

Assessing Digital Empowerment: An Exploratory Study

Swapnil Sharma

Abstract

This thesis presents the findings of four connected exploratory studies undertaken with the aim to investigate the impact of digital initiatives on citizen empowerment, which is termed as Digital Citizen Empowerment (DCE) in modern digital democracies. Globally, governments are replacing physical offices with supersites that expand out and span the entire administrative structure of countries. With the advent of digital commons, the nature of state-citizen engagement has changed, making it more convenient and direct. We examine the phenomena of DCE for sustained e-participation in the democratic dialogue for establishing information societies of the future. The four major studies target each dimension of the state-citizen relationship facilitated by information and communication technologies. The first study covers a systematic review of literature attempting to uncover different strategies governments adopt to target their citizens for digital empowerment. The thesis review uncovers four primary strategies: multi-channel service delivery, digital activism, participatory budgeting, and deliberative governance. In the second study, we approach the phenomenon of DCE from the citizen's perspective. In an attempt to understand DCE, we validated a multi-level measure with four distinct dimensions of emotional, interactional, relational, and behavioural empowerment. The analysis of data also establishes the role of digital accountability in government services for improving the overall quality of participation. In the third study, we move ahead to explore the concept of digital accountability in the context of government websites delivering e-services. We developed a framework of digital accountability covering the dimensions of transparency, controllability, responsiveness, responsibility, liability, and security and privacy. The fourth and final study is an outcome of the changing nature of the state-citizen interaction due to the pandemic situation and also the growing popularity of mobile devices for delivering e-services. This study explores different contextual conversion factors that can help establish an ecosystem of collaborative e-governance using smartphones. The major contribution of the thesis could be seen as the conceptual model of digital empowerment developed to depict the government side of the e-governance triad. This model not only covers theoretical foundations but also policy action points for practitioners. We were also able to develop and validate a measurement model of DCE, and establish the importance of accountability for e-participation. Our research also uncovered the phenomenon of possible digital disenchantment in the urban population. Exploring the role of smartphone as an enabling artefact, we explored and developed a conceptual framework for the promotion of collaborative e-governance.