

“Digital Government” in Japan: A Selective Survey of Japanese Ministry Web Sites

Following the trajectories of rapid technological innovation, the Internet has evolved into an indispensable tool in modern politics. This phenomenon has found its most recent expressions in the successful utilization of Web 2.0 during the election campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 as well as the increase of political weblogs that replace conventional print media in the United States or the rise of citizen journalism in South Korea. Not only are politicians and civil society embracing the Internet, but bureaucracies also have recognized the increased importance of this technology as a mechanism for delivering information and services to citizens. In recent years, the digitalization of government has received growing scholarly attention, often within the framework of the study of “electronic government.” The American political scientist Darrell M. West (2005) of Brown University has defined “e”-government as the “public sector use of the Internet and other digital devices to deliver services, information, and democracy itself” (p. 1). With Japan at the cutting edge of technological innovation, one might assume that its political system involved the extensive use of new technologies and that its political apparatus was highly digitalized. Yet, on the contrary, Japan is known for being reluctant to embrace the Internet as a tool for politics (cf. Matsuura, 2009), a fact that is illustrated by the United Nations’ E-Government Survey 2008, which provides the “e-government readiness index” that measures the overall effort of the 192 UN member states to adjust their public sectors to provide proactive, efficient, and transparent public services to their citizens, communities, and private sectors by means of the use of new technologies. In the survey, Japan ranks 11th behind the leading e-government nations of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway and even behind neighboring South Korea, which is in the sixth position (United Nations, 2008).¹ This review attempts to selectively investigate the accessibility of the Web sites of Japan’s executive as a potential primary source for policy-related information for scholars and Japanese citizens alike. We will specifically focus our attention on the Web sites of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW; <http://www.mhlw.go.jp>) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF; <http://www.maff.go.jp>).

These two ministries are particularly accountable for issues, such as consumer-related problems or health issues, and thus should provide a high level of accessibility to online information for citizens and researchers alike. We will present the Web sites of both ministries in greater detail to provide an insight into policy frameworks, their revisions, and recently implemented measures, especially with

regard to employment measures and health issues in order to illustrate how Japan's bureaucracy utilizes the Internet for the provision of information and how these services can be employed by researchers interested in Japan's politics and policy.

Discussing the content of governmental Web resources reveals clearly the extent of digital government development in Japan. In our assessment of the current state of digital government in Japan, we will follow the above quoted study by West, who has provided reference points useful for assessing the accessibility of online platforms of government ministries based on a detailed study of American government Web sites. These reference points include the availability of publications, online databases, the use of audio and video clips, presentation in foreign languages, possibilities for making comments, and receiving e-mail updates (e.g., in the form of newsletters and links to other sites; West, 2005, p. 49). In assessing these criteria, West suggests a four-stage model of e-government development and technological change. At the lowest stage of this model, government Web sites take the form of "billboards," i.e., static mechanisms to display information, such as government publications, with a very limited opportunity for two-way communication between the user and the ministry officials. At the second stage along the trajectory of incremental technological change, Web sites may partially deliver services allowing users to search databases, access government services, and engage in communication with government officials. The third stage describes an advanced digital government with Web sites being portal sites that provide integrated services and access to information across agencies. The fourth stage is called "interactive democracy" and includes a radical transformational change that leads to e-government having a large impact on the public sector, shifting Web sites from simple interactive service delivery toward democracy-enhancing tools, including the possibility of public feedback, deliberation, and voting (West, 2005, pp. 9–12).

All of Japan's ministries maintain an English Web site that contains the most important information in abbreviated form. Japanese ministries have a very powerful role not only in collecting comprehensive data on the Japanese population through surveys but also through the establishment of complex networks with businesses and other organizations that support governmental objectives. Furthermore, the activities of the ministries are interlinked in some instances. For example, the MHLW (Kôsei rôdôshô) conducts complex surveys on the health, eating, and lifestyle habits of the Japanese population whereas the MAFF (Nôrin suisanshô) reacts to these findings by introducing policies designed to encourage the improvement of eating habits.

The home page of the MHLW covers a wide range of policy areas with regard to health, medical care and special care for senior citizens, food and food safety, children and child rearing, employment security, work-life balance, social security and welfare policies, the integration of disabled persons into society and the labor market (*atarimae* project), and gender issues with an emphasis on equal employment promotion. Sections on health and mental health issues inform about cancer prevention (*gan kenshin*), especially for women, and the increase of lifestyle-related diseases (*seikatsu shûkan-byô*), such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and weight problems. Besides general information on the organization of the ministry, a number of "White Papers" (*hakusho*) providing national statistics

are available and can be accessed and downloaded from the Web site of the MHLW. The Web site is updated on a regular basis and maintains English pages that in addition to the translation of the Japanese Web site content offer specific information for foreigners who enter Japan, such as the import of medication to Japan for personal use. The English site also refers to a wide network of organizations and contains links to domestic research institutes and nongovernmental organizations and to international organizations, such as the World Health Organization. Changes in the labor market are well documented. A section on "Tomorrow's Japan" (*Ashita no Nippon*) documents the recent changes of labor market policies, especially the introduction of emergency employment measures that were taken in the aftermath of the economic downturn in September 2008 in order to prevent a further rise in unemployment and to encourage private enterprises to maintain employment and/or to hire employees with inconsistent work histories. A section on gender and employment features measures undertaken to implement gender equality in the workplace, such as the recently revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law (*danjo koyô kikai kintô-hô*). The ministry makes limited use of the video site YouTube, with an emphasis on urgent topics, such as the prevention of child abuse, or topical health issues, such as the current outbreak of influenza H1N1 in Japan, in order to provide information and guidance. However, the presentation on YouTube does not contain detailed and animated visual presentations but is limited to the presentation of data material as lectures and as PowerPoint charts. A useful feature of ministry Web sites offered for users who are not familiar with the Japanese language is the "Japanese Law Translation" service (<http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/>), accessible from all government home pages. Besides the various statistics and reports, which are mostly provided in pdf-file format, this feature provides another important tool for those interested in Japanese policies.

The MAFF deals with issues related to both the production and consumption of food products. The ministry covers a wide range of issues on its Web site, ranging from information on the regulations on beef imports from the United States, Japanese beef (*wagyû*), the sensitive issue of whaling, labeling and standards of food products, and the use of biotechnology and genetically modified food. The ministry also informs users about Japanese restaurants outside Japan in order to promote certain standards regarding the authenticity of Japanese food outside the country. The ministry publishes weekly updates, monthly statistics, and annual reports. In contrast to the MHLW, the MAFF not only addresses policy frameworks but also the implementation of government initiatives that support the improvement of eating habits of the Japanese population through the policy of *shokuiku*, which can be roughly translated as "food education." A number of institutions, such as schools, companies, and sports facilities, cooperate with this food education policy to convey appropriate nutritional habits to the population. The MAFF is well represented on media channels, such as YouTube and Yahoo-Japan. Short video clips feature reports about the current low national food self-sufficiency rate and the improvement of eating habits. In contrast to the MHLW, the presentation of video material applies the use of animation techniques and also features Japanese celebrities, such as the well-known J-pop singer Matsuuru Aya (MAFF, 2009).² Yet, the interactive page design that integrates these Web 2.0 functions is in many cases limited to the Japanese-language Web sites.

In conclusion, following West (2005) and his four-stage model of e-government development, we argue on the basis of the two Web sites discussed above that Japan is currently in the second stage of e-government development. These sites provide comprehensive surveys and databases in two languages that are easily accessible and a valuable resource for the general public and for researchers. Readers can engage either in Japanese or in English in communication with government officials. From our own experience as researchers, inquiries to government officials are replied to speedily and efficiently. However, the online presence of ministry information is currently limited to the mere presentation of data collections. Analysis of these data and follow-up measures have not yet been implemented. Thus, Japan is still a step away from being an “interactive democracy.” However, the government is currently working on implementing e-government initiatives that allow the online access of administrative procedures, the promotion of electronic provision of government information, and the promotion of local e-governments.³

Notes

¹The full report entitled *UN E-Government Report 2008: From E-Government to Connected Governance* is available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN028607.pdf> (retrieved October 30, 2009).

²Source: MAFF (ed.). *Mezamashi Gohan*, Video File featuring Matsuura Aya, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvIcmh68Nc4> (retrieved June 17, 2009).

³See <http://www.e-gov.go.jp/en/doc/e-government.html> (retrieved October 31, 2009).

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