

## Chapter 13

# A Review of City Portals: The Transformation of Service Provision under the Democratization of the Fourth Phase

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reviews the development of portals by cities, their digital technologies and socially-inclusive platforms and sets out a simple four-phase model of e-government to describe their on-going transformation. It goes on to discuss e-government's recent transition from stage three to four; some of the post-transactional issues underlying their democratization of service provision and the participation of citizens in the consultations and deliberations this transformational process supports.*

### INTRODUCTION

As gateways to electronically-enhanced services, city portals provide online access to a growing number of e-government services. As such they have been successful in exploiting the opportunities technology offers to make local and regional government services available electronically, over the web. Today all larger and 'small-to-medium' sized cities have portals offering online access. As electronically-enhanced services they are seen as valuable alternatives to traditional modes of provision for the simple reason governments can now use digital technologies as socially-inclusive platforms.

Socially-inclusive platforms with the digital technologies needed to deliver electronically-enhanced services over the web and as customized products capable of meeting everyone's requirements online, via multi-channel access.

#### City Portal

City portals are core to this modernization of government and have undergone four phases of development as part of the ongoing search for electronically-enhanced levels of service provision. These phases of development are as follows:

- websites providing information about available services;

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- portals allowing the users of such websites to engage with the material hosted online and interact with it;
- platforms extending such online interaction into web-based transactions;
- web-based services allowing citizens to participate in this process of customization.

This chapter captures this fourfold classification of city portals and tracks their development from youthful experiments in tele-presence to mature exercises in the deployment of digital technologies. In doing so it focuses attention on the so-called fourth phase of this development and the deployment of digital technologies as socially-inclusive platforms. In particular on the digital technologies of socially-inclusive platforms whose post-transactional notion of e-government is open, transparent and accountable. Open, transparent and accountable with regards to the communitarian-based logic administrations are increasingly adopting to democratize decisions taken about future levels of service provision.

### The Fourfold Classification

Over the past decade, it has become common to come across portals offering *information* about available services. Static text on relatively fixed sites, has, however, proven insufficiently engaging for those using such services, resulting in the call for providers to develop *interactive* services. Interactive services that are not only considered to be capable of underpinning *transactions*, but which are also seen as able to support a major step-change in the development of e-government. That is to say, able to support a 'step-up' from the transactional logic of existing developments and onto a stage which allows e-government to 'come of age' by way of online consultations and deliberations. Online consultations and deliberations that are constructive in building a platform through which all matters relating to future levels

of service provision can be subjected to a process of *democratization*.

In moving between these four phases of development, portals are said to undergo a process of *transformation* (Torres et.al, 2005; Werrakkody and Dhillon, 2009). The first three phases of these developments are often said to be influenced by 'New Public Management' (NPM) approaches to e-government, where the users of the services are generally treated as passive consumers. The fourth phase is, however, often represented as a major step-change in the development of e-government. For here we begin to witness the development of users not as passive consumers, or even customers, but more dynamically as 'active citizens'. As active citizens whose engagement in e-government is no longer exclusively transactional, but that now also includes their involvement as user communities participating in the online consultations and deliberations which support the democratization of service provision.

This transformation from simply putting government online (phase one and two) to e-government, can be illustrated by reference to the S-shaped learning curve developed by Davidson et.al (2005). Figure 1 represents this 'learning curve' and serves to highlight the level of maturity required to develop from one stage of service provision to another. It also serves to capture the process of development city portals have been subject to and track their progression from youthful experiments in tele-presence to mature exercises in e-government. Mature in the sense such exercises in e-government manage the deployment of digital technologies as socially-inclusive platforms (Deakin and Allwinkle, 2006, 2007) Socially-inclusive platforms that allow their user communities to actively participate in this transformation via the online consultations and deliberations which it makes possible (Deakin, Allwinkle and Campbell, 2006, 2007).

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