



How responsive are government agencies when contacted by email? Findings from a longitudinal study in Australia and New Zealand



Robin Gauld ^{a,*}, Jayde Flett ^b, Sasha McComb ^b, Andrew Gray ^c

^a Centre for Health Systems, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

^b Department of Psychology, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

^c Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 May 2015

Received in revised form 3 March 2016

Accepted 29 March 2016

Available online 20 April 2016

Keywords:

E-government

Responsiveness

Australia

New Zealand

Email study

ABSTRACT

This article reports on findings from a longitudinal study of e-government responsiveness. Of course, a key expectation is that e-government will improve responsiveness. The article presents data collected at three intervals from 2006 to 2013 in a simple exercise that involved emailing government agencies in Australia and New Zealand asking for basic information. A total of 790 Australian and 115 New Zealand agencies were ranked according to whether they responded to the email and, if so, the quality of the response. Performances over time were relatively consistent in both countries, but highlighted some concerns for policy makers, especially in Australia around the responsiveness of their state and federal agencies. In a perhaps worrying trend, the quality of responses declined amongst both Australian and New Zealand local government agencies. This study offers an important lens on public sector performance, raising questions of responsiveness that every taxpayer whose money is being invested in e-government services ought to be concerned about.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Governments around the globe at different points in the 2000s made bold statements about the transformational potential and goals of e-government, and accordingly launched ambitious e-government investment strategies (Australian Government Information Management Office, 2006; Blair, 2005; Bush, 2004; National Office for the Information Economy, 2000). Of course, such initiatives have not always delivered on promises, have sometimes been viewed with skepticism by the public and civil servants, and have been surrounded by cost overruns and implementation failures (Baldwin, Gauld, and Goldfinch, 2012; Gauld and Goldfinch, 2006; Gauld, Goldfinch, and Horsburgh, 2010). This aside, and one of the successes of e-government at least in Australia and New Zealand, at the delivery level of individual government departments, many services are now accessible through the internet. This means that for a proportion of the general public there is no longer a need to physically visit a government office. This said, various services still do require an office visit or a member of the public might require additional information which is more readily obtainable in person. When members of the public want information on simple details around physical access to an office, for instance, there is a basic expectation today that such details will be available online rather than by phone, which was previously the key technology for making an inquiry.

Given the shift to the internet and email, an earlier study conducted by the authors was designed to probe a simple yet very practical question (Gauld, Gray, and McComb, 2009). This was that if a member of the public required basic information, 'e-government' was as responsive as a phone call might have been in its day (assuming that someone answered the phone). With email being the tool for communication (assuming that a member of the public might want to communicate directly with someone), the study emulated an earlier US study in conducting an exercise of locating an email contact for government agencies, sending a standard request to their addresses and monitoring the responses (West, 2004).

The 2006 study findings were both interesting and, perhaps, controversial. They were of interest to the research and policy communities as this was the first study of e-government responsiveness internationally to report on findings from national studies of central and local government agencies. In doing so, the study established baseline information on the relative responsiveness of e-government in a field otherwise mostly dominated by research into levels of development, usability and other aspects of e-government. This was important as improved capacity to be responsive to citizens has always been amongst the policy rationales for investment in e-government services (Heeks, 2006; OECD, 2005). Amongst the findings were that New Zealand local and central government agencies, such as city council offices and core government departments, were significantly more responsive (more likely to have answered our email in the first place and, if so, to have answered it accurately) than their Australian counterparts. Controversially, the findings indicated that questions needed to be raised over the methods

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: robin.gauld@otago.ac.nz (R. Gauld), jayde.flett@otago.ac.nz (J. Flett), sasha.mccomb@gmail.com (S. McComb), andrew.gray@otago.ac.nz (A. Gray).

used in global e-government ranking studies which consistently give Australia a higher score than New Zealand (Waseda University and International Academy of CIO (IAC), 2014; Waseda University Institute of E-Government, 2009). These global ranking exercises had not included indicators of responsiveness, although the United Nations e-participation index had, at the time, rated New Zealand higher than Australia (United Nations Public Administration Network, 2005). With its emphasis on participation, the United Nations index perhaps helped explain the divergence in e-responsiveness found in the 2006 study.

The 2006 study was subsequently replicated in Denmark, a country at the time with consistently higher rankings in global e-government studies, with the findings published in 2011 (Andersen, Medaglia, Vatrapu, Henriksen, and Gauld, 2011). The Danish performance was on a par with that of New Zealand, although a higher proportion of agencies failed to provide complete answers to the question posed by email to their official address. Since the original 2006 study was published, it has been twice repeated – in 2008 and most recently in 2013. Thus, data now provide for a longitudinal insight into e-government responsiveness in Australia and New Zealand. This article reports on the findings of these follow-up surveys. In brief, there was a relatively consistent performance over time in both countries, albeit one that highlights some concerns for policy makers, especially in Australia around the responsiveness of their state and federal agencies. However, in a perhaps worrying trend, the quality of responses declined amongst both Australian and New Zealand local government agencies. The research findings in this article have broad theoretical and practical implications. They add weight to arguments that new technology is unlikely to transform government or public service delivery; that there is a tendency for government agencies to remain the same despite the disruptive potential of information technology. The findings also raise a series of questions around how e-government performance is assessed. The research underpinnings of these lines of inquiry are taken up in the next section. The methods for the study are then described, followed by the findings and discussion. The discussion lays out the research implications and questions for further study.

2. Research perspectives relevant to e-government responsiveness

Various perspectives can be drawn upon in the study of e-government responsiveness and, in particular, responsiveness as measured via an email study. This section briefly reviews three key perspectives. These are: whether government and public service ‘transformation’ can be envisaged via e-government; whether e-government improves public accountability; and whether the field of e-government measurement, as it presently stands, includes a sufficient range of elements.

First, whether, in practice, e-government delivers on its transformational promise has been a question investigated by various researchers. In general, and detailed elsewhere, ‘transformation’, refers to the complete redesign of public services and government organisation. This includes creation of the ‘virtual state’ in which boundaries between government agencies and officials are eradicated through networked activities and collaborative working facilitated by the internet and websites. Thus, citizens should no longer need to deal with multiple agencies in order to interact with government for a particular service outcome, such as creating a business; rather, the services would be seamless via a website or similar virtual interface, delivered by collaborating agencies. Similarly, citizens could expect more efficient and closer interaction with government, from anywhere they are able to access a computer (Dunleavy, Margetts, S. B, and Tinkler, 2007; Fountain, 2001; Heeks, 2006; OECD, 2005).

At the most fundamental level, and the conclusion of different studies, is the point that there is a lack of evidence to back up claims of transformation. This is in spite of so-called ‘evidence’ provided by governments and policy makers of change. In a mid-2000s review of the field in the context of the USA, Kraemer and King found limited, if

any, backing for four e-government transformation propositions. In particular, they argued that:

Experience with information technology and administrative reform has shown the technology to be useful in some cases of administrative reform, but only in cases where expectations for reform are already well-established. IT application does not cause reform and cannot encourage it where the political will to pursue the reform does not exist (Kraemer and King, 2006).

They went on to suggest that some public officials’ work procedures might change, but that any changes to standard methods of delivery would tend to be minor at best: information technology ‘might play a role in reform’ but for service delivery to change or improve would require broader managerial and political will. Stemming from this is the notion that, rather than a transformer, e-government facilitates a broader expression of public services and different modes of their delivery. In this way, e-government is simply another method of delivering on organisational goals but improvements in performance should not necessarily be expected (Kraemer and King, 2006).

With regard to how workers adapt to new technology, studies have found that consideration of this is an ‘afterthought’ (Chisholm, 1988). As such, an e-government technology such as email may well result in work intensification, through adding a new mode of delivery in addition to existing channels, and increased stress levels (Chesley, 2014). However, a new technology can also bring the potential for improved and more rapid communication both amongst staff and between their agency and the public (Kraemer and Dedrick, 1997).

Second, there is a public accountability and responsiveness aspect to e-government. As alluded to above, political leaders routinely argue that email, the internet and other e-government services will bring services closer to the public with improved responsiveness and quality of delivery; in sum, that accountability to the public, the ultimate funder and user of e-government services, will be better. Various studies have found this not to be so (Gauld et al., 2009; Karkin and Janssen, 2014). One possible explanation for this may be in the e-government ‘maturity models’ (Andersen et al., 2011; Layne and Lee, 2001). Earlier work in this regard was focused mostly on technological advancement and connectivity, with various phases of maturity conceptualised. Fully mature e-government would see channels for vertical communication – between the public and agencies – and horizontal communication – across government – in place and driven by technology, changes in corresponding processes and work design (Layne and Lee, 2001). Missing from these models is the ‘demand side’ of e-government, which is focused on user interaction and the impact of technology on improving public service work. From this perspective, e-government may create a workforce that does not necessarily perform better, from both public and bureaucratic perspectives; it may also engender skepticism about the benefits of technology based on real-world experiences in the workplace (Gauld et al., 2010).

Third, are perspectives around the measurement of e-government. Various initiatives have sought to measure and compare cross-country e-government development and performance. These include those commissioned by international agencies and associated groups, as well as research studies (Das, DiRienzo, and Burbridge, 2009; Kim, 2007; Siskos, Askounis, and Psarras, 2014; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014; Waseda University and International Academy of CIO (IAC), 2014; West, 2005; West, 2007) (Machova and Lnenicka, 2015). As noted elsewhere, these projects have tended to focus on specific indicators with a bias toward how well a country has performed as measured against different stages of maturity (Andersen et al., 2011). Measurement has, therefore, been mostly focused on the structural and delivery components of e-government. This includes the ‘capabilities’ of e-government, such as website functionality, ability for the public to be able to access online services, proportion of public using e-government services and frequency of this. Largely missing are methods for assessing actual e-government responsiveness.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1024254>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1024254>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)