

Chapter XVI

Digital Divide and its Implication on Malaysian E–Government: Policy Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

*There is no doubt that e-government application in public administration and its productive use of information technologies (ICTs) would improve the interface between respective governments and their citizens in both service deliveries and provisions of basic needs. However, it is recognized that while there are many benefits that have been obtained by implementing e-government, there are many sectors of society that are not part of this growing electronic culture. Perhaps, economics, lack of access to the Internet and other technologies, low literacy levels and often lack of interest or willingness to use the new technologies, contributes to a country's disparities in e-government practices. It is argued that the concept of citizen's disparities in e-government application in **public sectors** is based on the hypothesis that there are both "information-haves and information-have-nots" in the ICT Era. In addition, the basis for such division may include demographic characteristics such as income, educations, ethnicity, regions and locality. Most of the governments all over the world recognized these fundamental divisional issues but fail to include them along the implementation of their e-government programs. Therefore, from a public policy perspective, the research questions to be asked are: does citizen's disparity matter in a successful application of e-government **in public sectors**? How much do these fundamental disparities (such as illiteracy, economic conditions of individual citizens, family and groups, disabilities and lack of interest or willingness levels) prevent citizens from appreciating the application of e-government? How much do these issues impact on the relationship between government and the citizenry in relation to the thesis of e-government programs? What kinds of policies might be needed by governments to ensure that*

large segments of the citizens are included in the e-government implementations? This chapter seeks to address the digital divide associated with e-government, which can serve as impediment for application of ICT. As a case study, the chapter explores the various initiatives that have been undertaken by the Malaysian government to bridge the gap.

INTRODUCTION

Science and technology have undergone revolutionary changes in the past century and only a few decades ago that all telecommunications services were delivered over copper wires. More recently, the world has witnessed the exponential growth of mobile telephony and the widespread commercial development of the Internet. Today, the dazzling array of new technologies, services and applications has led to a digital age of information communications technology (ICT) in which access has become a key component of people's lives. These changes brought so much promise. The convergence of technologies, its rapid rate of change and its importance in the development of the economic, social, financial, administration and educational sectors, is opening new opportunities from e-commerce, e-government to tele-education and tele-medicine (Ambali, 2007).

It could be argued that the changes brought about by the Information Age are revolutionary in nature. Malaysian government, towards its vision 2020, welcomes the advent of the information communication technology (ICT) with its opportunities and promises of a new world order and globalization. As such, the country has created a Multimedia Supper Corridor flagship (MSC) in 1996. The MSC has accelerated the country's entry into ICT applications in **public sector** to enhance its services for citizens. In other words, e-government application seeks to reinvent how government works and how it delivers services to the people as can be envisaged in the objective of the whole program. At the same time, the changes brought by ICT applications in **public sectors** pose fresh challenges especially to the

people in the developing world such as Malaysia (see: Ambali, 2007). A number of citizens have been completely shut out of the digital revolution and the promise it holds. As the pace of the technological revolution increases, so does the digital disparity in e-government agenda of the country. The disparity in e-government concerns Malaysian government and governments elsewhere in the world, private sector, multi-lateral organizations, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations and the citizens themselves.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO ICT APPLICATION AND DIGITAL DIVIDE

Diffusion of Innovation Theory and Digital Divide

The Diffusion of Innovations theorists such as Compaine (2001) hold to a belief that the nature of the marketplace dynamics will eventually close the digital divide gaps between **haves and have-not** without interference from policy-makers. The fundamental root of their thoughts relies on eventual widespread adoption of technologies such as television, radios and the telephone. Compaine established his argument in line with Roger's Diffusion of Innovations Theory (1986) that technologies initially are adopted by those with plentiful resources, and that these early adopters drive the cost down for those with fewer resources, making access an increasingly viable option for those who cannot afford the initial costs of technology. While appreciating the existence of digital gaps among haves and have not, Compaine has drawn

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