Electronic Government-Citizen Relationships: Exploring Citizen Perspectives

Arthur D. P. Sweeney

ABSTRACT. Citizens that already are engaged in online activities are more inclined to connect with their governments electronically. One question that has largely gone unanswered is, *Does citizens' use of the Internet to interact with governments facilitate relationships between them and their governments?* This is the key issue for e-governance and is under researched. So this research explores citizen perspectives through qualitative interviews. The data is content analyzed using Leximancer. Citizens trust the e-government process but not their governments. Quantitative survey research is needed to confirm these results that are important both for relationship theory and for the working relationships between governments and citizens. doi:10.1080/19331680802076165 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. E-government, relationships, relationship marketing, Leximancer, content analysis

The impact of the Internet on citizen-government interaction has been scrutinized in recent years, because as citizens increasingly engage in online economic and social activities, they are more inclined to connect with their governments via the Internet (Shulman, Shelley, & Thrane, 2006; Thomas & Streib, 2005). One question that has largely gone unanswered, and to be addressed here is, *Does citizens' use of the Internet to interact with governments facilitate relationships between them and their governments?* This is the evaluative question for e-governance according to Haque (2002), because without a deep and abiding trust by citizens in their governments, e-government will not succeed (Evans & Yen, 2006).

So far, the literature reports an unrealized potential of e-government to develop citizen-government relationships. Torres, Pina, and Acerete (2005) found that Web sites of 33 major European cities had few signs of enhancing citizen trust in governments, although governments everywhere acknowledge the Web's potential to generate trust. Similarly, data from

US state budgets, public opinion polls, and State and Federal government Web sites shows that there is not a significant relationship between citizen use of e-government and trust in government (West, 2004). Given that this data is mainly from governments and not citizens and is somewhat dated (1998-2001), the potential of e-government is largely unresearched. Thus, this study explores citizens' views on e-government-citizen relationships so that governments may form better relationships with their citizens. Also, the study will advance e-government-citizen relationship theory. Thirdly, the research has practical implications for citizens on the question of whether e-government facilitates or diminishes their democracy. This paper has five parts: a literature review, a justification of the research method, a report of the results, a discussion of the findings, and a discussion of the implications.

LITERATURE

E-Government: Conceptual Clarification

Before addressing the literature directly related to the research question, the concept of e-government is clarified and its status reviewed. E-government, or electronic government, seems to be in a state of development, and finding a consensus definition is difficult (Jaeger, 2003). The overarching term is e-governance, inclusive of all the processes and institutions that harness information communication technologies (ICTs) for governance, and so includes e-democracy, e-administration, e-politics, and e-government (Saxena, 2005). As the relationship focus of this paper is not captured by any of the terms, *e-government* is the most relevant and is used throughout.

E-Government: Current Status

Unlike offline systems, the Internet is non-hierarchical, non-linear, two-way, and available all day everyday, and it is already changing the way that we do everything, including government (West, 2004). For example, in the US, citizen-government contact is 40% by phone, 24% by the Web, and 13% in person. In Austra-

lia, where this study is conducted, 48% of people access a government service via the Internet while 43% do so in person. The figure for e-government would be much higher except that 32% of Internet users think that contacting governments cannot be done online. Only 14% of Internet users prefer to speak to a real person ("Australians' use," 2005).

The transfer of government to the online mode tends to occur in stages from billboards to service delivery, integrated portals, and interactive democracy (Layne & Lee, 2001). So far, much of the evidence about the journey to e-government comes from local or municipal governments in the USA and the European Union, where most Web sites are devoted to good management rather than good democracy that cultivates significant citizen involvement (Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000; Scott, 2006; Torres et al., 2005).

Australia has three levels of government: Federal that deals with national activities; States that are largely responsible for police, public safety and transport, education, and health services; and local governments that function like the municipal authorities in America and Europe. In the early 1990s, most Australian governments had no online presence, but now Australia is ranked sixth out of 32 countries on the comprehensive Wasada scale that measures six components of ideal e-government (Obi, 2007). Nevertheless, whether e-government in Australia, which is used by half the population, has been successful in facilitating citizen-government relationships is unknown and is, therefore, a matter of research interest.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this research is depicted in Figure 1 (adapted from Widing, Sheth, Pulendran, Mittal, & Newman, 2003, p.497) and is drawn from the relationship marketing literature.

Relationship Marketing (RM)

Fundamentally, marketing is about creating different types of exchanges. These may be one-off transactions where personalities and social bonds are extraneous, or relational ex-

FIGURE 1. Inputs and outputs of e-government-citizen relationships.
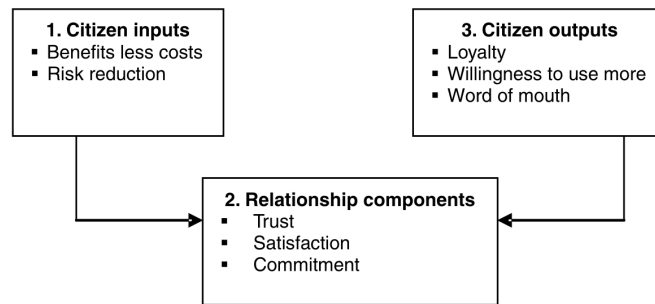
changes developed through the trading history of the partners into social and emotional partnerships that are more than merely repeated transactions. Discrete transactions have an information and economic content with no social exchange, whereas relational exchanges are more social and psychological, with trust, satisfaction, and commitment as important components (Ching & Ellis, 2006).

The purpose of RM is to develop relational exchanges (Gronroos, 1989), but what constitutes a relationship is unclear. For example, the literature review by Sheaves and Barnes (1996) describes relationships as exclusively people-centered contacts with considerable emotional components. Thus it will be difficult for technology-based service providers (like e-government) to create close relationships with people. Further, reciprocity is the norm: the parties in the relationship provide something for each other, and this mutuality means that the behavior of each takes account of the behaviors of the other. According to sociologists, personal relationships can be strong ties (close friends or family) or weak ties (acquaintances) whose strength is determined by how much time, emotion, intimacy, and reciprocal services are invested in them (Granovetter, 1973, 1983).

In contrast, the RM literature takes a wider view of relationships that are said to be contacts between two or more people, objects, symbols, or organizations (Gummesson, 1996). Thus Sheaves and Barnes (1996) extend the concept of weak ties to include electronic contexts (e.g., banks, e-government) where relationships can be developed without face-to-face contact. However, the risk in moving from face-to-face to electronic contact is that it becomes increasingly psychologically distant and task oriented, less personal, spontaneous and collaborative; that is, contacts between two parties become routine and regularized rather than relational, functional rather than social (Gabbott & Colgate, 1999). Indeed, with virtualization, a relationship with the customer is maintained at arm's length with little or no direct personal interaction; that is, a disembodied social relationship depriving a traditional relationship of its defining characteristics. In the case of e-government this may create uncertainty about the citizen-government interface.

Nevertheless, as Sweeney and Morrison (2004) found in e-banking, the Internet may facilitate relationships between non-institutional customers and their bank as much as face-to-face interaction, as long as the Internet service contains strong social components. Similarly, the in-depth interview data of Ching and Ellis (2006) obtained from small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in e-commerce in Hong Kong showed that relational exchanges (characterized by emotional bonding) exhibited higher levels of trust, commitment, closeness, and satisfaction with past performance than ad hoc e-exchanges (a transaction conducted with no expectation of any future interaction between the exchange partners) and repeated e-transactions. Furthermore, such findings from e-commerce may forebode well for e-government and thus suggest that citizen-e-government relationships are a legitimate area of research.

Citizen inputs. Figure 1 shows that citizen inputs influence people's decisions about entering a relationship with an institution, including

a government. When such a relationship features trust, satisfaction, and commitment, the outcomes may be increased citizen loyalty, willingness to use the service more, and favorable word of mouth promotion. Today's fast-paced world is increasingly dominated by self-service technologies (SSTs) that enable customers to produce a service independent of a direct service employee. Their popularity arises because they satisfy customers' needs to maximize benefits and save the costs of problem solving including time, effort, inconvenience, and risk, and for some they are more effective than face-to-face contact. E-government is in part an SST, but whether it can generate relational exchanges characterized by trust and commitment remains to be determined. For example, an evaluation of non-e-government, critical SST incidents with 1,000 Americans concluded that additional research is needed to determine how organizations should develop trust and loyalty with customers when there is an absence of human contact (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, & Bitner, 2000).

In particular, adopting a customer orientation has become a burgeoning theme in public management, and municipal governments have found it fruitful (Schedler & Summermatter, 2007). For example, customer relationship management (CRM), which uses ICTs to provide the information required to create a more personal interaction with citizens to increase their loyalty and lifetime value, has recently become popular in UK local government. An analysis by King (2007) of case studies of 12 local authority leaders in CRM revealed different stages of CRM maturity, but there was no evidence that CRM is used to generate insight into citizens' use of services or future service needs.

Many governments have taken these and other commercial approaches to e-government. For example, Australia's e-government objective is a return on investment (Keating, 2003). Similarly, the Hong Kong government has adopted CRM, and it measures the benefits of e-government by the return on its IT investment ("Next wave," 2007). Also, the US administration's objective for e-government is to use the Internet to create a market-based government ("Government Reform," 2001). Indeed, Steyaert (2004) found empirical support for using a marketing framework for evaluating e-government services. In brief, commercial or market-based approaches to e-government are responses to citizen desires for a convenient and efficient channel of contact with their governments. However, as there has been little interest in citizen-e-government relationships in the literature, it is the focus of this research.

Citizen-e-government relationships. Citizen-e-government relationships stand, as all genuine offline relationships do, on the emotional tripod of trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Widing et al., 2003), and trust exists when one party has confidence in another's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). There are two types of trust in e-government empirically found in the literature. Firstly, trust in governments (institutional) and trust in the Internet channel (process). Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) analyzed 2001 Pew data to explore the impact of e-government on citizen attitudes. In general, they found that enhancing citizen trust in e-government is due to process factors rather than institutional. This data is now somewhat dated, but the authors suggest that future research should explore process-based trust further. Similarly, a large structural equation modeling (SEM) study of US households by Bart, Shankar, Sultan, and Urban (2005) found that particular process factors such as information and navigation are the strongest drivers of trust in e-government. Nevertheless, an investigation by Carter and Belanger (2005) of 105 US citizens found that only when process and institutional trust were combined into one construct was there a significant intention to use e-government. However, their sample may have been too small for SEM and was strongly skewed towards females (64%), perhaps biasing the results.

Contrarily, Horst, Kuttschreuter, and Gutteling (2007) found the reverse: that perceived usefulness of government e-services is mainly predicted by trust in e-government, which seems counter intuitive, as Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) and Barnes and Cumby (2002) argue. That is, trust builds slowly through experience with an e-government Web site, and if citizens get good results repeatedly. Indeed, missing values and a convenience sample analyzed with SEM may have skewed the

results in the Horst et al. study. Similarly, the Internet survey of 124 Canadian e-government users by Parent, Vanderbeek, and Gemino, (2005) found that the perceived quality of e-government Web sites did not significantly influence and explain citizen trust in government; that is, Governments should engage individuals with high pre-existing levels of trust if they wish their online efforts to succeed. Once again, a convenience sample with an over representation of females (62%), with a small number of respondents, and analyzed with SEM probably lacking statistical power, may diminish the usefulness of the results.

Finally, regarding the other components of a relationship, satisfaction with the performance of each party is an important part (Wilson, 1995) and is related to how close people feel towards the service provider based on satisfaction with the total relationship and its individual parts (Barnes, 1997). As for commitment, continuity seems to be its hallmark, which is that part of a relationship worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Outcomes. As Figure 1 shows, the outcomes of a relationship are loyalty, a willingness to use more of government services, and a proactive word of mouth support for the e-government experience. Loyalty is a preference to act consistently in a certain manner and is often reflected in a greater use of the service concerned. Word of mouth support expresses a citizen's satisfaction with the product or service.

Citizen-E-Government Relationships: State of the Art

E-government is now an important channel through which citizens contact their governments: One quarter of the population in the US and about half in Australia use this mode of communication. Some argue that the key evaluative question for e-governance is "do citizens' uses of the Internet to interact with governments facilitate relationships between them and their governments?"

So far, the e-government literature has not demonstrated much interest in answering this question, perhaps not least because many scholars see relationships as exclusively people-centered, and not something to be developed with objects, symbols, or organizations. Thus the literature reveals that e-government shows few signs of enhancing citizen trust in governments, although it is recognized that without a deep and abiding citizen trust in their governments, e-government will not succeed. The little empirical data that is reported in the literature suggests that where trust has been generated by e-government, it is trust in the Internet channel (process factors) that is a more important driver than trust in government itself (institutional factors). Given the paucity of data on this important question, this study explores the issue further.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Plan

This study aims to address the lack of research on e-government-citizen relationships from the citizen's perspective using an exploratory qualitative research design, because such a perspective could not be gained otherwise. The author is trained in marketing and qualitative methods, he is widely experienced in their application in consumer research, and his theoretical orientation is interpretive analytic.

Data were collected through personal interviews with citizens who had contacted Federal, State, or local governments online for any reason. Examples include library services, government permits, bookshops, information searches, education, or even political involvement such as listening to parliament, starting an e-petition, engaging in dialogue with MPs, making a submission to a parliamentary committee, or completing government surveys. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using Leximancer, data-mining software that analyses the content of textual documents and visually displays the extracted information as a map (Smith, 2005).

Research Participants

The sample of 18 included 11 males and 7 females, married and singles, aged 18-72 and living on Queensland's Gold Coast. Respondents were recruited using a random selection of telephone numbers and sometimes thereafter the

"friends of a friend" method. On the telephone, respondents were asked about their contact with governments, and if there had been no Internet contact they were thanked and excluded from the research. At the end of the interview respondents were invited to name any friends that may be suitable for interview. Occupations represented were students, psychologists, typists, office assistants, factory workers, academics, public servants, business owners, builders, and consultants. Participants were offered a nominal incentive of movie tickets, and most interviews were conducted at the university campus, although some took place at participants' homes or by telephone.

Research Procedures

Interviews. To provide a relaxed environment in which respondents were open to fully discuss topics, personal interviews began as non-directive by explaining the purpose of the research, and then participants were invited to "please tell me the story of your contact with governments electronically." This gave them the opportunity to converse on the topic and encouraged them to share information. As the interviews progressed, they became more directive and semi-structured, using a minimum of prompts and guiding questions to explore how respondents think about the topic. For example, questions were arranged in stem-plus-query design ("I am interested in what you like about online government. Would you tell me something about this, please?"). This enabled interviewees to focus on the topic, softened the questions making them less inquisitorial, and facilitated probing. Data were collected during 2005, and as data saturation occurred after 18 interviews, interviewing was stopped. This compares with Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, (2006) who found that saturation occurred within 12 interviews, although basic metathemes were present as early as six. This suggests that interviewing in this study was not halted prematurely.

Data analysis. In the data analysis process, Leximancer automatically extracted the most important concepts from the interview transcripts and drew the concept map (Figure 2). Concepts are shown in words and points. More

frequent concepts are darker, and bigger points indicate that the concepts are more highly connected, while concepts that are closer together appear in similar contexts.

Content analysis is a research tool that determines the presence of words or concepts in textual documents and breaks down the material into manageable categories and relations that can be quantified and analyzed. In general, approaches to content analysis are either thematic or relational. Thematic analysis is the most common form and involves the detection and quantification of the presence of predefined concepts within the text, which can be explicit (i.e., particular words or phrases) or implicit (i.e., not explicitly stated in predefined terms). Relational analysis, by contrast, measures how such identified concepts are related to each other within the documents. One of the strengths of the Leximancer system is that it conducts both forms of analysis, measuring the presence of defined concepts as well as how they are interrelated.

In Leximancer, concepts are collections of words that travel together throughout the text and are weighted according to their frequency in a sentence compared to how frequently they occur elsewhere. Sentences are tagged as containing a concept if enough accumulated evidence is found. Terms are weighted using an algorithm, so the presence of each word in a sentence provides an appropriate contribution to the accumulated evidence for the presence of a concept. Thus the coding is computerized leading to perfect scoring reliability, allowing dictionaries to be defined automatically for any topic and bypassing the need for manual coding. Furthermore, this process can be interactive, allowing users with knowledge of the domain to influence the concept definitions and to focus on concepts of interest.

Reliability and validity. In content analysis, two forms of reliability are pertinent: stability and reproducibility. Stability refers to the tendency of a coder to consistently re-code the same information in the same way over time. However, human coders are often inconsistent because of the ambiguity in the coding rules or in the text, simple coding errors, or cognitive changes within the coder. As Leximancer's approach is automated and deterministic, such in-

FIGURE 2. E-government: Main concepts and themes.
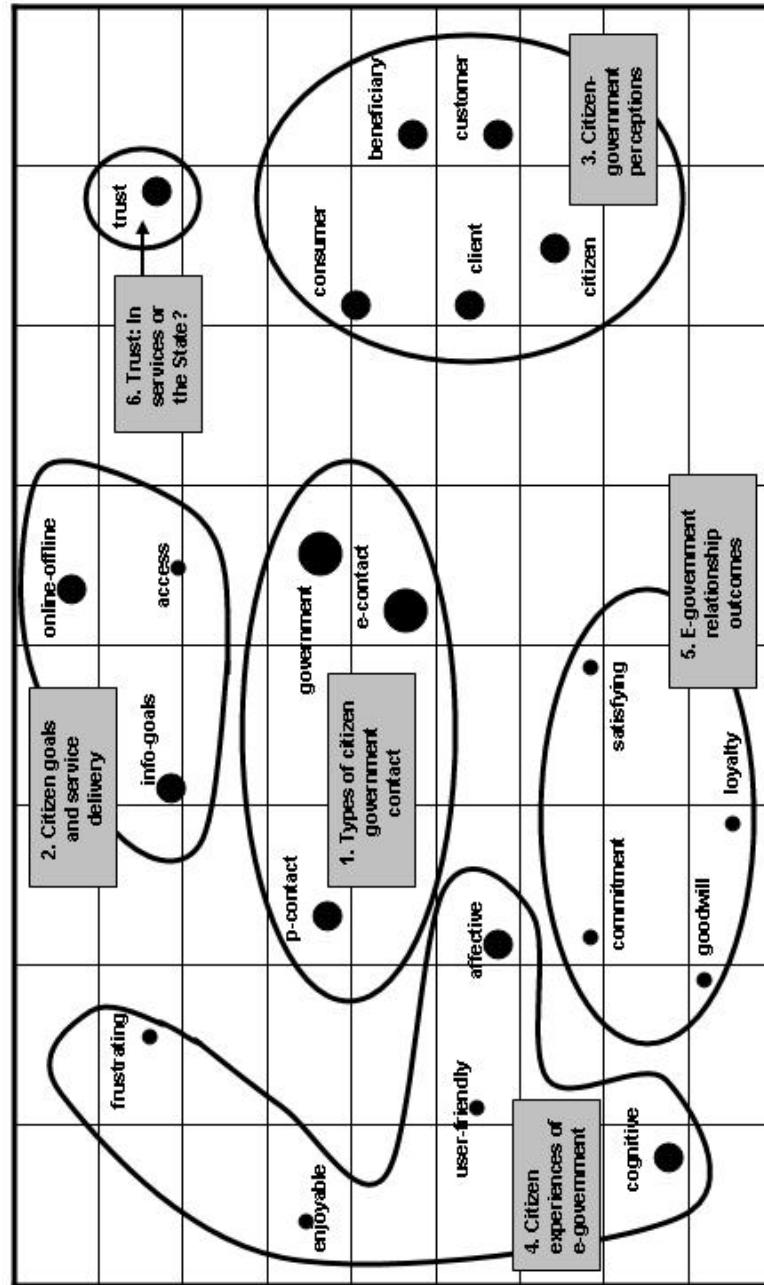
consistencies are avoided leading to a high level of coding stability.

Reproducibility refers to the consistency of classification by several coders given the same marking scheme. In Leximancer, this issue is most relevant to the generation of the conceptual map that can be thought of as a bird's eye view of the data, displaying a two dimensional projection of the original high dimensional co-occurrence matrix between concepts. The process of map generation is stochastic, leading to the possibility of different final positions for the extracted concepts each time the map is generated. If the map changes in gross structure, the most common reason for this cluster instability is that the map is too highly connected and that no strong pattern can be found. Thus for a strict interpretation of the cluster map, the clustering should be run several times and the map inspected on each occasion. If the relative positioning of the concepts is similar between runs, then the cluster map is stable; if not, it is because the coded context blocks are too large, or that the classification thresholds are too low. The standard run is 1,000 iterations, and in this research, map construction was found to be very stable well before 1,000 iterations.

RESULTS

As the goal in qualitative research is to discover and to interpret meaningful themes in the data (Malhotra, 2006), the main conceptual themes identified were "types of citizen-government contact," "citizen goals and service delivery," "citizen-government perceptions," "citizen experiences of e-government," "e-government' relationship outcomes," and "trust: in services or the State?" These thematic groups comprise a number of main concepts as shown in Figure 2.

Theme 1: Types of Citizen-Government Contact

The types of citizen-government contact are "e-contact" (electronic) and "p-contact" (personal, whether spoken face-to-face or by telephone or letter). The proximity to government, but not identical placement of the two types on the map, suggests that both forms of contact may be similarly useful for some respondents.

The reasons for choosing e-contact are revealed in a sample of quotations from the interview transcripts:

> Convenience! Government departments are notoriously difficult to get in touch with by mail and phone. But it means I can approach them and generally find the information that I want in my time, when I want it. It is just easier. So I like the convenience of it. The accessibility. I do like also the speed with which you get the responses to questions which otherwise would take a lot of time. I like the time saving and the energy saving. So it is the accessibility, time saving and the convenience. They are the key things. (Colin)

> When I get what I want electronically and have further questions I'm happy to phone with a proper question. I know that I will not be misunderstood because I have asked the right question. (Lynn)

Convenience, speed of response, time and energy saving, ease of access, and 24/7 availability of service are the prime reasons for choosing electronic contact. Interestingly, while Colin chose electronic contact to avoid personal contact, Lynn is happy to mix and match both forms according to which one gives her the best service result.

Theme 2: Citizen Goals and Service Delivery

This thematic group includes citizens' objectives for using e-government and their evaluation of the experience.

Info-Goals

"Info-goals" (information seeking) embraces the main objective but also includes others:

> I have visited a government Web site for the last 6 months mainly for research purposes. (Jodd)

> Yes, I have tried to access information about property development and self-managed super funds, how they get taxed, what your obligations are, what is

the costing . . . trying to access that kind of information basically. (Carmel)

These responses are typical. Obtaining information for research or other purposes, and accessing government services such as library and transport, paying rates, and looking at government regulations seem to be the most important goals. Using e-government to participate more in democracy is rare, although here is an example:

I've been involved in an e-petition with the current debate about daylight saving. Just had a look to see whether there is anything that I thought would be worthwhile being involved in the democratic process and being a part of this participative e-government. (Ian)

Service Delivery

Did participants receive the services they wanted? Achievement of goals was mixed:

99% yes definitely I get what I want. The other 1% is not in straight English. I can't understand the way it has been spelled out. You know, it is not right to the point. (Sigi)

A lot of the Web sites are not set up in a directory type scenario, so sometimes finding information can be a convoluted process, so you meet with sort of limited success. But with local governments sometimes you are not able to do what you want to do. (Greg)

Found it complicated at first but got there through trial and error. It's the jargon that is confusing and did not understand what was required to begin with. (Shirley)

Evaluation of e-government service delivery ranges from positive to negative. The main problems expressed here are language and service structure. Concerning the former, government jargon (rather than "citizen speak") creates misunderstanding and is a barrier to effective communication. As for structure, simple services like library are delivered without

problems, but others are convoluted and complicated to the point that citizens give up on the process.

Online versus Offline

Respondents were asked how online government compared with offline, and if one form was better than the other:

Definitely. Online is easier to find information and the answers to questions. (Georgia)

I'm actually critical about that. There are some e-services that are delivered much better, like if you want something like a form or a basic policy statement or some very broad information, it's excellent. But if you want some very specific piece of information you may have to get it face-to-face or by the phone. (Ian)

Couldn't communicate my needs online as well as face-to-face. (Jessica)

I just wanted the reassurance of a person, being a new sole trader. I suppose I don't fully trust myself and my ability to make sense of a new area. I wanted to spill my guts to someone on the phone and get a 'yea' or a 'no' to know if I'm doing the right thing. (John)

It seems that online government may be preferred for services that are routine (e.g., Ian). However, where detailed explanation of citizen need (e.g., Jessica) or emotional reassurance (e.g., John) is required, then offline government is better than e-government.

Theme 3: Citizen-Government Perceptions

Respondents were asked how they saw themselves when using e-government and how they thought governments perceived them. Here is a sample of typical responses:

I view myself in dealing with the government as a customer. On the other hand, I think that they see me as a pain in the bum. You feel that the government is

providing something that they are forced to provide rather than value adding to their business. (Marcus)

I view myself as a customer in using e-government. The government does not view me as a customer, but more as a citizen, who has certain obligations to fill. (Colin)

I don't feel that I'm accessing the government but just using the Web to find government information. When the issue is just access to information there is no food chain and everyone gets the same service, but it can be different when you make a request. We used to be treated as citizens but it has changed and we are now clients. (Lynn)

I suppose as a citizen, part of a collective group called Australia . . . the sense I got was I was one of the numbers, nothing special . . . (John)

e-government tries to engage the general public but also hold them at arm's length. The staff don't have to come to a public meeting and deal with people, particularly angry people because it's much easier to flip the anger into the Web site which is impersonal and remote. (Ian)

In brief, there is not much that is positive about e-government here. Respondents want to be treated as citizens who have responsibilities as well as entitlements and privileges, but they are not being treated as they once were. Rather, there has been a decline; Citizens are now colorless numbers, nothing special or distinctive, but irritant obligatees to be held at an arm's length, and certainly relationships with their constituents are not to be encouraged.

Theme 4: Citizen Experiences of E-Government

This thematic group focuses on respondents' cognitive and affective experiences of e-government. Here is a sample of quotations from the interview transcripts:

It is enjoyable because I am in control of the way that I interact. I am not sitting on the phone pushing buttons and being redirected from department to department. So, it is a relatively easy and hassle free experience, which is good. However, there are some things that are fairly frustrating like broken hyperlinks to other government Web pages. (Mitchell)

There were no basic explanations for some concepts and processes that I would have appreciated. They assume too much about my knowledge and ability I think. (John)

I fear Big Brother tracking where I've been and what they could use this for. (Rahim)

It could be used more positively than it is. More organization of online content, make it logical. The Department of Fair Trading Web site is atrocious; there is so much information there that sometimes it is difficult to get what you want. (Marcus)

Local government Web sites need to be simpler. You would think that there would be simple things that you could find out online but they're quite difficult. So, they are not particularly user-friendly. It was too nerve wrecking; I was worried I was going to make a mistake so I gave up. (Carmel)

Citizen experiences of e-Government are mixed, ranging from the enjoyable and user-friendly to frustrating and lacking important cognitive features, as Figure 2 shows. On balance, the dominant feelings are positive, but citizens report frustrating experiences because the cognitive aspects need improvement–content needs to be organized simply and logically.

Theme 5: E-Government Relationship Outcomes

This thematic group focuses on the relationship between governments and their citizens. The distance of this group from the concept of government in Figure 2 suggests that the idea of

citizen-government relationship is remote, as the following quotations show:

> I'm satisfied with the e-government experience but undecided about commitment. (Georgia)

> I feel good about what they are trying to do and I would use it in the future but I would tell others about the negative aspects as well. (Michael)

> I don't feel any sense of commitment and loyalty. They are not the sorts of words that come into my relationship with the government. I don't see a link between the Web site and the government. I see it in a far more functional sense, it is really there to perform a task and in terms of affecting the way that I think about government itself doesn't really have significant impact. (Lynn)

> As a customer in using e-government I don't find that I feel goodwill, I don't find that I feel more committed, I don't find that I feel loyal. (Colin)

> I don't feel any sense of loyalty. However, I believe that there is 'reciprocity' that both parties are getting something out of the transaction. I intend to use e-government in the future, because the information is easy to access and use. But if I had bad experiences I would tell others about those as well. (Marcus)

> . . . it's my money that they're spending in propaganda essentially and that annoys the hell out of me . . . particularly me at the moment because I paid tax for 20 years and . . . I'm getting nothing in return! So, I feel somewhat annoyed by the whole system. Its about 'smart state, 'smart Australia', 'working smarter'. At the moment I'm just appalled. The government is not really trying to generate a relationship with me. (Ian)

In brief, there is a continuum of feelings about e-government ranging from a sense of commitment to a more domi-nant feeling of no sense of commitment, loyalty, or goodwill. There is a disconnection between satisfaction with e-government service delivery on the one hand and the lack of relationship commitment to governments on the other. Additionally, the concepts of loyalty and goodwill are even further away from the central concept of government. Indeed, they are on the extremes of the conceptual map.

Theme 6: Trust: In Services or the State?

The final theme is *trust*, and while it is isolated on the conceptual map (Figure 2), its proximity to service access and its distance from *government* suggests that citizens trust the functional aspects of e-government service but not the government providing the service. Moreover, the large spatial distance between *trust* and the other relationship variables of *satisfaction* and *commitment*, of which they are an integral, theoretical part, highlight the relationship disconnect. Here is a sample of typical quotations:

> Trust doesn't come into it because I'm only getting information from them. (Margaret)

> I don't distrust them about forms and information. (Lynn)

> The words government and trust don't compute. They are corrupt; they don't keep their promises. Everything comes down to cost and government online is to save them money by reducing the workforce and getting people to serve themselves. (Shirley)

> No, I don't trust them more and I didn't vote for them at the last election. (Jessica)

> Oh no. My perceptions of government are as a bureaucratic monster that doesn't really get anything done in haste, probably is unchanged by e-government. I think I see what you are asking in that question, that if they streamline their pro-

cesses and made it far more interactive and useful, then yes, probably if you can get on and do what you needed to do and there is never a drama, it would certainly facilitate a more amiable relationship with it certainly. (Greg)

I would say that I trust the government less by dealing with it electronically because once again it's a method to hold the general public at an arm's length, while giving the perception of trying to engage them more. (Ian)

Clearly, citizens dichotomize their trust. On the one hand, they trust the process of e-government service delivery but do not trust the State that provides these services. Indeed, their lack of trust in the State is expressed quite strongly, but there is no sense of tension between these apparently contradictory attitudes.

DISCUSSION

This paper began by highlighting an important evaluative question for e-governance: *Does citizens' use of the Internet to interact with governments facilitate relationships between them and their governments?* The evidence to date suggests an unrealized potential of e-government to develop citizen-government relationships. While governments everywhere seem to acknowledge the Web's relationship building potential, there are few indications that they are serious about using e-government to enhance relationships with their citizens. This study, however, provides some tentative answers to this question from an exploratory investigation of citizens in Australia, where nearly half of them contact their governments by the Internet.

Convenience, speed of response, time and energy saving, ease of access, and 24/7 availability of service are the main benefits for choosing electronic contact with governments. That is, respondents see themselves as customers of governments, which have obligations to them, although participants think that governments view them as citizens with obligations to the government. These findings support the "citizen inputs" construct of the conceptual framework and the empirical literature that argues for a market and commercial framework for assessing e-government services (Steyaert, 2004). Nevertheless, respondents do not always choose electronic contact with governments over face to face. While some like to avoid personal contact because of the expected disappointing service to be experienced, others use both forms if necessary to get the best service outcome.

Indeed, service outcome in the form of information and transactions are the main reasons to use e-government rather than for a deeper participation in democracy. It seems that online government may be preferred for the delivery of simple, routine services that respondents describe as enjoyable and user-friendly. In contrast, where detailed explanation of citizen need or emotional reassurance of correct citizen behavior is required, then citizens give up on the process in favor of offline government that better copes with such convoluted and complicated problems. In these cases, e-government is frustrating because the cognitive and emotional aspects need improvement.

The issue of emotional reassurance brings us to the subject of citizen-e-government relationships that can only be built on the emotional components of trust, satisfaction, and commitment, trust being the most important (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Widing et al., 2003). However, as already noted from Figure 2, the distance of the themes of e-government relationship outcomes from the concept of government suggests that the idea of a citizen-e-government relationship is somewhat remote.

In particular, citizens trust the technology and the e-information or e-service obtained, but they do not trust the State behind the computer interface. This is reinforced pictorially from Figure 2, where *trust* is proximate to *service access* but distant from *government*, emphasizing that citizens trust the functional aspects of e-government service but not the government providing the service. Clearly, citizens dichotomize their trust. Indeed, their lack of trust in the State is expressed quite strongly, but there is no sense of tension between these apparently contradictory attitudes. Thus these findings support that part of the literature that distinguishes trust in government (institutional) from trust in the Internet channel (process) (Bart et

al., 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Further, the results are consistent with the lack of citizen trust-enhancing government Web sites in Europe (Torres et al., 2005). They are also consistent with the finding of no significant relationship between citizen usage of e-government and trust in government in the US (West, 2004). In the absence of a large quantitative study that confirms these qualitative findings from Australia, no claim is made about the generalizability of results, but the consistency of findings with European and American data is encouraging.

Further, the findings are relevant to the theories of relationship development. The results do not support that part of the RM literature that extends the concept of weak ties to include electronic contexts (e.g., banks, e-government) where relationships can be developed without face-to-face contact (Sheaves & Barnes, 1996). In contrast, the results do support that part of the RM literature that warns of the risks in moving from face-to-face to electronic contact–such as increased psychological distance, and more functional and less personal and social contacts (Gabbott & Colgate, 1999). Thus with virtualization, the citizen is maintained at arm's length in a disembodied social relationship.

In contrast, the results of this study do not support the literature that engagement in e-government by citizens is predicated on trust in government (Carter & Be1anger, 2005), although there are some methodological issues with this study that may diminish its findings.

Additionally, *commitment*, and *satisfaction* are also relationship concepts that are distant from *government*. As trust is the basis of commitment and satisfaction, this is to be expected, and on this issue the findings support the literature (Sweeney & Morrison, 2004). Moreover, the large spatial distance between trust and the other relationship variables of satisfaction and commitment, of which they are an integral, theoretical part, highlight the relationship disconnect between citizens and government. Additionally, the concepts of *loyalty* and *goodwill* are even further away from the central concept of government. These results, then, generally support the citizen outputs of the conceptual

framework with one contradictory qualification. Citizens will continue to use e-government services in the future because they trust them and will by word of mouth tell others about their experiences.

Nevertheless, they do not trust the State providing these services and so far do not see that e-government has facilitated relationships between them and their governments. Whether this will change in the future is a good question, given that the results of this study are both at variance with and supportive of the e-commerce literature. The evidence provided by Ching and Ellis (2006) from small- and medium-sized enterprises engaged in e-commerce shows that relational (emotional) exchanges showing higher levels of trust, commitment, and satisfaction than ad hoc e-exchanges and repeated e-transactions can be developed online. However, that was a business study and perhaps more relevant is the conclusion from consumers on non-e-government SSTs, that additional research is needed to determine how organizations should develop trust and loyalty with customers when there is an absence of human contact (Meuter et al., 2000).

Does citizens' use of the Internet to interact with governments facilitate relationships between them and their governments? This research is innovative because it provides the answer to this question. The answer is that it does not. It certainly facilitates access to government services, and citizens trust that functional part of e-government although some substantial improvements need to be made. *Can* e-government facilitate citizen-e-government relationships? The jury is still out on that question, although given some evidence from e-commerce, the potential may be there to do so. Figure 3 illustrates the path to develop mature, citizen-e-government relationships. At the moment, e-government is located in the bottom left of the diagram, where contacts have a transaction and service focus. The ideal location is the top right hand corner of the figure, where citizen-e-government relationships comprise the essential components of trust, satisfaction, and commitment. That potential has yet to be realized.

FIGURE 3. Path to mature e-government-citizen relationships.
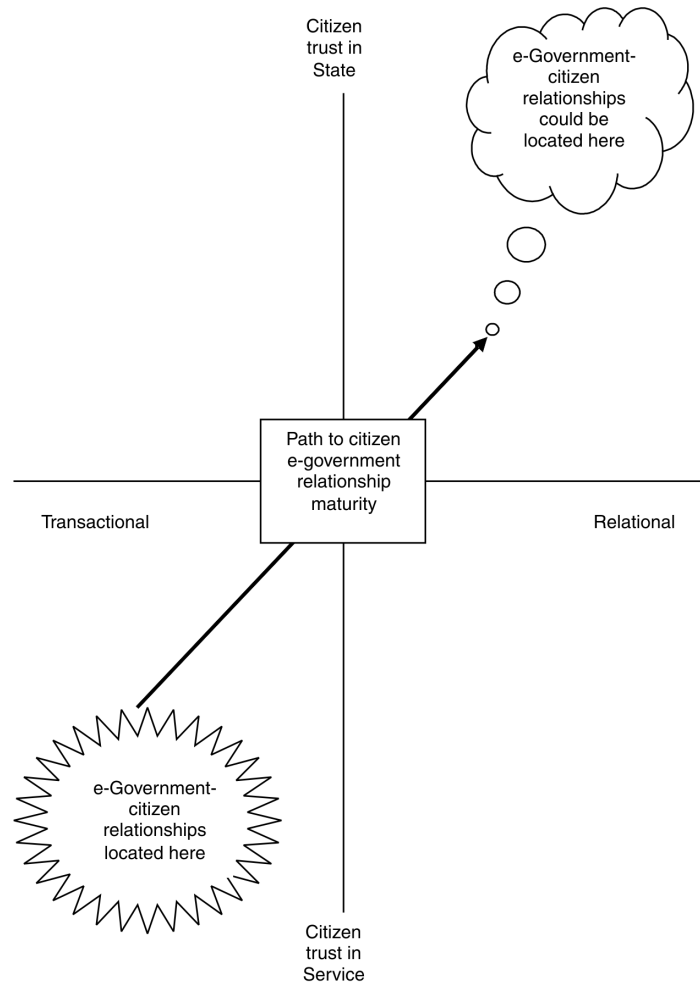
CONCLUSION

Limitations, Implications, and Further Research

This research set out to determine if the Internet, and particularly e-government, could facilitate relationships between government and citizens. The preliminary answer to that question is that it cannot. Citizens trust e-government technology and the associated service, but having a relationship with a government is not something that they contemplate. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement in e-government services. Web sites need to be made user-friendlier with less complexity and jargon; they must be made more intuitive to avoid the frustrating need for citizens to go

offline to get a complete service. Thus governments at all levels should study their citizen base to determine how best to improve current electronic service delivery.

The potential of e-government to facilitate citizen-e-government relationships has yet to be fulfilled, but the evidence from e-commerce is encouraging for e-government. As relationships are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity, both citizens and governments will need to work together to achieve the goal. However, governments have to take the initiative and do more, because they want relationships but citizens do not. As Meuter et al., (2000) recommend, additional research is needed to determine how organizations should develop trust and loyalty with customers in the absence

of human contact. In depth case studies of citizen-e-government interaction may identify the factors that will assist governments to create these trusting relationships.

Further, the qualitative data revealed some comparisons between online and offline experiences with government. Building on the findings of this study, a future research project could investigate longitudinal changes in citizen contact behavior, showing changes in offline and offline contact, how these were brought about and why. In addition, how different degrees of trust in both institutions and processes change over time will be an interesting question to explore in the future.

The limitations of this research are the small sample and its regional bias. Much more investigation of the issues needs to be done by way of a substantial quantitative survey in Australia and comparatively in other countries as well before the results of this study can be generalized, but the consistency of findings with European and American data is encouraging.

REFERENCES

Australians' use of and satisfaction with e-government services. (2005). Retrieved April 12, 2007, from http:// www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2005/june/e-government_ services/exec_summary#conclusions

Barnes, J. G. (1997). Exploring the importance of closeness in customer relationships. *Proceedings of the Three American Marketing Association Special Conferences, New and Evolving Paradigms* (pp. 227-240). Dublin, Ireland.

Barnes, J.G., & Cumby, J.A. (2002). Establishing customer relationships on the Internet requires more than technology. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, *10(1),* 36-46.

Bart, Y., Shankar, V., Sultan, F., & Urban, G. L. (2005). Are the drivers and role of online trust the same for all web sites and consumers? A large-scale exploratory empirical study. *Journal of Marketing*, *69(4),* 133-152. DOI: 10.1509/jmkg.2005.69.4.133

Carter, L., & Be1anger, F. (2005). The utilization of e-government services: Citizen trust, innovation and acceptance factors. *Information Systems Journal, 15(1),* 5-25. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2575.2005.00183.x

Ching, H. L., & Ellis, P.(2006).Does relationship marketing exist in Cyberspace?*Management International Review,46(5),* 557-572.

Evans, D., & Yen, D. C. (2006). E-Government: Evolving relationship of citizens and Government, domestic, and international development. *Government Information Quarterly, 23(2),* 207-235. DOI: 10.1016/j.giq.2005.11.004

Gabbott, M., & Colgate, M. (1999). Information technology and relationship marketing: Advances, incompatibilities, and opportunities. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, *7(1),* 102-108.

Government Reform (2001). Retrieved May 1, 2007, from http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/usbudget/blue print/budix.html

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78 (6),* 1360-1380.

Granovetter, M. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory. 1(1),* 201-233.

Gronroos, C. (1989). Defining marketing: A market-oriented approach. *European Journal of Marketing, 23(1),* 52-60.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, *18(1),* 59-82. DOI: 10.1177/1525822X05279903

Gummesson, E. (1996). Relationship marketing and imaginary organizations: A synthesis. *European Journal of Marketing*, *30(2),* 31-44.

Haque, M.S. (2002). E-governance in India: Its impacts on relations among citizens, politicians and public servants. *International Review of Administrative Sciences, 68(2),* 231-250. DOI: 10.1177/ 0020852302682005

Horst, M., Kuttschreuter, M., & Gutteling, J. M. (2007). Perceived usefulness, personal experiences, risk perception and trust as determinants of adoption of e-government services in The Netherlands. *Computers in Human Behavior, 23,* 1838-1852. DOI:10.1016/j.chb.2005.11.003

Jaeger, P. T. (2003). The endless wire: E-government as global phenomenon. *Government Information Quarterly, 20(4),* 323-331. DOI: 10.1016/j.giq.2003. 08.003

Keating, C. (2003). *E-Government in Australia–how does it score?* Retrieved March 1, 2007, from http://www. developmentgateway.com.au/jahia/webdav/site/adg/ shared/keatingpaper.pdf

King, S. F. (2007). Citizens as customers: Exploring the future of CRM in UK local government. *Government Information Quarterly, 24(1),* 47-63. DOI: 10.1016/ j.giq.2006.02.012

Layne, K., & Lee, J. (2001). Developing fully functional e-government: A four-stage model. *Government Information Quarterly, 18(2),* 122-126. DOI:10.1016/ S0740-624X(01)00066-1

Malhotra, N. K. (2006). Consumer well-being and quality of life: An assessment and directions for future research. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *26(1),* 77-80.

Meuter, M. L., Ostrom, A. L., Roundtree, R. I., & Bitner, M. J. (2000). Self-service technologies: Understanding customer satisfaction with technology-based service encounters. *Journal of Marketing, 64(3),* 50-64.

Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S.D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, *58(3),* 20-38.

Musso, J., Weare, C., & Hale, M. (2000). Designing web technologies for local governance reform: Good management or good Democracy? *Political Communication*, *17(1),* 1-19.

Next wave of e-government. (2007). Retrieved March 20, 2007 from http://www.info.gov.hk/digital21/e-gov/eng/strategy/index.htm

Obi, T. (2007). *Waseda University e-Government Ranking [Electronic Version], 1-11.* Retrieved April 18, 2007 from http://www.obi.giti.waseda.ac.jp/e_gov/3nd_rankings_en.pdf

Parent, M., Vanderbeek, C. A., & Gemino, A. C. (2005). Building citizen trust through e-government. *Government Information Quarterly, 22(4),* 720-736. DOI: *10.1016/j.giq.2005.10.001*

Saxena, K. B. C. (2005). Towards excellence in e-governance. *International Journal of Public Sector Management, 18(6),* 498-513. DOI: 10.1108/09513550510616733

Schedler, K., & Summermatter, L. (2007). Customer orientation in e-government: Motives, and effects. *Government Information Quarterly, 24(2),* 291-311. DOI: 10.1016/j.giq.2006.05.005

Scott, J. K. (2006). "E" the People: Do U.S. municipal government web sites support public involvement? *Public Administration Review*, *66(3),* 341-353. DOI:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00593.x

Sheaves, D. E., & Barnes, J. G. (1996).The fundamentals of relationships: An exploration of the concept to guide marketing implementation. In T. A. Swartz, D. E. Bowen, & S. W. Brown (Eds.), *Advances in Services Marketing and Management,* 4, Connecticut, JAI Press.

Shulman, S. W., Shelley, M. C., & Thrane, L. E. (2006). Lost in cyberspace: Barriers to bridging the digital divide in e-politics. *International Journal of Internet and Enterprise Management*, *4(3),* 228-243. DOI: 10.1504/IJIEM.2006.010916

Smith. A. E. (2005). *Leximancer Manual*, Vol. 2.2. Retrieved August 25, 2006, from http://www.Leximancer.com/

Steyaert, J. C. (2004). Measuring the performance of electronic government services. *Information & Management, 41,* 369-375. DOI: 10.1016/S0378-7206(03)00025-9

Sweeney, A. D. P., & Morrison, M. (2004). Clicks versus bricks: Internet-facilitated relationships in financial services. *International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising, 1(4),* 350-370. DOI: 10.1504/IJIMA.2004.006329

Thomas, J. C., & Streib, G. (2005). E-democracy, e-commerce, and e-research: Examining the electronic ties between citizens and governments. *Administration & Society*, *37 (3),* 259-280. DOI: 10.1177/0095399704273212

Tolbert, C. J., & Mossberger, K. (2006). The effects of e-government on trust and confidence in government. *Public Administration Review*, *66(3),* 354-369. DOI:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00594.x

Torres, L., Pina, V., & Acerete, B. (2005). E-government developments on delivering public services among EU cities. *Government Information Quarterly*, *22(2),* 217-238. DOI: 10.1016/j.giq.2005.02.004

West, D. M. (2004). E-Government and the transformation of service delivery and citizen attitudes. *Public Administration Review, 64(1),* 15-27. DOI:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2004.00343.x

Widing, R., Sheth, J. N., Pulendran, S., Mittal, B., & Newman, B. I. (2003). *Customer behaviour: Consumer behaviour and beyond.* Australia: Thomson.

Wilson, D. T. (1995). An integrated model of buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *23(4),* 335-345. DOI: 10.1177/009207039502300414