Service Quality in E–Government Portals

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, e-government seems to become a driver of the government modernization in the world. According to Ronaghan (2002) and Musgrave (2004), the use of computers and ICT by government departments becomes a significant part of the service delivery mechanism, and e-government programs remain at the top of most countries policy agendas.

Enthusiasm for e-government may be justified by its widely recognized potential to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of public services (Ancarani, 2005; Buckley, 2003; Ronaghan, 2002). E-government may connect dispersed and disparate systems to give access to information and work to common service level delivery through a gateway portal, which provides information to users and supports one-stop transactions through a single point of contact, avoiding the need for dealing directly with different government agencies (Kaaya, 2004, Musgrave, 2004). For example, the Tunisian national government portal (www. bawaba.gov.tn) has links to ministries having Web sites and to postal e-services.

Portals allow better online service delivery by facilitating ease of access to information and services and reducing costs of services provision. Nevertheless, only a well-composed portal can add substantial value and signal important potential benefits to consumers (Van Riel & Ouwersloot, 2005), leading to better service quality.

Several studies attempted to identify service quality attributes in online service environments (Cai & Jun, 2003; O'Neil, Wright, & Fitz, 2001; Tan, Xie, & Li, 2003), but they seem to focus on private organizations (Buckley, 2003). In fact, in the context of public organizations, less concern is given to service quality (Buckley, 2003), and research on e-services quality in public area is still in its infancy (Ancarani, 2005; Barnes & Vidgen, 2004; Buckley, 2003).

This article proposes, at a first time, an overview of works on e-government portals and e-service quality in both private and public sector. At a second time, authors will identify, using the cited works, dimensions, and items to measure e-service quality in the case of e-government portals.

BACKGROUND: DEFINING E-GOVERNMENT PORTALS

E-government may be defined as the use of ICT by government organizations to improve the information's exchange and services delivery to citizens, enterprises, employees, and government agencies (Buckley, 2003; Ebrahim & Irani, 2005; Ronaghan, 2002). It's developed through an evolutionary process (Layne & Lee, 2001) composed from several stages (Kaaya, 2004; Layne et al., 2001; Ronaghan, 2002).

The basic service is the dissemination of information about structure, functions, and services of particular government agencies. The Web is simply used to post information to be consulted by users. A two-way interaction stage allows users to download forms and to interact with government officials through e-mail systems. Through an online transactions stage, forms are submitted online and users can achieve transactions such as renewing driving licenses, filing tax returns, etc. Government Web portals are the ultimate stage of e-government development, and emerge as a key priority for public sector organisations (Ebrahim et al., 2005; Kaaya, 2004).

In general terms, an Internet portal is defined as "a structured Web site that provides a point of entry into an array of structured Web contents. The individual contents are grouped together by the portal operator and made available to interested parities. Portals are typically multi-functional and make a multiplicity of various information and services available at a single location" (Schubert & Häusler, 2001, p. 4). Smith (2004) added that portals provide "secure, customizable, personalizable, integrated access to dynamic content […] in a variety of source formats" (p. 94).

In the case of public sector, many authors (Ebrahim et al., 2005; Kaaya, 2004) agreed that portals integrate government information and services from distinct departments

and organisations, and allow users to find a wide range of information and to complete transactions with government agencies without having to visit several separate ministries/departments. For example, Teicher, Huges, and Dow (2002) defined a portal as "a point of entry, which enables citizens to have access to a full range of services without any consciousness of movement between Internet sites and where those services may be tailored to the user's profile" (p. 389).

Since e-government portal integrates government information and services from distinct organisations, horizontal and/or vertical integration among functions and levels of government, and integration of systems for sharing knowledge resources, exchanging data, and devices are needed. This may allow portals' evolvement to an advanced stage where improvements of service quality will be achieved (Teicher et al., 2002, Van Riel et al., 2005). This will beneficiate to both citizens/enterprises and government agencies, as portals may lead to faster, more available (24h/7j), more convenient access to government services, increased efficiencies, cost reductions, and potentially better customer service (Teicher et al., 2002, Wang, Bretschneider, & Gant, 2005).

Authors such as Phifer (2001, cited by Teicher et al., 2002) and Musgrave (2004) defined three to four stages of portals evolvement. These stages are summarized in this way:

- **Thin Portal:** Described as collections of Web resources at the same level providing an easy to use list of links to useful Web sites.
- **Thick Portal:** Uses search engines to access many different types of information, including collections and databases. Personalisation, which includes features for content management/aggregation, search/index, and categorisation, with a lightweight integration layer, is a recent attribute that characterises the thick portal gateway term.
- Resource discovery, which represents a new direction of portal development by the use of intelligent agents within portals. The user interacts with the portal to submit a request and the portal will then retrieve information from a range of content sources, based on the request parameters. This may be achieved by advanced search functions.

SERVICE QUALITY IN THE CASE OF E-GOVERNMENT PORTALS

"Service quality is an elusive and abstract construct that is difficult to define and measure" (Tan et al., 2003, p. 168). Traditionally, it was understood to be a measure of how well the service level delivered matched customer expectations, and based on the evaluation of the gap between these expectations and the perceived performance of received services (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). More recently, Santos (2003) defined the e-services quality as "the customers' overall evaluation and judgment of the excellence and quality of e-services offerings in the virtual marketplace" (p. 235).

One of the most widely known service quality measures is SERVQUAL, which is developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) in traditional context of service delivery. The authors believed that service quality is measurable but only in the eyes of the consumer. They postulate that service is of high quality when customers' expectations are confirmed by subsequent service delivery. SERVQUAL consists of 22 items measuring five key dimensions on which customers evaluate service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

SERVQUAL was used as a reference for many researchers investigating different settings and service industries. However, prior research suggests that service quality tends to be context-bounded and service-type-dependent (Cai et al., 2003). Moreover, SERVQUAL has several critics limiting its use to measure e-services quality (O'Neil et al., 2001; Tan et al., 2003) and seems to be an inadequate measure of service quality across industries, particularly in online service environment (Cai et al., 2003).

Therefore, various researchers have tried to identify service quality attributes that best fit the online business environment (Cai et al., 2003), leading to several measures such as the importance performance instrument (O'Neil et al., 2001), E-SERVQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000, cited by Tan et al., 2003), WebQual (Barnes & Vidgen, 2001, 2002). These measures are based on a direct measurement method to assess the quality of e-services. Several dimensions of service quality, which are interdependent, are cited: reliability, responsiveness, access, flexibility, ease of navigation, efficiency, assurance/trust, security, site aesthetics, customization/personalization, quality of information, tangible, and contact/communication.

However, many services provided by government agencies are unique and citizens can not obtain these services from any other sources than these agencies. Also, government agencies disserve citizens with different characteristics (age, education, income, culture, language, disabilities, etc.) (Schubert et al., 2001, Wang et al., 2005). So, the interactions between citizens and government agencies over the Web may be different from the online interactions with private organisations. This may affect the design of a Web site and lead to different criteria for assessing a government Web site than for a business (Wang et al., 2005). For example, portals may tend to include too much information and too many functions leading to a heavy perceptual work for visitors. This situation will have an impact on the portal's usability and its information content, and consequently on

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