

Chapter 4

E-Government Concept: A Holistic and Eclectic Framework

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, many different definitions for the e-government term have appeared in the literature. This diversity of definitions created a conceptual multiplicity and divergence. While being understandable, taking into consideration the newness of the e-government field, this may be prejudicing the e-government research and development. The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the clarification of the e-government concept, by providing a framework that hopefully will help to understand its boundaries and main constituents, as well as the way in which many of the different related terms found in the literature, can be further articulated. The framework put forward in this chapter is based on a generic model of a democratic government system. Building on that model, six main spaces, where Information Technologies (ITs) can be deployed, are identified and discussed. The use of IT in all those spaces contributes to the overall development of a country's e-government reality and maturity. By suggesting and arguing for a comprehensive, holistic and eclectic vision of e-government, this framework provides a basis for achieving more sustained e-government research and development efforts.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, the term *e-government* was coined and started to be used around the world, both by practitioners as well as research communities. Since then, a significant number of research papers, books, reports, green books, white books, and other documents have been published on the

subject. Although, those documents constitute valuable contributions to knowledge development and extension in the e-government field, several criticisms have been raised concerning the lack of scientific rigor, quality, and maturity still exhibited by the research undertaken in this emergent area (Andersen & Henriksen, 2005; Bolívar, Muñoz, & Hernández, 2010; Grönlund, 2004; Heeks &

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E-Government Concept

Bailur, 2007; Löfstedt, 2005; Rana, Williams, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2011). Some of the main criticism concerns the following:

- The disregard or lack of variability of the research paradigm adopted i.e. most of the works do not state explicitly nor it is easily or implicitly understandable to the reader, the authors' research paradigm standpoint;
- The type of research performed i.e. there is a predominance of descriptive work and a lack of either theoretical, theory generating or theory testing work)
- The type of outcomes generated by the studies (i.e. most of the works produce descriptions, lists or models; only a small percentage of them produce theories or frameworks.

Although some of these criticisms are understandable taking into consideration the newness of the field, it seems to be the time to leave this initiation and categorize research opportunities, characterized by the publication of many articles in a still unstructured and unorganized research domain. The aim is to provide a step forward towards an upper level of research maturity.

One of the problems and challenges that persist in the e-government research relates to the meaning of the e-government concept itself. Indeed, the review, analysis, and comparison of numerous e-government definitions found in literature show that different authors define e-government in slightly different ways, some giving it a narrow perspective in which e-government is a synonym of electronic services (e-services) provision, while others giving it a wider perspective, in which e-government includes much more than e-services provision initiatives. The analysis and comparison of e-government definitions also show that there is still some confusion, overlapping and disarticulation in the use of terms such as e-government, e-politics, e-administration, e-participation, and e-democracy.

The aim of this chapter is precisely to bring a contribution to the clarification of the e-government concept. The intent of the chapter is not simply to provide yet another e-government definition, but to provide and describe a framework for the e-government concept that helps to understand its boundaries, its main constituents and the way in which many of the different e-government definitions are articulated. The proposed framework, based on a generic model of a democratic government system, suggests and argues for a holistic and eclectic vision of the e-government concept. The framework may become a relevant frame of reference in the e-government field. It can be useful to the research community, as an instrument to guide and organize research activities, as well as to the community of practice, helping, for instance, in the definition of general long-term e-government development strategies and in the characterization of the evolution and the current status of e-government development efforts of a country.

This chapter is organized into five sections. After the introduction section, we set the background for the rest of the chapter. This background section starts by providing an historical context of e-government, where some of the major developments concerning the use and adoption of Information Technologies (IT) in government in the last few decades are described and the most relevant landmarks that fostered the emergence of the e-government term and the rising of the so-called *e-government era* are pointed out. After the historical context, the section proceeds with the review and comparison of multiple e-government definitions found in the literature. By the end of this section, it will be evident that there is still no universally accepted definition for the e-government term that is agreed by most researchers and practitioners. Instead, the terms are frequently used with slightly different meaning covering different scopes ranging from a narrower perspective (in which e-government is seen as e-services delivery) to a wider perspective (in which the term includes

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