

Given the growing influence of global economic, social, technical, and political forces, digital government research is expanding to include international dimensions.

Introduction

For most people, the idea of “government” is linked to a particular place. We associate government with a town hall or capital city and with the laws and policies that apply to the people and organizations located in a specific area of political geography. For instance, municipalities provide fire protection to their residents, states issue professional licenses to people who live or work with the state, and the national government defines what it means to be a citizen of a country. At the same time, we know that governmental jurisdictions and programs often overlap within a single country. Taxes, emergency services, transportation networks, and public schools are just a few examples.

This pattern of overlapping governmental policies and activities increasingly goes beyond national borders. For example, any global business that collects personal information from customers must comply with the privacy laws of multiple countries. If you live and work in one country but are a citizen of another, special international tax agreements apply to your income. The radio-frequency identification (RFID) chip or bar code in passports are checked by immigration officials all over the world. Government managers negotiating contracts with private sector companies are often not only outsourcing work, but also “off shoring” it, along with associated accountability, to people and subcontractors subject to different laws in other countries. International law enforcement, intellectual property rights, and global trade and finance all operate simultaneously under the rules, practices, and cultures of different nations. Broad socio-demographic trends like migration of jobs and workers, global health concerns such as swine flu and AIDS, and the environmental impacts of human activity are all concerns for governments on every continent. All of these international activities have at least one thing in common: they involve the collection, use, and management of information.

Digital government as an emerging global research domain

Over the past fifteen years, a global field of inquiry has been emerging at the intersection of government, society, and information and communication technologies. This domain is characterized by different labels, including “e-government,” “e-governance,” and similar terms (see Yiltze, 2007; Brown, 2005; Grönlund and Horan, 2004). The different terms stem in part from the development of the concept over time. In the early 1990s, government reform efforts were closely linked to the creative use of information technology to transform bureaucracy, including efforts to redesign back office work processes and support them with new applications of technology focused on citizen services. This push was typically labeled “e-government.” The view of e-government has gradually expanded to “include not only services and administration but also democratic processes and the relationships among citizens, civil society, the private sector, and the state. Collectively this broader view constitutes what is coming to be understood as “e-governance” (Dawes, 2008). E-government focused on the use of information and technology to support or improve existing public policies and government operations and to provide comprehensive and timely government services. E-governance, is seen as a more fundamental effort to redistribute power across all sectors (Roy, 2005) and thus involves concerns for participation, inclusion, and democratic processes. In this report, we use the term “digital government” – a term coined by the US NSF in 1999 – as an umbrella to represent the full array of concerns related to the relationships between ICT and the public sector. Accordingly, “digital government research” attempts to illuminate and explain this phenomenon by focusing on the intersection of computer and information sciences, social and behavioral sciences, and government challenges and needs. “International digital government research” in particular, examines phenomena and concerns that are relevant beyond the borders of a single country.

International digital government research focuses on topics and problems that cross the jurisdictions, cultures, or customs of different countries.

Today, digital government research is going on all over the world. So far, this work mostly has been confined to studies conducted within the geographic and political contexts of individual countries. However, given the growing influence of global economic, social, technical, and political forces, the questions, risks, and opportunities embedded in digital government research are now expanding to international dimensions. Brown (2005, pp. 243-244) emphasizes the importance of understanding the state’s relationship with e-government in an international context, suggesting, “[i]n the electronic environment, governments have access not only to each other, at all levels of administration and without regard to the formalities of inter-state relations but also to their respective citizens. In the same way, trans-national public sector institutions extend their reach into the constituent countries, and trans-national private and non-governmental actors come into contact with

governments and interested citizens around the world. National sovereignty remains a cornerstone of the international system but the context in which it operates and the tools with which it is expressed are altered.” International digital government research is unique, in that it explicitly focuses on understanding topics and solving problems that cross jurisdictions, cultures, or customs of different countries.

Purpose and scope of the reconnaissance study

This reconnaissance study is part of a multi-year effort funded by the US NSF to create a framework for a sustainable global community among digital government researchers and research sponsors. It takes a broad look at the current state of international digital government research to identify its main contours and current directions. A reconnaissance study has the virtue of highlighting the defining characteristics of a topic. We can say something about its size, scope, variety, and trajectory. However, it also has limitations. In order to gather information about as many aspects as possible, our methods rely on secondary analysis of published information. We have acquired enough information to describe the current state of international digital government research with some breadth, but little depth. In this report, we present our findings on the nature of international digital government research and illustrate it with selected studies and organizational profiles. We have not exhaustively analyzed this body of work, nor have we attempted to evaluate its quality.

Within these limitations, the study addresses the following broad questions:

- What kinds of international problems are the subject of digital government research efforts?
- What kinds of topics have been investigated using comparative methods across national boundaries? What problems and topics are emphasized by different research sponsors?
- What are the patterns of investigation (problems, topics, methods, funding sources and mechanisms) in different parts of the world?
- What are the important international organizations in this research area?
- What are the research institutions, conferences, journals, or other sources of research information that span countries?

The following sections of the report define six basic types of international research, summarize and characterize the extant research literature, profile the main research sponsors, and briefly describe key events and professional organizations where international digital government research is encouraged. An extensive bibliography of international work as well as the detailed methodology of the study are presented in appendices. A detailed Endnote® file of international research publications is available at http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/reports/recon_study. These results can be used as a baseline for assessing subsequent growth and development of the field. The study can also inform the development of the emerging global network of research professionals who are working in the international digital government domain.