

Chapter 3

Transparency Issues in E-Governance and Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Today, people regularly debate the meaning of the term transparency relative to government. President Obama has made transparency a prominent issue in the federal government with his directive to use online resources to promote transparency. However, transparency is important at all levels of government, particularly transitioning from e-government to e-governance. This chapter discusses the definition of transparency related to e-governance and the implementation of transparency initiatives. The mission is to set the standards for government transparency and citizen engagement with an online presence. The standards and roadmap for achieving transparency in e-governance involve politics, policy, and technology. This chapter outlines the necessary political, policy, technology, and transparency issues in e-governance. The discussion and recommendations covers issues such as political will, insufficient knowledge, and fear. Also, recommendations address best practices in policy development and implementation. The current applications and data recommendations cover technology developments.

INTRODUCTION

E-government entails providing services via the Internet, ranging from vehicle registration and license renewals to paying taxes to commenting on legislation in process and e-rulemaking. Addition-

ally, e-government offers the unique capacity to provide information via spreadsheets, documents, and basic text to citizens related to the operations of government via an online format. Traditionally, these services have been provided to citizens through software and processes that have been developed specifically for the government (ex. TurboTax) or that are proprietary in nature (ex.

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Adobe and Microsoft products). The focus of e-government efforts was largely to provide services in a more effective and efficient manner that took out the government “middleman” and allowed for transactions to occur online at the convenience of the consumer. However, with the implementation of newly developing Internet tools, there is an opportunity for e-government to evolve.

This evolution or transformation will be to a system of e-governance where citizens can aid in the decision making process through online methods. E-governance promotes and is driven by increased transparency and civic participation through online tools developed in tandem with citizens. The tools and technology exist today for truly transparent online government. Raw data can be provided in exportable, machine-readable formats or with application programming interfaces (APIs). Untold applications enhance transparency and civic participation with mapping, visualization, analytical and personalized applications. Documents and data previously provided in a PDF or other proprietary formats that do not provide for information exportation can be provided in an open source format that allows for participation via independent analysis of raw data. Using Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, citizens can interact virtually with their governments in conversations and public meetings and hearings.

Excellent, isolated examples exist at the federal, state and local levels here and abroad. True transparency requires public participation and analysis with original applications. Hence, the status quo must transform from e-government to e-governance allowing for participation and civic engagement. The next step is to explore and recommend standards and a roadmap for governments to achieve transparency in e-governance. Government officials must set the direction for policies to be implemented with the latest technology that maximizes government transparency and civic engagement.

BACKGROUND

“E-government refers to one aspect of digital government: the provision of governmental services by electronic means, usually over the Internet. E-governance, in contrast, refers to a vision of changing the nature of the state” (Garson, 2006).

This chapter focuses on transparency issues in e-governance and civic engagement and the resultant changes in the nature of the state of government through transaction to governance through transparency and participation. E-governance involves the ability of citizens and government to carry out the operations of governance including deliberation and decision making online and occurs in the transformational stage of e-government.

The stages of e-government are as follows:

- Website presence stage
- Interaction & Communication Stage
- Transactional stage
- Transformational stage (Sood, 2000)

The website stage involves simply having an Internet presence. The interaction and communication stage entails email communication between government and citizens. The transactional stage allows citizens to transact government business such as renewing auto registration or paying taxes online. Most sizeable state and local governments have reached the transactional stage and some are entering the transformational stage by providing GIS, interactive, open source, and wireless applications. E-governance is more likely to occur in the transformation stage.

E-Government typically refers to having an online presence allowing interaction with the public, such as document searches, transactions and online payments. Governments tend to think of e-government as transacting government business. E-Governance, on the other hand, calls for public participation in governmental decision making via the Internet (Garson, 2006). E-government

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