

BOOK REVIEW

GOVERNANCE AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: FROM ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT TO INFORMATION GOVERNMENT

By Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and David Lazer (eds)

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For somebody with a familiarity (rather than an expertise) in electronic government and related debates, this book provided a useful insight into the concerns current in this field. The book contains 12 chapters and 11 “case illustrations”. The chapters, for the most part, present a theoretically-grounded discussion of the issues concerning electronic government tied into particular empirical examples. The “case illustrations” provide short descriptions of actual cases which relate more or less to the theme of the proceeding chapter. The interaction between existing norms and practices – and new possibilities for government and governance enabled by information communication technologies (ICTs) – is the main theme.

In the opening chapter the editors introduce an issue which appears throughout the book: the potential for ICTs to empower the public and to facilitate new forms of citizen participation in policy making and enactment. The constraints to the transformative power of technology are considered in relation to e-government by Darrell West. His chapter reports on a content analysis of departmental government websites in 198 countries carried out between 2001 and 2003. On the basis of this work, he argues that there is no huge transformation taking place in the public sector in regard to service provision, as a result of the greater availability of ICTs. Richer countries, as defined by GDP, are, however, doing better than poorer ones. One reason offered for this is that a greater proportion of citizens in richer countries have access to the internet and would be more likely to take up the opportunities to access services electronically. It was noted that governments had not seized the opportunities offered to them by ICTs to make services more interactive or as a tool to empower citizens.

In his chapter, Gary Coglianese refers the reader back to a time when it was believed by some scholars that technology would enable citizens to interact more directly with policy making. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Coglianese reports that the reality of government rule making is some way from this utopian vision. It would appear that the existing power structures which underlie decision making at this level are simply too difficult to shift. An empirical example is used in order to show that the availability of information on the internet does not mean it is easy to find or use. The more optimistic outcome for democracy is, however, that of increased potential for citizens to have access to the decision making process. This is not in order to

participate directly – as in the ideal of “strong democracy” – but so that rule making is more transparent and open to public scrutiny.

Coglianese confronts the barriers to technology achieving its perceived transformative potential with regard to the issue of “strong democracy”. On the theme of the difficulties and barriers of changing existing structures of interaction and influence, David Lazor and Maria Christina Binz-Scharf look at the impact of existing social networks and practices on the integration of an ICT network. They discuss the different functions of various types of network structure, for example the hub-spoke system, which is accepted as being better at disseminating information than networks which are decentralised. Old traditions of non-sharing between departments – and more widely – create cultural barriers to be surmounted, while standardisation initiatives may be in competition, as individual departments resist changing their own practices.

In his interesting chapter on “open-source politics”, Matthew Hindman offers insights that are applicable beyond the world of software, and even politics, to other areas where a culture of openness and access is promoted. The tempering of optimism in regard to the transformative potential of the internet is a refrain once again picked up in this chapter. As is in the field of open-source, key actors will take steps and succeed in remaining influential despite the dawn of an apparently new technological era. This insight is applied in the blogosphere, where those who have succeeded in gaining the biggest readership (and therefore influence) are from similar backgrounds to those influential in other spheres of public life. Again the message appears to be that technology cannot change the world or indeed the continued existence and influence of elites.

On a somewhat more optimistic note, Monique Girard and David Stark use the community reaction to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in Manhattan and the subsequent process of planning for the site to show the interaction between technologies, perspectives and participation. Technology played multiple roles in this story, allowing dissemination and sharing of ideas and supporting the creation of representations both of what had happened and what ought to happen in post 9/11 New York. The authors offer analysis and description but not recommendations. This approach reflects their assertions that, for those participating in the various efforts at reshaping and depicting the former WTC site and its surroundings, the outcome was as much the process of participation as what would eventually replace the twin towers.

Jane Fountain’s chapter picks out three levels at which change, including changes to information technologies, must be integrated. These are: the micro or individual level; the organisational or inter-organisational level; and the institutional level, which includes written rules and relevant legislation. Fountain critiques attempts by rational choice theory to explain and predict such processes, pointing out the non-utility of “free-riding” in the process of creating collaborative structures. For individuals and organisations, however, working in networks requires the building of trust relationships in order to make use of the network structure to innovate, ties must necessarily be weak. Again the issues of barriers to change are picked up, with regard to successful networking being blocked by organisational and institutional structures. For example, the departmental model or data protection laws can prevent activities necessary for a network, such as sharing data. A key insight is that the network model

may fail where the goals of the various actors are better achieved by organisations or individuals working in isolation.

Focusing on what Fountain may have called the “institutional level”, Herbert Burkett puts forward a case for the necessity of strong freedom of information legislation to take the pressure off individuals in decisions concerning the release of information. He sets out minimum criteria for effective freedom of information legislation in e-government environments, including a right of access as default. He then points out that, while more than fifty nations have freedom of information legislation, none of them meet these criteria. Again there is optimism that these attempts, while falling short of what is necessary, provide empirical data which could be analysed and applied to the future improvement of the design and implementation of freedom of information legislation. However, he leaves us with the question of whether the will to make government information more open will stand up to counter trends towards increased government security and secrecy.

The requirement and methods of evaluating the benefits of the introduction of technologies, was dealt with in the last section of the book. Behn looks at the issue of evaluation. The chapter’s other focus is the intelligent use of data to evolve beyond e-government to what is termed “P-Government”, with the P standing for performance. This does not, as he points out, simply involve making existing services electronic. Two examples of more innovative harnessing of the potential of technologies by government departments are given. The matter of the difficulties of deciding how to evaluate change is, however, repeated throughout.

The question of how and what to evaluate is also raised by Edwin Lau. He makes the case for thinking about the benefits of well-managed e-government not only in terms of cost, but also in terms of social and ethical benefits such as increased citizen trust and satisfaction with government. He warns of the limitations of applying business models borrowed from the private sector to the evaluation of public sector services. Moreover, a more holistic approach to assessments of the outcomes for e-government strategies is advocated, rather than seeing each department as an isolated entity. The matter of variable access to the electronic resources needed for citizens to take advantage of the potential of new technologies is a theme picked up here in relation to an unfortunate paradox facing e-government solutions: those who require services are often the same individuals least likely to have the means to access them electronically.

Martin Eppler deals with an issue that is crucial for information or e-government, that of information quality. He reminds the reader that the existence of ICTs does not ensure the quality of the data they collect, store and transmit. He argues for the importance of getting this aspect of e-government right, on the basis that poor-quality information is likely to undermine the willingness of citizens to buy into e-government and undermine trust in the enterprise.

Questions addressed in the book include if and how the availability of ICTs has:

- improved the delivery of public services;
- resulted in greater access to democracy ;
- supported networked action; and
- been intelligently and innovatively deployed.

Additionally, there is discussion of how such changes can and should be assessed and managed. The promissory potential of ICTs is also addressed and the theme of the

potential, realised and unrealised, for technology to transform the way in which things are done in various areas of public life.

By rejecting technological determinism, and pointing to the political and social transformations that accompany new methods of sharing information, the introductory chapter sets the scene for the subsequent contributions. When describing the potential for ICTs to change the flow of information across and outside of government, technology is cast as a facilitating – but not a causal – factor. There is the suggestion, which finds support in other chapters that technology will change little if there is not a political or social will to support this change.

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