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[Review] Redefining the Concept of e-Government Program. A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper was to redefine the concept of e-Government. Therefore, given the nature of the present study, this paper leaned on a desktop inquiry only and no empirical research was conducted. Consequently, in our review, the current study taught that e-Government needed to be defined in a more comprehensive sense than just being defined solely by Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and service delivery. Therefore, to conceptualize the new notion and definition of e-Government, the present study proposed a new conceptual frame, resting mainly on the following six concepts; (a) ICT platforms, (b) government processes, (c) information and service delivery, (d) digital society, business environment, and other governments, (e) public participation and involvement, and (f) accountability and transparency. Therefore, with reference to the above concepts, the following definition resulted “e-Government is the use of ICT platformsto digitalize and integrate internal government processes, improve informationand service delivery mechanisms for the digitally disrupted society, the business environment and other governments, and encourage electronic public participation and involvement in government policy formulation and decision-making processes, as well as driving governments to be more accountable and transparent in all administrative processes”.

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Background

Sagheb-Tehrani & Maysami (2007) on 'E-Government: Challenges and Concerns?' developed a conceptual e-Government model. Their model suggested seven primary propositions related to e-Government, namely; knowledge management, Information Technology (IT), vision, publication, interaction, transaction, and finally, e-Government as the seventh concept. Alongside this, their model further suggested twelve sub or secondary propositions, namely; IT blueprint, communication, IT priorities, update, push technology, transparency, citizen-centered, security, privacy, novel services, accessibility, and transparency. While these propositions are welcome, their model however lacked the central theme of e-Government as a whole. Looking at their primary propositions, there is no evidence of basic e-Government concepts, rather this is observed in the secondary propositions, that is transparency, citizen-centric, and transparency. While in the secondary propositions, other important concepts are still missing, to name a few, e-Government patrons such as the private sector, and other governments. Overall, their model is in desperate need of revision.

While Sagheb-Tehrani & Maysami fail to conceptualize the true meaning of e-Government, authors in this arena increasingly opt to create conceptual models for e-Government success factors only. For instance, Kanaan, Hassan & Shahzad (2016) in 'A Conceptual Model for E-Government Success Factors in Developing Countries' developed a model resting on the following five concepts: information quality, ease of use, business user fulfilment, personalization, and trust. Currently, the literature is witnessing an overflow of reports on conceptual models for e-Government success factors, than e-Government itself.

Introduction

Having been introduced and implemented for more than a decade now, e-Government has attested to be the frontrunner for modernizing governments across the globe. Today governments can, inter alia, interact with their stakeholders using electronic platforms, and improve information and service delivery channels. In view of that, the civic society and the business sector can now file their tax returns and pay their municipal bills online. Despite these innovations and their existence, the concept of e-Government remains miscalculated still and those theories necessary to guide its notion are understudied still. Academics and practitioners of the program increasingly misjudge this notion by defining e-Government by ICT and service delivery only. Other important concepts are discarded in their definitions. Being underreported, those

studies focusing specifically on developing conceptual frames for e-Government are very insufficient in the literature. In fact, only one study could be found in the literature search; that is the study conducted by Sagheb-Tehrani & Maysami (2007). Therefore, with the global gap in the body of knowledge on the subject of conceptual frames for e-Government, this study becomes imperative and necessary to be conducted. The proposed frame is envisaged to contribute to the literature and guide investigators of the program on how e-Government should be labelled and interpreted.

Purpose of the Study

Since e-Government cannot be defined in a vacuum, guiding frameworks on how to formulate a comprehensive definition of the program are necessary. Disappointingly, studies on these particular frameworks are very deficient in the literature. Instead, academics and practitioners of the program increasingly elect to define e-Government in a vacuum, particularly without guiding frameworks. For that reason, every author or institution appears to define e-Government using their own vantage points (Mabinane & Edoun, 2018) with ICT and service delivery being the central themes. A definition I find very biased. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to address this misunderstanding gap by redefining the concept of e-Government.

Research Problem

Globally, there has been an overflow of reports on e-Government, yet key concepts that should most probably and rightfully form part of the e-Government description, are however, disregarded by many academics and practitioners of the program. Furthermore, those theories necessary to guide its notion are younger still. In fact, there is very little to no evidence of studies on the conceptual frame for e-Government. The conceptual context of the program is significantly miscomprehended in the literature today. According to Leitner (2003:16), for e-Government to convert into a significant representative of transformation for public service delivery and fresh governance, it must move away from its technological bias. Accordingly, the research problem is, therefore, formulated as follows:

“E-Government is increasingly defined solely by ICT and service delivery, other important notions such as improved government processes, stakeholder relationships, cooperative policy formulation, as well as government accountability and transparency are, however, disregarded in the literature”.

Literature Review

Defining E-Government

Essentially, there is no distinct explanation for e-Government, and this is because of the lively and unpredictable nature of technology (Tohidi, 2011, 1102). Arguably, e-Government is not only about the use of all kinds of new ICTs by public

administrations to enhance both their dealings with stakeholders and their internal processes (Leitner, 2003:13). Similarly, the Canadian E-Government Policy Network (CEGPN) as cited in Oliver & Sanders, (2004:5) also maintains that e-Government cannot be defined solely by IT, service delivery or methods of operation, and social context are also important. Ndou (2004) as cited in Mutula & Mostert, (2010:154), also disputes that some of the accepted e-Government definitions are too constricted, which results in poor interpretation of its objectives. Therefore, e-Government means far more than just that: it entails key socio-economic inventions and political-administrative institutional shifts based on first-hand ICT uses and improvements (Leitner, 2003:13). In contrast, the literature has revealed some ICT and service delivery bias e-Government definitions. Therefore, the table that follows presents such definitions:

Table 1. Bias e-Government definitions

Definition	Authors and Year
...is defined as applying the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) for transporting government information and services to people.	United Nations and American Society for Public Administration (2002)
...is defined as all the ICT platforms and applications applied in the public service such as the Internet for bringing government information and services to end-users.	Olowu (2004) as cited in Hafkin (2009)
...is the application of ICTs to encourage more resourceful and operative government, enable more accessible information and services, allow better open access to information, and make more liable to citizens.	Farelo and Morris (2007)

Source: *Developed for this study*

As advocated by the above table, it is evident that the concept of e-Government is significantly misunderstood by many researchers and practitioners of the program. Against this background, both ICT and service delivery are mistakenly viewed as alpha and omega respectively in terms of e-Government. This misconception is increasingly seen in the literature today, thus blindfolding academics and practitioners of the program to ignore other important aspects of e-Government. Modern government is not just about delivering services (Leitner, 2003:16). In view of that, the concept comprises independent and cooperative policy creation, voter and civic involvement, open and participative implementation of policies as well as accountability of public decision-makers to enhance policy-making in the future (Leitner, 2003:16).

Proposed Conceptual Framework for E-Government

Since e-Government cannot be defined solely by ICT and service delivery, the following framework is proposed, resting on six important concepts:

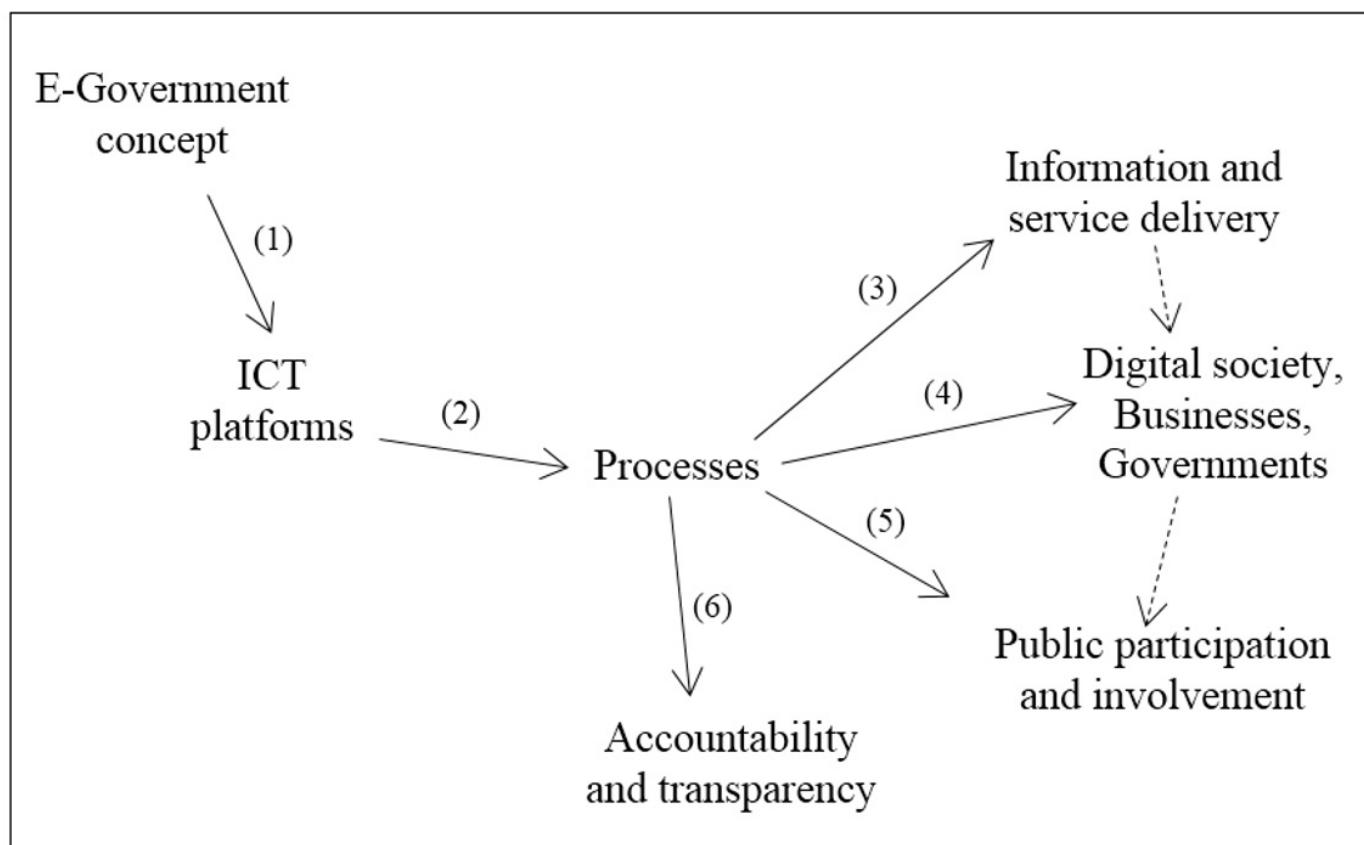


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for e-Government

Source: Developed for this study

Guided by the above frame, the following concepts are suggested and centralized:

- 1st suggestion: ICT platforms
- 2nd suggestion: Government processes
- 3rd suggestion: Information and service delivery
- 4th suggestion: Digital society, businesses, and other governments
- 5th suggestion: Public participation and involvement
- 6th suggestion: Accountability and transparency

Therefore, e-Government needed to be defined in a more comprehensive sense, not by ICT and service delivery. As a result, the following definition resulted:

“e-Government” is the use of ICT platforms to digitalise and integrate internal government processes to improve information and service delivery mechanisms for the digitally disrupted society, the business environment, and other governments, and encourage electronic public participation and involvement in government policy formulation and decision-making processes, as well as driving governments to be more accountable and transparent in all administrative processes.

Now Examining Each of the E-Government Concepts as Guided by our Frame:

ICT Platforms

ICT platforms refer to those equipment and services necessary to drive e-Government. The research argues that “there will be no e-Government without ICTs” (Mabinane & Edoun, 2018). For that reason, ICT, therefore, is considered the sole panacea to linking the world (Mabinane & Edoun, 2018). A perfect example of such technologies includes but is not limited to video-conferencing, computers, cell phones and social media networks to text, call or video-chat with anyone, anywhere and at any given time (Mabinane & Edoun, 2018). Therefore, the term ‘ICT’ speaks about the use of technologies such as the internet, mobile devices, computers and other types of technologies to gather, store, retrieve, transmit and transfer data and information from one unit to another (Mabinane & Edoun, 2018).

Government Processes

With the arrival of the new digital era and information economy, traditional government processes or front-office administration systems such as counter services are now replaced with technologically driven ones, aiming at transforming the information and service delivery channels of governments, encouraging public participation and involvement in policy formulation as well as holding governments accountable and open in their dealings. As a result, citizens can now apply for travel documents, file their tax returns, and vote electronically using the Internet and other forms of technology. Businesses are no exception, they can also file their tax returns and bid government tenders online without any physical interaction with the government. Governments also followed suit, sharing public information on employment, health, residence, and other nationwide population statistics.

Information and Service Delivery

Similar to the former, customary government practices are increasingly being substituted by digital ones, aiming at making information and service delivery mechanisms as effective and efficient as possible. Prior to the dawn of the Internet in the late-1960s, and the World Wide Web (WWW) in the late 1980s, government stakeholders used to tangibly visit government branches or ministries to access government information and services, sometimes even going from one ministry to another (cross-ministry). Currently, there is little evidence of such practices, meaning governments are now reacting to technological improvements and realizing the value of e-Government. As a result, government information and services are now delivered in a way not possible before. Today, government stakeholders can interact with the government from the comfort of their homes, workplace, or even when they are on the go. Put simply, they can interact with the government anywhere and at any time.

Digital Society, Businesses, and Other Governments

A stakeholder network that is digitally disrupted and transformative in its dealings with the government. This network of stakeholders constitutes our commonly known e-Government relationships or interactions; ranging from citizens (G-2-C),

businesses (G-2-B), and other governments (G-2-G).

According to Sebetci & Aksu, (2014:226), the interactions amongst government ministries or entities and citizens to conduct transactions such as identity documents, traffic fines, taxes and many others institute the G-2-C services.

The G-2-B relationship is therefore made successful by the interactions concerning the government and the business sector when doing business trades such as payments from services/equipment provided, renting or subcontracting, while the G-2-G relationship is enabled by the relationships concerning all spheres of government, including entities or agencies in the distribution of relevant information, especially population statistics.

Public Participation and Involvement

This is often referred to as electronic participation, otherwise e-Participation or e-Part and it deals with the electronic participation or involvement by the civic society and the business sector in government policy formulation and decision-making processes through public online chat rooms, blogs and discussion forums. Defined, but citizen-centric, “e-Participation” refers to the method of involving populations with the necessary technologies in policy formulation and decision-making to make government hands-on, inclusive, cooperative and considered for key and instrumental ends (United Nations E-Government Survey (UNEGS), 2014:61; Seo & Hasan, 2015:13). It is another indicator for e-Government by measuring citizens’ usage of ICTs to participate in policy creation and executive practices to reshape government management (Seo & Hasan, 2015:13). In other countries like South Africa, public participation in policy formulation is done through an intensive private sector and public consultation, particularly through a number of bureaucratic papers; namely; Framing, Green, and White Papers sequentially whereby interested parties react and respond to particular legislation or policy using both traditional (postal) and electronic (email) channels. According to UNEG (2014:38), governments across the world hold a responsibility to defend the public’s constitutional right to partake in public governance. At a federal level, the right to governmental and civil involvement is often assured in the constitution (UNEG, 2014:61). While on that notion, the UNs e-Government development survey conducted in 2014 established that more than 150 UN Member States reserve the right of citizenries to contribute in one practice or another. In South Africa alone, the National e-Government Strategy and Roadmap (NeGSR) aims to multiply the technological competencies of citizenries and businesses for involvement in government administrative practices (Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services (DoTPS), 2017:504).

Accountability and Transparency

With the dawn of ICTs and subsequently e-Government, governments across the globe are becoming more and more accountable and transparent in their dealings with the civic society, the business environment, and other governments. Inspired by e-Government, today governments are liable for their administrative choices and conducts, especially those concerning their stakeholders. The business sector also enjoys the synergies of inter-governmental relationships and their integrated processes to ensure transparent and bias-free bids or contracts. As a result, traditional methods of tender submissions have now been deployed online, and businesses can access and submit them without any physical

interaction with government officials. Thus, limiting the chances of corruption in the form of kickbacks. Advocated by the NeGSR which aims to hold the government more responsible by making its practices more obvious, therefore, decreasing the prospects for corruption (DoTPS, 2017:504).

Discussion

The main aim of this treatise was to redefine a conceptual model for e-Government which remains one of the least studied features of e-Government (Sang & Lee, 2009). Therefore, in our examination, the study found that the notion of e-Government is significantly misinterpreted by many researchers and practitioners of the program in the literature. To address this gap, the study proposed a conceptual framework that is envisaged to guide these investigators on how to interpret this notion. Consequently, the resulting frame dwelled on six central theories, that is (a) ICT platforms, (b) government processes, (c) information and service delivery, (d) digital stakeholders, (e) public participation and involvement, and (f) accountability and transparency. To further understand these theories or concepts, the study explained each of the theories adequately and within the parameters of e-Government.

Limitations

As with any other research, the present study also includes restrictions that should be considered by the readers. Therefore, following the nature of the study, this paper relied on a desktop inquiry only and no empirical research was conducted.

Implications

Researchers and Practitioners

We are confident that you wouldn't disagree with the notion 'e-Government is very broad and may encompass a variety of elements or concepts'. In that view, similar research could be suggested to draw and invite any missed concepts to refine the current framework.

Conclusion

The main aim of this theoretical paper stood to redefine the notion of e-Government. This aim or purpose was successfully achieved with the newly developed conceptual frame for e-Government which rested on six important concepts; specifically; ICT platforms, government processes, information and service delivery, digital society, businesses and other governments, public participation and involvement, as well as accountability and transparency as per the conceptual order. A new definition of e-Government was also derived from these concepts. Defined as 'the use of ICT

platforms to digitalize and integrate internal government processes to improve information and service delivery mechanisms for the digitally disrupted society, the business environment and other governments, and encourage electronic public contribution and involvement in government policy formulation and executive processes, as well as driving governments to be more accountable and transparent in all administrative processes'.

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