Public Service Gone Digital

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Canadian e-government development over the last 20 years and examines both the advantages and disadvantages that it can bring. This paper argues that, while e-government faces certain problems, it remains a worthwhile project as it provides an alternative channel of communication for government and citizens. The benefits of e-government discussed in this paper include: reduced service delivery costs, ease of access for citizens, encouraged flexibility and integration among governmental departments, and transparency and accountability of government activities. Some of the challenges examined include: coordination of the integration of information and communications technology across departments, standardization of e-government's platforms, the possible trivialization of the citizen-state relationship, the "digital divide," and the determination of realistic expectations for e-government. Technology has dramatically changed many industries, and it has also changed the way citizens expect to interact with their government. Canadians have come to expect accessible and interactive e-government, and Canada's initiatives in the domain will, with time and money, help ensure that its e-government fulfils those expectations.

Keywords: Canadian e-government, Canadian public policy, technology policy, information and communications technology, digital divide, Blueprint 2020

Introduction

Technology brings about great change in the societies it develops within and public administration worldwide is changing because of it. The internet has become a useful tool that governments of all levels can use to provide services to their citizens. This tool is described in the literature as *e-government* and can mean many different things in theory and in practice. These include the provision of information, contact services, transactions (e.g. paying taxes), dialogue between citizens and government, and information exchanges between the public and private sectors (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 375). What each of these capabilities have in common is that they are all facilitated through the internet in e-government and use information and communications technology (ICT). Governments worldwide are to develop e-government programs that not only bring public administration practices into the digital era, but also solve

ongoing problems of lack of transparency, rising costs, and public dissatisfaction with excessive bureaucracy.

Clifford McCue and his colleague Alexandru Roman (2012), both academics who conduct research in public administration, noted that, according to the World Bank, "a significant number of nations have spent more on ICT over the last decade than on traditional capital investments such as roadways, airports, water purification plants and the like" (222). In 2014, the United Nations ranked Canada as 11th worldwide in e-government development and implementation (United Nations 2014, 15). These results demonstrate not just the real interest in e-government worldwide, but also Canada's reputation as a role model in e-government development and implementation. This paper will briefly describe the evolution of Canada's e-government in the last twenty years and argue that, despite its problems, e-government is a worthwhile project because it provides another channel of communication between government and its citizens. I will primarily discuss the federal government and draw on provincial and municipal examples to better illustrate Canadian e-government in practice.

Canada's Brand of E-Government

E-government started to develop in Canada in 1994 when the Information Highway Advisory Council was established to make the internet available to all Canadians (Reddick and Turner 2012, 3). The next significant initiative was Government Online which had the government develop websites that could provide information, transaction services, and a forum for political dialogue. This also required different government departments to coordinate ICT infrastructure to achieve cost-effective results. Canadian Customs and Revenue Agency with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada worked together to share ICT information and servers so that the 85 percent of Canadians who interact with these ministries could receive cost-effective and cohesive e-government services (Borins 2005, 26).

Using data from a 2004 federal study, evaluating the impact of Government Online, Sandford Borins (2005) found that from the "319 million requests for information in 2003, 88 percent were provided over the Internet" (14). This demonstrates that e-government is a widely used tool by citizens for informational purposes. Analysis of Canada's e-government shows informational and transactional services compose the majority of citizen-government interactions online (Reddick and Turner 2012, 3), but that creating online forums for political dialogue is a priority (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 379). The federal and provincial governments handle ICT internally because, as Borins says, "they see their Web presence as a core communications function" (Borins 2005, 11).

The Canadian bureaucracy has developed its own unique objectives to accomplish e-government. The Clerk of the Privy Council has designated this strategic plan as "Blueprint 2020" (Canada 2017). This plan outlines: "affordable, e-enabled and seamless services," "open

access to data and information," "standardized technological infrastructure," "interoperable systems," and "enhanced ability to leverage *Workplace 2.0*" (Canada 2017, 7). This can be reduced to the basic point that the Canadian bureaucracy needs to have affordable ICT, flexible and integrated web-services, and that information needs to be more accessible to the public, including accessibility to private sector businesses to better coordinate communication with the government. The public service hopes that attaining these goals will "nurture a tech-savvy culture, making use of social media tools while respecting Public Service values and ethics" (7). It also acts under the assumption that as more Canadians log on and surf the worldwide web there will be higher expectations regarding the online availability of government information (Canada 2017). As Blueprint 2020 describes, bureaucrats in Canada can expect to spend the next years of their careers "finding innovative ways to customize public services, enable networking and provide open access to information that Canadians can use…" (7).

What E-Government Provides

One of the most powerful reasons why governments are moving towards the e-government model is that service delivery through the internet reduces costs (Borins 2005, 14). Delivering services through e-government, via the internet, instead of traditional technologies (e.g. phoning, visiting a government office, etc.) can reduce operating costs (7). Since operating expenses make up over 25 percent of the Canadian federal government's annual budget, any way to reduce that cost would be very attractive (8). In his research on the cost of Canadian e-government, Borins uses data from a federal government initiative in 2003 that estimated service delivery in Canada. Borins depicts the attractiveness of the internet as a service delivery mechanism when he compares the 84 cents per internet transaction to the "$2.99 per call… mail service an average of $18.86 per letter…and in-person service an average of $38.24 per visit" (8). A government confronted with these numbers, such as the Canadian federal government, can suddenly become very interested in service delivery through e-government. With this level of savings, the government will likely provide incentives for citizens to switch to online delivery of services (15).

Cost is not the only factor driving e-government adoption. Many governments consider it a solution to bureaucratic shortcomings in efficiency, accountability, and effectiveness. As Victor Bekkers and Vincent Homburg (2007), authors of "The Myths of E-Government: Looking Beyond the Assumptions of a New and Better Government," state (in the context of Australia's online government): "hardly any sphere of activity…could not be improved by online government" (377). Under an ideal model of online government, the citizen becomes the consumer and the government becomes the primary service provider (379). As a consumer, citizens can have quick and easy access to customized services provided at a much lower price (i.e. transaction cost). Many national policies on e-government are aiming for this development (377).

E-government can improve citizens' access to information (e.g. easier and faster searches), online services (e.g. paying taxes, applying for funding as a business) or translation of government documents online for the impaired with the help of special software (e.g. text enlargement or text-to-voice capabilities) (West 2004, 17). Technological advances can make public and private administration simpler and make government and administration practices more transparent if the guidelines, ethical codes, and administrative output are more easily available for public scrutiny due to their availability online (Welp, Urgell and Aibar 2007, 301). It is also reasonable to expect that bureaucrats have a duty to reinvent government administrative practices through technological progress (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 378).

Canadian bureaucracy is Weberian in model, and, therefore, hierarchical and inflexible as a result. The Weberian model was imagined by Max Weber in the 1800s and claims that efficiency is only achieved when there is a well-defined and structured chain of command, management by rules and regulations, and a division of labour by specialization (Rockman 2015). Due to these constraints, and as bureaucrats are assigned to certain specialized, hierarchical positions, with both their position and department size remaining static, public administrative units can become rigid and immobile. E-government promotes decentralization of government agencies as it requires them to integrate their web services to save money and avoid excessive administration (Welp, Urgell & Aibar 2007, 301). Such decentralization improves government's flexibility as departments can change in size and share ICT infrastructure and human resources.

Problems with E-Government

The integration needed for government websites is one of the difficulties that e-government development faces. Citizens expect standardization of practices and cohesion in design and format when browsing government websites. This provides a real challenge since different aspects of the Canadian bureaucracy must collectively agree on a single vision and then implement it (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 377). If a Canadian citizen wants to complete a service transaction through e-government, then all the involved departments must coordinate their administrative processes to avoid sending the citizen from one website to another to complete their desired transaction. To avoid this situation, serious integration must be coordinated amongst very different bureaucratic units belonging to disparate jurisdictions. Given the challenges it may not yet be possible or reasonable to achieve this, even with unlimited funding and human resources.

Moreover, such integration may even be undesirable because, as Bekkers and Homburg (2007) state, "standardization and integration may intensify existing dependencies and enshrine these dependencies in the technology" (379). E-government bureaucracy can become exactly like traditional bureaucracy, and the flexibility and decentralization promised can become just that: a promise. Furthermore, Bekkers and Homburg (2007) observe that there is a myth in national e-

government strategies that "ICTs… [help] the realization, with little effort, of administrative machinery that is responsive, client oriented and cohesive" (375). Cohesion is difficult, and ICT, while revolutionary, cannot be the quick-fix solution to departmental integration once believed.

In e-government, like New Public Management, the citizen becomes the client or consumer and the government, the service provider (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 379). It is similar to the Weberian model in that New Public Management is a theory that describes how administrative organizations should work to achieve the best results. It was inspired by for-profit firms from the private sector, and seeks to outsource government services, allowing the market to facilitate funding and decision contracting (Bevir 2015). New Public Management has been adopted in many democracies, but there remain serious obstacles to treating citizens as consumers or clients, partly because this kind of thinking reduces the relationship of citizen and government to a much more trivial and arbitrary position. E-government can, when it focuses on service delivery (which it often does) trivialize the special relationship of reciprocity of rights and duties that underpins the citizen-state relationship (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 374, 380).

Service delivery for citizens by e-government has two major issues in practice with respect to accessibility. The first is the "digital divide" (Daou et al. 2013, 159). This is used to describe how certain citizens are excluded from or have limited access to the internet as compared to those who are familiar with it and have easily accessible web services. Alain Daou et. al. (2013) think that this "digital divide may deepen [already strong] economic, demographic, or social divisions" (159). Research shows that age affects e-government access and use, as younger people tend to have more knowledge about digital platforms (Borins 2005, 9). Those with higher income and education are also reported as having greater access to e-government (9). Additionally, large differences exist between e-government availability to citizens based on their location, with larger cities having a clear advantage in access. Larger cities' municipal websites are also much more interactive (Daou et al. 2013, 164). Northern Canadian communities can have extremely limited access to the internet with few computers, while remote municipalities may lack the IT support or structures needed to provide local e-government effectively (164).

Even with these problems, e-government has not delivered on its expectations (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 373; Daou et al. 2013, 157). Differences that exist between e-government in theory compared to practice should be unsurprising when expectations surrounding the idea are too ambitious (Bekkers and Homburg 2007, 380). Public sector technology is inferior to the private sector, meaning larger investments in e-government projects might bridge the gap between what is expected and what is available (Reddick and Turner 2012, 1). E-government may not have fixed the problems of traditional bureaucracy, but it has provided citizens with a new channel of communication to their government. Moreover, surveys indicate that many Canadians are happy with e-government reforms (3).

Citizens and Canadian E-Government

Canadians have asked for e-government so that service delivery and communication between Canadians and the government can be fast and convenient (Martinez et al. 2013, 106). Co-authors Christopher Reddick and Michael Turner (2012) examined how Canadians feel about e-government. A series of surveys conducted by Ekos in 2002 showed that "80% of citizens surveyed agreed with the government's increasing use of information technology and 70% of internet users thought that it was important to put all government services online" (cited in Reddick and Turner 2012, 3). Significantly, in that same series of surveys, it was found that almost half of Canadians expected "the internet would be their primary way of interacting with government in 5 years," demonstrating that Canadians believed that e-government was the future delivery platform of government services (cited in Reddick and Turner 2012, 3). This, however, has not happened. Yet, Reddick and Turner report that the internet was the most used channel of communication (55 percent of total communication) in 2007, with the caveat that Canadians tended to use the phone when they had a problem with government and tended to use the internet to find information about services (5). Moreover, Canadians are most satisfied with personal office visits as a means of communication with government and second most satisfied with internet communication (6). When satisfaction rates are compared among Canadians, government employees are contrarily reported as least satisfied with e-government, along with those in larger cities (8). Reddick and Turner conclude their analysis of citizen satisfaction with e-government showing that Canadians with higher levels of trust in the public service also reported higher satisfaction of all channels (e.g. telephone, visits, e-government, etc.) and suggest that e-government can improve public perception, but that it cannot fix the bigger issue of low trust (9).

Canada does have a "digital divide" as research demonstrates that those who live in large municipalities have superior local e-government websites, in terms of content and features, compared to those who live in remote or small communities (Dolson & Young 2012, 1). For example, municipal e-government has reduced service delivery capabilities compared with other levels of government (18-19). Borins (2005), using data from large national surveys, explains that Canadians want five things from e-government: "In order of importance, [they are] are speed (i.e., time needed to provide the service), staff competence, courtesy, fairness, and outcome" (8). Canadian citizens are comparably satisfied with e-government as a channel of communication as citizens want a fast and easy way to access government services.

A few initiatives involving e-government in Canada, outlined in Blueprint 2020, include the partnership of Canada Heritage and Industry Canada on an e-initiative of public consultation for Canada's *Copyright Modernization Act* written to clarify and ensure that copyright owners

are protected from copyright infringement on the internet (Canada 2017).[1] Over 30 thousand people participated in the consultation by logging on to the website. Among them, eight thousand participants wrote comments, and around one thousand and a half discussions were recorded on the online forums (Canada 2017). This is an example of e-government promoting direct communication between citizens and government, in this case the departments responsible for updating the *Copyright Modernization Act*.

Further examples of e-government in Canada include the use of ICT by the province of Ontario and the national Open Government initiative. The province used ICT when they consulted constituents on the budget. Online consultation with the public took place from 2004 to 2008 as people were asked to fill out online questionnaires in order that the government could accurately represent their interests in the budget (Borins 2005, 23). This was not the only channel which the provincial government used to communicate with constituents, but it did provide another way in which Ontario residents could inform the government of their thoughts on the budget. Open Government is a recent project launched by the federal government in 2011 (Canada 2018). It is an ongoing project that aims to make government data easily accessible on the internet and seeks to address the transparency and accountability shortfalls of traditional channels of communication (Canada 2018).

Conclusion

Despite e-government's problems, it is still a worthwhile project for governments to undertake since it provides citizens another channel of communication. Canada's government has made it clear that government services are, and will continue to be, increasingly accessible through the medium of the internet. Projects like Government Online, Open Government, and Blueprint 2020 demonstrate Canada's commitment to developing its e-government. Like all communication and service delivery platforms, if done right, e-government can reduce service delivery costs, provide information easily for citizens, offer new ways of paying taxes or applying for government funds, encourage flexibility and integration among government departments, and make the public sector more accountable and transparent to Canadians. The problems of e-government discussed included: inter-departmental integration of ICT and human resources, standardization of online platforms, the possibility of the trivialization of the special relationship between government and its citizens, the "digital divide," and the gap that can form between expectations and the reality of e-government. Yet, though these problems exist they do not entail that e-government is an unworthy project, in fact, Canada has signalled its commitment to using ICT to provide a viable alternative channel of communication between government, its bureaucracy, and its citizens.

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