

# Digital Government in the USA

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, digital government is a prevailing concept in public sectors around the world. Regarding digital governments' contributions to the democratic administration or democratic society (Leigh & Atkinson, 2001), a fundamental question has emerged: How can e-government cultivate citizen participation and citizen competence for public affairs? This question stems from a more basic philosophical question on how we set the relationship between the state and the citizen in the information age (Beachboard, McClure, & Wyman, 1997).

The prevailing efficiency-oriented application of e-government has caused side effects and different opinions,<sup>1</sup> because digital government strategies just focus on information providers' interest rather than public interest, and focus more on the managerial side of the digital government than on substantial contribution to increasing citizen participation, citizen competence, responsibility or responsiveness, and transparency or openness (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2000; West & Berman, 2001; Cullen & Houghton, 2000; Relyea, 2002; Beachboard, McClure, & Wyman, 1997).

Digital government strategies mainly focused on providing information or simple transaction functions, and they did not pay much attention to interaction with people via digital government systems (Leigh & Atkinson, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that a new way of thinking of digital government is emerging, in terms of increasing democratic values like citizen participation and citizen competence for the democratic administration and democratic society (Relyea, 2002).

Since the White House established the Web in 1993<sup>2</sup>, there are three perspectives on digital government strategies in the United States (U.S.): policy environment and operational requirements; chronological procedures; and the four-stage model (Relyea, 2002; Beachboard, McClure, & Wyman, 1997; Leigh & Atkinson, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001). For example, Leigh and Atkinson (2001) explained the e-government development situation based on chronology. They divided the digital government of the U.S. into three phases: Using the Internet to share information (Phase one; 1993-1998), online transactions, service provision (Phase two; 1998-2001) and integration (2001-?)<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, we can see digital government development with the four-stage model. Layne and Lee (2001)

analyzed the e-government procedures with four-stage models based on state government in the U.S.: Catalog, transaction, vertical integration and horizontal integration. In the case of catalog, the initial efforts of government Web are focused on establishing an online presence for the government. With transaction as the second stage, digital government initiatives will focus on connecting the internal government system to online interfaces and allowing citizens to transact with government electronically. In the stage of vertical integration, for example, once a citizen filed for a business license at the city government, this information would be transmitted to the state's business licensing system and to the federal government to obtain an employer identification number. The final stage, horizontal integration, is defined as integration across different functions and services. Some scholars suggest there are four usage criterions for digital government strategies: information dissemination, social equality, privacy rights and public interests, with two broad criteria, such as information-content criteria and ease-of-use criteria (Kaylor, Deshazo, & Van Eck, 2001). These criteria have been applied to the assessment case study for the New Zealand government Web site in 1998 (Cullen & Houghton, 2000)

## BACKGROUND FOR DIGITAL GOVERNMENTS

According to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memorandum for *E-Government Strategy*, there are three aims in modernizing government: Make it easy for citizens to obtain service and interact with the federal government; improve government efficiency and effectiveness; and improve the government's responsiveness to citizens (OMB, 2002). Digital government offers the potential to deliver public services in a more efficient, more holistic matter, and improve a government's responsiveness to citizens' needs. Old divisions between governments, between tiers of government and even between the public and private sectors become increasingly irrelevant in the digital age.

Smart digital government should focus on the goal of helping citizens solve problems. Most people are not interested in which government agency, or even which tier of government, is responsible. Nor should they be.

Nor are they interested in bureaucratic acronyms and governmental self-promotion. Digital government should deliver services to citizens seamlessly and in a common-sense way, without requiring them to surf around to find the right Web site. Based on these substantial purposes that digital government has and the diverse approaches and the current usage patterns of digital government, we must reconsider how we understand the digital government, and what the substantial goals of digital governments should be. We can approach these basic questions through various theoretical backgrounds for digital government strategies. There are various theoretical models for digital government strategy: four-model by Dunleavy and Margetts (2000), two models by Glassey, and four stages models by Layne and Lee (2001).<sup>4</sup> In this study, I choose the Dunleavy and Margetts' model (2000).

### **The “Digital NPM Scenario”**

The digital NPM scenario was aimed at producing a dramatic displacement of demand from current physical services into electronic substitutes, with emphasis on substantial cost reductions for standardized public services and major cutbacks in public agencies' personnel numbers. NPM is focused on the disaggregation, competition and incentivization agenda, as well as cost-cutting potential, rather than on potential for enhancing quality of service or opening government to greater citizen accountability. From this approach, we can expect some negative impacts, such as: difficulty in making citizens appropriate recipients of corporate suppliers, strong resistance from small businesses and elderly people, digital divide and strong government mandating that citizens interact with them in particular ways. In other words, other forms of substantial costs have emerged in terms of damaging citizens' competence and levels of political involvement, along with a likely increase in policy complexity, as governments' remaining in-house capabilities for undertaking Web administration and Web-enabling hollow out.

### **The “Digital State Paradigm”**

This approach represents a different track, where radical Web-enabled change inside government replaces NPM as the dominant public administration paradigm. This approach works strongly against the fragmenting tendencies of NPM, and is much more integrative. In addition, Internet and Web changes are now one of the strongest forces for “joined-up government,” for a “holistic” approach to data acquisition and utilization instead of the previously highly compartmentalized and non-communicating data “silos” of fragmented departments and agen-

cies. This approach uses the Web as part of a process of continual organizational learning, making incremental improvements and testing effects on customers, which allows continual and rapid customer feedback; and entailing agency staff trying to get close to customers and use their feedback to reengineer public services. In addition, this approach dramatically enhances citizen competence and reduces policy complexity, and becomes the central operating tool of the whole organization, as well as the critical interface between government and society.

### **INTERIM EVALUATION OF THE U.S. DIGITAL GOVERNMENT**

Based on usage patterns of people in the U.S. and the theoretical backgrounds for digital government, the current appraisal results of the U.S. digital governments can be concluded. According to the Development Phase model, the U.S. is mainly in phase one and phase two, and in the field of criminal data integration, partly in phase three. According to four-stage models for digital government development, the U.S. is mainly in catalog/transaction with limited activities and vertical integration, in part based on different levels of government, such as criminal data integration. In addition, the U.S. is focused on economy-related activities rather than on broader public policy proposals, such as policy-related information dissemination or citizen participation. According to the United Nations (UN) assessment report on e-government readiness, among 191 nations around the world, the U.S. shows upper levels of ranking of government Web sites and online transaction services, but e-participation, citizen participation and feedback on policies still have a long way to go (see Figure 1).

Based on these appraisals, there is an emerging issue: Interactive communication and service delivery, in particular, require developers to re-think past assumptions and their own training and, on a daily basis, implement new and different ways of using rapidly changing technology (OMB, 2002). The result of this shift is that governments are using technology to present information in old ways and are also moving to develop new ways of presenting information and providing services for citizens. These changes will continue to occur as the public sector gains experience with and learns to exploit its potential. The phenomenon of the government on the Web promises to change how governments interact with their citizens, how the democratic process unfolds (Stowers, 1999; Beachboard, McClure & Wyman, 1997; Layne & Lee, 2001).

For this reason, some scholars suggested that we have to reconcile the incoherent directions of develop-

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