Chapter 1
A Framework for Considering the Market and Political Value of E-Government Websites: A Focus on the Current Political Value on State, County, and City Sites in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This chapter starts with the assumption that E-Government implementation requires public administrators to respond to stakeholder value considerations. A theoretical value framework is described that is based on market and political value concepts. After describing the value framework the chapter narrows its focus to active political value, defined in terms of civic engagement, in E-Government websites. Three recent studies are discussed that show that the active political value on E-Government websites is underdeveloped in the U.S. at the State, County, and City levels of government. The chapter concludes with some suggestions as to why the active political value is underdeveloped and suggests how public administrators might go about determining how and whether or not it should be enhanced on E-Government websites.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the chapter is to provide E-Government website decision makers and developers strategies they can use to increase the value of site content. This is not a chapter on website design in the sense of making the site more attractive or easier to navigate. Though those issues are important, and much is written about them, they cannot be the starting point for considering E-Government website content. The starting point must be a consideration of the kind of value that the site will provide stakeholders, the many individuals, organizations and institutions that use E-Government websites.

The discussion is based on a conceptual framework for considering the value of E-Government websites which suggests two kinds of value: market and political (Downey, 2008). Market value is conceived both in terms of the ease with which
markets work and as proprietary value production. This suggests two market value sub-categories. The first ease with which markets work is defined as economizing on the cost of legally mandated exchanges between individuals, organizations, or institutions and government by making these transactions on a web site. The second, proprietary value production, is growing the proprietary business economies within government jurisdictions (i.e. increasing the value of products and services produced). Political value is also conceived in two sub-categories: improving government efficiencies and promoting civic engagement. The first sub-category, improving government efficiencies, is making better use of fiscal resources by governments through savings from the use of web sites. The second is promoting civic engagement to tap the capabilities of citizens, institutions and other stakeholders to pursue the core values of liberal societies-individual freedom, a more genuinely participatory political system, a critical culture, and social justice (Benkler, 2006). This second sub-category of political value, civic engagement, to tap the capabilities of citizens, institutions and other stakeholders to pursue the core values of liberal societies, is called active political value and is the focus of this chapter.

Why focus on the second sub-category of political value and not on the other three subcategories? The reason for this focus is that the second sub-category of political value, promoting civic engagement, appears to be much less developed than the other three categories. For the first market value sub-category, economizing on the cost of legally mandated transactions, the development of E-Government web sites that allow citizens to do things like pay for automobile registrations and other fees and taxes on-line are examples in common use. Also, the second sub-category of market value, encouraging the growth of proprietary business economies in the jurisdiction, is frequently found in site content designed to attract tourism, business, and prospective residents to the jurisdiction. The first category of political value, improving government efficiencies, is the reciprocal of the first market value sub-category, economizing on the cost of legally mandated transactions. For example, when a citizen makes a mandated transaction on line such as paying the required user fee for the use of a camp site in a public park, not only does the citizen benefit from lower transaction costs but the jurisdiction also benefits from the increased efficiencies of processing the transaction. The second sub-category of political value, promoting civic engagement, appears to be less in evidence on E-Government web sites.

Some E-Government sites provide some information necessary to the promotion of civic engagement but very few provide interactive forums despite the availability of the technology (i.e. Wikis, Blogs, and RSS feeds). This chapter explores the existence of civic engagement on E-Government web sites and hopes to provide some understanding as to why it might be underdeveloped. Three recent studies are discussed to show that the active political value on E-Government web sites is underdeveloped in the U.S. at the state, county, and city levels of government. The chapter provides some suggestions as to why the political value is constrained and thus underdeveloped. Finally ideas on how and whether or not political value might be enhanced are considered.

BACKGROUND

The Conceptual Framework for Considering the Value of E-Government

Since the idea of looking at E-Government web site content in terms of market and political value is new it is restated and further discussed here. As previously mentioned, market value is defined in two sub-categories, they are: (1) economizing on the cost of legally mandated exchanges and (2) proprietary value production. Economizing on the