



## Chapter I

# Introduction

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The concept of electronic government (eGov), sometimes electronic governance, is about to emerge from a practitioners' concept to one that also attracts research. Conferences abound, and research scales up from individual researchers and projects to institutes, both those governed by industry, such as IBM's Institute for Electronic Government<sup>1</sup> and those governed by universities, such as the Center for Technology in Government at Albany University.<sup>2</sup> Research and development programs such as the EU Information Society Technologies and Government Online are focusing on developing strategic and transferable IT (information technology) uses in government. Research institutes with the focus on policies and development focus increasingly on IT use, such as the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the University of Manchester.<sup>3</sup> Countries and states establish "Task Forces" in the field, and there is a rich supply of Web pages with titles like "Electronic Government Resources," where electronic services are offered.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to estimate the amount of effort to implement eGov currently going on around the world. Many things relevant to the field come under different names. Much material is not available on the Web, and even if it is, it is often in other languages than English as it is for use in one particular country rather than intended for the rest of the world to read. Still, an indication of the amount is that a search with Adobe pdf Finder<sup>5</sup> finds 23,308 pdf documents containing the words "Electronic Government," while an AltaVista search finds 44,979 html documents (March 30, 2001). One interesting observation is that not only is research increasingly focusing on developing countries, but also policy documents and implementations come increasingly from countries outside North America, EU and Australia/New Zealand, such as India, Malaysia and Mexico. From a start in the U.S. and the EU, electronic government is increasingly on the agenda worldwide.

eGov generally refers certainly to *more* use of IT, but more importantly to attempts to achieve more *strategic* use of IT in the public sector. History shows emerging uses rather than strategy-based ones (Grönlund, 2000; Norris, 1999), and by now the use is so comprehensive and so diverse that strategies are badly needing in order to get some kind of return on the investment. Typically, so far electronic services have been set up at additional

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costs (G8, 1999; West, 2000), leaving operations much as they were rather than achieving savings or better services by improved logistics.

eGov is about changes in two related but distinct fields. First, it is about changes in the *internal* government operations that come about as IT is used for automation, cooperation, integration among government agencies and as tools assisting in decision processes. While such IT use has been going on for a couple of decades, the current spark of interest in the field is most of all due to the fact that now, also *external* operations are transformed, as information and services increasingly become available on the Internet. This has meant that government agencies begin trying to organize their operations based on the premise that citizens and companies will to a large extent manage their interactions with the public sector on a self-service basis (See Chapter 15 by Wiberg & Grönlund).

While it is certainly too early to provide other than fragmentary results from research in the field, there seems to be good reasons to investigate the concept of eGov. There are certainly many issues and many experiments that have bearing on the more extensive and more systematic use of IT in the public sector. While many issues are already studied under other banners, I believe there are reasons to consider eGov a research field because the issues must be studied in a context. We will return to some of these issues later, but in short the major reason is that government is not just any business. Many existing research fields have potential relevance for eGov, such as MIS (Management Information Systems), IS (Information Systems) and CSCW (Computer Supported Cooperative Work), but so far these fields have not incorporated the views, concepts and history that make up a democratic government in a way that make them immediately applicable to eGov.

The term "government" covers several aspects of managing a country, ranging from the very form of government, over strategic management to daily operations. Definitions of eGov generally also cover all these areas, and most—but not all!—thus typically contain not only goals of more efficient operations but also of better quality of services and increased and better quality citizen participation in democratic processes.

This book covers the background to eGov, illustrates the situation as of today and brings up some issues for the future that could form the distinguishing focus of eGov research. The authors come from countries across the globe, which is important for giving a comprehensive account of the concept of e-government, and which also provides various angles from which to gain new perspectives and insights.

## PERSPECTIVES ON ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

To integrate the research from different disciplines and on different topics relevant to eGov, there is a need for defining a context in terms of the public sector model. In simple terms, and at a general level where national differences do not matter, a democratic government is organized as shown in Figure 1.

All too often, an overly simplified view of a democratic system is propagated. In that view, the relationships of the model are presented as straightforward; citizens elect officials, which then go to work in a formal political system containing certain institutions and rules. Their work produces results in the form of directives to the administration, which with blind obedience—without any influence on the political decisions—executes the decisions.

In practice the system is of course much more complex, as Figure 1 intends to illustrate. The political impact administrations can exert by having the expertise necessary to prepare

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