E-Gov: Will the Real “Cyber-Optimists” Please Stand Up?

I n their article “Local E-Government in the United States: Transformation or Incremental Change?” Donald F. Norris and Christopher G. Reddick point to “cyber-optimists” as e-government evangelists who are likely behind the claims of government e-transformation and e-democracy. Specifically, who are these cyber-optimists, what do they know, and what is their motivation to promulgate the good e-government story?

I know of two groups for sure—the politicians and the vendors. For elected officials, e-government is a wonderful platform on which to engage their constituencies. Politicians can tout many publicly favorable tenets such as convenience, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, association with new and cool technology, transparency, and so on. It is likely, therefore, that mayors and governors, and all demagogues in between, would go a long way to sing the praises of e-government, including the anticipated benefits to government and citizens alike. The e-government vendors, including hardware, software, infrastructure, development, and so forth, have similar cause to fuel the e-government fire. Given an opportunity to cultivate a new market that has so much public attraction and revenue potential, the seller community has much motivation to maintain the hype at high levels.

Although I surely cannot rely on personal experience to prove my case, I surmise that the “optimists of the day” predicted comprehensive government transformation on the forefront of other historical technology transitions. Some obvious examples include the electrification of municipal utilities such as lighting and water supply delivery, the transition from horse-drawn to motorized vehicles, and the introduction of telephonic communications. History shows us, repeatedly, that these technological milestones, while epic, were followed by prolonged periods of incremental change. Furthermore, such change was not limited to government; rather, it was similarly characteristic of, and applicable to, the much broader society of the era. So why wouldn’t we expect history to repeat itself?

On the other hand, my colleagues have provided substantial empirical evidence to support the fact that e-government processes and applications are real, of value, and growing. The seven-year span of data fully supports the notion that initial e-government offerings were more of an informational nature, often structured as a “one-way” push of information in response to a constituent request. Over this period, there has been a distinct evolution to a more transactional form of e-government in which customers routinely interact with their government. In the state of Maryland today, virtually every motor vehicle renewal registration is executed electronically. Most Maryland citizens purchase hunting and fishing licenses online, whether they are acquired at a retail business or directly on the web by the applicant. Most taxpayers file their state tax returns electronically, and the governor “crowd-sources” our citizens for ideas on managing the state budget during these tough economic times.

So maybe the cyber-optimists truly believed that government agencies were in the pilot’s seat and could leverage e-government to propel their entities to new heights in customer service and service delivery. While most would agree that e-government initiatives have produced a varied array of operational efficiencies, customer conveniences, and, to the real optimists, cost savings, few would agree that e-government has realized the hype of radical e-democracy transformation. However, e-government has radically transformed the ability of citizens and businesses to communicate and, therefore, to interact with their government through a plethora of channels (e.g., Web sites, mobile apps, social networks, etc.), applications, and platforms (e.g., traditional computers, tablets, smart phones, etc.). Constituents engage with their government representatives, not because agencies have recently discovered innovation and have posted to Facebook and Twitter accounts, but rather because the technological generation prefers to communicate and conduct business in that fashion.

I do not intend to devalue the good efforts of government to implement e-government strategies.
right marketing strategies would do much to deepen e-government penetration.

In conclusion, Norris and Reddick get it exactly right in their suggestion that e-government is an incremental and growing process that is continuously evolving from a one-way push of information to more of an interactive, transactional portal model. For an individual government entity, the speed of e-government adoption is strongly linked to the balance between anticipated benefits and resources available for portal development, accompanied by a strong marketing program that educates the customer about what e-government services are available and how to use them. Perhaps the cyber-optimists, characteristically led by the politicians and technology purveyors, subscribed to the notion that “if you build it, they will come,” but the reality is that e-government is all about increasing the channels and bandwidth of communications between citizens, businesses, and their government in a mutually desirable, efficient, and transparent manner. In some ways, this is what e-democracy is all about.