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Chapter IV

Portals and Policy: Implications of Electronic Access to U.S. Federal Government Information and Services

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the emerging electronic “portal” model of information and service delivery to U.S. citizens, businesses, and government agencies. The portal model is being used as a technology framework in the U.S. Federal government to carry out the electronic government strategies set out in the President’s Management Agenda for 2002 and the subsequent 24 electronic government initiatives included in the Budget of the United States Government for 2003 and the E-Government Strategy. FirstGov.gov is the official Federal government portal for all information and services delivered by the Federal executive agencies. The legal and organizational framework for FirstGov, based on an in-depth case study, is presented and evaluated as a model for future electronic government initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Federal government is the world's largest creator, maintainer and disseminator of information. The Federal government's information technology (IT) portfolio of investments for fiscal year 2003 is approximately \$52 billion; a portion of this includes the development of 900 major IT projects, which account for \$18 billion of the total IT budget for fiscal year 2003. This makes the United States the largest investor in IT in the world (*Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2003*).

Under the current Bush administration, the development and further enhancement of electronic government applications is one of the five government-wide Presidential management initiatives highlighted as critical for improving government performance. This continues the strategic focus on information technology that began in the Clinton Administration with the creation of the National Performance Review. The implementation of FirstGov.gov, the first Federal government-wide portal, was a major project endorsed, developed, and launched under the aegis of the Clinton administration.

The portal concept of electronic commerce has become a dominant theme in today's Internet environment. At its most basic, a portal is the main doorway for users to access the Web. It is somewhat analogous to a homepage as Internet users see it as a personal entry point to the Web. Further, it becomes a place Internet users routinely access, meeting a range of their information and commerce needs (Kalakota and Robinson, 2001). Government is moving towards a portal model of business in an effort to offer a more integrated or horizontal view of government — one that minimizes the “agency” or stovepipe aspect of services and information and capitalizes on the “content” or subject of the information or service need. The development and use of a single point of access application to government is seen as a necessary condition in the move to a more citizen-centric Federal government. It is envisioned that an electronic government portal will transform the citizens' relationships with their government. Governance will also be facilitated; with portals creating communities of interest that will meet around issues of democracy, politics, and electronic interaction with elected officials, enabling an unprecedented flow of conversation between citizen and government. FirstGov.gov was designed to enable government-to-citizen (G2C), government-to-business (G2B), and government-to-government (G2G) interactions and transactions to occur.

FirstGov.gov was launched on September 22, 2000, with 47 million U.S. Federal government web pages. FirstGov.gov is the only official U.S. Federal government Web portal. The intent is to be a single, trusted, point-of-service for citizens and businesses to the services and information resources of government. The Presidential Memo of December 17, 1999, *Electronic Government*, was the impetus behind the development of FirstGov.gov, calling for a government-wide portal that would be accessible by type of service or information needed. The vision for this portal was described as a high-speed, 24 hour-a-day, seven days-a-week, user-friendly entry point to every online resource, be it information, data, or service, offered by the Federal government, and ultimately, to all levels of government in the United States. FirstGov.gov was also seen as the vehicle to substantively reduce government bureaucracy, create a more responsive and customer-focused government, and enable a new and active citizen participation in democratic processes. Today (September, 2002) FirstGov.gov contains information and services from more than 51 million Federal, state, local, District of Columbia, and tribal government web pages of information, services and transactions.

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