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Inicio

E-GOVERNMENT: TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY

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> *"The net is the world's only functioning political anarchy but
> it could soon become a major tool for democracy
> by allowing anyone anywhere access to information
> and opinions of anyone else, anywhere else."*
> *Rael A. Fenchurch, 1994*

Introduction

There has been a long-standing relationship between technology and democracy; nonetheless, internet and its websites are clue components that have revolutionized this relation. The appearance of new technologies in communications such as radio, TV and even cable TV, have changed the nature of democracy. Although not everyone has viewed such as positive, technology has often been seen as a vehicle for the improvement of democracy. This perception has to do with the encouragement of public participation and the establishment of new channels of communication.

The Internet has reached the possibility to provide tons of information needed by the public in order to participate in their own governing. The World Wide Web and email were tools that allowed the average citizen to interact, which was impossible before, with decision makers. This computer-mediated communication replaces the old structure with a more direct participatory experience where policy makers can address the needs of the citizens through the establishment of a direct channel of communication. As we may assume, the result will be a more effective government that clearly knows and understands the needs of their citizens, businesses and other arms of governments.

Despite the belief of some groups that technology can injure public discourse, recent evidence has shown a tendency for improving it through digital governments. The use of tools, such as chat rooms and discussion boards, has accelerated pluralism and citizen participation. The drive for public agencies to provide information and services on the Internet opens up a new way for citizens to contact government that was not available a decade ago.

There are several implications to the use of digital government, both positive and negative, but we cannot deny the fact that there have been expanded flows between government and citizens that allow a new communication medium between them.

E-governments

The OECD definition of e-government is "the use of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government" (OECD, 2005). In such a way, Governments are adopting information society tools and working practices to remain responsive to citizens' needs. The most important anticipated benefits of e-government include improved efficiency, convenience, and better accessibility of public services. E-government arises then as a new way to make public services more accessible, easier to use and more effective.

The best advantage of this worldwide tendency has to do with the possibility of reinforcing the exercise of democratic rights by citizens. This is because it offers the opportunity of equal access for everyone via internet. Despite the several terminologies used to refer to this new phenomenon, i.e.

online government, electronic government, cyber government, electronic administration and digital government, all of them describe the use of information and communication technologies, ICTs, by public agencies to make the information more accessible through online tools.

Democracy in this context refers to the influence of the citizens on public authorities; the dialog between citizens and authorities; the possibility of making political decisions happen; the right to information as well as government transparency; and developing institutions and procedures in civil society. The general objective of e-government is hence the improvement and simplification of the relationship between the government, its citizen, businesses and other arms of government. Most governments use this tool as a way to speed up the deployment of the information and services by electronic means.

Governments worldwide have set the digitalization of their information and services as a high priority on their agendas. The result has been translated into a more effective and less costly service available for all citizens. The majority of the information and services has been perfectly translated to this new scenario, but the greatest advantage is that at the same time it allows the consultation with citizens, on public policies as well as on their level of satisfaction with government services. "The interactive and networking capacity of technologies would provide solutions to our rather tired system of representative democracy" (Ward, Stephen, 2006, p. 210). The instauration of this new channel of communication between government and their citizens is a high advantage that obviously has worked as a trigger for this tendency.

The emergence of online governments is quite related to the modernization of governments and to the need for transparency. Information technologies offer the opportunity to review interaction between the government and citizens from the ground up in order to make them more efficient and to reduce the costs for society. Efficiency in terms of cost-effective services can be achieved via digital public service, exchange of information and projects of cooperation among public organizations.

Using these exceptional tools enable the governments to improve the delivery of services offered and make them more accessible to citizens. These characteristics are achieved at the same time that they pave the way for the emergence of a more effective public administration capable of responding to the numerous challenges to come. E-government, hence, is an effective way to answer to a key issue: democratic values.

We may consider that online government has three main components:

 • Digital administration: refers to the improvement of the internal and external administrative procedures. We can find the online services that address the upgrading of the services offered to the citizens as particulars or enterprises.

 • Cyberdemocracy: refers to the development and improvement of the relations between citizens,as political actors, and the inter-governmental relations. It emphasizes the ability of the interactive nature of websites to increase participation in politics and civil affairs.

 • Information societies: refers to the development and improvement of the social relations with the entire civil society: peer pressure groups, NGOs, businessmen, etc.

Digital administration enables a quicker and more immediate access to the data used for political decision-making. This advantage is accomplished by the establishment of new ways of citizen involvement, the creation of a more direct contact between politicians and citizens and the built up and improvement of exiting communities within civic society.

Although cyberdemocracy is considered to be a key component of e-government it is important to highlight the difference between these two terms. While Cyberdemocracy implies the use of public discourse, e-government only refers to the medium for the transfer of information and citizen-government communication. Therefore cyberdemocracy is a target of modernization.

The establishment of information societies necessarily requires an improvement in the access to the new technologies available; the modernization of the educational system as well as the transformation of jobs in order to fit in the new demands of the technological era and the renewal of the digital governmental services.

The main goals pursued by the implementation of online governments have to do with the simplification of the life of citizens and to the response to expectations. People got tired of looking for help and being sent from a counter to another; instead they started to demand a quick, simple and user-

friendly access to their government. The means as well as the schedules should fit citizens' needs in order not to become obstacles but advantages available for them.

Flexibility is, hence, a major concern enabling efficiency that has to do with extended service hours, quicker administrative procedures, and new ways of contacting the public administration. The simple idea of having 24 hours, 7 days a week communication naturally changes the whole panorama. People can access the information they want at whatever time they need. Besides this advantage, the merging of information and the research tools offered by information technologies contributed in creating the paradise for its users. As a result many governments have adopted the commitment to offer reliable information in their websites available for the public use and as a consequence fulfilling the need for transparency.

The necessity for user-friendly schemes in quite important since many people lack the formation needed to navigate through these technologies. A single-window offering multi-services is preferable since information is easier to find. An initiative taken by many governments include the use of a single portal to avoid the user having to figure out which department or agency is responsible for the information he is looking for. The governments of Quebec (2007) and Venezuela (2007) have established a single portal with references to all the other web sites of the different agencies.

The use of search engines within the site is a huge advantage that results in time efficiency. It will certainly result ironic that the intention of speeding up processes would be affected by the fact that people spend hours trying to find the application or service wanted.

Figures worldwide have illustrated the new embracement of e-government. The 2003 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2003) showed that 97 millions adult Americans, this is 77% of Internet users took advantage of e-government. These figures refer either to government web site visits or mails to government officials. This represents a growth of 50% from 2002. However, the citizens who contacted government officials said they are more likely to turn to traditional means such as telephone and in-person visits rather than to the web communication. Another study by the CEFRIO (2004) in Quebec has shown that almost 40% of their citizens had visited a Government of Québec department or agency website.

As we mentioned above, the encouragement of public participation is one of the major characteristics of the use of ICTs. There is no reason to doubt that the internet has become an essential part of politics, especially during elections. A study provided by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005) showed that 75 million Americans accounting for the 61% of online Americans used the internet in the campaign of 2004 to get political news and information, discuss candidates and debate issues in emails, or participate directly in the political process by volunteering or giving contributions to candidates. A study by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2007) reveals that Latin Americans perceive that the use of mails, web sites and blogs are positive for political communication, although they still prefer conventional means.

As a result to this tendency, countries around the world have embraced the compromise to expand the access of citizens and businesses to ICTs. To accomplish this task they have engaged in a quarrel to diminish the existing digital gap through the formation and training of human resources in the technological sphere, as well as the investment in infrastructure and modernization. Online education is a strategy chosen by many governments in order to target the lack of preparation and information on the use of these new technologies.

We must clearly understand that e-government places the citizen in the center. As the Venezuelan government states it is an issue of empowerment "dar poder al pueblo a través del conocimiento" (2007). The users of government web sites are no longer passive users waiting to get responses from the government, but willing to find information that can guide their decisions. These users are also eager to participate in public debates leading to important government decisions.

This encouragement of participation is a response to the Governments search for ways to re-engage citizens in the political process. Electronic voting is considered to be a medium that intends to improve political participation by making voting easy. However, there is still a concern that has to do with the fear of fraud arisen from the mistrust of some electronic voting methods.

Bureaucracy and expenses arisen from the traditional communication between government and citizens are going to diminish as a result of the order and efficiency that online governments can offer. Delays in responses are also going to be reduced since new and effective channels of communications are to be established by the innovative technologies.

The advantages of e-governments can be reduced to the easier, more accessible and more efficient use of information and communication. However, some governments have found themselves dealing with sophisticated technology where the budget and need for training is a major difficulty.

We must understand that the regular citizen was used to interact across multiple channels, including telephone, interactive voice response, email, web content and multimedia. The new tendency is to choose self-service applications. The citizen is now free to decide the means of communications he prefers, regardless if they choose traditional means. In fact, there is a propensity for a mixture of the new technologies with the traditional ones. People are normally passing from one delivery mode to another during the same procedure. This means that a person can combine both technologies while doing the same thing.

The Mexican Strategy

The use of ICTs in Mexico is not a new trend. The Mexican government was already making widespread use of them by the early 1990s. Nonetheless, they lacked an e-governing strategy that just came into effect in 2001 as an initiative of the President's Office for Government Innovation. This strategy focuses on two main issues: the instauration of the portal e-mexico and the inclusion of the e-government initiative as one of the six pillars of the Presidential Agenda for Good Governance in late 2002. Obviously the objective pursued was the improvement of the governmental sphere and the possibility for a wider transparency that could allow a major scrutiny from public opinion. Along with this objective for further transparency came the Law of Transparency and Access to Information as a major development in public policy during President Fox administration. This law brings to the table the issue of citizen trust in the government as a key component of the democratic exercise.

E-government is more than the simple updating front office service delivery channels. It is also a matter of reforming back office, where coordination between agencies is a key issue. In such a way Mexico has clearly identified the need for reforms and not the mere integration of Information and Communication Technologies. As the OECD clearly states (2005):

While it is true that efficiency and customer focus of online citizen services are important for e-government in Mexico , the e-government strategy as a whole is more oriented towards changing the administration through horizontal coordination efforts under a reform agenda.

The Agenda for Good Governance (2005) intends to create a receptive and up-to-date government to address the Mexican challenges. E-government plays the role as a potential tool to improve the quality, transparency and effectiveness of the governments and public services. The 6 main guidelines of this agenda are:

- Transparency and government honesty to recover the civil society trust in the government.

- A professional government that allows an efficient and politically neutral transition from one administration to another.

- A quality government that fulfill and even overcome its citizens need.

- A digital government that enables the citizen to access governmental information and services.

- A government with a regulation improvement that guarantees that people within the government and outside use the online services in an accurate, secure, low-cost and quick way.

- A low-cost government that minimizes the expenses in order to offer more benefits to the society.

The innovation component intends to transform the former bureaucratic model into a model that benefits plurality and participation. At the same time the Mexican government understands the need for public reform and cooperation between all the agencies in the three levels of government.

The e-Mexico portal was created as an instrument of public policy to guide the country's transition towards the Information and Knowledge Society. This path includes the digitalization of services for the citizens and a close relation between service delivery, public administration reform and civil

society. In this way, e-government offers the opportunity to bring innovative solutions for reform and redesign of public services.

The Mexican government has made a huge improvement in the area and has greatly expanded the number and quality of online services available for its citizens. Following the example of some other countries, Mexico has developed a single portal that has already been internationally awarded as one of the best practices in matters of information technology in the world (Stockholm Challenge, 2007) . The Mexican project was recognized as a major effort to approach the population to the information society. One of the main purposes of the Mexican portal is to broaden the scope of public services and to provide information in four basic categories: health, education, economy and government. It is important to highlight the coordination between the local, state and federal level.

An innovation of the Mexican portal is the awareness of the different publics. Although it is focused for all the population, there are nine communities targeted: peasants, students, indigenous, immigrates, women, kids, elderly people, tourists and business men. In this way there is a space where people can interact regardless of their condition and societal role. At the same time the portal addresses the three basic relationships in a democratic system: citizen-citizen, citizen-government and government-citizen by establishing digital communities. These communities work through forums, blackboards and chats that allow an interaction between the parties.

Mexican government is also aware of the digital divide within the country. Many people still do not have access to internet from their home base, so they created Community Digital Centers that offer public access to information technology tools. A key component within these centers is the training offered to the user on how to profit from these technologies. These Digital Centers are located throughout the country in schools, libraries, health cares, post offices and governmental buildings. As an example of the scope of this project the e-mexico portal (2005) states that:

The DCC network has at least one Community Center in each municipality in Mexico . To begin, 3200 were inaugurated throughout the Mexican Republic ; in 2004 the installation of another 4000 continued, and for 2006, the projection is to have more than 10,000 CCD, so that all Mexicans can have the option of using new technologies.

Mexico , compared to other OECD countries, is still behind on the subject, but has an advantage on Latin America . The telecommunications infrastructure is not the most accurate to support the Mexican good faith and progress in e-government implementation. Besides this reality, Mexican citizens are not prepared enough to use the new tools available online for them. We must clearly understand that interaction is a two-way communication, and the fact that the e-mexico portal is working does not mean that people are using it. The promotion of the internet culture is an urgent need to make some advances.

The digital divide is a big obstacle to overcome in the following years, but we might say Mexico is already following the right path.

Conclusions

Although there are still some governments that have not implemented e-governments, the vast majority of developed countries already included this component in their agendas. The impact to the implementation of e-government results in better policy outcomes, good governance practices; higher quality services, improving efficiency, greater engagement of citizens, contribution to economic policy objectives and advancement in the public reform agenda.

Mexico is a clear example of the recent innovation in this field. Huge progresses have been accomplished and the government has benefited from them. Transparency and higher levels of efficiency are just some of the advantages that the implementation of ICTs has brought to the Mexican government. In such a way, we must understand that the mere implementation of ICTs will not be enough if they are not accompanied with the proper reforms. There have been worldwide progresses; nonetheless there is still a long way to go on a global scale. E-governments must follow the idea of cyberdemocracy, otherwise they will just be a modern way to display information without promoting civic discussion. Interaction is a key element to address rather than the limitation of information display. Websites must be interactive and offer the citizens a mean to express their views and encourage on and off-line communications. Other actions such as subscription to email newsletters, feedback forms, staff contact information, online surveys and polls, bulletin boards and chat rooms need to be implemented in order to create a real benefit from ICTs.

Finally, there is no doubt of the importance of e-government as a major enabler of good governance practices. Governments have therefore taken advantage of the 21 st century information and communication technologies to achieve public goals within a context of changing social, political and economic circumstances.

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