E-Government
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E-Government: Introduction and Overview

In its broadest sense, electronic government, more popularly referred to as e-government, is the use of information and communications technologies by governments to operate more effectively and transparently; to provide more and better information and services to the public; and to facilitate the participation of individuals, businesses and groups throughout society in their own governance. Another, more succinct, way of putting this may be that e-government is the use of electronic technology to facilitate better and more open government and governance.

There is now a common understanding of e-government as encompassing most or all of the components noted above, even if there is still some level of controversy among academics and practitioners as to the proper scope and definition of e-government and its sub-components in practice.

There are some who argue that e-government has in fact been in existence since the introduction of the first mainframe computers in government agencies in the 1950s. At some level, this may be factually correct, but the term itself was most surely not in existence at that time. The use of the term and the more dynamic and commonly understood concept of e-government as a transformational process in government, governance, politics, democracy and public management is directly associated with the rise of the Internet, especially as the Internet entered the mainstream of society in the mid to late 1990s.
Definition and Study of E-Government

E-government is an inherently multi- and interdisciplinary field. Concepts from government/public administration, political science, communications and media studies, law, public policy, engineering and computer sciences, and other. The study and, indeed, understanding of what e-government is, and how it affects the structure and management of government institutions, the delivery of any and all public information and services, and the relationship between individuals and organizations in society as well as those who govern them. This field is still in its infancy.

The main axis of controversy in both defining and studying e-government is whether e-government is or should be thought of as a broad and inclusive concept, or a narrow and exclusive concept. In terms of technologies, the narrow-broad distinction focuses on the “e” in e-government: does it include only or primarily the Internet and internet related technologies; or does it include any and all electronic/digital technologies from personal computers (PCs) and traditional computer based technologies, telecommunications technologies, as well as the Internet and the host of new mobile technologies and others that are only now in the testing stages?

In terms of public management and government institutions, the main point of dispute, especially among academics, is whether the term e-government itself refers narrowly to administration of government and delivery of public services; or whether the term should be more broadly construed and include the impact of the Internet and new
communications technologies on the democratic process including elections, political communications, and the participation of individuals and groups in society.

While a complete review of e-government definitions is beyond the scope of this section, suffice it to say that there are both commonalities as well as distinctions between them. A key re-occurring theme, however, centers on the transformational aspect of government in using technology. A number of illustrative definitions that have been adopted by a range of large, credible organizations, are included below.

The United Nations defines e-government fairly broadly as the use of information and communications technology (ICT), and its application, by the government for the provision of information and public services to the people. This definition subsumes the efficient administration and services delivery components of e-government, but stops short of encompassing the political and social aspects of e-government, which in United Nations parlance are termed e-participation, or more broadly, e-inclusion.

The World Bank offers a broader, more complete explanation of e-government, worthy of including in full here: “E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as wide area networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient
government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.”

In the United States, the federal government loosely defines e-government as the “federal government’s use of information technologies (such as wide area networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) to exchange information and services with citizens, businesses and other arms of governments.” This brief definition leans heavily toward the administrative and services aspects of e-government.

The Gartner Group, a leading private technology research company, provides a more dynamic, process oriented definition of e-government as “the continuous optimization of service delivery, constituency participation, and governance by transforming internal and external relationships through technology, the Internet and new media.” Here, again, can be seen a broader, more inclusive definition of e-government.

**E-Government In Practice**

In the United States, e-government by way of transforming access to government through technology was a key component of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government during the Clinton administration. By the late 1990s the Reinventing Government initiative had resulted in the creation of dozens of new federal websites and online cross-agency service centers. This e-government website push included a complete overhaul of the federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) website, and culminated in 2000 with the launch of the groundbreaking (at the time) FirstGov.gov government web portal.

Under the Bush Administration, a number of high profile projects were identified
specifically as federal e-government initiatives in 2001-2002 (the 24 so-called
Quicksilver Initiatives), and the first E-Government Act was passed in 2002. At the time,
Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.), a key supporter of the bill, said the e-government act will
"revolutionize Americans' relationship with their government.... The Web-savvy citizen
of the 21st century is accustomed to the standard of service on commercial Web sites and
will accept nothing less from government sites." The hopes and expectations around e-
government were indeed great at the time.

Other nations that were early adopters in the mid-late 1990s include the United Kingdom
(UK), Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. Canada and the UK, in particular,
were credited with implementing forms of national e-government that facilitated and
encouraged e-participation, thus evidencing possibly the broadest understandings of what
e-government is and can be. In more recent years, nations as varied as South Korea and
Estonia have established comprehensive systems of e-government. In Estonia’s case,
comprehensive e-services are matched by e-democracy and e-participation tools that
allow citizens to have direct input on legislation and participate virtually in online cabinet
meetings. The Korean government has developed and published perhaps the most
sophisticated national e-government strategy to date which includes goals of universal
citizen access and participation in government, and transparent government. To date,
Korea has made great strides in implementing this e-government vision.

E-government can be thought of as constituting the intersection between three related “e”
spheres: e-administration, e-services and e-participation. The relationship is illustrated in
Figure 1 below. E-administration deals primarily with the backend processes and internal structure of government. It therefore has an internal focus. E-services connects the backend processes that generate information and services with the end users, such as citizens (government to citizen, or G to C), businesses (government to business, or G to B), and other governments (government to government, or G to G). E-services, then, maintains both an internal and an external focus. E-participation focuses primarily on the external relationships of the government with civil society, and encompasses citizen input on decision making and policy development, direct access to government officials, electronic voting, citizen and social networking as it relates to governance, and other tools of citizen empowerment. E-participation has a primarily external focus.
**E-Administration**

E-administration refers broadly to the internal mechanisms, processes and structures of government. While the most immediate goal of most e-administration initiatives is to increase efficiency of administrative processes, a longer term and potentially more important goal is that of government transparency, one of the key hallmarks of democratic societies. By digitizing government records and making them available in electronic formats, and by streamlining and automating bureaucratic processes that previously involved large amounts of paper and human discretion, the inputs, process and results can all be more readily accessed and monitored, thereby putting in place a more transparent process.

**E-Services**

**Government to Citizen E-Services.** Government to citizen, or G to C, e-services are generally the main focus of e-services initiatives. The delivery of public information and direct services to citizens via electronic channels has revolutionized the way many governments deliver and think about public services. Citizen e-service initiatives often take the citizen as a true consumer of public services, and the best practices among citizen e-services incorporate notions of marketing and customer service from the private sectors. From the online renewal and issuance of important documents such as drivers licenses, to registration and payment for government amenities such as recreational services, to the qualification of citizens for and even delivery of key social services such as education and public health benefits, the G to C area of e-government promises the most immediate and tangible benefits to individuals and governments.
**Government to Business E-Services.** Government to business, or G to B, e-services can bring significant efficiencies to both governments and businesses. Large-scale e-procurement projects for example, whereby governments move their purchasing and contracting processes online, have been initiated at all levels of government, and even between national governments. These projects can span a range of implementations, from posting and/or distributing government procurement documents and contracts online, and allowing or even requiring that bidders responses are similarly submitted online either via email or through more sophisticated electronic systems implemented specifically for that purpose; to managing formal online reverse auctions. Other basic forms of G to B services include one-stop service centers for business licensing and registrations. While G to B services are generally implemented with the goal of increasing the efficiency of government procurement and realizing cost savings, a related goal is to increase the fairness and transparency of government contracting, thereby reducing corruption and favoritism.

**Government to Government E-Services.** Government to government, or G to G, e-services can increase not only the obvious backend internal processes between governments but also seamlessly external services for citizens through the integration of services offered. For example, in the United States, multiple government entities came together to form the GovBenefits.gov portal, which matches citizen beneficiaries with a government agency that provides some form of assistance. This centralized G to G portal approach allows backend integration, coordination, and cost savings in targeting
individuals between multiple government agencies while improving citizen access to
information and services, helping them get the assistance needed. On another G to G
front, the use of information technologies by different governmental entities (e.g., federal
and state, among different states, state and local) to share and/or centralize information,
or to automate and streamline intergovernmental business processes such as regulatory
compliance, has produced numerous instances of time and cost savings and service
enhancements.

**Government to Employees E-Services.** The Government to employees, or G to E,
programs initialized often result in significant service improvements. Employee e-
services can range from online form initiatives for internal purposes to integration of
third-party services, such as allowing employees access to manage their benefits online to
partake in tailored information related to the agency mission. Even simple internal
communications and morale building initiatives done online can show great results.

**E-Participation**

E-participation encompasses the range of engagement between citizens, as individuals
and as members of groups, and their governments. This includes formal interaction,
including e-voting, formal participation tools such as electronic input on policies,
regulations and legislation, to more informal participation mechanisms such as online
citizen forums, direct access to government officials and policy makers, and newer and
still emerging technologies, such as blogs, vlogs, wikis and RSS feeds.
The exact definition of E-Participation varies across countries and is sometimes also referred to or partnered with E-Rulemaking, E-Democracy, E-Regulations, or E-Inclusion. Generally speaking, all of the definitions and scopes seek to promote the social empowerment of citizens generally, and more specifically to allow citizens to engage in the decision-making or participatory processes. As such, the United Nations, for example, defines e-participation as follows: “The goal of e-participation initiatives should be to improve the citizen's access to information and public services; and promote participation in public decision-making which impacts the well being of society, in general, and the individual, in particular.”

Conclusion

While there are differences in opinion regarding the historical underpinnings of E-Government, and some minor discrepancies in its nomenclature as well as the extent of its impact, it is safe to say that it most certainly is transforming the structures and processes of government, and more important, governance in society. Some see the change as incremental, others view it as revolutionary. Either way, as E-Government systems and applications become more efficient, inclusive, and widespread, the rate of transformation is likely to increase, not only in the United States but globally as well. As such, the study of E-Government in itself as well as its current and future impact will only increase in importance.
Further Readings and Resources

United Nations Online E-Government Readiness Knowledge Base,
http://www.unpan.org/egovkb/


Journal of E-Government,
http://www.egovjournal.com


Journal of International Electronic Government Research,
http://www.idea-group.com/journals/details.asp?id=4298


**Global and International E-Government Reports on the Web:**

Accenture:
http://www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enweb&xd=industries\government\gove_thought.xml

Brown U.:
http://www.insidepolitics.org/policyreports.html

Capgemini:

Economist/IBM:

Pacific Council (PCIP):

World Economic Forum:
http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Global+Competitiveness+Programme%5CGlobal+Information+Technology+Report

RAND:

United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN)
http://www.unpan.org/egovkb/global_reports/index.htm