

# The Hierarchical Model of Value Reason in E-government of “Putting People First in China”

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**Abstract:** China has invested heavily in informatization, however, the result is not satisfactory. After careful reconsideration of the nature of e-government and reflection on the predominant idea of superiority of technology, the author points out that the development of e-government runs on a dual-track, i.e. one is the info-technological reason and the other is governance value reason. At present, the reality is that hardware has been attached too much importance while the software is unduly overlooked, and this in turn may cause a barrier to the healthy development of Chinese e-government. On the other hand, lopsided views of development stem from the default of guidance of value reason. Therefore, only after we look through the mist of “technology” and let humanity, democracy, equality, justice and service, etc that represent the true meaning of e-government return to their normal place and have their full play in the future, can e-government go on the right track and hence a harmonious development.

**Key words:** e-government; putting people first; instrumental reason; value reason; values

## I Reflection on construction of e-government in China

The warning from the e-government index

On January 22nd, 1999, a conference on “Governments go online project” hosted by China. Telecom and the economic info-center of State economic & Trade commission and co-sponsored by more than 40 other state commissions, bureaus and departments, was successfully held in Bei Jing, thus raising a new wave of construction of e-government. Henceforth, from the central to the local, governments at all levels have attached great importance to this project, and governmental informatization and e-governance have gained great momentum

### 1.1 reconsideration of the nature of e-government in response to the alarming fact

The main reason why e-government is still not mature is that there exists partial or limited understanding towards the nature of e-government in China. On the other hand, intentionally, as e-government and e-governance are gaining more and more attention and being extensively practiced the world over, more and more people are having better understanding of the nature of e-government, the following are a few examples:

UN

According to a joint survey of e-government in 190 countries across the world launched in 2001 by two significant international organizations, DPEPA /UNDESA of UN and ASPA, it is believed that in a broad sense e-government means using all kinds of info and communication techniques, from the commonly used fax to the most advanced WAP, to conduct public administration on daily basis. “E-government is a government that applies ICT to transform its internal and external relationships. Through the application of ICT to its operations, a government does not alter its functions or its obligation to remain useful, legitimate, transparent and accountable. If anything, this application raises society’s expectations about the performance of government, in all respects, to a much higher level.”

World Bank

“E-government includes: providing greater access to government information; promoting civic engagement by enabling the public to interact with government officials; making government more accountable by making its operations more transparent and thus reducing the opportunities for corruption; and providing development opportunities, especially benefiting rural and traditionally underserved communities. Better service delivery to citizens improved services for business, transparency & anticorruption, empowerment through information, efficient government purchasing”.

U. S Government

“improve the delivery of government services to the citizens, use technology as a tool to better serve citizens and improve efficiency, provide quality often at a lower cost to the them and people are better to choose how and when to access information and transact business. E-Government initiatives are operational and yield benefits (for example, cost reduction, response time, burden reduction,

improved citizen service, etc.”

EU

“E-government is defined as the use of information and communication technology in public administrations combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies. The potential of e-Government goes far beyond the early achievements of online public services.”

Private Sectors

The world famous Cisco defines e-government as “Like businesses, government organizations can extend budget dollars by using technology - creating e-government - to provide services more efficiently. Streamlining business processes. Managing budgets. Providing more efficient services. Saving costs. Improving the customer experience. It's a big wish list. But thanks to Internet technology, businesses are realizing the benefit of leveraging Internet technology to get products and services to market quickly and move ahead of competitors.”

From the above definitions, we know clearly that e-government has evolved from the original orientation of “using info technology to reform mode of government service provision” into “public administration in e-era”, and then it becomes a new model of governance. The fundamental point is that it is a new e-government established through restructuring and a new mode of exercising governance based on advanced info technology. Firstly, on the level of configuration, the traditional hierarchical framework for public organizations is reshaped, administrative levels reduced, and then a kind of flattened and network organization is set up; secondly, on the level of governmental operation procedure, the conventional one is transformed into one that is highly flexible, responsive and efficient, a seamless government; thirdly, on the level of governmental role, we should aim at a government that steers rather than one that rows, that is a government that directs should be established; fourthly, on the level of mode of governance, the government needs to transform from one that is good at administration to one that is good at governance, and promotes the shift from the original unitary mode of governance by the government to a polycentric one formed by the society, citizens, and the government, etc. It is worth mentioning that though it is quite often that construction of e-government begins with government informatization or “government go online”, it is quite misleading either to think of e-government as a simple process of government informatization or as merely a technical problem. E-government is a complete change, a brand new mode of governance, in its further development, e-government is sure to go beyond this technological stage and focus on the elevation of its content. Therefore, despite that e-government is based on “electric”, it should not be confined to “electric”, but rather to focus on “governance”. In this sense, e-government is the direction of governmental reform, and in the meantime value reason that serves this new e-government is sure to be a new approach to constructing e-government.

## **2. Reflection: emphasizing technological methods whole overlooking management**

2.1 Dialectical unity of instrumental reason and value reason: One supplements and promotes the other

Instrumental reason represents one way of thinking, i.e. one uses logic to reason and calculate for maximum efficiency and profits, it is the source of human scientific progress and innovation. While value reason represents a kind of ultimate concern and value guidance in social conduct or management so that blindness in people's value pursuit can be avoided, so it is the basis of the harmony and progress of the human society. In this sense, the relationship between instrumental reason and value reason should be this way: interdependent, one supplements and promotes the other. To be specific, value reason is the brain, while instrumental reason is the body, the former directs the latter. So if we put instrumental reason before value reason it means that we put the cart before the horse, and this will inevitably lead to ascendancy of instrumental reason and collapse of value reason, and hence the instrumentalization and fragmentation of technology and loss of subjectivity. For as we know “the precondition of instrumental reason dominating the society is the loss of subjectivity. In the case of e-government, it may cause disorientation, putting undue emphasis on the tangible infrastructure construction and short-term economic benefits and neglecting the covert theoretical construction and long-term interest. So evidently in the construction of e-government, it is very important to seek the universality of modern info technology but more importantly to stress the importance of guidance of value reason in public administration.

2.2 The rampancy of instrumental reason and default of value reason

Compared with sound e-government, e-government in China is still in its initial stage, or to be exact a stage centering on hardware construction, this is a big gap to be filled. In the following are misunderstandings exist among public servants as well as common people:

The first, emphasizing new construction while ignoring application. Governments at all levels

rush headlong into mass construction and invest heavily in various projects. In some places, a big sum of money has been spent on some expensive equipment yet the result is not satisfying.

The second, emphasizing upgrading rather than integrating the existing hardware. Local governments each does things in his own way without exchanging ideas or consulting others, neither do they share their hardware with each other, so it is inevitable that great waste is caused though their equipments are advanced for they are not shared or interconnected with each other, each system being an info island.

The third, emphasizing the form while ignoring the effect. On the one hand, great investment has been spent on various projects; on the other hand, the rate of utilization is very low. In some cases, some computers and Internet equipment in some departments are only for show, for higher authorities would be able to see there are such things there when they inspect them.

The fourth, emphasizing “being electric” rather than “governance”. One aspect of e-government is unduly emphasized, the technological aspect, while innovation of governance is neglected. While all kinds of advanced e-equipment is being used in every aspect of government affairs, in contrast, the routine administrative procedure, old way of governance, configuration, etc, are old-fashioned, seems immutable and frozen. This is what people say “while there is nothing wrong with the e-equipment, something is indeed wrong with the governance”.

The nature of e-government is obscured by the advanced hardware and network, yet advanced equipment does equate sound e-government. Going merely after advanced hardware or facilities will only promote people to put technology above everything else, governance included, this is bound to cause people to think that technology is all while at the same time lose the sight of value reason and hence without its guidance. All the other more important elements are totally ignored, ethics, culture and law, etc., all of which belongs to value reason. With overwhelming concern about efficiency and speed, value reason being neglected, everything revolves around the superficial things, the tangible index to government performance, for instance, one after another, the so-called image or achievement projects are being built in order to be counted as a kind of achievements or that more funds from the central government can be allocated for these very achievements. The result of this is that the construction of network is well ahead of its application, the utilization of information ahead of its exploration, there is a loop in the software product-customer demand chain... all of this comes from that fact that the old administrative value system does not match this new mode, e-governance, and the rub is the default of value reason in construction of this e-government.

## **II Exploration into the reason of rampancy of instrumental reason in e-government**

### **1. Historical aspect: utilitarianism in Public Administration**

While the new mode of value of governance is still taking shape, the old one has been transferred to this new mode of governance, that is e-government. When “Egalitarianism” was negated in the e-government value system, utilitarianism began to gain ascendancy, and then China started the construction of e-government, therefore instrumental reason is the mark of China’s e-government at this stage.

Equalization: “Not concerned lest people should be poor, but only lest what they have should be ill-apportioned.”

After her foundation, during the early period of, China’s administrative idea was heavily influenced by Confucian’s idea: “All is well-apportioned, there will be no poverty; people are not divided against one another, there will be no lack of men; there is contentment, there will be no upheavals.”

Egalitarianism that deeply rooted in the thinking of people at the time, the ideal of all becoming rich at the same time and the same level regardless of discrepancy in places or individual situation was highly emphasized and widely accepted. However, in practice it was confused with egalitarianism that collective interest was protected at the expense of justified personal interest, and all ended up with being “equally backward and poor”.

Negation: efficiency has precedence over fairness

After reform and opening-up, China was determined to speed up her economic construction and had chosen efficiency over fairness after she opted for a market economy. The reason why efficiency has precedence over fairness is because low efficiency and low level of production was the most pressing and ultimate problem that threatened China’s survival and further development at the time. To solve the vast problems in the society, efficiency and low level of production had to be elevated.

Yet in reality, “efficiency has precedence over fairness” became “efficiency is the first important and nothing else”, and instrumental reason that backs up efficiency is overemphasized while justice and fairness, etc, that represents value reason was totally marginalized and neglected. And this is also true

of construction of e-government, for instrumental reason has also taken the place of value reason there.

## 2. Genealogy: Instrumentalization of technology

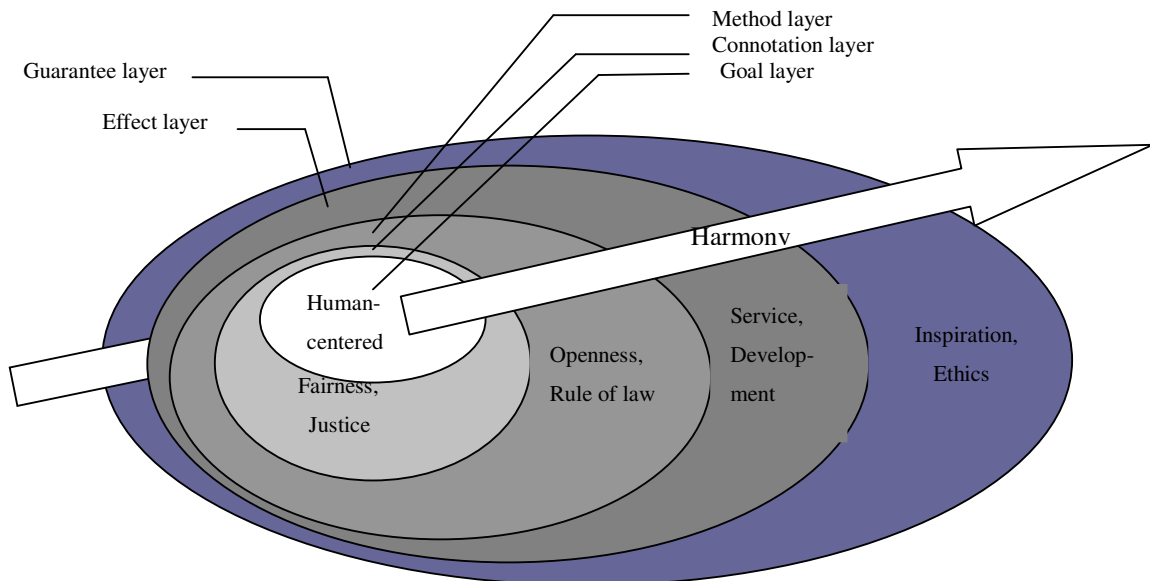
Genealogy is a science that studies the development of things from their earlier forms, factors and features that influence their late evolution, etc. Originally, the motivation of e-government is to innovate the mode of public service provision through the introduction of modern computer, communication and Internet technology into public administration. So the construction of e-government has to depend on the development of info technology, info infrastructure and related software. In this sense, here “e” is introduced from the outside, instrument being its fundamental feature; it is neutral in terms of value judgment. Nevertheless, in real life, governance involves value pursuit and adjustment, the truth is people only see the “e” aspect of e-government rather than the governance aspect, its content and fundament feature. The aim is to elevate the governance, this is to a large extent ignored.

### 3 exploration for the path: emphasizing the “hardware” while overlooking the “software”

E-government has undergone several stages, “office automation”, “government goes online” and “construction of e-government”, during which undue emphasis is put on construction of hardware such as infrastructure and government websites, etc, e-government has been assumed to be just putting all things as they are on the Internet or inputting into computers, to adjust it to or imitate the old-styled administrative model. Consequently, e-government is confined to “office automation”, for instance the circulation of official documents, upgrading of auto equipment and level of office automation so on and so forth. In this way, government departments run in accordance with the old management mode and service provision, the difference is only that all this is done via the modern info or network technology, while the old problems are still there, for example low efficiency, poor quality of service, low responsiveness and openness. In a broad sense, remolding of administrative ideal, value judgment towards a new mode of governance, etc, are all neglected, judging from this, we can say it is technology-oriented rather than governance-oriented, it will make us trapped in a kind of technological determinism. Actually, what the clients or citizens expect is certainly not info technology but the effect or benefits that info technology can bring in terms of policy making and public administration, and exactly it is the latter that is the center of e-government.

## III the return of value reason: the hierarchical model of value reason in e-government

Since technology is not the ultimate goal of e-government, the ultimate goal should be innovating administrative ideal via modern info technology, restructuring the administrative procedure and government administration, the construction of e-government needs the systemic direction of value reason . Here, we have tentatively divided the value reason in e-government into 5 layers, the goal, the connotation, the method and the effect, all together they constitute the hierarchical model of value reason in e-government, and then we can have a better understanding of the concept “e-government”.



The hierarchical model of value reason in e-government

## **1.the goal: human-centered democracy**

### 1.1 towards human-centered democracy: e-government for people

“human-centered” democracy means that taking people as the foundation of the state, people’s interests come the first or devotion to human interests. It is human-oriented, that is to solve problems concerned with mankind on the basis of analyzing and studying the living condition of mankind, the essence is respect of mankind.

To say it is human-centered is to emphasize that e-government acknowledges that mankind is the subject and his dominant role in it, man is both the subject in social existence and development and the subject in value judgment. People who uphold “human-centered” idea concern about the world he lives in, his existence and development and overall elevation, etc. along this line, it is evident that we have to discard that old mechanistic philosophy that man is subordinate to the machine; man is parts that can be replaced, etc. Instead, we have to encourage our personnel to be more independent and more responsible, upgrade their knowledge structure and promote their improvement in an all-round way, etc. What distinguish e-government from the traditional administrative mode are human-centered democracy, equality, justice, openness and rule of law, etc. Because it is human-oriented and humanized, e-government can better serve the purposes of democracy, equality, justice, openness and rule of law, etc, and helps to raise the efficiency of the governments and improve their public image.

### 1.2 Towards democracy: more social participation in e-government

E-government creates a new way of social participation, it is a forum through which more people can have access to government information, and it helps to save citizens’ time, energy and money when they participate in government affairs. However, we should be aware of the fact that development of technology can not bring us innovation in democracy; we can not count on technology, especially the emerging media to solve all the chronic illnesses of industrial democracy overnight. So the democratic e-government enables us to return to value reason. The essence if democracy being the guarantee of each individual’s equal rights, both politically and physically. For instance, we have to make sure that each citizen is the master, equally sharing the rights to participate in politics, in public administration, either directly or indirectly. There are many ways for social participation, for instance, online election, opinion poll, public forum, BBS, publicity, information disclosure, parliamentary procedure, online legislation, etc., through which all the citizens can instantly have access to public information and participate in and supervise government affairs, or even express their views and influence the process of administration, etc. By doing so, the original discourse hegemony is broken and the common goal of e-government is emphasized, and public administration becomes more efficient, effective and accountable. While on the side of the government, it needs to eliminate bureaucracy, and respond positively to this and guarantee the effect of this interaction and social participation.

## **2. The connotation: justice and fairness**

### 2.1 towards fairness: equal rights in e-government

By fairness, we mean people of different circles equally share the same right and fulfill their duties in political, economic and cultural aspects. Because of its openness, all the people can have access to the Internet system, they can be kept informed of government information, policies and decrees, etc, and they can vote and express their views via the network. However, it is not necessarily to say that e-government is absolutely spontaneous and fair, to give you an example, there still exists a so-called “digital gap” despite that information revolution has been around for many years, some backward areas still can’t have access to the Internet, to say nothing of benefiting from public service via the Internet. If we can not solve this problem timely, unfair distribution of wealth and will arise because some people may occupy more resources than the others, and thus income gap tends to widen. What is more important is that it is this vulnerable group who has no access to the online information that needs the government public service most, if not properly solved, it may cause the effect that those poor will become even poorer and disadvantaged just because they lack adequate resources. Therefore, to solve this problem, the government needs to either provide them with free Internet or e-mail service or install network terminals in public place and lower rates for services at the same time, besides, offer second-hand computers or subsidiaries to low income families, etc.

### 2.2 Towards justice: sunny image and integrity of e-government

By justice, we mean each citizen has the right to pursue his or her happiness and this helps to prevent social injustice. It falls into two types, one is substantial justice, the other is formal justice, and the former refers to the soundness of laws or institutions, the latter refers to the impartial implementation of laws or institutions regardless of the nature of them. In this sense, formal justice can not guarantee substantial justice, for the laws or institutions themselves may not be sound. Through the application system of e-government, all the information and procedure can be standardized and integrated, at some key links, for instance registration of enterprises ,project determination and

approval, customs clearance, etc., responsibility and supervisor privilege are well defined, therefore all the procedures are standardized and randomness reduced while transparency increases. In this way, to some extent formal justice is guaranteed and corruption prevented. On the other hand, to make sure that formal justice is realized, we have to guarantee substantial justice.

### **3. Methods: openness and rule of law**

#### **3.1 Towards openness: transparency of e-government**

In the past, the predominant idea is that “all the government information should naturally be monopolized by government departments”, and now in the era of e-government, it becomes “all the government information should be publicized and shared by all”. In the information age, citizens’ right to learn the truth necessarily requires that e-government should be transparent. So long as it is not confidential or concerns something personal, the defense industry or foreign affairs, all the information should be available to citizens. On the one hand, some citizens have little interest in government affairs or even don’t know they have the right to learn the truth, they just passively take what the government gives them, and so they inevitably have to accommodate themselves to the government. On the other hand, some government departments have no idea that it is their obligation to publicize information to citizens, and consequently regard it as a kind of favor to the public, while the content, the degree and the amount of what should be publicized are all decided by these departments. Hence, the construction of a transparent, open and standard e-government calls for the joint efforts of the whole society. As far as citizens are concerned, they should construct their subjectivity, and recognizes that it is one of their rights that they have the right to learn the truth; besides, they should take the initiative to keep themselves informed of government affairs. And for the government, it should have the full realization of the fact that for citizens the right to learn the truth is one of the important means to vindicate their rights. If governance is not transparent or is a kind of behind-the-scenes deal, then even if there are advanced techniques it would not work.

#### **3.2 towards rule of law: An orderly e-government**

Rule of law is one of the most important features of modern countries. An e-government through rule of law means to maintain the order through the enforcement of relevant laws and institutions. It contains three aspects, the first, in terms of governance, public administration is not subject to change of leadership or to the views and concern of leaders. The second, it means that e-government legislation should be enhanced and crimes concerning the Internet should be curbed, so that e-governance can step by step become standardized and orderly. The third, it means to materialize the restructured administrative procedures, form of framework and management mode in the form of law or institution, and lay a solid foundation for further improvement, so that the construction of e-government can be realized in an orderly way. So order and stability is also very important to the success of e-government.

### **4. Effect: and education**

#### **4.1 Towards service: convenient e-governance**

At present, many countries are dedicated to the change from an administration government to a service government, which means that the government is no longer all-powerful as it used to be, rather it often acts as a “servant”, and instead, market mechanism and social participation should be given full play. The chief goal of e-government is to establish a client/customer-oriented e-government which provides a whole set of all-round quality service. So we can say that e-government is by the people and for the people, it represents the will and the interest of people and promotes the welfare of people to the maximum. In terms of service mode, the education and receptivity of people should be given adequate consideration in order that it can better serve them. The most important benefit of e-government is that it can overcome the shortage of the traditional administrative mode, which often distances the government from the public and leads to corruption in some links. Through e-government, government personnel can directly contact with the public so that government information transferred and public opinions collected yet with high efficiency and low cost. E-government also changes the way of social participation, for people are no longer passively taking what they are given but actively participate in public administration and ask for more information as they now have access to more resources. The ideal e-government is one that responds quickly to public needs and more people can have more good services provided by the government directly.

#### **4.2 Towards education: free e-governance**

Education promotes social progress. Its main function is to pass on knowledge from one generation to another. The development of info technology has brought unprecedented changes to this traditional industry, for more and more people are receiving better education. So the government should take the initiative to guide people.

For example, the country needs to actively borrow from the useful achievements of the political

civilization of mankind, including Western democracy, and assimilated the democratic elements of from China's traditional culture and institutional civilization. The government needs to help people to form scientific outlook of the world, value system, advocate patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, etc, among them; people in China should be imbued with the national spirit with patriotism at the core and the spirit of the times with awareness of renovation; local governments at various levels to attach more importance to the development of science, education and various undertakings to raise the cultural levels of the farmers and other people and step up ethnical education of youngsters as well as the ideological, political education of college students throughout the country so that everyone is to become masters of their own country and society, and enjoy extensive cultural and democratic rights, etc."

## **5. Guarantee: inspiration and ethics**

### **5.1 Towards inspiration: e-government full of vigor**

In the traditional governance, the rigid hierarchy, complete obedience to authority and tight control in government departments over personnel actually prohibit them from doing something creative. The traditional government seems to be isolated from the outside world, for there is no exchange, the ideas or opinions of various social groups, entities and common people, either creative or fresh, can't get to the government. While in e-governance, there is neither an ever-existing center nor a fixed boundary, everyone is free to participate in it, no superiority or inferiority at all. So the government should inspire various social groups, entities and common people to take an active stance and join hands in constructing a better government so that all the labor, intellectual, capital and technological factors can contribute to the vigorous growth of economy and harmonious development of the society.

### **5.2 Towards ethics: e-government of integrity**

Influenced by the traditional ideas about power, many government departments do not have enough or little realization of the concept of government of integrity, they tend to think that they can wield the power as they like for there are no restrictions on government's power. As there is power and information asymmetry between the government and the public, the public can not have sufficient supervision on the government, dishonesty and irrational behavior can happen among personnel as behind-the-scenes deal, constantly making unpredictable changes in policy and abusing power for personal gains, falsification of figures or accounts, etc, which on the one hand harm the interest of people and damage the image of the government among them. And now e-government provides us a good opportunity to reshape this public relation, both government personnel and common people's awareness of credit, responsibility and integrity should be raised so that they can discipline themselves and adhere to moral codes. The value reason, integrity should take roots in public servants' heart so that it can guide them in their daily service and make them responsible and accountable for what they are doing. Furthermore, their legal consciousness and awareness of dedication should also be deepened.

## **6. Integration: harmonious e-government**

All layers in the hierarchical model of value reason in e-government are closely connected with each other, one being the other's goal and means; they are not unchangeable but dynamic for there is no clear cut boundary between them. Only by interacting and coordinating with each other as one, can these layers jointly promote coordinated and harmonious development of e-government so that people's rights can be effectively protected and their interests better served. In this dynamic hierarchical model, there is a critical point upon which all five elements are in a perfect balance, i.e. one supplements and promotes the other and jointly contributes to the better performance of the whole system; and here no one element should be unduly stressed, so that the whole system can function well in a coordinated and comprehensive way.

## **Conclusion**

1. China has invested heavily in informatization; however, the result is not satisfactory.
2. e-governance is the integration of "e" and "governance", it runs on dual-track, one is info technological reason and the other is value reason. Disorientation of value reason leads to the fact that hardware is unduly emphasized while software relatively neglected, and this is the main reason why e-government in China is still not mature.
3. As to disorientation of value reason, historically, before the new value reason in e-government, is introduced, people are so obsessed with efficiency and utility that they tend to ignore management, and this usually leads to utilitarianism, undue emphasis is put on construction of hardware such as infrastructure and government websites, upgrading of auto equipment and level of office automation so on and so forth. The truth is people only see the "e" aspect of e-government rather than the governance

aspect, its content and fundament feature. The aim is to elevate the governance, which has been to a large extent ignored. In terms of development, e-government has undergone several stages, “office automation”, “government goes online” and “construction of e-government”, the first two stages focus on construction of hardware, however, some people have mistaken it as construction of hardware.

4. The harmonious development of e-government requires the return to human-centered democracy, justice, fairness, rule of law and service, etc., requires the guidance of value reason.

5. In the hierarchical model of value reason in e-government, “human-centered” is the core, “the connotation” depicts its rich meaning, “the method” is the means, “the effect” enables implementers to closely check the result, and “the guarantee” is the safeguard, and through integration, all these factors are combined and coordinate with each other to contribute to the harmonious development of e-government.

And lastly, how to combine these aspects of value reason to come up with a set of effective mechanism and apply it to e-government is quite a complex problem and one into which we have to make further research to provide a better solution.

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