



**Multicultural Challenges and Barriers in E-Government Enabled Canada**

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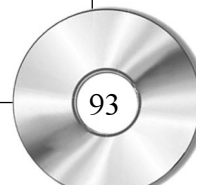
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**Introduction:**

In recent years, Information technology has transformed the daily life of human beings. Emerging technologies such as the World Wide Web (WWW), known as the Internet, has dramatically influenced today's societies all around the world. With the advent of e-mail communications, sophisticated e-business and e-commerce transactions, nations and their governments have realized the importance and the need for transforming themselves into citizen-centric digital societies in order to better serve their residents. The era of electronic transformation does not come alone; it brings with it a bundle of challenges that need to be addressed in an innovative and creative way to allow progress to occur.

E-Government is the mechanism through which citizens become closer to their governments and better served by accessing information and services around-the-clock. Two important aspects in the provision of on-line services are still on the early stages of development; multiculturalism and the improvement of citizen participation in the decision-making process.

This paper analyses the impact, challenges and barriers that multiculturalism and equality have brought in the implementation of e-Government and e-Democracy in a citizen-centric Canada. The analysis is viewed from the perspective of the three ruling levels of government in Canada: The Federal, Provincial and Local government. Moreover, an analysis is made to determine to what extent the Canadian government has considered the equitable rights and needs of minorities to provide access to Government On-Line and promote participation through e-Democracy.





### Multicultural and Diverse Canada: Our e-Strength:

Since 1971, when the Multiculturalism Policy was acknowledged by the Federal government, the multicultural qualities, ethnic diversity and equality rights have firmly been established in Canada, as can be read in Section 15 and 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms<sup>1</sup>.

The introduction of this policy has changed the perception and reality of Canadian inhabitants, and that of the new generations of immigrants to come. Ethnicity and diversity have formally become part of Canada's identity and character.

The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (CMA)<sup>2</sup> and the Multiculturalism Policy<sup>3</sup> laid the foundation to encourage all residents regardless of their place of origin, race, religion, or physical condition to participate in the building of an equal Canadian society, providing assistance in the resolution of any obstacles that may rise during this effort<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* provides:

“15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

27. This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.”

<sup>2</sup> *Canadian Multiculturalism Act R.S., 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.)* [C-18.7] An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada [1988, c. 31, assented to 21st July, 1988]

“AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada”

<sup>3</sup> *Multiculturalism policy of Canada*

3. (1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to:

(c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation;

(i) preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official languages of Canada; and



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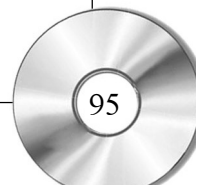
If “*equality of all Canadians*” as stated in the CMA is properly interpreted in the context of access to information and technology, it can be said that not only a large segment of the population who are able to reach technology because of their level of education or economic power can enjoy the benefits of the technological advancements, but also those minority groups who poses different cultural backgrounds, limited financial resources and speak other non official languages should be considered.

Minorities do not always have equal access to services provided by the government, such as employment, housing, community services, etc. This situation creates the so-called Systemic Discrimination, which refers to “discrimination that is part of an organizational system”.<sup>ii</sup> Therefore, this concept could be applied to the ability that certain individuals have to access and interpret electronically delivered services and information offered by the government.

The following figures will help to understand inequalities and segregation in the distribution of Internet access among Canadians. According to the Canadian Internet Survey (2005),<sup>iii</sup> approximately 64.2% of the adult population reported to have a mean (home, work, library, schools, etc.) to access the Internet. Unsurprisingly, most of this population is concentrated in large urban areas whereas in small towns or rural areas only 58% of the residents have accessed the Internet. Many are the activities available to perform over the WWW, being the most popular among the population: access to e-mail (inter-communications) 91% and general browsing (access to information) 84%. However, 52% of individuals have accessed information on Canadian Municipal, Provincial or Federal government and only 13% of all Canadians have had some sort of communication with any type of government.<sup>iv</sup> This indicates that the government needs to do more to bring technology access to those less fortunate, so the possibility to progress could be equally distributed, benefiting all as a participative society.

#### A Multicultural E-Government Approach

To better comprehend the purpose of e-Government in the context of this paper, it is necessary first to define it and understand its advantages and limitations.





### What is e-government?

Many connotations of e-Government have been provided through the years; however, in simple words, e-Government is a Web-enabled mechanism that provides governmental information and services anytime and anywhere to citizens, allowing the sharing of electronic information between residents and their government. As it may be implied, e-Government requires a robust back-end infrastructure, reliable systems and personal computers connected to the Internet to access services on-line. E-Democracy which is embedded in e-Government is intended to empower citizens' participation to practice their right of freedom of expression through the use of technology as a conduit of communications. This allows them to get their voice heard and help them to become an essential element in the decision-making process.

Different models of e-Government implementation have outlined the path to be followed; some models have even ranked the maturity level of governments based on predefined achievements. However, Kampen and Snijkers (2003) have concluded that there are three main steps characterizing the implementation of e-government: 1) presence of the government on the Web; 2) online government transactions performed by citizens and businesses and; 3) interactive government.<sup>v</sup> E-government services can be divided into three categories: Information Services, Transaction Services and participation.

### Advantages of e-Government:

A lot has been said regarding the advantages of e-government. According to the United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN), the advantages in timeliness, responsiveness, and cost containment are outstanding.<sup>vi</sup> Most importantly, seeking citizen satisfaction by increasing customer service levels and increasing operating efficiency by reducing cost are among the relevant advantages. Also the sharing of information among citizens and the government could be used as a mechanism to centralize information related to services provided to the citizens, and as a tool for better decision making. For example, in Europe the use of smart cards has been propagated as a device to access information. In France, health network applications are accessed;<sup>vii</sup> in Finland, citizens access services to update personal information online,<sup>viii</sup>



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and in Spain, access to welfare information and benefit payments are available from Internet kiosks.<sup>ix</sup>

The provision of services through technology has enabled a new vision for governments that is to “treat citizens like consumers”<sup>x</sup> and ensure high level of customer-citizen satisfaction by providing more efficient services and an efficient compendium of information, resulting in a positive impact in the communities. Benefits in online delivery costs will be tangible for businesses and governments with the improvements brought by the use of information technology and economies of scale.<sup>xi</sup>

#### E-Government: Challenges and Barriers:

The implementation of e-government has brought many challenges, such as promoting the use of electronic services among reluctant citizens, gaining constituents trust in performing online transactions, transforming business processes in bureaucratic organizations and reaching out to multicultural societies with linguistic limitations. E-Government is transforming existing social and cultural structures, facing a breath of obstacles during this process.

Religious beliefs, cultural traditions, education levels, computer literacy, languages, and proficiency in foreign languages recognized to be the link between the local people and the international community are factors that impact the successful implementation of e-government.

It is important to preserve social values in the implementation of e-government, and in order to do so citizens should actively participate and represent their opinion and the ethics of their social and cultural groups. As said by Evans and Yen (2005): “*e-governments should be set in place to preserve the freedom and integrity of its citizens and as a reliquary of their individual and unique cultural heritage.*”<sup>xii</sup>

The digital divide refers to technology segregation among the population, which has unequal access to Internet. Some citizens do not have access to computers due to lack of knowledge on how to use it, limited education, scarce economical and financial resources to purchase technology and in some cases misleading perceptions in how easy or difficult it is to use technology. Although governments have put a lot of emphasis and effort on bridging the digital gap, there is still more to be done. Very good initiatives have been put in place in many countries around the world, such



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as, developing programs to build a robust infrastructure to provide high-speed access and making use of innovative mobile technology to access the Internet in places where there is not even phone lines. Such is the case of Bamako capital of Mali in Africa, the city Major in a presentation at the First Worldwide Forum on Electronic Democracy encourage and challenged major IT providers to narrow down the digital divide gap in his City, a City that lacked of telephone networks, with half of the population illiterate and very minimum knowledge of foreign languages, being French the official one. With support from his government and other countries, the dream came true. Mali has now “telemedicine, distance learning and even e-commerce”<sup>xiii</sup> and, most importantly, “the internet is used daily to help suppressed people in their struggles for human rights and there ability to act as an agent for democratization”<sup>xiv</sup>.

Language is perceived to be one of the most challenging barriers to overcome in order to reach high levels of customer-citizen satisfaction. Since English has become the preferred language to communicate in the information highway, English is the official and widely used language among the leading countries in the implementation of e-Government. As reported by the United Nations (2005) “68% of the current web content is in English – a language spoken by 5.4% of the world population”<sup>xv</sup> causing a major language divide.

In most cases, it is believed that Internet and access to electronic information including government sites is a privilege for a selected group of people, resulting in the exacerbation of inequality and systemic discrimination. Moreover, 94.6% of the population world wide is not native English speakers,<sup>xvi</sup> which causes a major impact and threatens the advancement of e-Government. The arguments in question are: How do people react to the fact that they cannot comprehend the information that is presented to them after performing a basic search on the Internet? Is it frustration what will lead to abandonment of interest in the use of electronic services? Would people feel excluded from the benefits of accessing online services because of the lack of confidence and fluency in another language? People by nature like to have access to information in their own language, the language they dominate inside-out and comprehend intimately. Would it be better to say that the prefer language for the Internet is “multilingual” rather than English? Perhaps it is time for



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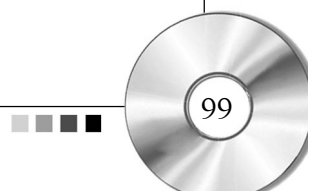
governments to seriously consider internationalization in the global delivery of information and services.

To reach minority groups and avoid exclusion of electronic interaction with governments in a multicultural society such as Canada, people would appreciate having access to services, and relevant information in the language of their own; people will be encouraged to take advantage of the benefits offered by e-government feeling that they belong to a society rather than being excluded from it. As the Treasury Board of Canada indicates (2004): *“When clients can easily find the services they want through the Internet, they will be more likely to use this delivery channel rather than traditional ones...”*<sup>xvii</sup> Hopefully, the words “easily find” in the statement above will stimulate future openness of the Government of Canada to consider the incorporation of multilingual support in their websites and provide content in Chinese, Italian, Punjabi, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish and Arabic, which after all are the most common non-official languages spoken in Canada. This action will capture citizens’ interest, will educate them more, will gain confidence in their transactional relation with the government and will augment their participation in policy making matters.

**E-Government in Canada:**

This section examines Canada’s success in implementing e-Government compared to other countries in the world. It also identifies the strategic objectives of the Federal, Provincial and Local governments in the electronic delivery of services. It also analyzes the responses to addressing some of the multicultural barriers and challenges found as the implementation of e-Government evolves across Canada.

According to a series of studies made by Accenture (2004, 2006),<sup>xviii</sup> since 2000 Canada has been positioned as the leader on the overall maturity level of e-Government implementation, located at the top of the ranking among 22 countries around the world. Furthermore, in 2005 Canada was ranked the 1<sup>st</sup> in the Leadership in Customer Service category<sup>xix</sup> by the same publication. The United Nations (2005) positioned Canada in the 8<sup>th</sup> position in the e-Government readiness ranking (effort in the provision of e-services) – due to its “strong online presence”<sup>xx</sup>, accessibility, navigation and bilingual support and consistency across look and feel. Canada was





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positioned number 7 on the Web Measure category (determines if e-government is employed to the fullest) and occupied the 4<sup>th</sup> position in e-Participation (element by which inclusion is achieved). What can be recognized from these reports is that Canada, despite having the technology and systems to support the electronic delivery of services, is still facing challenges in engaging citizens and persuading them to embrace technology.

While analyzing in more detail the e-Government goals, strategies and efforts made by the three levels of Government in Canada that have positioned our Country among the most advanced and successful implementers of e-Government around the world, the following questions arise: What has Canada done to be positioned among the leaders in electronic service delivery? What else needs to be done to reach out the vast of the population and ensure that all the benefits of an electronically enabled government are distributed equitably among citizens in a diverse and multicultural Canada? Who in the government needs to do more to encourage citizen participation? And who is in a better position to develop a cohesive provision of services for a diverse community?

The Government On-Line (GOL) initiative of the Federal Government of Canada (GC) has put a lot of attention in ensuring that service delivery provided to citizens is accessible, using clear content and in the two official languages. It also offers a single point of entry to government services through an integrated portal ([http://www.canada.gc.ca/main\\_e.html](http://www.canada.gc.ca/main_e.html)).<sup>xxi</sup> The short and long term strategies of the government are promising, with emphasis on a citizen-customer centric approach. The key objective is to make these services more convenient for the constituents, urging for a widely adoption of electronic channels instead of traditional ones, such as, phoning in or walking into the nearest government office.

With these objectives in mind, a set of shared expected outcomes and benchmarks were established: Provide convenient electronic services to augment citizen satisfaction, and provide accessibility of services and reliable information.<sup>xxii</sup> The Government of Canada acknowledges to a certain extent the provision of equitable access to information to all citizens.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The GC has done an impressive job in keeping the citizens' needs at the core of the GOL initiative. According to the UN (2004), "Canada is an





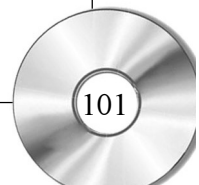
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example of a best practice approach for multilingual online information<sup>xxiv</sup>. However, it would be more clear to say bilingual approach, given that most of the content has been mirrored and published in the two official languages only, English and French. Equality from the official languages perspective is followed precisely and efforts are made to consolidate the user experience from a “look and feel” point of view, these actions have brought consistency across the government and agencies.

Notwithstanding that, English and French are the official languages spoken in Canada, according to the 2001 census<sup>xxv</sup>; only 58.5% of the population has English as a mother tongue and 22.6% French. 17.5% of the population speaks a non-official language. In some circumstances, people confined in this latest group could have a high level of proficiency in either language; however, it cannot be disregarded that language barriers will prevail and hinder a full understanding of what is said or written. As mentioned before, language barriers are a very difficult challenge to overcome, and this factor could play an important role in preventing citizens from fully accessing services provided online, specially those transactional services that assist the citizens in fulfilling their citizen responsibilities, for example, NetFile, the Canadian Online tax filing system.

It is worthwhile at this point to take a look at what other countries and organizations that immersed in the middle of multicultural societies as Canada are doing; how are they approaching multiculturalism? And how are they trying to engage more users? For example, in France, the Government’s website offers content in foreign languages, such as English, German and Spanish in addition to French.<sup>xxvi</sup> Another example is the United Nation’s website that provides content in six different languages.

The GC is not only focusing on the electronic service delivery to citizens, but also it is finding creative ways to get closer to the public and invite them to participate in the policy making process. It is through a pilot Consultation Portal (<http://canada.gc.ca/consultations>)<sup>xxvii</sup> that the GC opens up the opportunity for citizens to participate in the public consultation process. The way this portal has been designed is very user friendly; it allows easy navigation and searches for active consultations. It is also available in French. However, would it be important to consider expanding the boundaries to provide access to the consultation process in other languages?





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In a recent publication, the Federal government has acknowledged the success of implementing e-Government and recognized the potential for future enhancements to it. “The challenge will be to find ways to engage a broader constituency of citizens, public officials and politicians in a service transformation process that respects jurisdictional accountabilities and cultural differences”.<sup>xxviii</sup> After all, it is a fact that 1.5% of the population in Canada (approximately 500,000 inhabitants) does not have knowledge of neither English nor French. This figure is almost equivalent to the population in Ottawa-Gatineau (Part of Ontario) or two times the population in Windsor or Oshawa.<sup>xxix</sup>

Certainly, more concise results in reaching out minority groups will be observed in the years to come. Luckily, for the GC the most important principle to performance measure is not just to have a sophisticated arrangement of information systems but is to have citizens and customers accessing services online and appreciating the benefits they provide.<sup>xxx</sup>

This section studies the advancement in the implementation of e-Government in the province of Ontario, Canada. “The Government of Ontario has played a leadership role in establishing the necessary legal and policy frameworks that support e-Government”.<sup>xxxi</sup> Ontario’s objective is to become a world leader in the electronically delivered services and to increase Ontario’s citizens and businesses satisfaction. Not only has the province of Ontario adjusted the legislation to support the electronic service delivery to citizens in urban areas, but also it has implemented programs such as the “connect Ontario-GeoSmart”<sup>xxxii</sup> where municipal and provincial information and services are available through one single point of access for the community. This initiative contributes significantly in bringing services to smaller and rural communities; it does not only leverage technical infrastructure but also experiences from larger urban regions. Ontario as many other governments has identified similar barriers in implementing e-government, being one of them the equitable access to electronic information and services in a multilingual society. For that effect, some municipalities in the province have drafted plans to address this issue within the delivery of electronic services ambit. For example, Region of Peel’s IT strategy recommends to work with community and volunteer agencies, specially those that provide services to ethnic communities, to make electronic services more accessible.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The town of



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Tillsonburg, to better serve its constituents, has implemented a Customer-Relationship Management system (CRM) that allows them to record, document and track issues reported by citizens. The City of London has developed a Web-based interactive city map that provides service information in a graphical user friendly format, consolidating services and information in one single place.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The City of Toronto has been a pioneer in providing e-voting (electronic voting) capabilities in Canada. The ability to file contributions electronically was approved by City Council in June 2006 and it is currently available; and the use of touch screen voting units was implemented for the first time in the November 2006 municipal elections.<sup>xxxv</sup> These are just examples of initiatives that have been developed in the province of Ontario. However, the important aspect to identify is that these initiatives are a step forward in narrowing the access and digital divide gap, these strategies will incorporate more citizens into the electronic service delivery channel.

Given the proximity to constituents and their commitment to a transparent, accountable and accessible government, lower tier structures of government are the most appropriate institutions to encourage equality. Their knowledge of ethnic profiles and needs of the communities under their jurisdiction make them the ideal promoters of e-government and e-democracy at the citizen level, and improvers of the involvement of ethnic minority groups. "It is only through a partnership with the community that local government can meet the challenge and opportunity of a multicultural society".<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Some residents cannot benefit from electronic service delivery because of disabilities or languages barriers; this can occur when local governments do not change their policies, practices and programs to meet the changing needs of the community; on a positive note, municipalities are identifying ways to assist such people. Language issues are beginning to be addressed in municipal e-service strategies. For instance, some municipalities are adopting race relations policies, programs and practices to increase the participation of minorities.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Local governments under the mandate to eliminate any kind of discrimination could influence behaviors and opinions of other special purpose bodies and other upper tier governments to make electronic information and services more accessible to the tax payers. These



governments must have the capability of addressing the information needs of their community “to say that municipal governments should provide services only in the official languages ignores the demographic reality of Canadian society”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### Conclusion:

Multiculturalism and language barriers are negatively seen as obstacles in the adoption of e-government not only in Canada but also in the United States, Europe and all those countries that hold large concentrations of immigrants. However, this force could turn positive if governments open up to the inclusion of internationalization in their websites. The development of initiatives supporting multilingual services and information and ensuring equally distributed access to technology will increase the number of constituents using the Web as a communication channel, allowing the governments to reach economies of scale in the provision of services and, most importantly, paving the path to build our “e-strength”.

In order to successfully implement e-Government across our nation and become citizen-centric, transparent and accountable, all levels of government have to act together to provide economical and human resources to promote and encourage public access to information and interaction with e-government. In the end, the most important tool for implementing e-government is a willing citizenship, which has reliable, approachable and easy access to information, services and which participates in the decision-making process that affects its OWN interests.

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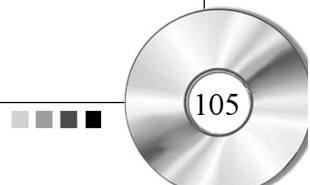
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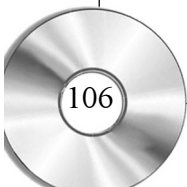
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<sup>xxxi</sup> Municipal Information Systems Association (MISA), 2002., *op. cit.* Pg. 71

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 73

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 69

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 22

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