The Same Wine but in New Bottles. Public E-Services Divide and Low Citizens’ Satisfaction: An Example from Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

When introducing public e-services, the Lebanese government predicted that it would reduce inequality between citizens (OMSAR, 2002). However, the results of this research prove that this will not be the case, and the introduction of the virtual channel of services delivery system will create a public e-services divide. In response to the research questions: “what is an e-services divide?” and “what are its antecedents and consequences?”, this cross-sectional explanatory research shows that the public e-services divide will separate citizen’s who have access to ICTs, who have the skills to use ICTs, and who accept use of public e-services from the others. The public e-services divide will result from the e-access divide, the e-skills divide, and from the public e-services acceptance divide, which will lead to lower citizen satisfaction.

Keywords: Citizen’s Satisfaction, E-Access Divide, E-Service Acceptance Divide, E-Services Divide, Public E-Service

1. INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world are introducing the virtual channel of public service delivery system (UNDESA, 2008). This channel allows for the connected citizens the possibility to benefit from integrated e-services that eliminate boundaries (Thomas & Streib, 2003), eliminate paperwork and physical transport (Steyaert, 2000; West, 2004), reduce response time (Dimitrova & Chen, 2006, p. 173), and increase flexibility and personalization which puts the citizen’s needs first (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009; Thomas & Streib, 2003).

These e-services are delivered through the Internet and computers. However, citizens who do not have access to the Internet and to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), who do not have the skills to use Internet and ICTs, and/or who do not accept to use government e-services cannot benefit from these advantages (UNPAN, 2005; Van Dijk et al., 2008; Weber et al., 2003). Therefore, the introduction of e-services will create a public e-services divide.

The e-services divide can result mainly from three types of inequalities: (1) inequality
in the access to ICTs and to e-services, called the “e-access divide” (e.g., Bélanger & Carter, 2009; Helbig et al., 2009; van Dijk et al., 2008), (2) inequality in the ability to use ICT and e-services among those who have access, called the “e-skills divide” (e.g., Bélanger & Carter, 2009; Dewan & Riggins, 2005; Hargittai, 2002; Helbig et al., 2009; Tapscott, 1998; Van Dijk, 2006; Van Dijk et al., 2008), and (3) inequality between those who will accept to use e-services and those who will not, that we call “e-services acceptance divides” (adapted from Dwivedi et al., 2009; Helbig et al., 2009).

The implementation of e-government in developing countries can lead to a system where the greatest benefits from public online services will accrue to persons of high socio-economic status and education who may use their resources to employ the online services sooner and more productively than their less privileged peers (Basu, 2004; Ciborra, 2005, p. 267; Dada, 2006; Grundén, 2009; Hart-Teeter, 2003; Norris, 2001; Shelley et al., 2004; Thomas & Streib, 2003; UNPAN, 2005). In this case, inequalities continue and even increase (Hart-Teeter, 2003; Shelley et al., 2004; UNPAN, 2005).

The aim of this paper is to explain the divide that results from the implementation of the online public services. We chose Lebanon, because like the majority of the developing countries only a small percentage of the population uses the Internet (only 26.28 percent in 2008). As a result, citizens who do not have an e-access, e-skills, and/or who do not accept to use government e-services cannot benefit from the public e-services advantages. This is a disturbing fact, because Lebanon cannot afford to wastefully spend large amounts of money for such an investment, especially if it will lead to a system where only privileged segments of the population may have access to these e-services.

Therefore, there is a crucial need today, to resolve the issue of the public e-services divide. Success of e-government projects will depend on how governments provide e-services access, create conditions for its usage, and persuade citizens to use online public services (Dwivedi et al., 2009, p. 3). The potential existence of the public e-services divide should be of interest to those conducting research in business management, especially in the area of information systems (IS) and marketing.

Consequently, the two main questions of this paper are: What is a public e-services divide? How and why is it created?

For answering these questions, a model has been empirically tested using data collected with a questionnaire from a large sample (330) of Lebanese potential users of the public e-services. The model was tested using partial least squares (PLS) technique. The research model is general enough to be applied to a large number of public e-services. It determines the impact of the public e-services divide on the citizens’ satisfaction. It can help governments optimizing the deployment and management of their ICT investments by better understanding the divide.

We will begin by defining the public e-services divide at the individual level (2). Then, we will present the e-government project in Lebanon (3). Then based on prior research, and after having defined each variable (4), we will present the relation between the e-access divide, the e-skills divide, the public e-services acceptance divide, the public e-services divide, and the citizens’ low satisfaction (5). Then, we summarize the general model of this research. The results are presented in the section 6. Finally, in the conclusion, we describe the lessons learned from this study and we highlight the limitations and future directions (7).

2. PUBLIC E-SERVICES DIVIDE AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Over the last few years, with the beginning of the e-governments implementation, the divide has become an important topic in academic research. But until today, there is little research that examines the public e-services divide. The e-services divide characterizes the division between those who have real access, know-how to
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