Ethics of Digital Government

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is at once a new communications medium and a new locus for social organization on a global basis. A digital government will allow public access to government information and services, and group participation in discussions at any time and from anywhere on the globe. Digital government is regarded as the most recent development in the evolving application of electronic information technology to the performance of government. The development and migration of the technologies, as well as applications of information technology in support of government operations are other important aspects. New policies have been passed by legislative bodies to ensure the proper management and implementations of these technologies and the systems they serve, their protection from physical harm, and the security and privacy of their information. The growth of digital government has increased governments' ability to collect, store, analyze, and disclose private personal and organizational information (Fountain, 2001). In the rapidly evolving environments of digital technology, it is impossible to anticipate the leading-edge ethical issues. However, there are solid ethical imperatives to use these principles ethical behavior for resolution of the issues (Anderson, 2004). This article will focus on privacy and confidentiality of individual private information in digital environment.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AND DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Digital government and digital governance are used interchangeably. It is important to make the distinction between these two important concepts in here. Digital or e-government refers to primarily on providing information and online transaction kinds of services to citizens of government. On the other hand, e-governance focuses on public's participation and their role as citizens (Abramson & Morin 2003). Electronic governance popularly referred to as e-government is broadly defined as an application of information technology to the functioning of the government to enhance the delivery of public services to the citizens and other individual and organizational consumers of the government services (O'looney, 2002). West (2000) defines digital government as "e-government refers to the delivery of information and services online through the Internet or other digital means." For the past several years, a great deal of focus has shifted to this concept which has varying meaning and significance. Initially, the term was a little more than a general recognition of a convergence of information technology (IT) developments and application and use of these technologies by government entities. With the passage of time however, the term is being used as a reference to both current applications of IT to government operations and a goal of realizing more efficient and transparent performance of government functions. E-government involves access to government information and services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in a way that is focused on the needs of the citizens. E-government relies heavily on the effective use of Internet and other emerging technologies to receive and deliver information and services easily, quickly, efficiently, and inexpensively.

UNESCO identifies several factors affecting the e-government and e-governance movement internationally in its e-governance study (2002): the use of information and communication technologies by citizens and non-governmental organizations to influence policymakers, transferability of information in terms of e-government reforms including draft government legislation and online services, public sector reform, and the promise of information and telecommunication technologies to increase government efficiency and effectiveness, pressure for increased accountability and transparency. In this environment of digital government, citizens can go online any time, anywhere to get information, receive services, conduct business transactions, or talk to elected representatives. The natural transparency of the online environment creates digital government that is truly of, by, and for the people. The digital government vision that guides several governments around the globe to focus commitment to digital government and reach far beyond shifting the delivery of agency services to the Internet. This vision also represents a clear and purposeful innovation that changes government culture from within, as it unfolds and demystifies bureaucracy.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AND ETHICAL ISSUES

Digital government can support efficacy and accountability of government functions and services. Digital government will make transparent information about the government performance more accessible and might enhance the accountability of government to citizens (Abramson & Morin, 2003). Digital government also, because of its technological foundations, can allow public agencies to deliver "real-time" public service to citizens (Kolodney, 2004). Even though efficacy and effectiveness of digital government is so convincing, public service should be available to all citizens for digital government to be completely effective (Layne & Lee 2001). However, the universal access to public services using the Web site is still not the case for governments around the world. "Governments may want to provide Internet access through public terminals as a part of their universal [public service] access efforts (Layne & Lee, 2001, p. 134).

One of the big concerns of citizens or e-government costumers is the problem of privacy. "The technologies' surveillance capacity to collect, aggregate, analyze, and distribute personal information coupled with current business practices have left individual privacy unprotected" (Berman & Mulligan, 1999). Will the digital government be one in which individuals maintain, lose, or gain control over information about themselves? Privacy is critical because government interaction with citizens always has autonomy issues, as only government is in the business of law enforcement. Systems which design with the assumption that privacy is an issue of property or seclusion should not be adopted for use in government. "The information exchanged on many federal (government) Web sites is personal and confidential. Privacy and security policies, therefore, must be not only developed but clearly displaced as well. To fully meet users' needs, federal (government) Web sites must create protected, private, and secure spaces for the mutual exchange of information" (Stowers, 2003, p. 49).

The confidentiality and privacy of public' sensitive personal information is challenged by a legal framework that centers protections on who maintains the information, how the network is structured, where data is stored, and how long it is kept. It can be imagined that how dangerous it can get in the hands of public officials are unaware of e-government code of ethics and how to deal with sensitive public information. "As our wallets become "e-wallets" housed somewhere out on the Internet rather than in our back-pockets, and as our public institutions, businesses, and even cultural institutions find homes online, the confidentiality of our communications, pa-

pers, and information is at risk of compromise" (Berman & Mulligan, 1999).

The emergence of digital government requires public agencies and citizens as well to reflect and apply existing code of ethics and other privacy principles. This task requires significant expertise. Berman and Mulligan (1999) recommends the following:

To function well, such an entity should have the ability to: monitor and evaluate developments in information technology with respect to their implications for personal privacy; conduct research, hold hearings, and issue reports on privacy issues in both the public and private sector; develop and recommend public policy appropriate for specific types of personal information systems; comment upon government and private sector proposals that impact on privacy; review agency activities under the Privacy Act; participate in government proposals that impact on privacy.

Future technical advancements can provide an underlying framework for privacy and confidentiality. However, while implementing technical advancement in the realms of privacy and confidentiality code of ethics should be implemented in digital government services. Public administrators should be well equipped with information technology and code of ethical conduct for ethical decision and behavior.

One of the major issues in electronic environment of digital government is the question of access: who will have access to the information, and what kinds of information will be accessible. These questions are important because electronic sources offer tremendous economic, political, and even social advantages to people who have access to them. As the electronic resources become a larger presence in society, conflicts may arise between information "haves" and "have-nots." Conceivably, electronic communication could create greater equality by offering common access to all resources for all citizens. Internet accesses established through local libraries or other municipal or local organizations specifically for people who otherwise would have no way to use the networks, have shown that those people will, for instance, participate more in local government issues. They therefore have a greater voice in whatever happens with local government. Conversely, if access is not evenly distributed, it threatens to effect or deepen existing divides between the poor, who cannot afford expensive computer systems, and the better-off.

Questions of free speech and community standards of decency on the Internet are difficult to resolve. At present, local communities may define what is or is not obscene, and therefore not tolerated, within their geographic bor-

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