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Public Trust Building through Electronic Governance: An Analysis on Electronic Services in Bangladesh

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Abstract. Globally, public trust in their government has gradually been declining. It is acknowledged that public trust is the sine qua non of good governance. With the advent of the internet, the influence of ICT on society and the dependence of government on ICTs have grown far beyond our expectations. Moreover, electronic governance and trust foster each others: electronic governance promotes trust, and vice-versa. Other ways, the promotion of electronic government can be a way to increase the citizen trust in government and improve citizen evaluations of government. Simultaneously, many government institutions in both developed and developing countries have entered the digital highway and introduced e-service delivery to the citizens. However, there exists a question of trust in e-governance across the globe as the question of the trust in governance is yet to be solved. This paper intends to illustrate the impacts of online services and initiatives that play imperative role in building public trust in government. It is obvious that there is a significant relationship between public trust and use of ICT based service delivery. The study shows that e-government initiatives can enhance public trust by improving interactions and responsiveness and encouraging participatory mechanisms. Therefore, the government of Bangladesh introduced numerous apparatus/avenues of e-services ranging from education and public utilities to law enforcement. Despite positive impacts, building trust in e-governance has also created special challenges within shifting governance contexts.

Keywords. Public Trust, e-government, government websites, social media, digital payment, service delivery, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

In developing economics, declining of public trust in government is related to weak systems and processes of democratic governance, as well as inadequate access to services and economic opportunities. Trust in government in most of the developed countries, on the contrary, is associated with citizen disagreement with government policy (Cheema and Popovski, 2010). The increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) by government and institutions has potential impacts on public services and their delivery, both via Internet websites and portals, mobile and especially smart phones, social media, and kiosks situated in places accessible to the public (United Nation, 2018). It is argued that ICT can be used effective tool to restore the public’s trust in government through improvements in transparency, cost efficiency, effectiveness, and policy participation (Moon, 2003). Moreover,
Online services across the world are popular and the advantage of providing these services online is unquestionable. Online services are cheaper, faster and more available and accessible across the regions. Therefore, the global nations are spending a high amount of money on digital government projects and initiatives. Notably, the main purpose behind this global spending was to improve performance of governments, save costs and improve citizens’ trust in their governments through a digital transformation (Mahmood, 2019).

Over the last few years, the government in Bangladesh has invested and commenced the digital services and making them available for citizens. Web 2.0 social sites, digital payment systems and government websites are mostly mentionable initiatives of Bangladesh government regarding online services. The main purpose of this paper is to examine to what extent online initiatives have been successful in increasing public trust in government. In doing, this paper conceptualizes trust and electronic government and electronic services. This paper looks to try and understand the possibility of the use of electronic tools, such as government websites, social media and digital payments systems in the public sector in public service delivery in Bangladesh. The final section analyzes the potentiality of digital initiatives that may affect the service delivery system, government-citizen interaction, eventually contribute to building public trust in government.

2. Trust, Electronic Governance, and Electronic Service

The concept of trust is a key variable in many social sciences. It is operationalized as an independent variable (causal), an intermediate variable (moderating or mediating), or a dependent variable (consequence) (Farazmand 2018). Simply, trust in government represents confidence of citizens in the actions of a “government to do what is right and perceived fair” (Easton, 1965). Trust as a multifaceted concept refers to a basic consensus among members of a society on collective values, priorities, and differences and on the implicit acceptance of the society in which they live. It also refers to citizens’ expectations of the type of government that they should have, how government should operate and interact with other social and economic institutions and citizenry, and the behavior of political leaders, civil servants, and citizens (Cheema and Popovski, 2010). Cheema and Popovski (2010) identified five alternative trust dimensions: moral trust, with a focus on ethics and morality; economic trust, with an emphasis on economic efficiency and nonpartisanship; political trust, with the stress on political legitimacy; social trust, focusing on the catalyzing effects of social capital; and technological trust, concentrating on how technology can bring about more democratization.

Thomas (1998) outlined three means by which trust in the government is produced. The first, characteristic-based, is produced through expectations associated with the demographic characteristics of a person. Secondly, institutions may create trust either directly through adoption of professional standards or codes of ethics, or indirectly through the observance or administration of laws and regulations. Third, process-based trust results from expectations of reciprocity in which the giver obligates the receiver to return goods or services of equivalent intrinsic or economic value (Parent et al., 2005).

E-governance can be defined as the application of ICT tools in the interaction between government and citizens and businesses, and in internal government operations to simplify and improve democratic governance (UNPAN, 2011). UNPA and ASPA (2001) also defined e-Governance as the public sector’s use of the most innovative information and communication technologies, like the Internet, to deliver to all citizens improved services, reliable information and a greater knowledge in order to facilitate access to the governing process and encourage deeper citizen participation. E-Governance is the use of ICTs in government in ways that either: (1) alter governance structures or processes in ways that are not feasible without ICT and/or (2)
create new governance structures or processes that were heretofore not possible without ICT and/or (3) rectify heretofore theoretical ideas or issues in normative governance (Bannister and Connolly 2012). The e-Governance involves three contributions to improve government process: e- Administration, connecting citizen that is e-Service and building external interaction that is e-Society (Heeks, 2001). E-Governance has been treated as an effective mechanism for bringing citizen’s satisfaction as it tends to reduce costs, minimize third party contacts, and enable citizens to transact themselves (Karim, 2015).

Researchers conceptualized the e-service in two ways. Some focus on the delivery and delivery infrastructure (digital networks) while others emphasize both the delivery process and the benefits or outcome of the service (Hofacker et al. 2007). As an instance, Javalgi, Martin and Todd (2004) defined e-service as those services that can be delivered electronically. Whereas Tiwana and Balasubramaniam (2001) indicate e-services as Internet-based applications that fulfil service needs by seamlessly bringing together distributed, specialized resources to enable complex, (often real-time) transactions. Moreover, e-services are defined as services that are produced, provided and/or consumed through the use of ICT-networks such as Internet-based systems and mobile solutions (Scupola, 2008).

3. State of Electronic Services in Bangladesh

3.1 Web 2.0 Social Sites

The traditional way of popular participation in governance has changed with the introduction of new technologies, including social media across the globe. Social sites are considered as a significant tool to improve government efficiency, user convenience and citizen involvement (Freeman and Loo, 2009). Globally, there are varieties of social media applications that can be used by the government agencies for various purposes such as public hearing and service innovation, problem solution, experience sharing and departmental coordination. The government officials and offices frequently use social media, particularly facebook to provide information and services to citizen and to ensure e-participation in decision making. In fact, many governments are using social media more for information dissemination (e-informing) than for interaction (e-involving, e-collaborating, e-empowering) (Thompson, 2008). Hong (2013) stated that recent years have witnessed the increasing use of online media such as websites, blogs, and social networking sites by governments for various public relations purposes.

Bangladesh is one of the few developing countries that have been using Web 2.0 tools in the public administration for information dissemination and service delivery. In Bangladesh, social media has become an indispensable part of people’s life and has been used as significant tools to connect citizen with government. In Bangladesh, more than 11 thousand of the government officials are connected with each other through facebook group, namely Public Service Innovation Bangladesh and more than one thousand ‘Citizens Journalists’ are tie in with district administration. Social media is being used in more than 5000 government offices and about 2.5 million citizens engaged in it (a2i.gov.bd, 2020). Additionally, public officials at local levels also use and connect with numerous facebook pages/groups and personal account, and provide feedbacks to the citizens. Union Digital Centre (UDC) blog was introduced to share innovations, experiences and problems of entrepreneur of UDC with others. The government also developed mobile apps that can be downloaded to smart phones through which a citizen can easily download data and use them freely.
3.2 Government Websites

National web portal (www.bangladesh.gov.bd) is the gateway to access all government information about the services under single address. More than 25 thousand websites of 43 thousand offices, including unions, upazila, district, divisions, directorate, department and ministries were integrated in this portal. The services portal (Sebakunjo) (services.portal.gov.bd) is a web platform where citizens find all information on four hundred and fifty services from forty public agencies. As a result, there is no need to browse the websites of all government offices separately.

The Bangladesh Forms (www.forms.gov.bd), a one stop web address with all sorts of government forms downloadable and editable in one click, are considered as milestone of e-service development in Bangladesh. Presently, there are more than 1,688 downloadable forms in from 270 public offices under 20 categories. In these services, citizen can easily collect 124 forms from this portal and submit through online and the rest of the forms/services can be downloaded from the website and submit by regular post without extra cost or trouble.

Since 2013, the teachers’ portal (www.teachers.gov.bd) was introduced for teachers’ community aiming at to improve learning method and professional development. More than 2.71 lakh teachers from all over Bangladesh have registered on the Teachers’ Portal and can access more than 1.28 lakh contents developed and uploaded by registered teachers and among these contents, 944 contents are model contents. Mukto Paath (www.muktopaath.gov.bd) is a unique open e-learning platform which provide professional and skills development solution in bangle language. National Infokosh web portal (www.infokosh.gov.bd) is developed to find relevant information in livelihoods. More than one lakh content on 10 thousand subjects are available in this websites.

Union Digital Centre is considered as the one-stop service centre of all information and services for rural communities. Citizens can avail more than 150 public-private services from more than 5865 digital centres. A total of 4557 UDCs is also playing a pivotal role in providing e-services to the grass root people at affordable costs since 2010. Notably, the centers run under the idea of Public-Private-Peoples’ Partnership (PPPP) model by two local entrepreneurs; one male and one female. Digital record room (www.drr.land.gov.bd) was initiated to provide digital land service from all the record rooms. Moreover, the land e-Porcha is one of the vital e-services provided from UDCs. People can apply for the ‘Porcha’ through the web portal (www.districtname.gov.bd) by going to nearby UDC instead of going DC office and or AC (land) office.

| Categories       | Initiatives                                                                 |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Web 2.0 social sites | Facebook (official page and individual account)                               |
|                  | Twitter, You Tube and email                                                 |
| Websites         | National web portal (www.bangladesh.gov.bd)                                 |
|                  | Services portal (services.portal.gov.bd)                                     |
|                  | Forms portal (www.forms.gov.bd)                                             |
|                  | Teachers’ portal (www.teachers.gov.bd)                                      |
|                  | Education portal (www.muktopaath.gov.bd)                                   |
|                  | Livelihoods (www.infokosh.gov.bd)                                           |
|                  | Land (www.drr.land.gov.bd)                                                  |
| Digital payments | Government to person                                                         |
|                  | Person to government                                                        |
|                  | Agent banking                                                               |
3.2 Digital Payments

Bangladesh government initiatives regarding digital payments include government to person (G2P), person to government (P2G) and agent banking. On G2P, government started piloting with six social safety net programs, including pension, EGPP, old age allowance, allowances for widow and mother. Three commercial banks are providing electronic banking services through agent banking to the beneficiaries. A total of nearly 1 crore 23 lakh people are being benefited from these programs. The digitalization of payment process (G2P) provides easy access to cash, easy cash out, less travel time, save money and comparatively safe mode of transactions (a2i.gov.bd, 2020a).

The government has also commenced UDC based agent banking model where UDC entrepreneurs become a bank agent to offer financial services to hard-to-reach customers. All UDC at union level provides banking facility, including saving accounts, micro-loan and remittance disbursement. The model will play a pivotal role in accessing financial inclusion and reduce time and money of rural communities.

In 2018, the government of Bangladesh has been piloted e-challan (receipt), the person to government (P2G) revenue receipt portal, along with the conventional way of submitting government revenue through the traditional banking system. The pilot project starts with only three services, including passport fee, national ID correction fee and police clearance certificate fee. Following the login into e-challan website, an individual is allowed to submit online transaction of payment to government treasury through multiple payment options including Sonali bank prepaid card, Q-cash/visa card and Bkash. It is expected that more P2G payments and payment gateway will be systematically integrated in the next phase to upgrade the platform (a2i.gov.bd, 2020a). Since 2016, the rural community has the opportunity of paying online electricity bill service through respective UDCs with minimum time, cost and visits.

4. Electronic Services for Trust Building: Analysis

Web is now considered as a very expedient and easily accessible apparatus for better information flow and hassle-free services. Website or e-government information could include items such as how the government is structured, how laws are passed, and other basic government information (Farazmand 2018). Posting information on the web has often forced city agencies to streamline or coordinate procedures in various units, provide one stop access to city government, and present information in more user-friendly formats (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006).

For example, national web portal as a biggest government information repository significantly provides all government information on government services, relevant laws, processes, expenses and process times to all stakeholders. Additionally, collecting the forms from government offices is a tedious and time consuming job. This sort of web portals have been created to alleviate unnecessary distress of the citizens, arising from a lack of access to necessary government forms. The teacher community can also upload and download contents of all subjects, can comment other teachers’ content and also update their own content according to the other teachers’ opinion. Moreover, government web sites endorse e-mail addresses and cell phone number of government officials, which helps citizens for more individualized communication with government staffs.

Social media can bridge access and take-up gaps still faced by many traditional online government services (Mickoleit, 2014). Given such potentiality government officials seek to leverage social media tools to improve service and communication with citizens, especially segments of the population that previously were underrepresented (Kavanaugh et al. 2012).
In this age of social media, the relationship between governments, citizens, employees, and businesses have evolved to a more participatory level in decision-making and nation-building. In developing countries like Bangladesh, Facebook, blogs, YouTube have brought significant opportunities to both citizens and governments. Though social media, citizens can collectively create public information, provide services, and take part in policy making. Thus, citizens become active agents in creating, organizing, combining and sharing Web content through social media (Chun et al. 2010).

The use of social media has led to changes in social norms and behavior at the societal level in domains such as civic and political engagement, privacy and public safety (Aksoy et al., 2013). Facebook plays a significant role in fighting corruption, making the citizens and the officials more aware of irregularities. More recently, youth generation have been seen of engaging in government activities though using social media platform. The government officials obtain information and complaints from citizens and respond quickly to resolve those complaints and problems.

The studies conducted by A2I project show that digital payments directly contribute to financial inclusion as it contributes to reduce income inequality, boost job creation, accelerate consumption, increase investments in human capital, and directly help poor people manage risk and absorb financial shocks (a2i.gov.bd, 2020a). The digitization of land records improves the land transaction and land administration (Rahman, et al., 2016). The government’s initiative towards digitization will not only speed up the process of land acquisition, but will also help in building up of local revenues through property tax billing and collection (Pai, 2018).

The aims of UDC is to decrease digital divide and ensure participation of the poor, women and marginalized in the provision of information and services and finally connect them to the information superhighways. Through the delivery of e-services to the general people, UDC minimizes gap between government and people. It also plays a significant role in establishing the framework of e-governance which ultimately will lead to good governance in Bangladesh (Saleheen, 2015).

### 5. Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that public’s trust in government has continued to lessen because of various factors related to administrative, political, social and economic. Though digital government and online service, public administrations around the world can be more efficient, provide better services, and respond to demands for accountability and performance within and among countries (Farazmand 2018). The existence of the online payment systems around times may tend to build trust as of considering cost, time and money. From the citizen perspectives, digitization of payment has the potential to have greater accessibility in services. Government also provides services effectively and efficiently to the citizens. Increase access to government information and services through social media has the greater impact on trust building process in developing countries. It is also widely recognized that the social media empowers the citizen asking questions to government and thereby it can help strengthen democracy. Websites have also potential of improving citizens’ perception in government, but, the challenge is to ensure web accessibility and up-to-date information. Finally, a clear and comprehensive strategic framework is needed to create an enabling trustworthy and inclusive and effective environment for online initiatives in public institutions.
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