Chapter 51

Internet–Based Citizen Participation:
Do Municipal Website Contents Reflect Officials' Beliefs and Funding?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter determines whether the deliberative features of local government websites reflect city officials' beliefs and funding for Internet-based citizen participation. Although the Internet is argued to have interactive potential to bring citizens closer to their governments, empirical evidence suggests many governments have not taken advantage of this potential. A survey was sent to Chief administrative officers of municipalities with websites, and respondents' government website contents were analyzed and audited against the survey responses. Findings from the audit reveal that in general, the deliberative features of local government websites reflect the beliefs and funding stated in the survey. The technique applied in this research could be a useful tool to investigate the degree of alignment between a government's Internet website contents and its e-government strategic goals, policy requirements and priorities, etc.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to determine whether local government officials' beliefs in Internet-based citizen participation and funding for online participation are reflected in the delibera-

tive features of their local government websites. Advocates for citizen participation argue that citizen involvement in democracy will produce more citizen-supported decision making on the part of administrators and a better appreciation of the larger community among the public (Stivers, 1990; Oldfield, 1990; Box, 1998). Some scholars argue improved citizen participation could halt the

deterioration of public trust and hostility toward the government (King and Stivers, 1998). Thomas (1995) argues citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions, and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society.

The above-mentioned benefits notwithstanding, incorporating citizen input into public decision making could have social and economic costs if not done carefully (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, Thomas, 1995). As argued by Thomas (1995), in spite of proven accomplishments of citizen groups in some policy areas, there is a growing body of data to support the contention that public participation which is automatic, unrestrained, or ill-considered can be dangerously dysfunctional to political and administrative systems. The case could therefore be made that the decision of local public officials to involve citizens in the policy process and in public decision making, and to fund citizen engagement, depends on the perception and beliefs of those officials regarding the relative benefits and disadvantages of participation.

The use of Internet technology to further citizen participation is believed to hold great promise to enhance citizen participation and democratic governance by allowing citizens to access public information and interact with government officials, by promoting better accountability of public officials to citizens through efficient and convenient delivery of services, and by producing fertile ground for reinvigorated civil society (Webber & Loumakis, 2005; Budge, 1996; Barber, 1984; Bimber, 1996; Scavo & Yuhang Shi, 1999; La Port et al., 2000). Consequently, some pundits and scholars have touted the Internet as a means to strengthen the political community, foster democratic renewal, and reverse the recent downward trends in civic engagement by offering a more convenient and less costly alternative to traditional outlets of citizen participation (Klotz, 2004; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Trippi, 2004).

Despite the interactive potential of the Internet, empirical evidence suggests that some of the promises of bridging the gap among governments and citizens through enhanced interaction between citizens and government, and between citizens themselves are yet to be fulfilled (Chadwick & May, 2001; West, 2001; Musso, Hale & Weare, 1999; Kerns, Bend & Stern, 2002; the Global e-Policy and e-Government Institute and Rutgers University e-Governance Institute, 2003, 2005). This may be due to certain challenges inherent in the Internet as a medium of interaction. For instance, the required investment in computer hardware, monthly service fees, and computer skills can be prohibitive, especially to minorities and low income citizens. In addition, effective expressions in a text medium require a high level of education (Klein, 1999). Furthermore, improvements in citizen access to decision making and broadened participation often came at substantial cost, with those bearing the cost tending to have substantial say in setting the agenda (Arterton, 1987). Based on these constraints, it is not entirely surprising that officials at various levels of government have not taken advantage of the Internet to bring citizens closer to their governments.

If local government officials see the Internet as an important medium of communication and interaction, they will be more likely to support Internet-based citizen participation. The literature suggests that traditional citizen participation has strengths and weaknesses, and Internet-based citizen participation is plagued with opportunities and challenges. The above stated pros and cons coupled with the fact that various governments at all levels have not taken full advantage of the Internet's potential to bring citizens closer to their governments imply that there are unanswered questions as to whether city officials believe in traditional and Internet-based citizen participation and, even if they do, whether their beliefs are reflected in the deliberative features of their local government websites. Although there have been several studies on e-government, (e.g. Global e-Policy and e-Government Institute and Rutgers University e-Governance Institute, 2003, 2005;

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