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e-government better than b-government

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e-government better than b-government

By Rodolfo H. Terragno

A recent Deloitte Study, called *"At the Dawn of e-Government: The Citizen as Customer"*, charts six stages government organisations should go through to develop a proper e-government.

I hadn't seen the study until a few days ago, when I started to do a little bit of research for this conference. But I had been following those stages anyway, without knowing somebody had charted them.

For the last nine months I served as Argentina's Chief Minister, which means I was in charge, among other things, of my country's civil service. During that period, I made a big effort to introduce online services and comprehensive official information.

Now I realise that what I was doing was to push Argentina towards the three first stages of e-government, although I do not regard, as Deloitte does, citizens as if they were mere "consumers". A citizen meets officers, electronically or otherwise, not only to "consume" goods offered by government, but also to perform duties.

Apart from that distinction, I agree with the six stages to be followed in order to have an adequate e-government. Allow me then to read the first three of those stages charted in the study,

> **STAGE 1: Information Publishing/Dissemination** — Government agencies utilize technology to provide increased access to information.
>
> **STAGE 2: "Official" Two-Way Transactions** — Agencies begin utilizing two-way transactions through such technologies as digital signatures and secure web sites.
>
> **STAGE 3: Multi-Purpose Portals** — Agencies launch Web portals for citizens to obtain services and transact business across multiple departments from a single point of entry.

We started to press every single department to digitalise information and place it on the net.

A group of young professionals, all of them in their late 20s, helped me to develop a government websites network.

When we surpassed a number a sites (there are 767 right now, including provincial and local ones) we decided to build up a portal in order to offer a single point of entry to all government pages.

info.gov.ar

In doing so, we leaped up from the first to the third stage. We felt that necessary: before we set up **info.gov.ar**, there was not even an index to guide you through this Internet jungle of official sites.

Many of the existing sites were already offering online forms, which save a lot of time to citizens who otherwise would have to collect them (or have them collected) from crowded offices that might be far from their homes or places of work.

In a sense, this site follows the lines of **open.gov.uk**, the entry point to the UK's public sector information on the Internet.

Info has a section, *Forms*, with a classified list of all online forms available, and links to each of them.

In some cases, you don't get only the form: you can fill it and send it back to the original website. This belongs to Deloitte's second stage, i.e., "two-way transactions".

However, those transactions are limited to some applications (say, for scholarships or permits), social benefit claims, registrations or complaints. We did not want to go further until Congress approved two bills we proposed, one setting the legal framework for transactions made through the net, the other one establishing a secure system of digitalised signature.

Both bills are still waiting in Congress. If they are approved, algorithms will be used to create and verify digital signatures. That will allow to form a digital representation (or "fingerprint") of any person in the form of a unique "hash value" of a standard length. Any alteration in the "hash value" will prevent the signature from matching the prior certificate issued by an official certification authority, so producing no legal effect whatsoever. The certification authority will perform as an electronic notary function and will require in-person identification before using a certificate.

A big step will be made whenever we have the laws passed by Congress.

A lot of tax revenue forms were sent via Internet this year. Not as many as in the case of Brazil, I must confess. Early introduction of the Internet in the Brazilian banking system got executives used to the net and made the business world amenable to e-commerce. Their Inland Revenue is profiting from this. From 1,84 million forms filed this year in Brazil, 891.1 thousand (i.e., 48.43%) were received through the net.

Argentina is still far behind that volume, but we are now moving to allow taxpayers not only to fill and send their forms through the net, but also to pay their taxes via Internet.

All that is necessary for the government to offer such a service is to place an existing inter-active computerised system on the net. The system is currently in use at our tax offices, in standalone machines, and it can go onto the Internet as soon as Congress passes those bills.

At any rate, one could not say that Argentina has been slow in adapting to the e-commerce era and fostering e-government. It was only by the end of last year that the European Union passed a directive approving a legal framework for electronic signatures and required all EU countries to introduce legislation that recognises digital signatures as the legal equivalent to autographs, provided they have been certified by a third party and the technology used to make them respects a series of conditions.

The United States, on their part, did not have a national legislation on digital signatures until early this year.

We are pressing the Argentine Congress for Argentina to join the club at the earliest possible opportunity. In the meantime, the most noticeable achievement our country can show on e-government is the amount of official information disseminated through the net. Apart from links to every point of the government map, Info offers a service of online consultations to a search engine that allows you to look up a word or a phrase within this massive government information Argentina has already placed in the net.

nacion.ar

But, however complete Info may look, it is just a precursor for an even broader portal, **nación.ar**, which is under construction but is already accessible.

Info as whole will be incorporated to Nación, which will add an enormous amount of official data, links to libraries, an electronic job center, access to the Argentine press and a chat forum for virtual encounters between citizens and officers.

cristal.gov.ar

Cristal, as you can imagine, means *crystal,* and this is a website we set up in order to make *crystal clear* how government spends the taxpayers' money.

By entering Cristal, you can surf the national budget, check year-to-date income and expenditure reports, and receive a lot of information about government acts, public tenders and government suppliers.

Let's assume that you enter Cristal today. You will find that to date Argentina's federal government has collected 70.25% of its expected revenues of $44.758bn, and disbursed 67.24% of the $49.667bn it is authorised to spend.

Or can you discover that the public debt is running right now at $3,334.97.

Cristal is accessible through cristal.gov.ar, and also from Info, to be later incorporated into Nación, the portal that will consolidate all the online services provided by the Argentine government.

Now, let us examine the three coming stages Argentina should go through,

> **STAGE 4: Portal Personalisation**—Government puts even more power into the citizens' hands by enabling them to customise portals with their desired features.

> **STAGE 5: Clustering of Common Services** —Real transformation of government structure is now taking shape. As citizens now view once disparate services as a unified package through the portal, their perception of departments as distinct agencies will begin to blur. Governments will now cluster services along common lines to accelerate the delivery of shared services.

> **STAGE 6: Full Integration and Enterprise Transformation**—What started as a digital encyclopaedia is now a full service centre, personalised to each citizen's needs and preferences. Old walls defining silos of services have been torn down and technology is integrated across a new enterprise to bridge the shortened gap between the front and back office. In some cases, new departments will have formed from the remains of predecessors. Others will have the same names, but their make-up will look nothing like they did before e-government.

Rich nations have not gone as yet through these stages. After polling 261 senior managers of government agencies in the main countries, the study I have already mentioned says that for the moment only 12% of the people use the Internet as the primary access point to government services.

Clustering of services and full integration has not yet occurred, even in the first world.

In the case of the emerging countries, poverty, lack of electricity or phone services, poor education and even fear of technology make much more difficult for big portions of the society to have access to computers and the Internet.

Argentina is trying to overcome these difficulties through pioneering a very important experience in the field of the public education.

educ.ar

Last month, the federal government launched educ.ar, a portal devoted to public education all over the country.

Contents will match school curricula and will provide not only text and multimedia material to both teachers and pupils, but will offer an interactive channel.

Educ.ar provides customised texts that allow students to follow regular curses at primary, secondary and technical schools. It also gives access to a complete library of digitalised books.

The plan includes the provision of computers to schools, plus a national plan to finance the purchase of 1,000,000 computers in 30 monthly instalments at a comparatively low interest rate. This is a public plan. Private companies are launching programs of their own because they believe that the introduction of the Internet to the schools will create a habit in millions of pupils and will push up the demand for domestic computers. Educ.ar, which can become an indispensable tool for students, has also a space for chats and allows pupils to have free e-mails, so indeed promoting the habit of surfing the net.

The early introduction of boys and girls to the world of the Internet will certainly have an impact on families, and may prepare citizens to deal with governments through the net.

They may find that well-designed software is often more citizen-friendly than person-to-person bureaucracy.

It is not a question a having a double-click democracy, although voting via modem is no longer a fantasy and can well be a reality in the foreseeable future.

Technology can speed governments up, and make them more effective in the eyes of citizens.

At the end of the day, the actual relationship of the citizen with the state consists of asking, obeying, collecting and paying --all tasks that computers can do for both citizens and officers at an incredible speed, and virtually error-free.

Let us assume that freed by the electronics from the tedious obligations arising from traditional state routine, governments will have the opportunity to expand their imagination to solve the most urging economic and social problems of this world.

For the time being, technology has shown to be more efficient in substituting bureaucracy in dealing with their duties, than governments in developing fresh ideas and new opportunities for the people.

Unlike may politicians, I am not afraid of e-government. On the contrary, I think it is an enticing possibility (half-reality, in fact) and, at any rate, I am much more concerned with b-government, i.e. bureaucratic government, lead by old-fashioned bureaucracies that have nothing to do with bits. Let alone with efficiency and service to the people.