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ITB9463

Chapter XI

Issues in E-Commerce and E-Government Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines three issues emerging in the fields of e-government service delivery and e-commerce — the need for and a potential structure for performance measures, the heightened need for security awareness around e-government and e-commerce, and the need for e-government web design centered around usability. Beginning these discussions are some basic definitions, a review of the current literature on e-government and a discussion of the stages of e-government development. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a future research agenda in e-service delivery and e-commerce.

Electronic government, or e-government, can be defined as the “use of technology, particularly web-based Internet applications, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, employees, other agencies, and government entities” (McClure, 2000). As will be discussed later, e-commerce applications are a subset of e-government applications, and can be easily defined as “Business transactions conducted by electronic means other than conventional telephone service, e.g., facsimile or electronic mail (e-mail)” (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2002).

E-GOVERNMENT AND E-SERVICE DELIVERY

In the short period in which research has been taking place on e-government, there has been a rapidly growing body of descriptive research concerning what is taking place at the international, federal, state and local levels. However, there has been virtually no research on the impacts of the fledgling e-government movement.

The forgotten ancestor of e-government and e-service delivery are the freenets, or community networks, that began in the 1980s as computerized bulletin board systems (BBSs) (Rheingold, 1993). These efforts were online discussion communities backed by government information and information about community events — they were early grassroots efforts to apply technology to the democratic process and neighborhood services. These efforts predated the wide diffusion of the World Wide Web and other graphical interfaces and were largely based upon text conferencing and Gopher data access systems. Their importance as ancestors is acknowledged by recognizing that several touted government websites are built directly on the backbones of previous freenets — Cleveland, Ohio Freenet (the very first of these online communities), Blacksburg, Virginia (Blacksburg Electronic Village or BEV), Santa Monica, California's Public Electronic Network (PEN), and Charlotte's Web in Charlottesville, North Carolina.

Throughout the history of the United States, scholars, activists, and democrats have been concerned with the ability of the everyday citizen to more actively participate in their governments and so, to improve the democratic potential of this representative democracy and society (Pool, 1983). As certain technological changes have occurred in American society, these changes have often been touted as the route to improve access and communication and so, to enhance democracy (Pool, 1983) — and the early freenets were no exception. In retrospect, some of these changes have improved access (telephone) and some have reduced it (television [Ranney, 1985]). The freenets encouraged participation, but then were swamped by the commercialization of the growing World Wide Web.

These community networks, or freenets, organized around virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993). Probably one of the most famous online communities was the Santa Monica, California Public Electronic Network (PEN). PEN was the first urban electronic communications network sponsored by the local government to offer free accounts to city residents. Established in 1989, its purpose was to increase citizen access to public information and increase citizen access to public officials through city-sponsored e-mail and discussion forums. PEN offered searchable information on a broad range of city services such as homeless shelters, consumer affairs, planning and building services, city council meetings, and an online connection to the city library catalog. Notable discussions occurred between residents and their elected officials — many of them quite heated and eventually driving off the officials. However, some community organizing projects were also created through PEN, like the SHWASHLOCK project. This grew out of a discussion on homelessness and led to the conversion of an old facility into SHowers, clothes WASHing, and LOCKers for the homeless.

As technology shifted from text-based communication tools that facilitated community discussion to graphics-based technology that allowed business to better make their case, and then e-commerce where business and business tools really flourished, individually based democratically sound communication floundered. Today, even the

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