

Electronic Government

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INTRODUCTION

Digital government, electronic government, online government, wired government, virtual government—there are many terms used to refer to the contemporary strong focus, in practice as in research, on increasing the amount and sophistication of information and communication technologies (ICT) use in government and governance processes. While the terms are largely used as synonyms, there is no unambiguous definition of the field. Some use the terms to refer specifically to government services to citizens (G2C), but definitions by influential actors typically define electronic government in governance terms. The former definitions typically focus on efficiency issues, often directly concerning the ICT components, while the latter ones concern effectiveness and focus on systems aspects, organizations, and social systems in general, rather than individual components. While reduced cost per delivered form is a typical measurement emanating from research following from the first kind of definition, reduced corruption is one from the latter. This article investigates the content of the electronic government (e-gov) field briefly by exhibiting (1) definitions, theoretically anchored ones as well as definitions-in-use emerging from practice, (2) examples of work, including steps in the development over time, (3) models for evaluation, and (4) considerations about the future of the phenomenon based on the development so far. Altogether this gives a view of a vast field, not unequivocally defined but in practice framed by a number of similar practices, strategies, critical issues, and technologies. It is also regularly monitored globally by methods commonly used. While these are not uncontested and subject to different technical, social, and business-oriented viewpoints, they do contribute to the framing of the field as a practice.

BACKGROUND

The term *e-gov*, as well as the synonyms mentioned in the previous section, emerged in the late 1990s, but the history of ICT use in government organizations can be traced back to the beginnings of computer history. A scientific literature on “IT in government” goes back to

the 1970s (Danziger & Andersen, 2002; Kraemer et al., 1978). This literature concerns Information Technologies (IT) use within government, while the recent e-gov literature often concerns external use, such as services to the citizens (Ho, 2002). More recently, picking up the discussion in the Internet era, there are some classics, including Bellamy and Taylor’s (1998) *Governing in the Information Age* and Tsagarousianou (1998) *Cyberdemocracy*. The first textbook to use the term *electronic government* was *Electronic Government: Design, Applications and Management* (Grönlund, 2002), and the latest, as of this writing, is *Implementing and Managing eGovernment* (Heeks, 2005). The differences between the two in terms of the underlying empirical material is a telling story about how rapidly the field of practice has evolved over just a few years. In early 2000 there were very few cases; today they abound. Yet, as Grönlund (2004, 2005b) shows, research is still much about storytelling and “lessons learned”, and little about theory testing and theory development.

E-gov started as a practitioner field, basically convening practitioners struggling to meet the new challenges of the Internet medium by implementing new systems creatively. If a single event should be pinpointed as a starting point it would be the U.S. National Performance Review, started in 1993, which placed a strong emphasis on the role of e-government in federal services (Gore, 1993; Salem, 2003). Led by then Vice President Gore, strongly coupled to the Clinton administration’s strong focus on improved economy, it was given a high profile and relied heavily on the then new Internet technology with the effect of policy and technology mutually promoting each other.

While there are several terms, many largely refer to the same phenomena and are used interchangeably, such as *digital* and *electronic* government. In the following the term *e-gov* will be used simply because it is short and, together with the complete version *e-government* most commonly used, as Table 1 shows. A further note to the table data is that “governance” also returns a large number of hits.

The fact that the terms in Table 1 are commonly used as synonyms does not mean, however, that there is an unambiguous definition. There are both wide and narrow definitions. Government and governance are generally used confusingly in research. There is also some confusion over whether “electronic democracy” should be included or be seen as a separate field. Shared by all

Electronic Government

Table 1. Occurrences of commonly used terms. The search was made at Alta Vista on August 4, 2005. The search was made for the phrase, not separate terms (e.g., “electronic government”). The search was made using the “site collapse” function, which means that a maximum of two pages per site are displayed.

Area	Search term	Occurrences
Government	E-government	9,460,000
	E-gov	3,010,000
	Electronic government	843,000
	Online government	601,000
	Digital government	425,000
	Virtual government	42,000
	Wired government	3,470
Governance	E-governance	531,000
	Electronic governance	47,800
	Digital governance	9,900

definitions is that e-gov includes a comprehensive strategic approach to government organization rather than piecemeal automation of discrete functions.

E-gov can be defined theoretically by setting “visions”, operationally guiding definitions based on some theory, or by inducing from ongoing activities arriving at descriptive definition. Below we give examples of both.

DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITIONS

Defining the e-gov field inductively can be done in different ways. Grant and Chau (2005) offer a framework designed to be generic, not country-specific, containing five categories based on a comprehensive review of events in the field of practice (p. 18):

1. Service delivery (service automation and information, interactive services, CRM—customer/citizen relations management);
2. Citizen empowerment (e-participation/democracy, collaboration/partnerships, CRM)
3. Market enhancement and development (collaboration/partnerships, globalization)
4. Exposure and outreach (globalization, marketing e-gov)
5. Infrastructure consolidation and standardization

Another way of inductively defining the field is to directly use researchers’ and practitioners’ categories which can be found in calls for papers and proceedings from the multitude of e-gov conferences. These tend to emphasize critical issues rather than just activities. For example, there is less about exposure and outreach and more about security, trust, knowledge management, and reorganization. Table 2 shows one example, which, although only one sample, is quite illuminating as it comes from one of the largest e-gov conferences attracting both researchers and practitioners, and the list of topics is quite similar to other conferences in the field.

Table 2. Call for Papers for DEXA EGOV 2005 (Source: http://falcon.ifs.uni-linz.ac.at/news/cfp_e-Government2005.html)

1. Frameworks and guidelines for e-government and e-governance
2. E-government policies, strategies and implementation
3. Methods and tools for e-government research
4. Participation, e-democracy and e-voting
5. One-stop government, electronic service delivery, mobile services
6. International and regional projects, case studies and best practice
7. Administrative process design and change, collaborative activities, legal interpretation
8. Trust and security: provisions and instruments
9. Knowledge management, public information, decision process support
10. Interoperability and standards, semantic standardization
11. Change management and new organizational arrangements: public-private-partnerships, virtual teams
12. Legal, societal and cultural aspects of e-government
13. International dimensions: cooperation, comparisons, networks
14. Teaching e-government

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