

Chapter 8

Beyond the Digital Divide: Closing the Generation and Disability Gaps?

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ABSTRACT

An essential, and rapidly-developing, aspect of electronic government is the growing use of online resources for government activities such as e-rulemaking, citizen participation, and the provision of information, referral, and assistance for users with needs for service delivery. Major developments in the use of electronic government resources for services needed by the elder and disability populations are the primary focus of this chapter. We focus here on the results of a large-scale statewide survey of residents of the state of Iowa, and on the findings from evaluations of aging and disability resource Websites in the United States and in other countries. Current and future trends in service delivery that may help to bridge digital divides for the elder and disability populations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

E-government is a key concept in scholarly and policymaker dialogues about democratic government. Generational differences play an important role in linking information and communications

technologies (ICT) literacy and usage with political outcomes such as partisanship, elections, or public policy decisions (Fox, 2004). Complex contemporary issues regarding full participation by older members of the political community revolve around the rapidly expanding reliance on electronic information and communication technologies. All too

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often older adults are unfamiliar with opportunities commenting on pending government rules and regulations and the corresponding use of online “e-rulemaking” by public agencies (e.g., Garson, 2005; Shulman, Thrane, & Shelley, 2005).

Other socio-demographic differences, together with generational effects, define what has become known as the “digital divide” (Castells, 1999; Compaine, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Servon, 2002; Warschauer, 2003). Age, race, language, and disabilities are significant predictors of ICT literacy, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Cooper, 2000; Dennis, 2001; Goslee, 1998; Lenhart et al.; Loges & Jung, 2001; Novak & Hoffman, 1998). Previous research has shown that age and disability are closely related to the digital divide in political participation, access to electronic media, and the use of services available through electronic sources.

E-government—delivering government services through a Website or other ICT application—can provide quicker and better services (Daukantas, 2003; Holmes & Miller, 2003), improved interactions with business and industry (Krueger, 2002), citizen empowerment through access to information and participation (Takao, 2004; Watkins, 2004), and more efficient government management (Cohen & Eimicke, 2001). However, e-government provides accurate and reliable information to only those with Internet access.

The “gray gap” in service delivery is an important dimension of the digital divide. The elderly are largely unaware of existing services, experience difficulties in expressing their needs and in negotiating the human services system, and may go without needed help. In particular, determining how best to provide and fund care for vulnerable elderly with functional deficits in daily activities who need assistance in home management such as household chores is a major national-level policy need. As a result, a significant portion of the elderly are counted among society’s information disadvantaged groups.

The Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) initiative of the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Administration on Aging (AoA), in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is one current national effort to meet these challenges by establishing information and referral capability for the elderly and disabled in nearly every state. By integrating online, telephone, and in-person contacts, the ADRC cuts across generational barriers and serves as a virtual source of information for and about service providers that is intended to address the needs of the elderly and disabled population. Our study, in part, assesses the effectiveness of e-government, specifically the ADRC, in meeting the needs of the elderly and disabled (particularly in Iowa). We compare state-level and pilot-level ADRC Websites, and separately compare the information and services provided in other countries’ equivalent online sources to assist in plans for long-term care, retirement, and family-based caregiving between countries with higher and more modest levels of e-readiness as measured by multiple international criteria. In sum, we address how e-government is being used in the United States to deliver information and services for the needs of the elderly and disabled, and explore how these needs are being addressed in other countries. Within the U.S., the comparison between state-level and pilot-level sites is meaningful to evaluate whether there is a differential effect on Website quality—and thus implicitly on the delivery of information and services—from programs with a statewide emphasis versus those with a more narrow pilot site orientation. Comparing international Websites between countries with relatively more and relatively less readiness for electronic government has a somewhat different purpose: to ascertain whether the often vast differences in national infrastructure precondition the performance capability of e-government efforts to provide information and deliver services. Direct comparisons between the U.S. ADRC Websites and the international Websites are not undertaken

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