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Chapter II

A Brief History of the Emergence of Digital Government in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Digital government may be regarded as the most recent development in the evolving application of electronic information technology to the performance of governmental functions. In the United States, that evolutionary progression is rooted in the Federal, state, and local government use of such information technologies as the telegraph and the telephone. This history, however, considers more than the mere introduction and adaptation of such technologies by governmental entities. Other important aspects include the development and migration of the technologies, as well as imaginative applications of information technology in support of government operations. Also, new policies have been fashioned to ensure the proper management of these technologies and the systems they serve, their protection from physical harm, and the security and privacy of their information. These matters are concisely explored in this overview.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication was essential for the new Federal government, for various reasons, when it began functioning in the spring of 1789. Because it was a democracy,

communication between the citizen and the state was required. Because it was based upon federalism, communication between the national government and subnational governmental entities was necessary; because it was constitutionally comprised of three separate and coequal branches, communication among them was also requisite. The early establishment of Federal records management and publication policies was an initial attempt, of no small importance, at facilitating communication. These included statutes providing for the printing and distribution of laws and treaties,¹ the preservation of state papers,² and the maintenance of official files in the new departments.³ The printing and distribution of both the Senate and House journals was authorized in 1813.⁴ Congress arranged for a contemporary summary of chamber floor proceedings to be published in the *Register of Debates* beginning in 1824. It then switched in 1833 to the weekly *Congressional Globe*, which sought to chronicle every step in the legislative process of the two houses, and then established a daily publication schedule for the *Globe* in 1865.⁵ Subsequently, the *Congressional Record* succeeded the *Globe* in 1873 as the official congressional gazette.⁶ It was produced by a new Federal printing agency, the Government Printing Office, created by Congress in 1860 to produce all of its literature and to serve, as well, the printing needs of the executive branch.⁷

The permanent location of the Federal government in the District of Columbia in 1800 contributed significantly to the development of the Washington community and to communication both among the three branches of government and by them, directly and indirectly (through the press), with the American people. Communication was also facilitated by a gradually increasing number of government workers. At the White House, a single personal secretary, usually a relative, assisted the President, who personally compensated this assistant. It was not until 1857 that Congress appropriated funds for the hiring of official presidential staff.⁸ A modest number of clerks began to assist with the work of the new departments and the courts. By 1816, 535 paid civilian employees worked for the executive branch in Washington, DC; 243 were in the legislative branch; and 115 in the judicial branch (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975, 1103). Their numbers would grow as a consequence of not only added institutional responsibilities, but also increased interaction with a growing populace seeking government information, benefits, and services.

Before long, a revolutionary communications technology presented itself to this bureaucracy of handwritten communiqués, ledgers, and logs — the telegraph. Samuel F. B. Morse opened the first long-distance line, connecting Washington and Baltimore, in 1844. Twelve years thereafter, Hiram Sibley consolidated several fledgling telegraph businesses to create the Western Union Telegraph Company. A transcontinental line was completed on the eve of the Civil War. Recognizing the significance and value of the new technology, the Federal government seized commercial telegraph facilities in April 1861, and created the United States Military Telegraph, a quasi-military organization, to operate them during the war. The Army Signal Corps ran war zone telegraphs and tapped Confederate telegraph lines. Telegraph censorship was managed at different times by the Departments of the Treasury, State, and War, and the President had a telegraph office in close proximity to the White House (Plum, 1882, 64-66; Randall, 1951, 481-482). With the end of the war, telegraph facilities outside of the South were returned to commercial operators, Western Union counting some 4,000 offices. The war experience, however, had taught Federal officials the value of this new electronic communication technology for a variety of governmental functions other than military and law enforcement activities.

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