Global Trends in Digital Governance: A Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the research findings of a digital governance survey conducted in the fall of 2009. The study replicates previous surveys of large municipalities worldwide in 2007, 2005, and 2003. This longitudinal assessment, focused on the assessment of current practices in municipal e-governance by evaluating their official websites. Specifically, the survey analyzed security, usability, content, the type of online services currently being offered, citizen response, and participation through websites established by city governments worldwide. There were significant changes in the top ranking cities when compared to previous studies. Based on the 2009 evaluation of 87 cities, Seoul, Prague, Hong Kong, New York, and Singapore represent the highest performing cities in digital governance. Moreover, there continues to be a divide in terms of digital governance throughout the world; however, this divide, which increased in 2005, decreased in 2009.

Keywords: Citizen Participation, Digital Democracy, E-Governance, E-Government, Privacy, Services, Usability

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, governments at every level throughout the world have begun adopting information technology in order to improve their service delivery along with increasing transparency and accountability. In today’s era of globalization and networked governance, it is important to thoroughly understand how various regions of the world perform in terms of e-governance. This paper highlights the trends in municipal e-governance based on a seven-year longitudinal assessment of municipal websites worldwide. It compares the results of four surveys that evaluate the practice of digital governance in large municipalities. The most recent survey was conducted by a joint international collaboration in the fall of 2009 by Rutgers’s E-Governance Institute and the Sungkyunkwan University’s Global e-Policy & E-Government Institute. The survey replicated similar research conducted in 2003, 2005 and 2007 (Holzer & Kim, 2005, 2007; Melitski et al., 2005; Carrizales et al., 2006). Apart from identifying the best practices, such
regional studies also provide benchmarks for increased performance in e-governance over time, especially for those regions that are still in the earliest stages of development. In this regard, our study provides a critical contribution to the overall literature and research on e-governance.

In addition, comprehensive global studies are needed for a comparative approach in e-governance research. As a methodological tool for such investigation, our survey instrument, with 98 measures and five distinct categorical areas, is one of the most comprehensive indexes, currently in practice for conducting e-governance research. Specifically, we analyzed privacy/security, usability, content of websites, the type of online services currently being offered, and citizen response and participation, through websites established by local city governments.

The format of our paper begins with a review of e-governance literature and why it is important for government to communicate with citizens, thus increasing engagement and participation. Next we explain the research methodology used to examine differences in e-governance practices and applications across the globe. This is followed by the findings from the longitudinal assessment and the regression results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the overall findings and its implications for public policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-government is the application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) within government, to optimize its internal and external functions (UNDESA, 2003). E-government also refers to “the delivery of services and information, electronically, to businesses and residents, 24 hours a day, seven days a week” (Norris et al., 2001, p. 5). The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines e-government as “the use of information and communication technologies (ICT’s), and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government” (OECD, 2003, p. 22). Bannister (2007) provides a working definition of e-government that includes the use of ICT in the formulation and execution of government and public policy. The use of information technology also expands the possibilities for achieving direct democracy by focusing on transparency and openness. E-governance includes both e-government (delivery of public service) and e-democracy (citizen participation in governance) (Holzer & Kim, 2007). In the development of e-democracy, information disclosures and two-way communication are prerequisites for establishing an informed citizenry and sustaining a high quality of political debate.

According to Barber (2001), ICT tools are more suitable for political communication than the broadcast media and should be exploited to offer electronic delivery of public services, develop communities online and open up numerous possibilities for participation. Lau (2007) states that “good governance” includes modernization and transformation of the public sector, ensuring equity, increasing responsiveness, accountability and participation. When governments fully embrace all the benefits that technology has to offer to public administrators and citizens alike, then improved government performance will follow.

The design of government websites has focused more on informational and transactional e-government applications. The constituents are viewed more as customers than active participants in democratic decision-making (Moon, 2002). Van Nelson et al. (2009) state that the target group of services is varied and highly heterogeneous and government agencies must consider various cultures, skills, political opinions, and disabilities when designing e-government systems. It is critical for internal stakeholders who are responsible for the development and management of government websites to include features that will facilitate participation, and not inhibit it. Facilitating the inclusion of diverse thoughts and ideas helps to promote information sharing and overall improved performance.
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