

Chapter 7

E–Government in Local Government in the Era of Web 2.0: Experiences of Alabama Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies in recent years has the potential of allowing governments to move beyond simply disseminating information and providing more online services to citizens to the point of engaging them in policy-making and administrative processes. This survey study attempts to find out the extent to which public officials in Alabama municipal governments utilize existing Web 2.0 technologies to engage citizens and to affect their attitudes toward e-government. The preliminary results indicate that although some progress has been made in terms of providing more online services to citizens, Alabama municipalities, particularly small ones, have yet to take advantage of the existing Web 2.0 technologies to make the transition into e-governance. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research findings for advancing e-government in local governments and future research on e-government.

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been extensively applied in local governments since the 1990s, when the Internet became widely available. In an attempt to enhance their services to the public and to increase transparency and citizen participation, governments at all levels have taken advantage of these new technologies to engage in what scholars now call “electronic-government,” or “e-government” for short.

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies (social media) in recent years has the potential of allowing governments to move beyond simply disseminating information and providing more online services to citizens (“e-government”) to engaging them in policy making and administrative processes (“e-governance”). That is, the ability of public officials to engage citizens through the existing Web 2.0 technologies has the potential of improving not only the perceptions citizens have of their government (Berman, 1997) but also the quality of public service delivery in general since through their feedback citizens can play a more active role in the administrative process. Unfortunately, as some scholars point out, the implementation of Web 2.0 technologies for promoting transparency and participation in government settings has lagged (D’Agostino et al., 2011; Weber 2002); governments at all levels have yet to take full advantage of such technologies to engage citizens in a more interactive way (“e-governance”).

In an effort to contribute to the existing dialogue about the use of Web 2.0 technologies in local-government settings, this study attempts to find out the extent to which public officials in Alabama municipalities utilize existing Web 2.0 technologies to engage citizens. The purpose is to obtain an accurate picture of the status of e-government in Alabama, as well as to shed some light on the challenges public officials face when implementing e-government programs. The

following section reviews the relevant literature. Next, discussions of the research design and a summary of the key findings are provided. The paper ends with a brief conclusion and some suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Government: From E-Government to E-Governance

The application of ICTs in the public sector in the last decade of the 20th century created what we now call “e-government,” a phenomenon in which governments take advantage of ICTs to provide a wide variety of public services to citizens through the Internet, ranging from services that allow them to make tax payments, to services allowing them to hold web-based conferences and to voting. In this regard, many scholars observe that the use of ICTs in government has evolved from simply disseminating information and supporting online transactions (“e-government”) to engaging citizens in policy-making and administrative processes (“e-governance”) (Moon, 2002; Norris and Moon, 2005; Scott, 2006; Dawes, 2008).

According to Carrizales (2008), there are four distinct functions of e-government: e-organization (for internal management), e-services (to citizens), e-partnering (with other organizations), and e-democracy (for citizen participation). Although the adoption of e-government, which can be defined as the creation of websites, was fairly rapid toward the end of the 20th century, the transition from transaction-oriented e-government to democracy-oriented e-government has been relatively slow (Norris and Moon, 2005). In this regard, research finds that among the factors influencing the adoption and use of e-government are both internal organizational factors, such as leadership and organizational capacity, and institutional and demographic factors, such as city

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