

Understanding the Role of Intermediaries in Digital Government: The Case of Immigration Services

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Abstract: Digital government intermediaries is not a new topic and has been previously analyzed and documented in the literature. There is also a recognition of an evolution in the study of this concept towards open data intermediaries or infomediaries and, in fact, there are many more studies devoted to this more specific topic. However, there are still outstanding issues to be explored with respect to intermediaries in digital government, particularly in certain policy domains and specific services and programs. This study focuses on intermediaries that help users to obtain migration services. Immigrants can be considered a vulnerable population, given that they are not citizens and need to deal with government agencies from a different country and, sometimes, they are also required to do so in a different language and with certain technical skills that they do not possess. This is why they frequently turn to intermediaries. Based on semi-structured interviews with migration intermediaries such as consulates of Central American countries, NGOs, Mexican government offices, and internet café owners; this ongoing research paper focuses on online services for Central American immigrants in Mexico's southern border and analyzes the role of intermediaries. The results show that there are some similarities in terms of the role of intermediaries in digital government in general, but there are also some particularities of migration services.

Keywords: Intermediaries, consulates, NGOs, immigrants, non-citizens, migration services, digital government services

1. Introduction

Recently, the concept of intermediaries in the context of digital government, and particularly in connection with open government, has been extensively studied (Van Schalkwyk, 2015; Yoon et al. 2018; Kassen, 2018; Janssen & Klievink, 2008). This is due to the importance of intermediaries and the role they play in bringing government programs and services closer to citizens as well as democratizing access to the technological infrastructure of government (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2016). However, studies on migration management are few and therefore the issue of intermediaries in immigration services is also pending. The concept of intermediaries previously discussed in e-government studies has considered NGOs, religious associations or groups, and government offices

(Sein, 2011), but no organizations more specific to migration services such as consulates. So far, the intermediaries working with migrants, foreigners who wish to follow a process or obtain a service from a government from another country, have not been reviewed.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the role of migration service intermediaries by recognizing the differences and similarities with other online service intermediaries and also the particularities that this type of intermediation implies. From the analysis of the use of online services for migrants, it was observed that users require the help of public and private organizations to carry out the immigration regularization procedure. Immigration services are mostly requested by migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador who have entered Mexico irregularly, i.e. without immigration documents. Given their status as irregular, they have not established a relationship with the government for fear of deportation. Migrants wish to regularize their stay status by obtaining a temporary resident permit. This procedure is carried out in the offices of the National Migration Institute (NMI) in the city of Tapachula, state of Chiapas, Mexico. The procedure is initiated online by means of a pre-registration form containing each migrant's personal data, then it is continued with a notification in the user's email, and, finally, the last steps are carried out in person.

This paper is organized in five sections, including the foregoing introduction. Section two provides the results of our review of the existing literature, focusing on the role of intermediaries in digital government, the importance of the digital divide, and the characteristics of immigration services users. Section three briefly describes the research design and methods used in this study. Section four presents preliminary results which highlight aspects and characteristics of intermediaries in immigration services. Section five provides some final comments and suggests ideas for future research about this topic.

2. Literature Review

This section presents the results of our review of the existing literature. First, a brief presentation of the concept of intermediaries in general and also the ones devoted to digital government and data, who these intermediaries are, and the different roles they play. Second, the concept of digital divide is revised as it could be considered as one of the main reason why digital government intermediaries exist. Users of immigration services are also discussed, since it is considered necessary to make a review of such users' characteristics to understand their differences with respect to other users, including but not limited to the digital divide.

2.1. Digital Government Intermediaries

In the digital government literature, the concept of intermediaries has been used to analyze the relationship between government and users, which is mediated by a third party. Intermediaries are defined as "any organization that mediates the relationship between two or more actors" (Van der Muelen quoted in Arendsen & Hedde, 2009). Some of the first uses of this concept were in the context of e-commerce. It was initially considered that by moving from traditional commerce to e-commerce, intermediaries would disappear, as each person would find what he or she was looking for directly.

However, the roles played by intermediaries are maintained in many instances, even in electronic media (Bailey & Bakos, 1997).

These roles played by traditional intermediaries are: 1) bringing together buyers and sellers of products to achieve economies of scale and reduce the asymmetry of negotiations; 2) protecting buyers and sellers from the opportunistic conduct of other market participants, becoming a trusted agent; 3) facilitating the market by reducing operating costs; and 4) locating the appropriate buyer with the appropriate seller (matching buyers and sellers) (Bailey & Bakos, 1997). These behaviors have originally been studied from economic theory. Intermediaries are an important part of reducing transaction costs and generating some advantages. These roles have been transferred to e-government intermediaries for some authors (Janssen & Klievink, 2008; Arendsen & Hedde, 2009), which are described as follows: 1) uniting demand with supply; 2) gathering information; 3) providing trust; and 4) facilitating operations by providing organizational infrastructure.

As for Sein (2011), intermediaries are classified into four types depending on the role they play, 1) facilitating intermediaries, those that only provide physical access such as computers and the internet, they are usually Internet cafés; 2) direct intermediaries, they facilitate the use of online services or digital government information and these can be NGOs, local organizations, or citizens; 3) enabling intermediaries, it is the combination of the previous roles, they provide physical access and facilitate the use of services; 4) transforming intermediaries, those that support groups of disadvantaged citizens, act as activists. Studies on intermediaries come from developed and underdeveloped countries. Some of the work that has studied the case of intermediaries in a developed country such as the Netherlands. Janssen & Klievink (2008) point out that intermediaries can be employed to reduce costs and, at the same time, make e-government demand-oriented. Intermediaries, by being closer to users, facilitate the provision of services. In some cases, the government itself has decided to introduce private organizations to function as intermediaries, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, where significant benefits have been found from intermediaries' help to citizens who do not have the skills or access to computers to adopt digital government (Weerakkody, El-Haddadeh, Al-Sobhi, Akhet & Dwivedi, 2013).

In this regard, the literature on intermediaries notes that it is important to study their role in digital government projects in developing countries (Sein, 2011), where intermediaries could be considered to be just as important as the government and citizens. These intermediaries are usually internet cafés, NGOs, socio-religious organizations, private companies, and even other government agencies (Sein, 2011). All of them provide Internet access and also offer support to the citizens to use the services and information offered by government. Dombrowski (2014) and AlSobhi, Muhammad & Weerakkody (2009) mention that intermediaries are not typical end users but that they use digital government for their customers.

The importance of intermediaries is recognized by pointing out that the use of intermediary organizations cannot be easily replaced or internalized through direct interactions. The government should seek a strategy in which all types of intermediaries are used to interact with citizens and businesses (Janssen & Klievink, 2008). More recently, intermediation services went from online services to focus on the intermediation of open data or infomediaries. These intermediaries are usually computer programmers, designers, coders, testers, e-government enthusiasts, and even

technically savvy citizens (Kassen, 2018); that is, those who have the capabilities and skills to reuse and add value to datasets that the government makes available to citizens. The concept of intermediaries has been widely used in the context of open data, because in this topic, most of the datasets the government provide to citizens are often non-processed information and the majority of the population does not possess skills to reuse or analyze that information (Kassen, 2018).

Intermediaries can be a significant part of removing existing barriers while unlocking the potential of data for all, particularly for communities with limited human or financial resources, limited access to existing data infrastructures, and underserved populations (Yoon et al., 2018). Some of these barriers for users are lack of access, low levels of data literacy, and lack of human, social and financial capital to effectively use open data (Van Schalkwyk, 2015). For Van Schalkwyk et al. (2016) intermediaries play a number of important roles (i) they increase the accessibility and utility of data; (ii) they may assume the function of a “keystone species” in a data ecosystem; and (iii) they have the potential to democratize the impacts and use of open data, which is very similar to the roles that intermediaries originally had in the context of e-commerce and e-government services.

2.2. Users of Immigration Services and the Digital Divide

Environmental variables have been identified as important for Internet access and use (Helbig, Gil-Garcia & Ferro, 2009). We argue that the environment clearly affects how individuals use online government services, particularly the digital divide. For some authors (Belanger & Carter, 2009) there are two variables that are important for the digital divide at the individual level: material access and usability. The experience of users about these two aspects is influenced by their social and demographic characteristics. Some of these characteristics are ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income (Gil-Garcia, Helbig & Ferro, 2006).

Many e-government studies have focused on demand needs and specific conditions of users. One of the main aspects being studied is how much these services really respond to the needs of users and adapt to their specific conditions (Bertot, Jeager & McClure, 2008; Gauld, Goldfinch & Horsburg, 2009; Reddick, 2005; Moon & Welch, 2005). In addition, these studies also review the impact of the digital divide on the use of e-government services (Reddick, 2005; Bertot, Jeager & McClure, 2008; Helbig, Gil-Garcia & Ferro, 2009; Jeager & Bertot 2010; Norris, 2001; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Gil-Garcia, Helbig & Ferro, 2006; Belanger & Carter, 2009). While there are many issues studied in terms of demand, few studies have considered migrants as the main users. Some examples are Wang & Che (2012) and Wang & Gu, (2012), who describe how Chinese citizens migrating from the countryside to the city face a lack of skills when using government online services, due to the digital divide. However, their legal and social status is different from that of international migrants. In fact, internal migrants are by definition citizens of the same country.

Unlike the studies mentioned above, the current study focus on non-citizens. Therefore, the citizen-oriented theory does not match the concept of foreign users, as many of the benefits that a citizen would get from e-government are not accessible to non-citizen users. These include improving the relationship between government and citizens or having access to government online services from home; because of the requirements of the migration procedures, it is almost always necessary for them to be physically present at the government offices at least for certain steps in the

process. In addition, considering foreigners as users is ambiguous and complex (Garcia-Garcia & Gil-Garcia, 2018), because within this category of users is very diverse and there are many differences in terms of country of origin, native language, socioeconomic level, and purpose to enter the host country, among others. For this study, user is the person to whom government services are provided, which include face-to-face and online services. In other words, migrants are the users of migration management services, because those services are designed for them to accomplish certain goals.

3. Research Design and Methods

This research uses a case study approach. Primary data was collected through two information-gathering techniques: semi-structured interviews and direct observation. A total of 31 interviews were conducted with Central American immigrants, non-governmental organizations, government offices of the state of Chiapas, consulates of several Central American countries, and owners of internet cafés. We used "snowball" as the sampling technique for this study. Some of the topics covered in the interviews were the objectives of each intermediary as an organization, their role in supporting migrants, and how they advise them, the problems that users have to carry out the procedure, their opinion on the incorporation of technology into migration services, and how they participate in government programs and services. Analysis of interview data was done through linking content of the transcribed interviews to key concepts and topics from the literature. For example, comments on helping immigrants with government processes were associated to the topic of intermediation, comments on meetings and communication between organizations to the topic of networks, and ease of use of the website to the topic of usability. Following this process, the most relevant comments on the subject of intermediation were identified in each interview and then integrated with the comments of other interviews.

Direct observation was carried out at NMI facilities, NGOs, consulates, and internet cafés. This allowed us to reconstruct the information and get to know more about the migrants who came to request support in some government process, observe interactions between intermediaries and migrants, and provide a lot of information that helped to know the context in which they are immersed, as well as their skills and needs. Interviews and observation notes were coded and analyzed following a qualitative approach and looking for themes that were important from the interviewees' point of view. One of these topics was the role of intermediaries in the provision of migration services.

4. Preliminary Results

This section presents our preliminary results with a focus on aspects that are unique or different in terms of the role of intermediaries for immigration services in contrast with digital government in general.

4.1. Consulates as Basic Intermediaries

Unlike other types of digital government, for migration services the consulates play a very important role. Consulates are a representation of the government of their country, so they are seen as a safe place for migrants to ask for help and advise on services and technology. They are a common intermediary for migrants, especially for those who, given their short time in the country, do not yet have a social network or do not know any NGOs that also support these processes. For example, the role of Central American consulates is predominantly to support their nationals and receive information from the Mexican government, without interfering or making suggestions about work. The role of consulates is primarily as a link between demand and supply and to provide human resources with the necessary expertise to assist migrants in online preregistration for certain services. This function is carried out by consulates that have a larger population of migrants from their country in southern Mexico. For instance, the consulates of Guatemala and El Salvador are the ones with the largest migrant population in southern Mexico and, through their operational staff, they help migrants fill out the pre-registration form and also give them advice on the process. In contrast, the Honduran consulate is an organization with very few employees and they do not give any support to their nationals regarding the procedures of the NMI. In general terms, the consulates have information about the programs of the NMI and thus can advise their nationals. Due to the nature of migration services, consulates are a type of intermediary that is unique in this context and play a very important role.

4.2. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as Intermediaries and Activists

As an intermediary, NGOs contribute substantially, because they do not only support migrants by filling out the online preregistration, but also provide specific information about government procedures, directly support individual cases to meet the necessary requirements, and help migrants to prepare the materials they need to present at the NMI. They have also been promoting policies such as immigration regularization programs, so their role is the most active of all intermediaries. Therefore, NGOs are considered for helping migrants, not only because they want to do it, but also because the NMI promotes their role as intermediaries on its web portal. That is, a person is encouraged to receive help from an NGO in terms of reviewing their documents and their condition to know if it is applicable for any type of residence document. In fact, if they do not have the support of an NGO, it may take much more time for NMI to review their case and process their services.

4.3. Relationship with a Government from a Different Country

In most cases where digital government intermediaries exist users are citizens. This condition is something that facilitates the relationship between government and users, because some service intermediaries help users at the request of a government agency as a strategy that helps them spread their services online. Regarding immigration services, the users are non-citizens, therefore, it is necessary to have special considerations when relating to a population with different social and cultural characteristics. Individuals not familiar with the national language and/or the lexicon of government organizations will have significant difficulties understanding a process or service.

Even documented migrants have difficulty understanding the process of immigration procedures. In addition, since these are services related to regularizing residence in a foreign country, aspects related to security and border control must also be considered, which makes this type of process different due to strict data scrutiny. Above all, the most prominent feature of intermediaries in migration services is their ability to bring government online services closer to those people who, given that they were admitted as undocumented, face the fear of dealing with government.

4.4. Low Level of Digital Literacy, Poverty and Legal Vulnerability

Users of NMI services are migrants based on Mexico's southern border. The immigration regularization process is aimed at foreigners who have entered Mexico in an unauthorized manner and who are already living in Mexico, at least for two years. The low level of digital literacy stems from its low level of schooling and high poverty level. There are users who do not know how to read or write or only have a couple of years of schooling, as the consul of Guatemala says: "There are a lot of Guatemalan who unfortunately cannot read or write". The Consul of El Salvador explained: "Many conationals do not have schooling in which they have learned to use a computer, besides not everyone has access to a computer. We even have to explain to them what the at sign means when we tell them to send a document by email". In addition, users of these services are frequently in poverty. Most people who enter Mexico irregularly do not have a permit to reside or to work in Mexico, so they do not have access to a formal job with a good salary and social benefits. So, in these situations of low schooling, lack of technological skills, and problems associated with legal vulnerability and poverty, intermediaries play a very important role in being a bridge between government and the users of migration services.

5. Final Comments and Next Steps

Early studies on government intermediation were focused on analyzing the benefits of intermediaries in electronic commerce, while more recent studies acknowledge the importance of intermediaries in bringing digital government closer to citizens. The role of intermediaries in immigration services is consistent with previous studies. They help to bridge the gap between supply with demand and they also can reduce the cost for users when they approach these organizations. Consulates are the only intermediary that have not been studied in digital government literature and they have a very important role in migration services, because, for many migrants, the consulate is perhaps one of the safest places, given their legal vulnerability and the risk of being deported. These and some specific aspects about the intermediation in immigration services will be more deeply addressed in the following steps in this research. Besides, the specific characteristics of these intermediaries and the roles they play in the context of immigration services will be deepened.

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