Chapter 1
A Global Comparative Analysis of Digital Governance Practices

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ABSTRACT

The literature shows that governments around the world have sought to improve their governing capabilities by developing and implementing strategic information and communication technologies (ICTs). The use of ICTs can provide citizens with greater access to government services, can promote transparency and accountability, and also streamline government expenditures. This research provides a comparative analysis of the practices of digital governance in large municipalities worldwide in 2005. Digital government includes both e-government and e-democracy. The research is based on an evaluation of a sample (n=81) of city websites globally in terms of two dimensions: delivery of public services and digital democracy. The official websites of each city were evaluated in their native languages. Based on the analysis of the 81 cities, Seoul, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney represent the cities with the most effective e-governance systems.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a plethora of research in the past few decades on the significance of e-governance to the missions of public sector organizations. Governments across the globe and at every level have sought to improve their governing capabilities by developing and implementing strategic information and communication technologies (ICTs).

These technologies have transformed the ways in which governments operate and transact business with their citizenries. In addition, as Keskinen (2004) points out, the use of ICTs has created new opportunities for promoting democracy.

Ensuring citizen or customer satisfaction through web-based services and computer networking has been at the top of public reform movements across the world. ICTs can also promote government accountability and transparency, increase citizen participation, reduce

government costs, and in remote areas, help to break down barriers associated with distance, proximity or mobility. In addition, as Grimsley and Meehan (2008) point out, the use of ICTs can broader social outcomes "such as social inclusion, community development, well-being and sustainability." Interestingly enough, however, very little effort has been made to systematically examine the comparative effectiveness of governments' efforts, worldwide, to communicate and interact with their constituencies (see Wangpipatwong, et al. 2008; Backhouse 2007; Carrizales et al., 2006; Melitski et al., 2005).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the practices of digital governance in large municipalities throughout the world. In particular, it focuses on (1) the security/privacy, (2) usability, and (3) content of city websites, in addition to (4) the type of online services currently being offered, and (5) citizen response and participation through websites established by city governments worldwide.

FROM E-GOVERNANCE TO DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

As Singh and Byrne (2005: 71) point out, the "Internet and related technologies have made a substantial impact on the way organisations conduct business…around the world." Governments, too, have made major advances in their efforts to govern more effectively to the extent they have adopted web-based and related technologies. Democracies across the globe have embraced the practice of e-governance to enhance the quality of services they provide to their citizens as well as to business communities. More recently, the reliance on digital governance has become increasingly popular (Carrizales, 2008; Asgarkhani, 2005). Digital governance includes both electronic government (e.g., the use of ICTs to deliver public services) and electronic democracy (e.g., the use of ICTs to promote citizen participation in governance).

One of the most important components of digital governance is augmenting the directional flow of information, communication, resources and services available to the public. As Asgarkhani (2005: 465) points out: "The introduction of digital governance is an attempt to reduce traditional hierarchies in governmental practices and create an environment where information flow is bi-directional. The change from a hierarchical model to a networked and technology-based framework is a fundamental change to the nature of public administration and management, which we have been familiar with in the past."

There are several motivations for governments to pursue the use of digital governance. First, and perhaps most importantly, it fosters citizen engagement and democracy. Bi-directional communication and access to a host of government services ensures citizen participation in the governance process. It further promotes greater transparency in government, which fosters public confidence in government and ultimately serves to improve the public image of government. In addition, it can reduce government costs by streamlining government structures and procedures (see, for example, Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance, 2001). In remote areas, digital governance works to break down barriers associated with distance, proximity or mobility. In essence it opens doors, alleviates hurdles, and promotes ownership in government to ultimately ensure unimpeded democratic governance. To be sure, some segments of any population are unable to access electronic services (e.g., they lack the skills to use or the resources to own personal computers); thus, it is important for governments to set up learning centers in community spaces or in libraries, where direct access and assistance are available to all (Asgarkhani, 2005).

In recent years, digital governance has become increasingly prevalent throughout the world. And even though a digital divide prevails, developing countries are also instituting the practice often

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