The Scholarly Literature on E-Government: Characterizing a Nascent Field

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a comprehensive review of articles on the subject of e-government that were published in refereed scholarly journals through the end of 2004 to serve as a baseline for future analysis of this emerging field. They found over 100 e-government articles, but only 57 with empirical content. The authors then examined the articles using 12 analytical categories. They conclude that the scholarship about e-government comes primarily from the United States, and from authors trained in the social sciences. Few e-government articles adequately used the literatures that were available (e.g., IT and government, e-government, or any specialized literatures), and few created or tested theory or hypotheses. Articles employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but many contained conclusions that were not supported by their data or analyses. The authors conclude that e-government research is a young and growing field that has yet to achieve adequate scholarly rigor.

Keywords: e-government, electronic government, digital government

INTRODUCTION

Within the past dozen or so years, governments across the globe and at all levels have adopted electronic government (a.k.a., e-government) as a means of delivering of governmental information and services 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Nearly all national governments, most sub-national or state governments, and large numbers of local governments have established Web sites through which they provide e-government. In the U.S., the federal government has a strong e-government presence through its portal FirstGov.gov, and all federal departments and agencies have Web sites. All 50 states have Web sites as do most state agencies and departments. Finally, more than 95% of U.S. local governments with populations of 10,000 and larger have Web sites.
Although governments have adopted e-government rapidly, e-government remains a relatively new phenomenon. For example, about two-thirds of local government Web sites in the U.S. are 10 years old or less (Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003; Norris & Moon, 2005). This means that research into e-government is even younger because research typically lags behind practice by a few years.

Nevertheless, over the past few years, a small but growing body of scholarly literature about e-government has begun to emerge. Most of this scholarship has been published in traditional journals in a few key fields, including the social sciences, information systems, computer science, and business administration.

Although research in the field of e-government is still in its early days, now would be an appropriate time to pause and take stock of the field via an examination of the scholarly literature that has been published in it to date. In this article, we examine articles about e-government that have been published in refereed scholarly journals. We chose to focus only on articles in refereed journals because, in academic circles, these are the “gold standard” that defines the scholarship in a field.1

METHOD

As active researchers in the field, we endeavor to keep in touch with the scholarship and believe that we know the published works reasonably well. Thus, we began our search for articles about e-government by developing a list of works known to us. To ensure that we did not miss any relevant articles, we next searched the bibliographies of those initially identified works to find published articles of which we were unaware.

To expand the search further, we used 13 online article databases at the UMBC library (Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, CAIO, EconLit, Emerald Library, ERIC, Infotrieve, JSTOR, LLBA, PAIS, PsycInfo, Social Sciences Abstracts, and Sociology Abstracts) to find yet additional articles about e-government. In these databases, we used “e-government,” “electronic government,” and “digital government” as our search terms. Depending on the design and capabilities of each database, we looked for articles that had at least one of these terms in either the title or abstract, or had one of the terms assigned to it as a subject term or keyword. We then examined the bibliographies of all of these articles to identify works that we had not otherwise found. Through these methods, we identified over 100 articles about e-government published in refereed journals.2

Next, we read the articles to determine if they involved analysis of empirical data, or merely represented authors’ ruminations and speculations (no matter how well considered) about e-government. Our interest is with the empirical scholarship in the field, that is, works that undertake some form of quantitative or qualitative analysis of the empirical data or evidence about e-government. Thus, we eliminated articles that were essentially speculative in nature, and selected for further consideration only those articles that contained and analyzed empirical data. (By empirical data, we mean data derived from any research method involving “observation”, whether qualitative or quantitative.3) This left us with 57 empirical articles published in refereed journals through the end of 2004.

We chose to limit our review to the period from the appearance of the first
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