

E-Government Portals in Mexico¹

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic government has become a powerful administrative tool for governments around the world (Dawes & Pardo, 2002; Fountain, 2001; UN & ASPA, 2002). Governments at all levels are attempting to improve services and increase their interactions with citizens using information and communication technologies (ICTs). In Mexico, state and local governments are expending large amounts of money to introduce ICTs in operational tasks, as well as in the provision of public services. Many of these governments have created Web pages, which provide information about government agencies and, in some cases, allow transactions. Unfortunately, in Mexico, there is no systematic or rigorous research program that measures and assesses the evolution and impact of e-government.

As an initial step of a broader research effort, this study focuses on the functionality of state portals, looking at technical aspects, as well as their potential to improve the quality of the services provided by states. Gant and Gant (2002) state, "A Web portal serves as the integrated gateway into the state government Web site and provides visitors with a single point of contact for online service delivery within the state." Therefore, these portals contain an interesting mixture of applications and are good examples of current e-government efforts. Accordingly, taking an evolutionary approach, this study provides an initial assessment of e-government at the state level in Mexico. This article is organized into six sections including these introductory comments. In the second section, three approaches to e-government assessment are described briefly. The third section explains our method of analysis. In the fourth section, we present some preliminary results. The fifth section includes some future trends and areas for research. Finally, section six provides some concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND: APPROACHES TO E-GOVERNMENT ASSESSMENT

There is a current debate about the concept and characteristics of electronic government (Prins, 2001; Gil-García

& Luna-Reyes, 2003; Schelin, 2003). This debate can be interpreted through (1) managerial, (2) citizen-centered, and (3) evolutionary perspectives, among others. This section very briefly describes these three perspectives and attempts to highlight their advantages and limitations as approaches to e-government assessment. This article takes the evolutionary perspective to preliminarily evaluate state portals in Mexico.

Managerial Perspective

According to the managerial perspective, electronic government must focus on managerial processes. Similar to the concept of e-management (Gil-García & Luna-Reyes, 2003), this perspective establishes that the main objective of e-government is to improve managerial effectiveness and efficiency. For example, Wescott (2002) states, "e-government is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to promote more efficient and cost-effective government, facilitate more convenient government services, allow greater public access to information, and make government more accountable to citizens" (p. 1).

West (2001) and Toral (2000) also pay attention to managerial processes but in their relationships to services and citizens. West states that e-government refers to the delivery of information and services online through the Internet. Similarly, Toral says, "electronic government is the future government, which offers and performs services to the population in the way they need" (p. 6A). Finally, Holmes (2001) states, "Electronic government or e-government is the use of information technology, in particular the internet, to deliver public services in a much more convenient, customer-oriented, cost-effective, and altogether different and a better way" (p. 2).

Citizen-Centered Perspective

The citizen-centered approach to electronic government emphasizes the predominant role of citizens as drivers of e-government. This perspective also offers a critical lens to evaluate the influence of e-government initiatives on individuals and societies. Pipa Norris (2000) says that the influence of the Internet on societies, especially on the

poor ones, can change their life by improving education and access to government decisions. It should be clear that the nature of e-government is different from how businesses use the Internet to interact with customers. For example, Naief Yehya (2002) mentions, "Substantially, the egov idea is radically different to the e-commerce idea" (p. 31). This technology can make life simpler for people and their real objective is to promote, protect and make strong the democratic values (p. 32).

In summary, the managerial perspective is mainly oriented to processes, methods, information, and government legitimacy, excludes any links with citizens and avoids the opportunity to make interactions the strongest part of the process. In contrast, the citizen-centered perspective focuses on people's needs and takes into consideration important transformations in government procedures to make services and information more accessible to citizens.

Evolutionary Perspective

This kind of vision maintains the assumption that electronic government is evolutionary. Some authors contend that each one of the stages is already electronic

government. Others delimit from which of the phases a government can be considered electronic. After reviewing different ways to present the stages of e-government, the following model was integrated as the synthesis of previous theoretical developments (see Table 1).

Three hypotheses frame this research. First, Mexican state portals provide valuable information but few online services. Accordingly, the majority of the state portals are in the first stages of e-government (e.g., initial presence, extended presence). Second, state governments are mainly using old and less sophisticated Web technologies for their portals. With existing technologies, it is much more difficult to communicate complex information and provide transactional services. Third, there are sizable differences among state portals. Those differences may be related to economic and political factors, as well as to specific state e-government initiatives.

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to answer our hypotheses, we conducted a systematic analysis of the 32 state portals between January and February of 2005. The questionnaire includes 58

Table 1. Evolutionary approaches to e-government assessment: An overview

E-Government Stage	Additional Technological and Organizational Sophistication	References
Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited government information Few Web pages developed by single agencies Static information about government structure and services 	UN & ASPA, 2002
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More dynamic information (frequent updates) Greater number of Web pages Statewide portal as the entry point with links to most of the state pages 	Hiller & Bélanger, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001; Moon, 2002; UN & ASPA, 2002; Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2003
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forms that can be downloaded Two-way communication through electronic mail Use of search engines Use of chats, forums or other forms of interactive communication (service related) Some customization (citizen's profiles, use of passwords) 	Hiller & Bélanger, 2001; Moon, 2002; UN & ASPA, 2002
Transaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online services (secure and completely online), including accepting electronic payments (e.g., credit cards) More customization (use of passwords, citizen's profiles, etc.) Portal organized according to people's needs instead of government structures 	Hiller & Bélanger, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001; Moon, 2002; UN & ASPA, 2002; Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2003
Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service portal with a single checkout point <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple agencies, <i>same</i> function, <i>different</i> levels of government Multiple agencies, <i>different</i> functions, <i>same</i> level of government Multiple agencies, <i>different</i> functions, <i>different</i> levels of government 	Hiller & Bélanger, 2001; Moon, 2002; UN & ASPA, 2002; Layne & Lee, 2001; Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2003
Political Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political participation Online public forums/Opinion surveys Online voting 	Hiller & Bélanger, 2001; Moon, 2002

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