Chapter 2
A Framework for Citizen-Centric Government Websites

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ABSTRACT
This author argues for a stronger end-user and citizen-centric approach to the development and evaluation of e-government services provided via the Internet. Over the past decade government agencies at all levels have created web sites that provide primarily information and only offer few two-way transactions. The predicted and hoped for resulting transformation of government at all levels due to the advent of Internet services seems yet to occur. The overall development of e-government services has been slow and uneven. To add value to existing and future government web sites, public administrators need to come to grips with a framework presented here and to understand the nature of and relationships among three variables: End-user, task, and channel characteristics and then consider their respective role and impact on channel selection. This framework along with an end-user perspective enables public administrators to assess not only the value of current information and service channels, but newer information and communication technologies such as those found in Web 2.0 or social media developments. Recommendations are offered.
channels must be designed to provide all stakeholders with the information and services they want, when they want it, and to be delivered through their preferred channel. By evaluating web sites from the perspective of the end-user, public administrators will be able to access and manage citizens’ information needs, existing channels as well as emerging information and communication technologies (ICT) and channels such as social network sites, blogs, Wikis and Twitter. Public administrators at all levels of government can use this approach not only to evaluate channels, but to allocate resources to channels that will deliver outcomes (information and/or services) to citizens in an efficient and effective way for government. This emphasis on citizen-centric orientation is reflective of a fundamental communication principle, i.e. all communication efforts must start with the end-user. The end-user is the person for whom the technology or application was intended. In this chapter the term end-user is used interchangeably with citizen.

The importance of the end-user has been recognized in several fields (communication, information management, sociology, organization behavior, computer and information science and government). End-user orientation (sometimes referred to as ‘audience orientation’) is the alpha and omega of fields dealing with ICT use. Only the end-user can evaluate the value of the channel(s) used for communication (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhota, 2000). Accordingly, the end-user has a message, selects the appropriate channel to reach a receiver who responds, i.e. provides feedback, within a specified time frame and closes the communication loop. Moreover, this shift to an end-user orientation for government web sites will provide added value for all stakeholders.

The focus of this chapter is to place the end-user at the very center of the development, provision and evaluation of electronic public services. To accomplish this, the nature of and interrelationships among three variables: end-user characteristics, task characteristics and channel characteristics are examined to determine their respective impact on channel selection and the use of e-government services. First, though, a theoretical overview describes three overarching theories: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Diffusion of Innovations Theory. These theories provide an appropriate theoretical background to explain the characteristics of end-users, channel and task characteristics as well as variables that affect the adoption of a technology. A brief review of the relevant research on government web sites over the past decade is presented to examine why the adoption and use of e-government services are slow to take off in most countries. Next, relevant research on end-user and citizen characteristics such as age, education, sex, habits, and access, is examined to determine how these characteristics impact channel selection and the use of e-government services. Then task characteristics (complexity, ambiguity, routineness, and urgency) are explored to demonstrate end-user channel preferences for specific tasks. In addition channel characteristics (richness, social presence, and synchronicity) are reviewed to determine their relationship to channel selection and adoption of e-government services. Lastly, the relationship among these variables and their respective impact on channel selection is discussed. These interrelationships among the three variables provide guidance for building a framework of government web sites and to harness their value and investment for the future. The chapter concludes with a framework in which these efforts can be viewed conceptually.

Theoretical Overview

Three theoretical approaches, Uses and Gratification Theory, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Diffusion of Innovations Theory offer insights into the role of the end-user and channel selection. Uses and Gratification Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) posits that media users actively take part in the communication process,
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