

An Empirical Evaluation of E-Government Inclusion Among the Digitally Disadvantaged in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The authors undertake an exploratory study, in the context of a digitally disadvantaged community in the United States, to determine what factors are associated with e-government website visitation. Following a community-based initiative, designed to stimulate computer literacy and access to information and communication technologies for residents and neighbors of an underserved public housing community, a survey of e-government website visitation was undertaken. The results indicate that over half of the respondents are aware of or have visited e-government websites, with nearly a third indicating they intend to use e-government websites in the future. Awareness of e-government websites was found to be significantly related to e-government website visitation. Internet experience and perceived access barriers were found not to be significantly related to e-government website visitation. This research enhances the understanding of visitation of e-government services among techno-disadvantaged citizens to encourage greater inclusion. The authors conclude by emphasizing the importance of a community organizing strategy to sustain e-government participation among the digitally disadvantaged.

Keywords: Accessibility, Digital Inequity, E-Government, IS Policy, IS Utilization, Novice Users, Social Impacts, System Acceptance

INTRODUCTION

The digital divide is a phenomenon of much interest in the digital economy (Hsieh et al., 2008). While the subject of social inclusion and its manifold problems has been an endur-

ing concern of government bodies and others who wish to ensure the development of a more egalitarian society, the advent of the Internet and the ways in which it exacerbates existing social divides is unique to this period of history. As the Internet becomes more embedded in our ways of interacting with government and other social service bodies, those without access to

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the Internet are likely to become increasingly marginalized while those with such access will become increasingly advantaged. Consequently, governments are aware that a first step in reducing that divide requires that they proactively put measures in place to ensure that less-well-off members of our society not only have access to the Internet, but also receive the proper training to ensure their participation in the digital society, in particular with e-government.

Within the United States, the E-Government Act of 2002 was enacted to “create a law that will make it easier to get more government information and services online” (Hasson, 2002). Equity in citizen access of e-government services requires that the digital divide be addressed. In a study of e-government use by citizens, the digital divide was found to be more pronounced among government website visitors than among Internet users in general (Thomas & Streib, 2003). Citizens who are the biggest users of government services are the least likely to be connected to the Internet (Dugdale et al., 2005). The successful delivery of e-government to all citizens, especially the biggest users, is an imperative for all governments because of the opportunity for efficiency gains and improved services (Dugdale et al., 2005). A major challenge is how to get such citizens more involved and encourage greater interaction with e-government (ICT Results, 2008).

Thus, this paper explores the digital divide and e-government inclusion in the U.S. by surveying citizens of a technologically underserved public housing community and neighboring households. The major research question of our exploratory study is what factors are associated with e-government website visitation, within the context of a digitally disadvantaged community? Following up on a community organizing strategy (Sipior et al., 2004), a survey of e-government website visitation was undertaken in May 2008. The factors to be addressed in encouraging e-government inclusion among the technologically disadvantaged are first considered. Next, we present our research model and hypotheses, followed by the research

methodology utilized for this field study. Finally, the results, discussion, and limitations are presented. We conclude that awareness of e-government websites is an important factor in visitation of these sites. Further, we emphasize the importance of the community-based initiative to get techno-disadvantaged citizens more involved and advance e-government inclusion.

E-GOVERNMENT INCLUSION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A necessary condition for equity in information access is that citizens have Internet access. The divide between those with access and skills to use the Internet and new information and communication technologies (ICT) and those without, or in other words, the gap between the ‘technology haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is referred to as the digital divide (Holmes, 2002; Novak & Hoffman, 2000; OECD, 2001; Wilhelm & Thierer, 2000). “The Digital Divide is arguably the single, largest, segregating force in today’s world. If it is not made a national priority, a generation of children and families will mature without these tools that are proving to be the key to the future” (PR Newswire, 2000).

In a study addressing the adoption of e-governance, public Internet access was found to be the most important factor affecting the use of online government services (Prattipati, 2003). While the Internet has the potential to create well-informed and empowered consumers, it will also help to change the passive relationship most people have with the government (Symonds, 2000). Exclusion from online voting, and other interactive opportunities, will weaken the voice of those who are techno-disadvantaged (Althoff, 2004). These individuals are among the citizens likely to benefit most from government services (Lamb, 2004). If the digital divide is not bridged, the powerful communication tools meant to enrich lives will serve as a social divider. Empirical evidence suggests that simply providing access to ICT does not guarantee its use unless the concerns and abilities of users are addressed (Brookes, 2004). Dugdale et al.

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