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Small Communities and the Limits of E-Government Engagement: A Northeast Ohio Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Existing research suggests that progress toward a “virtual state” is inconsistent – at least at the local level of government. Coursey and Norris (2008) argue that few governments have moved beyond an informational presence on the internet and Cassell and Hoornbeek (2010) suggest that populist engagements (Kakabadse et al., 2003) between citizens and local governments remain the exception rather than the rule. This chapter examines two questions regarding e-government engagement among small communities in northeast Ohio. First, it assesses the extent to which small communities in northeast Ohio use websites to engage their citizens. And second, it analyzes factors that lead these governments to create websites and develop them to enable citizen engagement. We find that limited capacities and uncertain demand both limit small community website operations. We also suggest that these findings can help us understand constraints to E-government transformations and perhaps also the inconsistent nature of e-government citizen engagements.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, scholars and practitioners began envisioning a new world of governance, a world in which citizens and governments would interact twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week to achieve more interactive and efficient government (Fountain, 2001). A progression of e-government development was envisioned in which governments would move in step-wise fashion toward providing more information, services, and engagement opportunities on the worldwide web (Layne & Lee, 2001). The end result, it was believed, would be a transformation of government-citizen engagement toward a “Virtual State” which would become more responsive and efficient over time.

To some degree, this kind of transformation is occurring in both the United States (US) and elsewhere. Nations throughout the world -- along with international entities like the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) -- now routinely convey information through worldwide web sites. In the United States (US), federal government agencies rely on the internet to provide information and, increasingly, to provide services for citizens as well. All fifty state governments in the US now have web sites through which they provide information and services (Holzer et al., 2009). Moreover, larger cities in the U.S. and elsewhere have developed substantial online presences, as cities provide information and services for citizens through their web sites (Holzer and Kim, 2007; Melitski, et al., 2005).

Local governments generally have also made use of web sites in efforts to convey information and conduct business more efficiently and effectively, although their progress in this area has not been uniform (Coursey & Norris, 2008; Cassell & Hoornbeek, 2010). This chapter addresses e-government engagement among a particular group of communities in the US -- small communities with fewer than 5,000 residents. It addresses two questions. The first question relates to the extent to which these very small local governments use web

sites to engage with citizens. More specifically, we assess whether or not small local governments in northeast Ohio maintain a presence on the web. We also characterize the extent to which the websites developed by these governments pursue multiple forms of citizen engagement.

The second question addressed in this chapter relates to the factors that lead small local governments to create websites and develop them with multiple attributes to enable citizen engagement. To address this question, the analyses presented assess the influence of factors that impact decisions relating to e-government-citizen engagement in small communities. By understanding e-governance among small local governments and the factors that influence it, we can begin to understand constraints to E-government transformations and perhaps also the inconsistent nature of the web based citizen-government engagements that are now occurring.

BACKGROUND

In spite of notable progress toward greater internet use by governments, existing research suggests that progress toward a “virtual state” is inconsistent -- at least at the local level of government. Brown (2007) argues that the slow progress achieved to date among local governments is attributable to an understandably slow process of local government (website) maturation. Others are more pessimistic regarding the prospects for E-government. Bolgherini (2007) suggests that a high proportion of e-government initiatives fail and Coursey and Norris (2008) point out that few governments have moved beyond an informational presence on the worldwide web. Cassell and Hoornbeek (2010) present data that re-enforces this latter point, and suggest that populist engagements (Kakabadse et al., 2003) among citizens and their local governments are still the exception rather than the rule. They also argue that some of this lack of progress is political, as local governments

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