Government Without Walls:
The Use of the Internet by Government Organizations

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Introduction

From its origins as a U.S. government research project in the late 1960’s, the Internet has grown to become a major component of network infrastructure. According to the Internet World Stats, as of December 31, 2009 there were 1,542,769,457 people on the Internet worldwide and 259,561,000 people in the United States on the Internet.

Approximately 15 years ago, most government agencies barely had an Internet presence. In that short time frame, government organizations have made great strides. For example, in the year 2000, over 90 percent of all federal and state government agencies had established websites (Hyde, 2001).

Currently, Americans have reached a point where they are demanding more government held information that’s already supposed to be public to be posted online. By doing so, the government is giving the public what they need to participate as informed citizens. Social Web tools like Facebook and Twitter are playing an integral role in getting people connected and are undoubtedly a step towards the state of transparency we need to reach.

Transparency and sustainability are finally beginning to go hand-in-hand when it comes to effective government. Clearly, the Internet is making the government more accountable (Welch & Wong, 2004).

This increase in usage by the government to share information that would otherwise be lost and citizens’ ability to access information, make requests, and receive additional
information has essentially networked the country. The rise of e-government has been one of the most striking developments on the Web, and it’s making an impact on citizens who are taking advantage of the opportunities.

Planning for a technology enabled government and community has become a multidimensional effort in building cooperation and consensus among government organizations to achieve goals. This has assisted in making government portals truly the face of government and the citizen gateway to services as sites become more robust and easier to navigate. The convenient accessibility of these portals in education, research, commerce, and politics reflects a short range of uses and approaches that can be seen in the way government organizations use the Internet today to deliver information and services.

According to a poll by Pew Internet & American Life (2010), 97 million American adults have used government agency Web sites. Roughly 40% of these adult Internet users have gone online for raw data about government spending and activities. In addition, these citizens’ exploit their new access to government in wide-ranging ways from finding information to further their civic, professional and personal lives, to applying for benefits, engaging public officials, and completing transactions such as e-filing taxes, thereby making daily life less complex.

The digital revolution is already changing the way that government does business at the federal, state, and local levels. Ten years ago, government was just starting to utilize the Web to provide benefit information, automobile registration, paying parking tickets, and
making newsletters available. Now that has expanded upon that. For example, many
government websites can provide GIS (Geographic Information Systems), which allows
citizens to analyze a variety of socioeconomic, transportation, environmental, and
economic issues. What was once Government to Citizen services has now expanded to
Government to Business services as well (Davis, 2007).

Internally, this technology has increased the efficiency and accuracy in the performance of
day-to-day tasks resulting in a more innovative and responsive government. These
improvements have taken the form of increased collaboration and greater efficiency in
information collection and exchange by fostering partnerships among levels of government
such as the advent of AFIS (Automated Fingerprint Information System) which links
federal, state and local agencies, private sector entities, non-profit groups, and
communities to promote excellence in governance.

This paper essentially provides a quick overview of E-government today and is divided into
four sections. The first section will discuss how government portals are improving service
delivery to those who require efficiency, speed and reliability. The second section
discusses criteria for judging a good Web site. The third section explores how government
agencies disseminate information while contributing to economic development of
government entities. Lastly, this paper will discuss some of the shortcomings involved by
implementing a virtual government that allows citizens and officials to connect where
traditional means fall short.
Service Delivery

The last decade has provided powerful evidence of how the Internet and email have entered national and international political life. At the core, services are becoming more streamlined through Web based service delivery. E-government has become a tool not only in improving government operations, but also influencing the public’s perception of government.

In the United States, three-quarters of e-government users believe that e-government has made it easier and more convenient for them to stay informed about government services, and two-thirds think that it has made it easier and more convenient for them to conduct transactions with the government (Hart & Teeter, 2007). The promise of e-government is transforming how Americans obtain government services and information.

Web based access to public agencies has the potential to make government much more open and transparent to all interested public audiences. On a typical day, more than 9 million people are going to the Web to get information and services from public agencies, making the act of seeking government information and completing transactions with government agencies one of the most popular activities online.

Online governments promote democratic practices such as easier and greater citizen access to basic information about government programs and initiatives. This has also spawned greater citizen input to agency and legislative processes. Government organizations are
frequently using the World Wide Web to assist in improving the level of customer satisfaction as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of the services they deliver.

The Web has become a popular tool with citizens because nobody puts them on hold, they don’t have to punch their way through a series of telephone menus, nor wait numerous days for a reply by mail. Typically, services delivered over the Internet are less expensive than those delivered in person because the staff is able to provide better services than to in-person customers, since workers can focus less on routine tasks that can easily be handled by computers. In time, this may eliminate the need to transact business by phone, postal service or in person due to the convenience of conducting transactions in this way.

For example, currently the government allows contractors and citizens the opportunity to save hours normally spent waiting in lines to purchase permits by completing a “virtual application.” Over the last few years, the turnaround time has been more expedient.

These systems have been cost effective and convenient, and have compelled government entities to create more online services. There is also a potential to improve social and economic conditions with its proper use. The degree to which this process is effective is open to question. The implicit requirements for many opportunities are still embedded in communications that takes place in face-to-face networks primarily.

According to Singer (2008), a government organizations involvement ensures that “its physical infrastructure serves the technical needs of its citizens, works to attract and retain
organizations and businesses that are similarly advanced, and creates a more economically viable community.

To realize this full potential, the American government must better inform citizens about their opportunity for engagement. In this way, citizens who are expanding their knowledge and utilizing more virtual recourses can grow with government agencies that are catering to their new needs.

Judging a good website

Government Web sites must raise citizen confidence by enabling a good user experience. Therefore, usability must be ensured. What is a good government Web site from a usability perspective? It is a Web site that meets the goals of the stakeholders while meeting the needs of the user in the performance of their tasks. It goes beyond minimum adherence to best practice and policy.

Today, many government organizations are concerned with design criteria or guidelines for WWW sites. To facilitate the process of publishing information on the Web, each government organization should establish universally specific policies, procedures, guidelines and responsibilities for creating and updating information on the organization’s Web site. This will assist in providing a more concise picture on how e-government can work.

While the organization’s technical staff can assist in the design of the Web site, operational staff will have a better knowledge of the organization's customers who include the public,
Effective Web sites should be organized to serve the requirements of its customers by maintaining accurate and up-to-date information. Other issues to be considered in setting up a Web site include: accessibility, security, privacy, consistency, maintenance, back up of systems and data.

According to the Standards Review and Recommendation Publication (2003), government organizations should take the criteria listed below into consideration for development of a Web site.

**Accessibility**

Making accommodations on the Web site for the greatest number of users increases the availability and usefulness of those materials.

**Privacy and Security Policy**

Public confidence in the use of the Internet depends on the privacy and security of the information they knowingly provide, or is otherwise collected by a government entity. This includes the collection and use of information about an individual when they visit a government web site. Every government entity should develop and publish privacy and security policy that identifies what information is collected by a Web site and how that information is used.

**Transaction Risk Assessment**
Prior to providing access to information or services on a state Web site that requires user identification; each government entity should conduct a transaction risk assessment, and implement appropriate security and privacy safeguards.

**General Web Page Standards**

Creating Web pages entails a responsibility to the customer. The design and coding should follow correct HTML format at all times, and ensure that the site/pages are available to readers who don't have fast Internet connections, the latest browsers, or large-screen monitors. All government Web pages should avoid the use of frames, because they provide poor navigation for users and because sites with frames limit public access to information. Web sites/pages should not be designed for a specific feature of a Web browser or the latest version.

**Linking and Indexing Internet Sites**

This requires all state agencies that maintain a generally accessible Internet site cooperating to facilitate useful electronic links among the sites. State agencies can attempt to link their sites in such a manner that different sites from which persons can be expected to need information concurrently are linked, and that the site can be located easily through electronic means.
Disseminating Information & Increasing Responsibility

Today's global citizens live in a world where communication technology offers revolutionary opportunities for new interactions between each other and their respective governments. There is evidence that electronic dissemination of government information increases the transparency of government and thus enhances public trust in government actions. Citizens worldwide are beginning to translate this opportunity into online citizenship (Hart & Teeter, 2007).

For many government organizations, the Web is becoming an increasingly important vehicle for extending access to critical information, both to internal customers and the general public. It has provided a one-point contact for most information and transactions. Information online must be accurate and actions promised through the Web must be carried out. Records cannot be lost and servers cannot be unreliable. This is a challenge that should be taken seriously by setting priorities based on customer needs and the impact felt by getting these services and transactions online in an integrated, user friendly way.

Citizens are online and learning to demand answers at Internet speed. The Internet provides government organizations with an opportunity to disseminate information on a much larger scale, while reducing printing and mailing costs. This can improve service to residents by reducing demands on staff in answering queries to make more time for solving more complex issues and providing more in-depth information on a broader scale.
Government authorities use the Internet as a method of disseminating information about their organization and its services by electronically disseminating business papers to elected members in a way that is timely and significantly reduces the amount of paper used.

Additionally, government officials are more responsive in answering email queries since most issues and questions are seen on a daily basis and can be answered in a form letter which eliminates the need for long, drawn out explanations. The paperless exchange is a proven way to cut administrative expenses, which is making government websites more popular.

This is expected to contribute to the economic development by providing favorable information via the World Wide Web to current and potential visitors, aiding in policy development by giving immediate access to research material and other technical and professional information, and fostering participatory democracy by encouraging citizen involvement in and understanding of local issues. Involvement of communities in the planning, processes, decisions, and activities of the organization is strengthened when the Internet is adopted and used (Stapleton, 1997).

The greatest potential to improve the performance of government and connect it to the people in a meaningful way is electronic government. The potential savings are enormous, however, the continued usage of services, transactions, and information to the public, businesses and other customers of government in a truly user friendly way will require breakthroughs that are not likely to occur unless given high priority, adequate funding, and accountability for results.
Problems with E Government

Governments cannot chose their customers; therefore, the services they provide must be for everyone, and much of what they do involves dealing with the poor, the less educated, and the more elderly who are less likely to not be “plugged in.” Even though smart phones are helping to allay the digital divide, many of government web based services are not optimized for smart phones.

Internet access in America is widespread; though disparities of age, education, profession, and race continue causing digital divides with local government staff among citizens. Government must engage with citizens, specifically those who don’t yet have access to the Internet. The citizen must be at the center of the e-government enterprise in order to be successful.

Second, readability levels vary significantly across individual states and the federal government. Readability should be improved on government websites in order to make it understandable to a wider range of individuals.

Problems arise since government organizations are writing their sites at a much higher grade reading level than is read by many citizens. Web sites are not connecting with the people who seek to access them because the readability level of many government websites is high, making accessing this information frustrating. According to national literacy statistics, half of the American population reads at the eighth grade level or lower.
Public officials need to work to make sure the language used on government sites is simple and that the sentence structure is not too complex.

Third, disability access also is a problem, as local governments are lagging behind state and national governments in providing access to the disabled. There needs to be greater attention paid to disability access. Many government websites do not pass the W3C standard of accessibility as determined by the automated online Bobby service (http://www.icdri.org/WebAccess/bobby.htm). Visually impaired or hearing impaired need to be able to access and make use of the tremendous amount of information and growing number of services online.

If changes are made to a site, new accessibility tests should be run to ensure the site remains accessible to the disabled in order to ensure individuals are not denied access. By making these types of changes, e-government can begin to realize its goals of improved service delivery.
Conclusion

The rapid growth of WWW for government has been great over the past fifteen years, but it should not be overestimated. Governments should assume that different types of consumer needs should be addressed through different modes of interaction. Through examination of government portals, it becomes apparent that it is important to ensure that services are carefully planned, and that the costs and benefits are constantly evaluated. Poorly planned web based services can increase agencies’ costs without significantly improving citizen satisfaction (Cohen & Eimicke, 2011).

The Internet is a tool and not a cure all. When used with care it can help government improve its ability to serve the public. The promise of the Web is still ahead of us, but government usage of the Internet is already changing the delivery of services by enhancing citizen access to government information and making government Web sites user-friendly. Web site development shouldn't be a defensive reaction to be on the cutting edge of trends but more of an extension to the growing demands and interest to its user base.

Governments can also encourage contributions from citizens, enriching the online information sources and fostering a greater sense of community. E-Government seeks to improve access to government information and to establish strong management regimes for information under the control of the various government agencies.
The Internet links people not only to one another and to e-commerce, but also to the public marketplace of ideas, initiatives, innovation, transactions, and results. Over time, “e-government promises to revolutionize Americans relationship with their government, not only as customers of government but also citizens of a democracy,” (Hyde, 2001). The Internet has the potential not only to revolutionize the way government operates but also to put ownership in the hands of all Americans.
Work Cited


