

Chapter XX

Transparency and Local Government Websites

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ABSTRACT

Government websites are quickly becoming the first point of contact for citizens and visitors seeking information. Local government websites' content is key with regard to transparency. Within this chapter, we present a review of the transparency and e-government literatures, explore how they intersect, and present a Basic Transparency Model for local government websites. An analysis of local government websites and the ways in which they are being utilized to increase openness in government is presented. A case study of the municipal websites in New Jersey follows the literature review. We found that 87% of New Jersey's 566 municipalities have a website. The extent to which these websites increase municipal transparency varies considerably. We conclude the chapter by making recommendations to municipalities to capitalize upon their web presence in order to increase transparency.

INTRODUCTION

Governmental transparency and openness are values near universally accepted as being a part of good government. When open government policies are discussed in literature, they are frequently associated with both freedom of information (Hood & Heald, 2006; Piotrowski, 2007; Roberts,

2006) and open public meetings legislation (Adams, 2004; McComas, 2001; "Open Meeting Statutes: The Press Fights for the 'Right To Know' ", 1962). While both of these policies contribute to transparency, they miss much broader avenues of access to government information. Governments proactively release information to the public and these releases significantly enhance transparency.

One of the most prominent ways in which governments release information is through their websites (Holzer & Kim, 2004). Within this chapter, we present an analysis of local government websites and the degree to which they are being utilized to increase openness in government.

Governments are increasingly turning to the internet to better their service capabilities. In addition, citizens are coming to expect that governments have a presence online. Government websites are quickly becoming the first point of contact for residents and visitors seeking information. While the appearance of a government website is important, the site's content is most valuable with regard to transparency. Within this chapter, we present an overview of the relevant transparency and e-government literatures. We follow this with the development and testing of a Basic Transparency Model for local government websites. A case study of the municipal websites in New Jersey follows the literature review. Data for this case study was gathered through a content analysis of New Jersey municipal websites. We conclude by making recommendations to municipalities to capitalize upon their web presence in order to increase transparency.

TRANSPARENCY AND MUNICIPAL WEBSITES

Local governments are increasingly creating and maintaining websites. In the case of municipalities, a website can serve as a bulletin board for information such as phone numbers and email addresses; meeting schedules, agendas, and minutes; and financial and planning documents. Websites can be used to assist municipal clerks and administrators with their duties, specifically with regard to releasing notices of public meetings and posting public records. In addition, they can be used to inform local residents of what is occurring inside their local government. In sum, local government websites can act as tools for

governments to better communicate with their residents while increasing transparency and openness. This chapter makes explicit the link between governmental transparency and e-governance. Most of the scholarly research to date has focused on either transparency or e-governance, but not both together. Within the chapter we explain how e-governance can be used as a tool to increase transparency of local governments.

Transparency as a Value

While the term “transparency” is a contemporary one, the surrounding concepts are not. Max Weber wrote about the secretive nature of bureaucracy in *Economy and Society* (Roth & Wittich, 1968). Theory provides that increasing transparency also increases democratic accountability. In the early 1800s, James Madison, an early and vocal supporter of transparency practices, wrote:

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps, both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. (Madison, 1999, p. 790)

Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Louis D. Brandeis, also well-known for his thoughts on transparency and access, stated: “sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman” (Brandeis, 1933, p. 62). While Brandeis wrote about the banking industry, the principle has been applied to governments.

Scholars have approached transparency in various ways. It can refer to either “efficiency and effectiveness” or “accountability and democracy” (Otenyo & Lind 2004). Some scholars associate transparency with the fiscal business of a government entity; others are more broad with their interpretations. Christopher Hood argues: “transparency denotes government according to

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