National & Municipal Government Websites: A Comparison Between the United States and China

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ABSTRACT

As the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) becomes more prevalent around the globe, the Internet has changed the way government and citizens interact with each other. The development of E-Government has been increasingly considered as a reflection of a country's informatization, modernization and democratization. In China, as the Internet users increased rapidly (CNNIC, 2005), the E-Government development and innovation is regarded as one of the most important national strategies. Launched in 1999, the "Government Online Project" (Zhou, 2004; Zhang, 2001) in China has successfully helped the country to implement both national and municipal government websites. While the depth and scope of E-Government service is expanding tremendously in China, problems remain in various facets and layers. Meanwhile, the United States has become an innovative leader in E-Government practices[1]. Researching and comparing the government websites in the U.S. and China could provide insights on improving Chinese national and municipal government websites.

The motivation of this project comes from the following interests: 1. A big digital divide exists between developing and developed countries (Roisin Woolnough, 2001). 2. The cultural, economic and political differences between the U.S. and China make government website services interestingly distinct and intriguing for research. 3. Although some research was found examining e-government in China (Zhou, 2004; Zhang, 2001), little research was done in comparing the United States and China specifically on national and municipal government websites. Yet, it is highly valuable and significant to gain a comparative picture in order to bridge the digital divide.

An on-going study, this project aims to explore the commonalities, discrepancies, and patterns by comparing U.S. national versus China national government websites and U.S. municipal versus China municipal government websites. The goal of the project is to statistically measure the patterns among them, examine how different users access government websites, identify the challenges and weaknesses in G2G (Government to Government), G2B (Government to Business) and G2C (Government to Citizen) services, explore factors that influence government website service level and provide insights on bridging the digital divide of national and municipal government websites between the two countries.

This poster reports Phase One of the project: examining the content and services on national and municipal government websites in the United States and China. Through empirical Content Analysis methodology, a random sample of 15 national government websites and 20 municipal government websites were selected from the two countries respectively. They fulfilled a geographical diversity. Two coders, both fluent in Chinese and English, coded the websites and achieved satisfactory inter-coder reliability. The study tries to answer the following questions: what types of content and services are available on national and municipal websites in the two countries? How does U.S. national differ from China national and how does U.S. municipal differ from China municipal government websites? Moreover, the poster presents the patterns found in terms of the digital divide among municipal websites of different locations (coastal, inland; west, east) in each of the two countries. The study also examines in-depth on the website functions available for citizens, interaction between the government and citizens, effective online services, etc.

The results indicate the following key issues and challenges:

- China national government websites tended to provide more information on policy and rules announcement, whereas U.S. national government websites provided more citizen-centered information.

- Government websites in the U.S. offered online services to a wider variety of users than China. Disability resources and minority services were especially reflected on U.S. websites.

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[1] U.N. Global E-government Readiness Report 2004, http://www.unpan.org/egovernment4.asp

- Many U.S. national government websites offered a clearly categorized structure in terms of G2G, G2B and G2C. However, such trend was not detected on most national level websites in China.

- The digital divide among municipal government websites caused by geographical differences was seen bigger in China than in the U.S. The level of service on coastal municipal websites and inland municipal websites showed a large gap in China. Also, eastern municipal websites were generally more functional than western municipal websites in China. Although U.S. and Chinese national websites were found to equally provide timely information, small Chinese cities' websites were weak on this. The digital divide between municipal sites of big cities and small cities were highly apparent in China. Many small cities' websites exist, but not useful or functional.

- Although some citizen service information was covered on Chinese municipal websites, they were in a format of basic introduction. Deep links and "do-it-online" functions were needed. Services such as e-payment, e-filling were seen more common on U.S. websites. U.S. websites were stronger in providing information on emergency solutions and public health.

- Government-citizen interaction was less seen on Chinese websites. For instance, many U.S. websites offered citizens the options to access statistical information, government directory, forms downloading, reporting streetlights trouble, etc. On the other hand, Chinese websites were less functional.

- U.S. municipal websites were more persona-centered with menu categories specifically prepared for users such as residents, visitors, businesses; whereas, Chinese websites conceived users in a more general way.

- Chinese municipal websites were found to provide more information specifically for peasant than U.S. websites. This is also a reflection of different economic structure. Chinese municipal websites did well on linking to other government agency websites and other municipal government websites.

- Utility links were provided systematically on U.S. municipal websites such as city interactive map, public transportation information, etc. Chinese websites were on the way to provide some of these information, but less interactive.

- Many U.S. websites provided customizable interface for the users to manage their own information needs such as the daily news they need or a specific government services they often desire. These functions were seldom seen on Chinese government websites.

- U.S. municipal websites offered more foreign language versions than Chinese websites.

The results indicate that a digital divide exist in various facets and layers in content and services of both national and municipal government websites between the United States and China. Interestingly, geographical locations and economic levels caused big gaps among websites of cities of different sizes in different regions in China. The study argues that both infrastructure and policy are highly influential to the success and effectiveness of government websites. Only improving the ICT infrastructure does not necessarily enhance the level of effects of serving citizens' needs. The study advocates that government websites in China have gained a certain level of foundation, but systematic research and reform is needed in both technical and policy aspect. The study concludes with suggestions for China to bridge the digital divide of national and municipal government websites between the United States and China. These suggestions include enhancing G2G, G2B, and G2C services, facilitating communication and interaction between government and citizens, bridging domestic digital divide through advancing infrastructure and institutionalizing knowledge, providing effective, functional and timely services, and improving usability and ubiquitous accessibility for various citizens. In addition, policy reform is needed in China to allow more transparent information sharing between the government and citizens. The awareness of citizen-centered design should also be a future focus in various kinds of e-government activities.

This poster presents the future plan of this project which includes surveying Chinese and American users about their pattern of use of government websites, examining how well citizens are informed about governance, how effective and satisfactory citizens participate in public affairs through government websites, and the barriers that limit their use of government websites.

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