

Chapter LXXIII

Public Administrators’ Acceptance of the Practice of Digital Democracy: A Model Explaining the Utilization of Online Policy Forums in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

The Internet provides a new digital opportunity for realizing democracy in public administration, and this study raises a central question: What factors determine public officials’ acceptance of the practice of digital democracy on government Web sites? We focused on online policy forums among many practices of digital democracy. To gauge public officials’ behavioral intentions to use online policy forums on government Web sites, we examined individual and organizational factors, as well as system characteristics. We administered a survey questionnaire to Korean public officials and analyzed a total of 895 responses. Path analysis indicates that three causal variables are important in predicting public officials’ intentions to use online policy forums: perceived usefulness, attitudes toward citizen participation, and information quality. We discuss implications of this study for practices and theories of digital democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Today the Internet is changing the operation of governments. A large number of citizens can access a large volume of information simultaneously and conduct online transactions with government agencies 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. In addition, citizens can register their opinions on government Web sites through online discussions

and online polls anywhere and anytime. Thus the concept of digital democracy is emerging. New electronic means have the potential to increase citizen participation in government and to ensure that citizens’ preferences are reflected in the policy-making process.

Despite the fact that digital democracy is possible in public agencies, there are wide variations in adopting and implementing practices of digital

democracy among government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. Decisions at the organizational level do not necessarily bring changes in the attitudes and behaviors of individual public administrators. In other words, policy adoption is different from program implementation, and factors affecting these two are also different (de Lancer & Holzer, 2001). Successful innovation implementation is determined by human factors, or end users' acceptance of the innovation (Nedovic-Budic & Godschalk, 1996). Organizational members can reject or not fully utilize an innovation (Leonard-Barton & Deschamps, 1988). The literature on implementation has indicated that street-level bureaucrats have considerable resources with which to influence policy outcomes (Hill, 2003; Lipsky, 1980). While some research has examined the adoption of e-government at the organizational level (Ho & Ni, 2003; Ho, 2002; Moon, 2002; Weare, Musso, & Hale, 1999), little research has been done at the micro level with regard to attitudes and behaviors of public administrators toward digital democracy.

This study examines why and how public administrators accept the practice of digital democracy on government Web sites when they make and implement public policies. Since public administrators offer and maintain government Web sites, supplying the space for digital democracy on a government Web site and utilizing it is a prerequisite for such democracy in public administration. The major research question of this study is: What factors determine public administrators' acceptance of the practice of digital democracy on government Web sites? More specifically, this study focuses on a single practice of digital democracy and aims to examine the impact of individual, organizational, and system characteristics on administrators' intentions to use online policy forums on government Web sites.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Citizens' involvement in public affairs through the Internet has brought about the use of several

essentially similar terms, such as "digital democracy," "electronic democracy," "e-democracy," "virtual democracy," "teledemocracy," and "cyberdemocracy." This study uses the term "digital democracy" to describe the use of government Web sites for citizens' participation in public affairs. The main characteristic of the new information and communication technology (ICT) is digital data transfer (Hague & Loader, 1999), and "digital democracy" is defined as "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using ICT or computer-mediated communication instead, as an addition, not a replacement for, traditional analogue political practices" (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000, p. 1).

Online citizen participation can enrich democratic processes and build public trust by enabling public agencies to receive broader and more diverse opinions from citizens than those available through traditional means of off-line participation (Holzer, Melitski, Rho, & Schwester, 2004). Through online discussions, members of the public can learn from each other, and public administrators can become better informed, sometimes through the experience and hidden expertise of the public (Coleman & Gotze, 2001). Several scholars have suggested typologies of digital democracy (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003; Norris, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 1999). With regard to the current state of digital democracy, information disclosure on government Web sites is full-fledged, and many agencies are receiving feedback on policy issues from citizens through the Internet. However, online discussion is just emerging, and decision making through government Web sites such as electronic referenda is still relatively infrequent in government (Norris & Moon, 2005; Kim, 2004).

Online Policy Forums

An "online policy forum," or an online discussion forum, is a place on the government Web site where public officials or citizens can post discussion topics on policy issues and exchange their views on those topics over a period of time. Online

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