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World Wide Web Site Design and Use in Public Management

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The Word Wide Web (WWW) represents a major opportunity for local government to better the ways by which it interacts with local residents. The promise and reality of WWW applications are explored in this chapter. Four types of WWW applications are analyzed–bulletin board applications, promotion applications, service delivery applications, and citizen input applications. A survey of 145 municipality and county government web sites was conducted and the data is used to examine how local governments are actually using the WWW. The chapter concludes that the promise of the WWW has not yet been realized. Local government, while doing a fairly good job of implementing the less sophisticated uses of the WWW, must rethink the ways that it interacts with the citizenry in order to fully utilize WWW technologies.

Not long ago, a group of "netizens"–permanent residents of cyberspace–posed a question for themselves, Technology, Yea or Nay? In a self-congratulating tone, one of them responded, "Technology is wonderfully liberating. I don't need my stockbroker or travel agent anymore. I may choose to use them for a variety of reasons, but I don't NEED them anymore. Multiply that by millions of people and you have an entire industry that could be irrelevant in the Information Age. . . . Take this even further–maybe technology at some point will make government irrelevant. . ." (Technology, yea or nay, 1998).

For those of us who visit cyberspace only occasionally, a scenario like this is hardly cheerful and conceivable. But the irony is that if there is any truth to the prediction about the fate of government, it is government itself now poised to embrace the new technologies in the Information Age, most notably, the World Wide Web (WWW). A growing number of governments across the country, following a similar trend in the private sector, have moved into cyberspace and begun to disseminate information and to interact with citizens they serve through this new communication venue (Sprecher, Talcove & Bowen, 1996; Nunn & Rubleske, 1998). In some cases, a viewer (you can be one without relocating to cyberspace) can find a wide range of information about government services presented in a fairly elaborate and graphic format. In others, a viewer can get government services without taking a trip to downtown during the business hours, a blessing for those living in an area with high traffic volume or a government located a hundred miles away (Milward & Snyder, 1996). The dynamics behind this wave of WWW adoption and diffusion is the desire to capitalize on the so-called information revolution to allow citizens to obtain up-to-date government information and use government services more cheaply, quickly and conveniently.

Fortunately, our own experience with these developments has not suggested even a slightest possibility that technological innovation will ultimately lead to the demise of government. If there is any problem, it is the sluggish pace by which the new technologies come into the public sector. Despite great efforts, much of the governmental presence in cyberspace is still in the early stage, not counting the federal and some state governments (Nunn & Rubleske, 1998). It is not uncommon, for example, that one finds nothing more than an expanded version of the telephone directory in a government's Web site. Public administrators face some daunting challenges if they want to jump on the sensational information superhighway bandwagon and be a comfortable rider.

This paper intends to explore the potential of the WWW as a way of information and service delivery for local governments, an area that has been largely unaffected by the new computer technology. We will first describe briefly what the WWW is and what a government agency can do with the technology. We will then survey a large sample of Web sites maintained by city and county governments to find what information and services they are providing on the WWW. Based on the results of that survey, we will discuss some major issues involved in the WWW application: how to identify government services that can be provided online via the WWW, how to establish and maintain a service delivery system on the WWW, and what impacts such a system would have on the personnel and structure of a government organization and its users. The future public managers must be equipped with certain strategic perspective if we expect them to make intelligent decisions concerning the use of information technology. We will conclude this paper with a discussion on key issues for the future research.

What Is the WWW?

The WWW is an Internet tool introduced in 1991 by Tim Berners-Lee, a computer engineer associated with the CERN, the European Particle Physics Labo-

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