Chapter 2
# E–Gov and Transparency in NJ Counties:
## Providing Information to Citizens

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents research on transparency in county government. It is argued that through the use of information and communication technologies, citizens can gain more access to government, hence keeping government more accountable. The research demonstrates that counties are utilizing information and communication technologies to increase transparency in a range of modes. That being said, the use of such technologies continues to remain in its infancy at the county-government level.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to show the direct benefits that information and communication technologies (ICTs) give to citizens. We argue that greater access to information through ICT allows greater transparency, hence increasing accountability and effectiveness of government. A number of stud-

ies on e-government, the use of ICT's to deliver services to citizens, have been done by examining how technologies such as the use of websites, have improved and enhance government's service delivery (cite). In this study, the authors evaluate the extent that NJ counties provide access to information through the use of their web portals. The impact of technology on government to citizens (G2C) relationships as well as citizens to government (C2G) interactions was addressed

in the following remarks from Robert O'Neill, Jr., President of the National Academy of Public Administration. He said,

*The (new) technologies will allow the citizen new access to the levers of power in government. As more information reaches the citizen, the greater the potential for them to influence and make informed choices regarding how government touches their lives. That potential gives new meaning to a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." (O'Neill, 2001, p. 6)*

The need for citizens to be active participants in government is inherent to democratic ideals. Even within a representative democracy, citizen participation in government can be seen as an integral check on the integrity of that representation. One major trend over the last century —starting in the New Deal era—was the growth of governmental bureaucracies. This placed a great deal of power outside of the representatives' control and into the hands of public administrators. In accessing government services, this creates remarkable challenges for citizens to make substantial changes in their own government. Often unaware of how to access the bureaucratic structures, citizens are left disenchanted and disengaged with government. There are many avenues in which public administrators and citizens may reengage in collaborative governance.

This paper presents research on one basic step that public administrators may take to enhance their relationship with citizens—primarily thorough transparency that is aided by advances information technology. More specifically, this paper addresses the levels of transparency that county governments display in providing information online for citizen and stakeholder access. Initial attention is paid to the access to information law and specifically the law in New Jersey that governs such access. Next, the paper addresses specific issues relating to access to information and service delivery. The authors then turn to

the methodology, the results of the study, and concluding thoughts.

This research remains in an exploratory stage; nevertheless, important research questions are addressed. Primarily, this research asks whether county governments use ICTs to present their information online. Limited research has explored this question from a county perspective. Therefore, this study supplements the research previously done by incorporating a state-specific county perspective. Exploratory in nature, this study may help point future research in ICT.

## BACKGROUND

Many feel that it is in the hands of the public administrator to increase communication between citizens and government, leading to a clear mandate that public administrators can fulfill. Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary (2005) wrote, "…public administrators have a unique opportunity to become the direct conduit for the public's voice in policy making, implementation, and enforcement…" (p. 550). Smith and Ingram (2002) wrote, "American democracy is an unfinished and open-ended project." They continued, "Especially during times in which patterns of governance are undergoing fundamental change, it is important to examine carefully whether expansion or contraction of democracy is taking place" (p. 567).

Opening government information up to citizens could be seen as a key to expanding democracy, since citizens need knowledge—derived from having information—in order to participate effectively in the democratic process. Having access to better information not only provides citizens with the tools they need to participate in their government's decision making but helps open up governmental processes to public scrutiny. From James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry to Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and into the present, despite divergent views on many aspects of government, there has been an

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