

# The need for a Cumulative Tradition in eGovernment Research: Conceptualizing the fundamental entities

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## Introduction

eGovernment as an area of research and practice has been around for roughly a decade and a half (and IT in public sector for some 50 years). Recent reflections based on rigorous examinations of the intellectual development of the field have revealed that the field is gradually maturing. Yet, there are ominous signs. eGovernment remains under-theorized and there are few attempts at either theory testing or theory building [1]. There has been little theoretical progress and a cumulative tradition is not emerging. We argue that a principle reason for this is a lack of shared understanding about basic concepts and entities amongst scholars in the field. Specifically, the entities that form the bedrock of eGovernment research, such as “Government” and “Citizen” are conceptualized at a very general level of abstractions and treated as homogenous groups. In a paper we presented at EGOV conference in Regensburg in September 2007, we proposed finer grained conceptualization of these two key and fundamental entities of eGovernment. We argued that existing models and frameworks fail to see the vast differences that exist between categories of these entities. Without a finer grained conceptualization, comparison of findings across different research studies is not possible and thus transfer of knowledge between different projects is difficult.

In this position paper, we seek to discuss and initiate a debate on how to increase our knowledge on these key concepts in the eGovernment research area and how this exercise can help establish a cumulative tradition.

## Attempting a finer grained conceptualization of “Government” and “Citizen”

Arguably, “Government” and “Citizen” are the most essential stakeholder groups in eGovernment practice and research. Yet, these terms are taken almost for granted and there is hardly any scholarly examination of what they mean. Each group contains a variety of stakeholder interests and different modes of operation, and it is clearly impossible to view any of the basic stakeholder groups as unified entities promoting just one or a few common interests. For example, politicians set policy on, among other things, providing services to citizens while civil servants such as administrators execute them. A large part of the citizenry simply consumes these services but a significant minority actively attempts to influence policy. This leads to different objectives of communicating within and between these groups. It is on this premise that we propose categories of these entities.

In our EGOV 2007 paper, we suggested a finer grained conceptualization (Table 1) of the basic entities of Government and Citizens.

Basic entity	Sub-categories	Description
Government (G)	Politician (GP)	Publicly elected decision and policy maker (e.g. mayor, councillor, parliament member)
	Administrator (GA)	Middle and higher level salaried career employees executing politicians' policies (city manager, health department head)
	Service provider (GS)	Lower level salaried career employees carrying out day to day government jobs directly or indirectly interacting with citizens (e.g., case officers in school department, advisors and information providers in taxation office)
Citizen (C)	Consumer (CCon)	Uses services offered by the government
	Activitist (CAct)	Citizens involved in efforts to effect specific government policies and decisions through civil action often individually or in groups (e.g., Amnesty International)
	Direct Decision makers (CDD)	Citizens are directly responsible for the decisions being made in a direct democracy system.

**Table 1.** Entities of eGovernment

These subcategories allow us to look at more specific interactions between the entities. Table 2 summarizes these interactions.

Type	Interaction	Example
Within entities	Politician – Administrator GP2GA	Politicians discuss policy issues and convey decisions to city employees
	Administrator – Service provider GA2GS	Strategic, tactical and operational decision making and task accomplishment
	Politician - Service provider GP2GS	Only informal
	Service provider – service provider GS2GS	Handing cases from citizens that cross departmental boundaries (e.g., placing a child through school)
	Administrator – Administrator GA2GA	Deliberations and decision making on issues that require involvement of more than one department
	All C2C interactions	Discussions on projects. Discussions on social issues
	All B2B interactions	Discussions on implications and consequences of government decisions
Between entities	Politician – all Citizen categories	Deliberations on social and governing issues and projects (such as a new road)
	Administrator – Consumers GA2Ccon And Administrator – Advocacy groups (CAg)	Information on forthcoming initiatives or explanations of decisions already made
	Service provider – Consumer GS2Ccon	Use of government services

**Table 2.** Interactions between the entities of eGovernment

## Discussion

Like any new conceptual framework, our proposed re-conceptualization seeks to provide a clearer understanding of a phenomenon based on logically integrating prior work in the area. Obviously there is a need to validate our concepts. Our conceptualizations are by no means complete or even comprehensive. It is a work

in progress, and its usefulness lies in serving as a springboard for further work towards achieving conceptual clarity and developing a cumulative tradition in eGovernment research. It is in this spirit that we present below some implications for practice and research and, more importantly, raise some issues for discussion.

### Potential implications for practice

First, by clarifying key concepts of Government and Citizen, our framework can eventually contribute to the practice of eGovernment, especially in developing eGovernment systems. Two key challenges still need to be resolved. First, how to identify entities and their relationships, and second, how to “translate” more detailed knowledge on key entities and their relationship into implications for design and development.

We find the stakeholder approach to be a good candidate for identifying entities and their key relationships. Stakeholder analysis is a technique for identifying different interests that may be affected, and thus triggered, by e.g. the strategic intentions of an organization or the intended outcome of a particular project. The stakeholder analysis not only serves to identify different interest, the outcome of such an analysis also shows different groups representing different interests, the relative power of the different groups and how likely the different groups are to act to protect their interests. Stakeholder analysis has been widely used in relation to organizational strategy development in the for-profit sector and also to some extent in the context of eGovernment. Experiences from stakeholder analysis in eGovernment contexts are largely positive, suggesting that such analyses can be particularly well suited in such contexts as they are often characterized by a multitude of competing interests that are hard to accommodate without using a structured approach. We thus argue that stakeholder analysis, and other elements from the larger body of work on stakeholder theory, can indeed be useful in terms of identifying entities and relationships between entities that enables further translation into requirements for design and guidelines for development and implementation.

Based on the outcome of the stakeholder analysis, genre analysis could help to identify communication needs for key entities, thus translating this knowledge into some implications for design and development of eGovernment services. The genre perspective employs communication patterns, while also exploring the rationale or reason for enacting the communication. In general, a genre of communication is characterized by socially recognised *substance* and common characteristics of *form(s)* identified by a community. *Substance* refers to social motives, such as purpose of communication *Form* of a genre refers to physical and linguistic features like layout, language and media. Hence, more detailed viewpoints on communication patterns for eGovernment purposes for key entities could be explored by introducing genre theory.

### Potential implications for research

Based on our conceptualization of eGovernment, where we limited our analysis to two high level entities, namely *Government* and *Citizen*, the next obvious question is to ask what is missing in our preliminary overview. First, other main entity groups could be included. One such group is *Businesses*, which we left out of our analysis, largely because this entity only has received marginal attention so far and we therefore consider it somewhat premature to theorize around it. Still, when reflecting on the *Businesses* at least two possible categories spring to mind: “individual businesses” and “business associations” (such as chamber of commerce and industry associations. Second, clearly our conceptualization does not cover all potential sub-categories of entities. Future research could investigate if e.g. citizens have more roles than those introduced here.

Another issue for discussion is whether interactions *within* entities (table 2) are partly neglected in current eGovernment research. Often focus is on the more visible interaction between entities, like developing eGovernment services for citizens or inviting citizens to participate in the decision making processes. A major part of interaction in a modern society is also about interactions within entities, e.g. to support communication between administrators and service providers and between administrators and politicians. Furthermore,

citizens not only contribute to political discussions initiated by governments, but also discuss amongst themselves in citizens' initiated debates. Our framework is thus intended as a first step towards emphasizing the importance of interactions within entities, in addition to the more obvious interactions between entities. Finally, entities can take multiple roles. For example, a politician (or an administrator) is also a citizen and can be a consumer of services or even an activist. The nuances of such multiplicity in roles can be an interesting avenue for research.

## Questions for discussion

Based on the discussion above our summarized questions for discussion are:

1. Do you find stakeholder analysis to be a good for identifying entities and relationships?
2. How could we translate knowledge on entities into implications for design and management? We suggest the genre analysis approach, but there might be others
3. Which entities are missing? We introduce government and citizens, and only speculate on businesses. What about others?
4. Should we focus more on research *within* entities?

## Conclusion

We argued that despite advances in both quantity and quality of research in eGovernment, there is little evidence of building a cumulative tradition. We believe that the main reason is a lack of shared meaning and understanding on primary and basic concepts in the field, specifically entities such as Government and Citizen. We delved into these entities and proposed categories of these entities. Our hope is that our thoughts can stimulate discussions and debates in the workshop that will help advance the research in eGovernment.

## Reference

**Towards a Cumulative Tradition in e-Government Research: Going Beyond the Gs and Cs** (2007) Flak, Leif Skiftenes, Sein, Maung and Sæbø Øystein; The sixth International EGOV Conference, Regensburg Germany.