

## **Are Data Policies Really Important?**

### <Executive Summary>

Information technology has been highlighted in citizens' participation and their trust in government. However, there is little systematic understanding about the roles of data policies in the provision of information to citizens. This paper considers potential impacts of data policies in the relationship between government and citizens. The paper considers the roles of data policies and its impact on citizen confidence and participation. The clarity of data policies will be important for public officials to decide on how to disclose information on the government websites. Clear data policies will guide public managers so that they can provide better quality of information to stakeholders and citizens and prevent inadvertent information from being released to stakeholders. Public managers may reduce stakeholders' excessive their demands to the governments and maintain citizens' high confidence through the coherent data policies.

Information technology is often expected to heighten transparency of government to citizens and stakeholders. The World Wide Web (WWW) provides important platforms to some governments in interacting with their residents (Fountain, 2001). Government can readily disclose information on its operation and performance on its web sites and citizens or stakeholders can easily access the information technology (Bimber, 1999; Jun & Weare, 2011; La Porte, Demchak, & Friis, 2001; Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Welch, 2012; Welch & Fulla, 2005; West, 2004). High transparency is believed to be important factor for citizens' trust in government (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Cook, Jacobs, and Kim, 2010).

However, high transparency through e-government technology does not necessarily provide benefits to the government. First, stakeholders may misinterpret technical and complex information disclosed on the websites. They may selectively use information disclosed on the websites without considering the relevant contexts and provide severe pressure on the

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governments. (Bannister and Connolly, 2012; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky 1982). Second, public officials may inadvertently release sensitive or confidential information on the government websites. Skilled stakeholders may easily identify individuals' or groups' information on the websites through combination of other sources and may break confidentiality. Third, high transparency on government performance may not always lead to citizens' high confidence in government. Although citizens may increase their knowledge about government through information released on the websites (Mondak et al., 2007), they may have high expectation on the government and may be easily disappointed with the performance (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2009, 2010). When important aspects of public organizations' performance are not well quantified, the limited information disclosed on the websites may be problematic for citizens' understanding of government and their trust.

Data policies may be important for effectively managing information technology in government. Governments should consider unintended consequence from any information disclosure through e-government technologies. Data policies as organizational rules may play critical roles in effectively utilizing e-government technologies. Organizational rules are commonly found in the bureaucracies and are important element of the organizational design (Kieser and Kubicek 1992, Levitt and March, 1988; Miner, 1987; Schulz, 2003; Zhou, 1993). Formal rules and organizational rules tell public employees what are required and prohibited in their work and how the behavioral requirements are implemented (Bozeman, 2000). Bureaucratic duties are embodied in the formal operating standards rules and procedures, which allow public employees to exercise their authority within the rule specification. (Peters & Pierre, 1998; Barzelay & Armajani, 1992; Weber, 1946; Kettl, 2000). Public services are expected to be properly delivered and public values are guarded when public managers conformed to the rules specified by the political bodies (Denis et al., 2005).

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Government needs to improve the clarity of data policies to effectively manage information technology. Government may not efficiently manage it without clear guidance on the information disclosure. Public officials can be confused with ambiguous objectives and unclear means (Davenport et al., 1999; Strassmann, 1994). When organizational goals are ambiguous and they invite multiple interpretations, public managers may not dictate the mandates into the required behaviors (Chun & Rainey, 2005; Sandfort, 2000). When the observance of the organization rules to not achieve the desirable goals, it would not be helpful for the organizational performance (Brewer & Walker, 2010; Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan, 2007). Management of information technologies without coherent rules will bring about great troubles to the organizations (Strassmann, 1994). When public managers clearly understand the roles and obligations specified in the data policies, they can properly execute the policies.

How may clear data policies help public employees manage information technology in the operation of the government? Clear data policies may guide how and what types of information should be disclosed on the websites. When data policies direct effective information disclosure, public employees may easily follow the guidance and provide clear information to citizens and stakeholders. When the guidelines contain effective means to disclose information on the websites, the observance of the guidance will help public employees release better quality of information through information technology. Government may have quantitative and qualitative information that well represent the performance on the websites. Such clear information on the websites will help citizens and stakeholders have better understanding about government operation and may not excessively demand to the government. In addition, clear data guidelines will reduce disclosure of sensitive or confidential information on the websites.

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Clear data policies may help public managers understand what information is private and critical for specific interests and be careful of the disclosure of such information through information technology. Therefore, coherent rules on information disclosure will benefit governments that rely on e-government technologies in their operation.

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