What is E-Government – How Will It Affect Us?

Keynote Address by
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Electronic Government: Recognizing the Challenges – Planning the Transition
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Good morning. I appreciate being invited to speak to you today. At least with this audience, I can presume you know what OMB is. And I think it is even safe to presume that you can figure out why someone from an organization called OMB Watch is here talking about E-Government. I will not presume that most of you have ever heard of OMB Watch, though. We are a nonprofit research and advocacy organization that works to encourage greater public participation in federal government decision-making and to promote a more open, responsive and accountable government. We have been engaged in the arena of public access to public information since the mid-1980s.

You may or may not know that I am your pinch-speaker. Which is, in itself, a little daunting. And then there is my topic: *What is E-Government – How Will It Affect Us?* When I saw that on the draft agenda, I thought, "Whoa!" But, after the initial shock reaction of, "How will I ever cover *that*?!, came the subsequent thought –"Gee, I can say just about anything." When Donna Wicker and I spoke about the talk, we framed it in terms of what the public wants – or might want – from a digital government. And that is how I am going to frame my remarks this morning. I am, also going to be talking about the challenges in the forum title; the other presenters today will be helping you to plan the transition.

Let me just start about by saying something that is really obvious when one pauses to think about it – there is no one public, "the public" does not exist. Certainly those of you who work in agencies know this very fully. The publics about which I will be speaking today are not those who want to transact business with the government – get their Social Security checks, their benefits checks, put in bids on contracts, fill out forms and applications online. That is not because I think that is not part of e-government and what it might do for us, but it is not where I want to focus my – and your – attention. I want us to focus this morning on the publics that want access to government information. Now, having noted that there is no one "public," I am nonetheless going to talk about "the public" – because the alternative is too clumsy and too grating to the ear.

In a recent Hart-Teeter poll (http://www.excelgov.org/egovpoll/index.htm), respondents said greater government accountability was the **most significant benefit** that e-government could confer. This was chosen by a considerable margin, **almost three times as often** as was convenient services. The **second** top priority according to the poll is greater public access to information (which is, of course, essential for greater government accountability). Majorities of adults expressed a favorable view of every e-government function tested and among the

most popular examples (80% favorable) is the ability to get medical information from NIH and other agencies.

Government officials were also surveyed. The survey report notes that government officials regard public access to information as the greatest benefit (34%) but rank accountability much lower (19%). As the pollsters comment, the government and the public apparently are in synch in valuing e-government's ability to produce a more informed citizenry, but the public is much more focused on its empowering potential.

Curiously – to me, anyway – none of the press reports so far have talked about greater public access to information being the second most significant benefit in the eyes of the respondents.

Why is this? You would think that the press would consider the public wanting greater access to information to be a newsworthy story. But, as all of you know, access to and dissemination of public information is not sexy. It can be an arena of great (even if fairly narrow) controversy and a political minefield but, barring something terrible happening, it is generally not a headline grabber.

Again, why is this? I think that – at least in part – it is because providing real, meaningful, useful, ongoing access to the vast array of information created or collected or maintained by or for the federal government is complex and it is hard work.

The new federal portal – FirstGov – is an important first step in this work. But you know – and certainly the speakers the rest of today will drive home – that it does not begin to get at the real and substantial issues that face the federal government in moving to a meaningful digital government. And, again, I am only talking about access to information – not transactions or interactivity, or electronic governance (which is a topic about which my organization cares deeply).

I want to talk briefly about another recently released report and then cover some other issues that the government is going to have to deal with in order to have greater access for greater accountability.

In 1997, the President established a 24-member President's Information Technology Advisory Committee. In its 1999 report to the President, the Committee identified 10 vital areas of our national life – including the relationship between government and the public – in which information technology offers the potential to dramatically transform current government practices in ways that will greatly benefit all Americans.

The PITAC report noted that the technological challenges to making all government institutions both more efficient and more responsive through information technologies include the need for:

- significant improvements in systems and methods for accessing data, including high performance data storage and tools to locate and present information; and

- robust, reliable and secure networks and software to deliver and protect critical information.

As a follow-up to that report, the Committee established a group of panels to look at the "transformation challenges" in greater depth and make recommendations for addressing them to the President and to Congress. One of these panels was the Panel on Transforming Government.

The PITAC specifically charged this panel to identify the key technical challenges and to develop a long-range technology-based strategy to harness the power of advanced information systems to make the government's vast stores of information and its vital services easily accessible to and usable by all U.S. citizens "regardless of their physical location, level of computer literacy, or physical capacity."

I want to take you now to two of the findings in the Panel's report – "Transforming Access to Government through Information Technology." Neither of these will be any great surprise to those of you in the government, and the first is no surprise to ***anyone*** who has tried to find and use government information. That first finding is that "Major technological barriers prevent citizens from easily accessing government information resources that are vital to their well being. Today government information is often unavailable, inadequate, out of date, and needlessly complicated." The Panel recalls the PITAC's charge about convenient, easy-to-use access to well-managed information – and right there is the main set of challenges! – and notes that finding the important information stored in the government's many databases is – in and of itself -- difficult. Worse, though, "correlating the meaning of findings from a number of inconsistently defined databases requires deep knowledge of the existence, contents, and management schemes of those databases."

To address this problem, the panel's recommendations include research on data integration, security and privacy, and on scalable information infrastructure. In terms of data integration, they recognize multiple technological issues, specifically:

- how to present users a coherent view of information stored in radically varied ways on systems that were created and have been optimized for a variety of purposes and of base technologies;

- how to make this coherent view both easy to use for non-technicians and adaptable to the various purposes that users might have; and

- how to do all this efficiently.

The other finding that I want to talk about before we move on is that the Federal CIO Council's..."mandates require them to focus primarily on near-term operational issues and acquisitions. Budget planning processes make it difficult to carry out effective cross-agency coordination and execution and the long-term research efforts that many of the goals require."

The Panel notes that, while "the CIO Council has established mechanisms for *sharing results and lessons*, the process of creating standardized processes and information representations, eventually leading to cross-agency transactions and information federation and integration, is much harder and requires cross-agency budget planning and execution. [However] [c]reating cross-agency budgets requires substantial work and, therefore, is used only for large initiatives. [And] [d]epending on cross-agency plans is very risky because of the uncertainty that all participants will receive adequate funding. ..."
In addition, the Panel notes that:

> [S]tovepiping of both congressional and executive review processes causes stovepiping of plans and programs. The Government Performance Results Act (GPRA), for example, while valuable in requiring agencies to set goals against which they can be held accountable, tends to hinder agency interdependencies in plans and programs because no agency will create a GPRA objective that depends on budgeting and operational success in another agency.

Yet a third recent report, "Some Assembly Required: Building a Digital Government for the 21st Century," was produced by the Center for Technology in Government (SUNY at Albany) on behalf of the National Science Foundation (NSF) to frame a research agenda that would be of pragmatic use in government. One of the important recognitions we can take from this report is, again no surprise to you in this room, that government programs and service delivery mechanisms are developed in a complex, multi-layered Federal-state-local system in which many organizations play significant and different roles. They cite, as an example, the National Spatial Data Infrastructure in which federal, state, local, and tribal governments, along with the private sector and academia, are working to develop and promote better access to geospatial data. And I am certain you could cite many other examples. So, there are yet other levels of complexities and other stovepipes to be dealt with.

Okay. So there are major problems with access to the information in the government's databases. What else is needed to get to e-government information?

Well, you will remember that the Panel noted that even finding out about the information in the government's databases is difficult. Why should that be now that we have FirstGov? A good – and valid – reason is that these databases are not on publicly accessible servers and the search engine powering FirstGov only spiders public web sites. But why can't there at least be pages that ***describe*** those databases?

Indeed, the Panel recognizes FirstGov as a "near-term effort built with currently available technologies," and urges effort focused on "government-specific capabilities" such as "metadata creation, and comprehensive searchable catalogs of information and services."

The truth is, though, that these sorts of finding tools are already supposed to be in existence in federal agencies. They are required by both the Paperwork Reduction Act and the E-FOIA amendments. But they don't exist much of anywhere in the federal government.

What else won't FirstGov find? It won't find print publications – unless they are described (or at least mentioned!) on an agency web page, have been submitted to and catalogued by the

Government Printing Office as required by law (and I would not want to see the results of *that* survey – it would be too disheartening) or unless they are described by a Government Information Locator Service file. This GILS information is also required by the Paperwork Reduction Act and it, also, does not exist much of anywhere in the federal government.

We're not doing so well here. What else won't it find? – and this is a biggie for the greater accountability that the public wants. It won't find information about government records, except for those posted in agency electronic FOIA reading rooms. And, again, this lack of information is not from lack of a requirement to provide it – the E-FOIA amendments tell agencies that they are supposed to make descriptions of their records locators (e.g., their records schedules) available and common-sense says they should put them in their -- required – electronic reading rooms. But this availability does not exist much of anywhere in the federal government.

Getting information about the ways the government organizes itself and its records would be an important – and fairly easy – first step. Obtaining access to the records *themselves* – in a government that has gone digital without thinking through where the technology was taking it and what the impacts were likely to be – is possibly as difficult as finding the important information stored in the government's many databases. You will recall that the Panel said that correlations of findings from a number of inconsistently defined databases requires deep knowledge of the existence, contents, and management schemes of those databases.

I don't want to push the analogy too far, but in the move from typewriters and then dumb terminals to desktop computers – and the parallel downsizing of support and clerical staff – we are not far from a situation where providing full and accurate provision to records – especially as these migrate out of current use and are not migrated to new operating systems and new software regimes – requires deep knowledge of their existence, their contents, and the structures of the formats in which they were created. What used to be created in multi-color carbons and filed by support staff now are likely to reside on someone's desktop. The one official copy may get printed out and filed, but the drafts and the shared versions that would help a student, or a historian or a reporter trace the development of a program or a policy rarely will be saved systematically.

And, lest you think that back-up tapes solve this dilemma, I would say to you – "Vice-President Gore's e-mail." A back up tape is not an electronic records management system – it does not provide for search and retrieval of individual documents by known search terms. I don't know about any of you, but I would not want to do a full-text search of an entire office's e-mails or its word processing files – on each relevant person's desktop – to be sure I had adequately complied with a FOIA request – or a subpoena.

Nor do document management systems meet the needs for electronic records management. Not only do you need to be able to search and retrieve records, but at the point of their creation, you need to be able to tag those items that are privacy-protected, that information that is confidential business information, those parts that are properly classified – and the duration of that classification. And we need to know and be able to see to whom a record circulated.

E-Government is an exciting frontier. But technology alone is not going to get us there. What it is going to take to move to the kind of government that uses technology as a tool to provide greater accountability through better and more meaningful public access to government information is not bigger and faster servers or more powerful search engines. It is going to take the federal government – both government-wide and agency by agency – to get its information under control and begin to manage it so it can be identified, located and used over time.

That takes research, certainly. But it equally takes leadership committed to meaningful access, it takes commitment of serious resources to those initiatives needed to move in the right direction, and it takes substantial funding. And, as the PITAC Panel noted, it is going to take interagency initiatives and collaboration.

We hear all the talk these days about stovepipes, but I actually prefer the Vice-President's earlier metaphor – silos of rotting information. What we have now are information silos ***and*** funding and budget silos, and evaluation and oversight silos inhibiting the kinds of collaborations needed to transform the government. We have a few mice – or "spiders" – that will find and bring – if you say the right words – lots of bits of information to a grain depository where you can sift through it yourself. But that is not my vision of access to information in an digital government and my guess is that it is not anyone else's either.

I don't think that government really has the option not to do this, not to begin to transform itself. And it does not matter who the next President is – or who controls the Congress. The public has begun to get a taste of what e-government is now and to think about what it ***could*** be. They are excited about it and excited that maybe it will make government more transparent and more accessible. But the impact if it does ***not*** turn out that way could be a further deterioration of the public's belief in government, E- or otherwise. And ***that*** is a transition we cannot allow to happen.

At the same time, the transition to e-government is one that must be made thoughtfully and with the awareness that, still, the majority of the American public does **not** have ready and ongoing access to the Internet and to the Web. This is a huge conundrum for all of us – how to encourage government to use technology to transform itself and make itself more transparent and accessible – and to do this both efficiently and equitably. For me, equity has to trump cost efficiency – we may have to maintain dual – print and electronic – access paths for the foreseeable future. The government – and the society – also have to take care in our technological innovations – to bring to **all** residents of this nation, "regardless of their physical location, level of computer literacy, or physical capacity," the benefits that the transformation of government through information technology will bring.

Again, thank you for allowing me to talk to you this morning. I will be happy to answer any questions – although I have to admit I am better at asking questions myself than at providing solutions.