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COMPARING E-GOVERNMENT VS. E-GOVERNANCE

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Differentiating the two Concepts

e-Government and e-governance can be defined as two very distinct terms. e-Governance is a broader topic that deals with the whole spectrum of the relationship and networks within government regarding the usage and application of ICTs. e-Government is actually a narrower discipline dealing with the development of online services to the citizen, more the e on any particular government service - such as e-tax, e-transportation or e-health. e-Governance is a wider concept that defines and assesses the impacts technologies are having on the practice and administration of governments and the relationships between public servants and the wider society, such as dealings with the elected bodies or outside groups such as not for profits organizations, ngos or private sector corporate entities. E-Governance encompasses a series of necessary steps for government agencies to develop and administer to ensure successful implementation of e-government services to the public at large. The differences between these two important concepts are explored further in this essay.

The Basis of the Service

E-Government is an institutional approach to jurisdictional political operations. E-Governance is a procedural approach to co-operative administrative relations, i.e. the encompassing of basic and standard procedures within the confines of public administration. It is the latter that acts as the lynchpin that will ensure success of the delivery of e-services.

The “E” part of both e-government and e-governance stands for the electronic platform or infrastructure that enables and supports the networking of public policy development and deployment. It is by now widely acknowledged that the original impetus for acquiring and using electronic apparatus in government and governance arose from the earlier successes with the same kind of strategy in commerce. E-Commerce had previously rested on credit and debit card processing for purchases, and on faxing of bulk orders and subsequent invoices in business-to-business transactions. In Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, the emergence of e-commerce by the private sector helped to stimulate and drive the evolution of e-government within departments and agencies. At the political leadership level it was clear that e-

commerce was reflecting the enormous changes taking place in the economies of countries in the developed world.

The transformation of the Internet from an academic research network to a publicly accessible information utility prompted increasing numbers of businesses to create a “web presence”. The initial postings were mostly electronic advertising brochures and product catalogues, with invitations to “order by phone”. As e-commerce came to the fore it became apparent to governments that customer expectations were moving in the direction of greater speed and convenience for transactions; so direct ordering through the Internet was developed and launched. The only issue that still inhibits the public from taking full advantage of e-commerce, is the concern with security of information and funds, a challenge that is also reflected in e-government and e-governance. The success of e-commerce drove governments to realize that citizens were now able to undertake transactions online, and were also capable of using email as an important communications tool that sped up and changed the way they communicated with each other. The evolution of the worldwide web in the early 1990s created expectations that if businesses and the population at large could engage in online commerce and share knowledge and information in ways never before conceived, then it was incumbent on governments to provide online services. This phenomenon was a case of governments having to respond to a cultural change in the way people dealt with each other and with groups in society on an international basis. The high expectations of change resulted, by the mid-1990’s, in rapid development of e-government services.

In essence, because the public liked e-commerce when it worked properly, they began to want their governments to perform in the same way. In terms of services provided, e-government and e-governance developed along the same trajectory as had e-commerce previously. The internal operational aspects of e-commerce included rationalizing supply chains and business rules. This aspect was referred to as “back office” requirements in government, and it focused around rationalized workflow and information sharing.

The external offerings of e-government and e-governance started with making policy documents available electronically. Both “stand-alone” studies and on-going series (newsletters, press releases, etc.) were posted and could be printed out as hard copies or stored electronically by whoever in the public was accessing them. The second phase of electronic products and services consisted of on-line electronic forms, either to exchange information (census forms, etc.) or to conduct transactions (purchase documents, pay user fees, submit tax returns, etc.). The third phase, now just emerging, involves consultation on issues of concern, and participation in policy making and regulatory administration.

The point of the above mini-history is to demonstrate that, in terms of the electronic platform and its operations, there are parallels between electronics for governing and e-commerce, and between e-government and e-governance. The computers, cables, software languages, and communications protocols, are standardized products for any kind of electronic networking, regardless of its information content or organizational context. What differentiates e-commerce from electronic governing, and e-government from e-governance is the purpose and functions that such networking supports. E-commerce is premised on profitable transactions, whereas e-government provides public services, and e-governance facilitates appropriate behavior. So, in each case, the motivation and the mandate will be distinct.

E-Government as Better Public Service

The observation has become accepted amongst government analysts that the public expects more and more in terms of service coverage and customization, while at the same time expecting to pay less and less for such services in terms of unit costs (and the aggregate tax bill). This consideration is behind the decision to put an increasing proportion of government documents on-line – electronic distribution places the cost of paper and printing on the consumer rather than the supplier, and in the case of government documents this accounts for the biggest share of the price of making these documents available. It takes far less time and person-hours to design and post an electronic document than to print and mail out the same information.

Electronic forms are also premised on lower costs and more convenience. Many jurisdictions enable driver's licenses to be applied for, or renewed on-line. Use of such things as publicly provided recreational facilities can also be booked (reservations) and paid for (user fees) via government Internet websites. Even when some kinds of special reports are made available on-line, access to them may still be by subscription or single payment. Background budgetary documents, expert studies, or reports from commissions of enquiry may all have charges attached to them, depending on the government's dissemination policy and the costs of preparing the documents. When there is a price attached, governments have set up e-commerce arrangements for credit card payments similar to what prevails in the marketplace.

The exchange of information between governments and various segments of the public similarly occurs increasingly by way of electronic forms. Businesses report many of their financial and functional operations to their governments via the Internet, as part of their regulatory requirements. Data on the kinds, volumes, and revenues of transactions go to the government's statistical repositories, to the finance departments for taxation purposes, and to the particular departments that oversee the kind of business being conducted (automobile production figures go to the department of transport, etc.). Those of the citizenry who are recipients of welfare and social assistance services (whether they be individuals or organizations) frequently use government websites and e-mail to exchange information and file claims. By these means, governments check on eligibility, inform claimants of the terms and conditions of support arrangements, and provide training or instructions on such matters as job searches and income management.

The "final frontier" of e-government is the attempt at extending "e-democracy". Voting has been conducted on-line, and will likely be extended once the design of the user-interface has been rendered more "user-friendly" and the security of the information has achieved more credibility. Consultation on issues of concern has been widely practiced, but with mixed results. The difficulty in this case is with clarifying the terms of engagement. There are three alternate formats available: (1) "Tell us what you think/feel" merely asks for public input without any promise of either reporting what was presented, or using the substance of the suggestions; (2) "Share your views" carries the promise to at least report back to the public the transcript of what was provided as advice, with or without comments as specified in advance; (3) "Let's cooperate" involves the specific commitment to not only report back, but to actually use what was presented or explain in convincing terms why it was not used. More e-government is still to come. The driving forces behind all of these developments will continue, as will the digitizing of governments.

E-Governance as Coordinated Propriety

The very concept of e-governance faces a dilemma: on the one hand, infractions of both legal requirements and good standards of behavior have prompted many to ask for greater scrutiny and more stringent enforcement; on the other hand, over-controlling through draconian statutes or proliferating regulations, has a chilling effect on management decision-making and organizational innovation. Good governance in general, and e-governance in and between large institutions and governments, is seen as a way to avoid the aforementioned shortcomings and still produce better outcomes.

Even the technical platform for some of this coordination has proven to be problematic. Information sharing, knowledge sharing, and jurisdictional cooperation (horizontality), are the means to achieve e-governance. The previous arrangement of jurisdictional “stovepipes” was (and is) the problem, but overcoming this problem has not proven easy. Once information, knowledge, and jurisdiction are shared, the old notion of bureaucratic control and accountability is jeopardized. The only effective response to this challenge (if the cooperation is to succeed) is to re-conceptualize the situation as “multiple contributions to common processes and solutions”.

Within governments, this e-governance will take such forms as these: shared databases of constituent particulars will assure consistent profiles to be built and used so that services can be customized and repetitive data requests kept to a minimum (constituents usually hate being asked for the same data by each department or branch). Where programs or policies involve inputs from a variety of departments or branches, a single point of entry (“one-stop-shopping”) can be arranged by creating a joint website that blends all of the requirements from the multiple sources, and presents it to the public as a unified program or policy. In most cases, the users do not care where the inputs come from or what jurisdictional coordination was involved in producing the services – they just want the results to be convenient, high quality, and low-cost.

Between levels of government (national, provincial, municipal, etc.) the mechanics of cooperation and coordination are even more challenging. From the public perception, a problem or issue as they see it may involve policy responsibilities and fiscal implications from two or more jurisdictions. The planning, financing, and maintenance of roads, the provision of health or education services, the regulation of land, water, and air use, are all shared jurisdictions – but the public wants workable answers rather than excuses for persisting problems. However, this desire by the public for efficacious solutions does not alter the fact that cooperative arrangements have to be carefully thought out and diplomatically negotiated. The machinery of government does have hidden, long-term implications that may come back to haunt those who act too precipitously under the threat of public displeasure.

The e-governance solution to the handling of these diverging expectations is, ironically, both the most effective and the most disquieting to many public officials. Transparency is the one policy that expanding government networks can easily support. It can also shift the locus of contention away from public officials and onto disputing social factions. If consultation and participation are made transparent, the diverging values that cause policy conflicts can be revealed as in the public domain rather than in machinery of government. But what this clearly leads to is the sharing of power with the public and other jurisdictions, to reflect growing interdependence. As the scale, scope, and complexity of situations and circumstances increases, this trend in e-governance will intensify.

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