political agendas, and is a concept that is apparently in constant development (Jaeger, 2003). This trend is understood to be one of the forms of expression of the information society, as well as a central part of the process of modernizing public administrations (Borins, 2001; Chan & Chow, 2007). There is a firm belief that e-government, by enhancing information flows and active participation by citizens, constitutes a valuable tool for building trust – which is a fundamental value of ethics in public administration (Gilman & Lewis, 1996; Cooper & Yoder, 2002) – and enhancing government-citizen relations, by identifying, assessing and, thus, satisfying public needs (King & Stivers, 1998).

Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) indicate that e-government arises as a way of increasing citizens’ trust in governments and of improving the evaluations made concerning political management. Its objective is focused on bringing public administration closer to citizens and restoring trust in governments (Cho & Choi, 2004; Shim & Eom, 2008; Kim et al., 2009). As Siau and Long (2006) argue, digital government will provide governments with an effective and efficient channel to facilitate their internal administrations and improve their external services, thereby increasing transparency and generating a higher degree of trust.

In the light of the multiple possibilities of new technologies, this chapter focuses on the Internet, one of the tools that is most widely used by the public (Borins, 2002; Cuillier & Piotrowski, 2009), and on on-line access to government financial information. In fact, the most common form of e-government initiatives is a government-run web site or web portal (Joseph & Jeffers, 2009).

Nonetheless, although e-government applications are revolutionizing such areas as record keeping—particularly in the West—most nations still rely on offline channels to accommodate the majority of their daily governmental correspondence (Berhel, 2000; Bouras et al., 2000; Jeffres, 2007). Indeed, the proportion of non-Internet population appears to be remaining fairly high, and so the oft-cited digital divide continues to be mean that e-government is not universal and that other channels must be kept open (Margetts, 2006b). Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that even non-users may benefit from e-government (Margetts, 2006b). Also, although most countries produce governmental information, such as financial information aimed at accountability, it has often been highlighted that citizens have difficulty in accessing it (Tayib et al., 1999; OECD, 2003b), which, in practice, implies a lack of information transparency.
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