

Chapter 5.16

E–Government and the Digital Divide

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INTRODUCTION

Many governments world wide are attempting to increase accountability, transparency, and the quality of services by adopting information and communications technologies (ICTs) to modernize and change the way their administrations work. Meanwhile e-government is becoming a significant decision-making and service tool at local, regional and national government levels. The vast majority of users of these government online services see significant benefits from being able to access services online.

The rapid pace of technological development has created increasingly more powerful ICTs that are capable of radically transforming public institutions and private organizations alike. These technologies have proven to be extraordinarily useful instruments in enabling governments to enhance the quality, speed of delivery and reliability of services to citizens and to business (VanderMeer & VanWindem, 2003).

However, just because the technology is available does not mean it is accessible to all. The term digital divide has been used since the 1990s to describe patterns of unequal access to ICTs—primarily computers and the Internet—based on income, ethnicity, geography, age, and other factors. Over time it has evolved to more broadly define disparities in technology usage, resulting from a lack of access, skills, or interest in using technology.

This article provides an overview of recent literature on e-government and the digital divide, and includes a discussion on the potential of e-government in addressing the digital divide.

BACKGROUND

The adoption of highly intensive and complex systems of ICT networks to establish e-government are radically changing how national, state, and local administrations deliver services, collect, integrate, and share information, and communicate

with one another and citizens. A growing number of professionals see the Internet as a transformative technology, and they regard e-government as part of a new vision of government for the 21st century (Jones & Crowe 2001; Kearns, Bend, & Stern, 2002; OECD 2001; Pardo 2000; Socitim & Idea, 2002). The use of ICTs to support public participatory decision-making via e-government triggers information technology to make government operate more efficiently (Griffiths, 2002; Lenihan, 2002; Lenk & Traunmuller, 2002; Macintosh, Malina, & Whyte, 2002). E-government focuses on the actions and innovations enabled by ICTs combined with higher levels of speed, scalability, and accuracy.

For the past two decades, the debate about the ways technology can aid democratic governance has been continuing especially in the developed (Arterton, 1987; Mclean, 1989) and has continued to accelerate with the proliferation of the Internet as an information and communication medium (Karakaya, 2003). The interactive nature of Internet in e-government allows contributions from the user instead of broadcasting data from one centre to many users (Hewitt, 2000; Yigitcanlar, 2003). For example in the local governance context, citizens can obtain information about their council through the council's Web site, can contact their representatives easily via e-mail and state their own views through online consultations and discussion forums.

ICT is not a solution to all concerns about e-government, but it can start to close the gap between what governments do and people's everyday lives. For that reason e-government means more than just a Web site, it has the power to transform citizens' lives. Socitim and Idea (2002) state that the overwhelming majority—up to 80%—of citizen-government transactions takes place at the local level. In this way the applications of e-government are affecting people's daily lives. That is to say applications of e-government are actually affecting—easing—people's daily lives. However without giving equal opportunity and accessibil-

ity to the public, e-government is nothing more than an elitist tool. Therefore, as e-government is becoming wide spread all around the world, governments have realized the importance of developing policies and programs to address the inequalities that are becoming evident in access to ICTs and the usage of these technologies.

E-GOVERNMENT AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In e-government discussions, the term digital divide has quickly become popular. It is used to explain any and every disparity within the online community. At its basic level the digital divide is about the difference between those with access and those without access to ICTs. It is also used as a term to indicate social exclusion in the online world as we move to the knowledge economy, or the knowledge society (Graham, 2002; Stimson, 2002; Woodbury & Thompson, 1999). Most of the available literature suggests that socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics determine the frequency of use of ICTs (Hoffman & Novak, 2000; NITA, 1999). In particular, issues of income and education are often seen as being important, while age and ethnic background may also be an issue (NOIE, 2002; VanderMeer & VanWindem, 2003). There may also be a geographic component.

The concept of the digital divide is generally understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects. The “global divide” refers to the divergence of Internet access between industrialized and developing societies. The “social divide” concerns the gap between information rich and poor in each nation. And lastly within the online community, the “democratic divide” signifies the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life (Norris, 2001).

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