



Explaining the low utilization of government websites: Using a grounded theory approach



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ABSTRACT

The low utilization of government websites is a worldwide problem, and many governments have been criticized for this reason. Several existing fields are relevant to this complex phenomenon, but few succeed in providing a holistic explanation because of their segmentary perspectives and limitations in conceptual innovation due to deductive paradigms. In order to explore the mechanism of government website utilization from a more integrated perspective, a grounded theory approach is adopted in this study. 51 respondents were interviewed and a grounded theoretical model for government website utilization was generated. The contributions of this study include: (1) developing a holistic understanding on the mechanism of government website utilization, (2) identifying a few new theoretical concepts that were not explored in previous studies, (3) revealing that value acquisition is the essence of government website utilization, and (4) formulating a derivative conceptual model for delineating the process of information source selection.

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1. Introduction

In recent two decades, ICT applications lead to the transformation of governments into e-governments. E-government was expected to bring added values for both governments and citizens by improving government performance and public efficiency. For this purpose, public administrations of all over the world invest an enormous amount of resources in e-government (Peters, Janssen, & Engers, 2004). A large number of government websites were designed for delivering government information and services and strengthening the interaction between governments and citizens. Driven by national information strategies, the total number of government websites in China had reached 81,725 by the end of April 2011, accounting for 4.4% of the 1.83 million Chinese websites (Zhaozhengfu.cn, 2011). Synchronously, by December 2013, there were 618 million internet users in mainland China, according to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2014). Nonetheless, there are still a great number of citizens who have never visited government websites or who know little about their functions (Guo, 2007; Lu, 2007; Wang & Chen, 2012). The Assessment of Chinese Government Websites released by China Computer World in January 2008 (Fan, 2008) showed that 57.5% of the people surveyed had never visited government websites, and 29% had no knowledge of them. The Survey Report on the County E-government Construction of Fujian Province showed that 81% of the people surveyed

had never visited county government websites, 93.4% of companies preferred traditional channels when they needed to communicate with government departments, and only 6.6% chose online channels in 2011 (Research Group on the E-government Construction at County level in Fujian Province, 2011).

Similar problems exist in other countries. "It seems that e-government in municipalities is still more rhetoric and less reality, at least in some countries" (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012). According to the FY 2009 Status Update on the E-Government Act of 2002, the number of unique visits or "touch points" to e-government websites was only a mere 148 million (National Archives & Records Administration, 2010), demonstrating the lack of use by more than half of the general public (Mathews, 2010). The British Central Office of Information reported that the UK Trade and Investment website averaged 28,000 users per month, accounting for only 5.3% of the total number of British Internet users, and each visitor therefore represented a cost of 11.78 lb, given that the website cost over 4 million pounds to build. As a result, the government had to review 1795 websites and closed more than 1000 which they regarded as "vanity sites" by 2010 (BBC, 2010).

These reports illustrate the mismatch between the huge investment made in e-government and the low utilization of government websites. Is the mismatch a normal phenomenon or a problem that could be meliorated? If it is the former, the government should consider closing some useless portals. If it is the latter, further measures that can improve citizens' utilization of government websites should be explored. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to firstly explain the low utilization of government websites.

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2. Literature review

The low utilization of government websites has been noticed by some scholars. It is found that progress toward citizen engagement is slow in local governments and there are very few efforts to increase interaction, participation, and collaboration channels on their portals in Mexico (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012). Existing studies on government websites were conducted mainly from two perspectives: users and websites. Concepts related with government website utilization are listed in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, users of e-government services have captured a great deal of attention (e.g., Alshehri & Drew, 2010; Fu, Farn, & Chao, 2006). User-centered models in information system such as TAM (Technology Acceptance Model, Davis, 1986), DOI (Diffusion of Innovation, Rogers, 1995) and UTAUT (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology) (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003) were successfully introduced into e-government field. Factors that affect the adoption of e-government services were fully examined, as shown in Table 1. UTAUT tried to integrate all the factors that had been explored in TAM related studies into one framework in a business context, and then it was empirically tested in e-government field by scholars from different countries (e.g., AlAwadhi & Morris, 2008; Alshehri, Drew, Alhussain, & Alghamdi, 2012; Lean, Zailani, Vitae, & Fernando, 2009; Verdegem & Verleye, 2009). These empirical studies tested a variety of influential factors of the acceptance of e-government information systems or government websites. However, because all of their theoretical variables were borrowed from information system studies which originally focused on businesses, they paid little attention to the contextual particularity of e-government and failed to contribute new theoretical elements and more explanatory power for e-government research.

“Websites can be considered key elements of successful e-government strategies” (Gil-Garcia, 2006). Numerous studies focus on government websites. Many concepts shown in Table 1 and other aspects of government websites were examined. Exogenous factors such as organizational factors were also investigated (Gil-Garcia, 2006). These studies examined nearly all kinds of properties of government websites that may influence their performance, but they couldn't explain the low utilization of those well designed websites due to segmentary perspectives.

Besides users and websites, efforts have also been made in integrated investigation. Experiences and lessons from implementation of e-government projects in developing countries were fully reviewed (Abdelsalam, Reddick, & El Kadi, 2012; Basu, 2004; Bhatnagar, 2002; Hossan, Habib, & Kushchu, 2006). Layne & Lee's (2001) four-stage model and Moon's (2002) five-stage model described the possible developing paths of e-government under integrated perspective combining technical, organizational, and managerial feasibility (Hiller & Bélanger, 2001). Because these studies paid more attention on the

whole e-government development than government websites, they have little explanatory power on government website utilization.

In order to make up for the deficiencies of above three types of studies, Luna-Reyes, Gil-Garcia, and Romero (2012) proposed a multidimensional model for e-government measurement. This model is instructive for its integrated perspective and government rooted thinking. Its limitation is that nearly all the indicators were formulated based on literature review. No innovative theoretical elements were contributed.

Abovementioned studies have provided concepts related to government website utilization (as shown in Appendix 1) and meaningful suggestions for e-government development in some way. Their findings have been applied in building official or semi-official performance evaluation criteria for government websites in many countries (e.g., Saidi Group, 2009; Wang & Zhai, 2009). However, few studies have so far examined the low utilization of many government websites, and even fewer can explain why so many people have never visited a government website. In view of this fact, the research questions of the present study are formulated as: What is the theoretical mechanism of government website utilization? How do we explain the low utilization of government websites?

3. Research method

The powerlessness of previous studies in explaining the low utilization of government websites lies in four aspects: (1) hypotheses deducted from theories that originated in business context may neglect special elements for governments; (2) empirical methods that are used to test existing theories may hinder the discovery of new theoretical elements; (3) pure theoretical reviews may lose new findings from vivid reality; and (4) segmentary perspectives may hinder the examination on the phenomenon in a holistic way. From the above, in order to explore the mechanism of government website utilization more systematically, an inductive approach that can be used to find new theoretical elements and can examine the problem under an integrated perspective is needed.

Grounded theory approach, which is thought as a holistic approach (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991), can examine a phenomenon in a real-world context and thus have the potential to disclose new theoretical elements that have not been involved in existing theories. It is to generate a new theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved (Glaser, 1992) rather than to verify existing theories. When a researcher intends to challenge existing theory, develop new theory, or is interested in drawing forth the object's understanding, perception or experience with the world, he/she could consider using ground theory approach (Layons & Coyle, 2007). At present, the low utilization of government websites has not been given a powerful interpretation by existing theories, and the understanding and perception of stakeholders (e.g., government officials and citizens)

Table 1
Concepts related with government website utilization in literature.

User perspective	Trust Culture Perceived ease of use Perceived usefulness Perceived risks	e.g. Carter and Bélanger (2005); Horst, Kuttschreuter, and Gutteling (2007); Patel and Jacobson (2008); Tolbert and Mossberger (2006); Warkentin, Gefen, Pavlou, and Rose (2002)
Website perspective	Language Usability	e.g. Curtin and Gaither (2004) e.g. Baker (2009); Choudrie and Ghinea (2005); Hirwade (2010); Huang and Brooks (2011); Youngblood and Mackiewicz (2014)
	Evaluation	Abanumy, Al-Badi, and Mayhew (2005); Eschenfelder and Miller (2005); Smith (2001); Wang and Gu (2011); Westbrook (2008)
Evaluation indicators	Benchmarking	Mosse and Whitley (2009)
	Information architecture (content, information organization, navigation system)	Wang and Gu (2012)
	Technical performance	Wang and Gu (2012)
	Quality of information, technological infrastructure, organizational characteristics, existing legal framework, electronic services, Quality of public services, efficiency & productivity, transparency & accountability, citizen participation	Luna-Reyes et al. (2012)

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