COMMENTARY

A New Way of Governing in the Digital Age

By Charlene Porter
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Information technologies and Internet transactions are changing the relationship between governments and their citizens.

The Internet delivery of government information and services, e-government, has been a fact of online life since 1996. In the fast-moving pace of digital technology, several evolutionary cycles in e-government have developed in that time. Now e-government is on the brink of a new era when it could work to transform government's service delivery and interaction with citizens, according to a number of surveys and experts. In so doing, e-government could also change the traditional structures of government and citizens' perceptions of them.

In the United States, the federal government, as the largest single government entity, is at the forefront of this transition. The federal portal FirstGov.gov offers an entry point to the full range of government services, programs, and agencies, and it does so in a user-friendly manner that has been widely praised by independent evaluating organizations and information technology specialists.

State, city, and county governments have also moved rapidly over the past several years to establish an Internet presence. All 50 U.S. states have established an online presence. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA), a professional organization comprising local government managers

and administrators, conducted a survey in 2002 of local governments with populations in excess of 2,500, finding that 75 percent have put a Web site online.

The quality and quantity of the information and services provided online by all these different government entities range across a wide spectrum, the result of thousands of individual decisions made in city halls, council chambers, and state houses across the country. Recognition of that divergent quality and usability brings on the next stage in e-gov's evolution—the challenge to identify the best practices of online service delivery and the best methods to use advanced information technologies to deliver the greatest payoff for governments and the citizens they serve.

If governments can rise to that challenge, they stand to transform the belief held by publics of practically all cultures and political systems—that government is inefficient, slow, and unresponsive. "The evolution of electronic government represents a bold new way of doing the state's business to provide a government that serves its citizens and businesses productively and more efficiently," according to a study conducted by the National Governor's Association (NGA).

The Council for Excellence in Government is an independent Washington-based organization closely monitoring the pace and progress of government online. Council Vice President for E-government David McClure said in an interview with *Global Issues* that online service delivery has already begun to highlight what's been wrong with the old methods. "The inefficiencies of the existing processes are already starting to show themselves. The Internet erases a lot of that inefficiency," McClure said.

The Council for Excellence in Government and private sector underwriter Accenture released a poll assessing perceptions of e-government by citizens in April 2003. E-government services received high marks, according to the more than 1,000 citizens surveyed by Hart-Teeter Research. More than 60 percent who were Internet users expressed interest in conducting basic transactions with government online—services such as filing a change of address, renewing a driver's license, or obtaining a birth certificate or marriage license.

Of those online users who had already accessed such services, 67 percent said that dealing with the government was easier and more convenient because of the online service, and 74 percent said that the benefits of e-government will likely grow in the years to come and improve government operations overall.

"They don't have to go stand in line to get a driver's license renewal," McClure said. "They don't have to write a letter; they can interact with the government via e-mail....It's convenient."

Evolving Internet Facts

• Half of all Americans and three-quarters of American Internet users already have used a government Web site to find information or conduct transactions.

• When asked to name the most important potential benefit of e-government, 28 percent of Americans cite greater government accountability to its citizens, 19 percent say greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness, 18 percent say more access to public information, and 13 percent say more convenient government services.

Source: Hart Teeter/Council for Excellence in Government

The Evolutionary Stages

McClure's study of the movement of governments online since the late 1990s has allowed him to identify several stages in the process. Governments large and small, local and national, go through much the same developmental process, he said, in the United States and in other nations. The first stage is bringing a Web site online and establishing a presence, which usually offers little more than basic information. Next a government will develop an interaction with citizens and create a channel for an online exchange of information. Then the agency will advance to the transaction phase—allowing users to reserve a campsite at a public park, renew a driver's license, pay a business license fee, etc.

The phase now beginning in many governments,

McClure said, is transformation, "figuring out how can you make the best use of this dynamic interaction you now have with people—citizens and businesses—so that you can redesign everything in your process behind it to make it much more efficient."

One of the progressive trends in governments' online services is to provide information in a thematic fashion, rather than in a bureaucratic fashion dictated by the structure of the government agencies that are the custodians of that information. On the federal level, for instance, a wide array of agencies maintain public lands that offer recreational activities. Now, online users can explore all those opportunities at Recreation.gov without having to know which government agency has jurisdiction over what.

The state of Massachusetts has established a thematic online clearinghouse for businesses attempting to start an enterprise in the state. MassMeansBusiness.com is an Internet portal that consolidates information from state agencies, municipalities, and private sector firms who are all hoping to encourage new business and improve economic development in Massachusetts. The portal consolidates information resources for a potential business investor in a way never previously achieved.

Projects such as these represent the new trends, but not the entire reality. General characterizations about the state of e-government are impossible to make because of the uniquely localized ways it is developing. Teams of technocrats, bureaucrats, and elected officials in governmental entities everywhere are working to combine their ideas, resources, and priorities in the design and maintenance of online government services. Their independent actions form a mosaic from which a full picture is yet to emerge.

Citizens themselves are getting more opportunities to contribute to the design of their online services. McClure says municipalities in increasing numbers are surveying citizens about the types of services they want to see online. When cities take that step, McClure said their online products get higher approval ratings from citizens. "[The cities] rate higher, they're delivering focused services. They're not trying to do everything. It makes a huge difference," McClure said.

There's another bonus that emerges from this approach, according to the Council for Excellence in Government survey. People who reported successful online interactions with government like government more. "Their trust in government, their acceptance of government goes up tremendously," McClure said.

The Obstacles

Ensuring privacy and security in transactions between government and online citizens is a high priority for both the people who use the services and for the people who provide them. A survey of government information technology specialists found that 80 percent of respondents identified the protection of confidential and sensitive information as a critical priority for their agency. The study, conducted by Lightspeed Systems—an information technologies (IT) company—also found that a majority of these technology specialists reported they do not have solutions to these problems.

"When gone unrecognized, IT issues such as privacy protection, system intrusion, offensive e-mail, and spam considerably drain IT resources at government agencies, costing these institutions a tremendous amount of time and money," Lightspeed President Rob McCarthy told *Government Technology* magazine in October. "And the survey indicates not many agencies have solutions in place."

Despite the positive reviews of e-government services that emerged from the Council for Excellence in Government survey, 46 percent of participants expressed strong concerns that their online interaction with government could compromise their privacy, or the security of personal information.

McClure said the findings reflect the high standards that the public holds for government's obligation to protect the privacy of citizens. "All it takes is one incident, and trust in government would slide 20 (percentage) points and everything would be pulled offline."

The expectation of privacy varies from one nation to the next, however, and some nations—notably Canada, the United Kingdom, and Singapore—have moved ahead of the United States in the types

of online transactions they offer involving the collection of private information. The Council for Excellence in Government survey finds that citizens in other countries have fewer concerns about privacy than Americans do and are more accepting of government compilation of personal information that could occur through online transactions.

Ensuring that all citizens receive an equal level of service from government is a concern about e-government identified in a report prepared by a task force organized by the ICMA. Even while governments move online, they are still providing services in person, on the telephone, and through traditional mail. The ICMA report finds that governments will be challenged to provide an equal level of service through all those channels.

"Simply because someone e-mails rather than mails a complex request does not mean, in practice, the issue should be rectified any faster," said the task force report.

Access and equity of service delivery are noted as

problems in a study conducted by the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University and released in September 2003. A review of government Web sites maintained by the 70 largest U.S. cities concluded that only 20 percent of them comply with an international Web standard for disability access, and only 13 percent comply with a standard outlined in U.S. law.

"Government Web sites need to do much more to make themselves accessible to all Americans," said Taubman Director Darrell M. West in a press release announcing the September findings. "Web sites maintained by city agencies are flunking basic disability access standards for the visually and hearing-impaired."
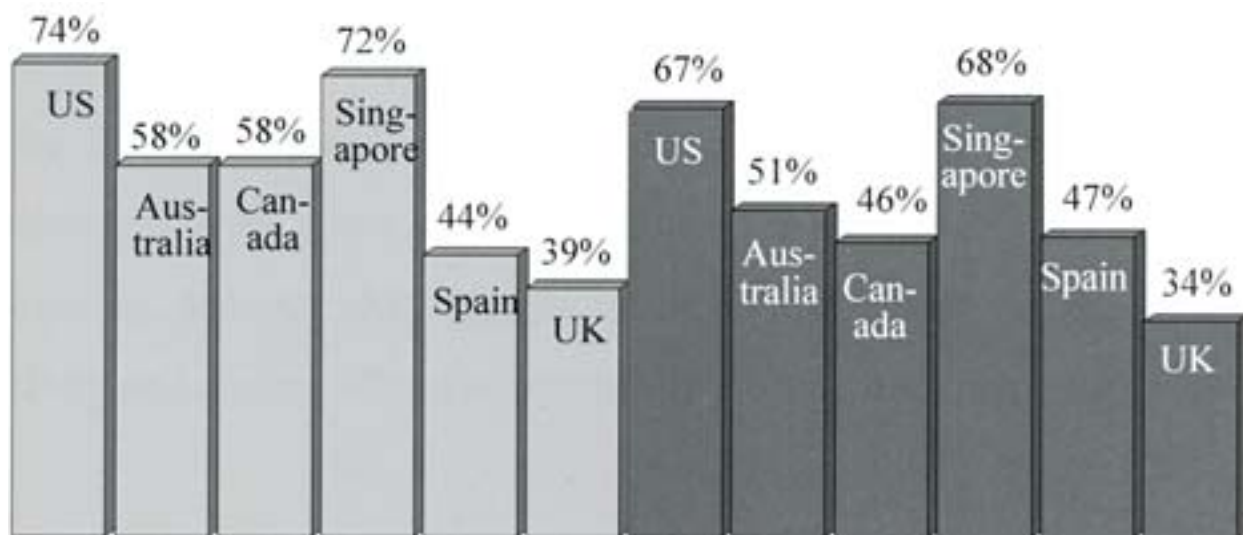
There's also a language barrier online, Taubman found. Only 13 percent of the city government sites surveyed offered any form of foreign language translation. A second Taubman study surveying state and federal government sites found a higher level of online multi-linguality. Sharing a border with Mexico and home to a significant Hispanic population, the state of Texas was

International E-gov Users Agree Information And Transactions Easier

E-gov makes it easier and more convenient to:

Stay informed about government services

Country	Percent
US	74%
Australia	58%
Canada	58%
Singapore	72%
Spain	44%
UK	39%

Conduct transactions with the government

Country	Percent
US	67%
Australia	51%
Canada	46%
Singapore	68%
Spain	47%
UK	34%

Source: Hart Teeter/Council for Excellence in Government

named by Taubman as the national leader in this area with 55 percent of its Web pages offered in a second language *(http://www.texas.gov/home.jsp?language=esp)*

The federal government took an important step toward overcoming the online language barrier in October with introduction of a Spanish language version of FirstGov.gov. WWW.espanol.gov will serve 28 million Spanish speakers in the United States, according to the General Services Administration (GSA), the agency that oversees federal online offerings.

"President Bush, through his e-gov initiative, challenged the government to employ the latest in technology to create a more efficient, citizen-centered, federal government," said GSA Administrator Stephen A. Perry, announcing the launch of the Spanish site. "FirstGov en Español is yet another example of making it easier for the public to interact with federal government agencies," he said.

The Future

Governments large and small increase their online presence day-by-day, even as they struggle to determine what services citizens want, how they might be provided, and how they might be funded. Even amidst this swirl of immediate activity, a picture of what the future might look like is taking shape in the vision of some analysts.

The ICMA task force found "(E-)government services help to 'democratize' local government in a positive way. Web site resources boost transparency, increase access to policymaking, and increase accountability from government leaders."

That positive outlook must be balanced against another possible outcome, according to the ICMA report. "(T)he rate at which information is received can also pose a hazard if it abbreviates the democratic thought process."

The prospect of increased transparency in government is one foreseen by many of the Internet futurists who watch the trends in e-government. A study released jointly in May 2003 by the Federation of Government Information Processing Councils and the GSA finds, "The use of e-gov can be an important tool of democratic governance, facilitating the transparent, two-way open communication that makes government-of-the-people possible."

Government jurisdictions throughout the United States and around the world are at many different points along the evolutionary e-government timeline. But authorities watching the trends seem to agree that advanced information technologies and their users have the momentum to compel more openness and transparency from governments large and small.

Charlene Porter is the managing editor of this journal and writes on communications issues for the Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State.

This article is based on a survey of current opinions, and does not necessarily reflect U.S. government policy.