Exploring Digitally Enabled Service Transformation in the Public Sector:
Would Institutional and Structuration Theory Concepts Keep the Research Talking?

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ABSTRACT

Digitally Enabled Service Transformation (DEST) in the Public Sector (PS) offers a unique opportunity for public administration (PA) and information systems (IS) disciplines to interlace. Albeit complicating the deployment of a coherent analytical lens in its study, such uniqueness has formed a basis to enable a deviance in the theoretical selection. Interestingly, there has been a gradual move from the adoption of native PA/IS theories towards imported social sciences theories including Institutional and Structuration. Institutional Theory provides a way of viewing and explaining why and how institutions emerge in a certain way within a given context. The theory however is being criticized for its structural biasness, as it avoids explanations situated at individual or same level of analysis. Such gap is filled with the adoption of Structuration Theory, which also focuses on how structures - as micro-institutional foundation, arise, or are maintained through co-evolution of actions and institutions. The fusion of concepts from both theories would potentially maximise the debates on DEST in PS across diverse perspectives, and continue to keep the 'research talking' by revealing novel insights.

INTRODUCTION

Digitally Enabled Service Transformation (DEST) in public sector is attributable to the e-government phenomenon. DEST refers to the use of ICT to change an existing public service radically, in order to achieve dramatic improvement in critical contemporary measure of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed (Omar & Weerakkody, 2016). Although many studies have been conducted to elucidate more facts and facilitate better understanding towards such context, the possibility to unveil new realities remains challenging. This claim is made based on our previous research findings (see Omar, Weerakkody & El-Haddadeh, 2014; Omar & Osmani 2015), where most of the existing studies seem to be focusing on single issues regarding technological imperatives, or managerial

aspects of e-government. To discuss the validity of this assertion in any detail is well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is certainly possible to argue that e-government researchers need to be exploring beyond both views.

The field of e-government is a discipline that is influenced by a range of theories. However, despite many theories that have been used, the scope for potentially better theories to discover more about the e-government phenomena are limitless (Bannister & Connolly, 2015). Nonetheless, research that combines both aspects remains scarce, despite the fact that e-government is the interlacing of (i.e. inseparable) both social and technological aspects (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010; Heugens & Lander, 2016; Omar et al. 2014; Outhwaite 1987; Pinsonneault & Pozzebon 2001; Poole 2009; Van Veenstra, Janssen & Tan, 2010; Welch & Feeney 2014). Since the entangling of both scopes is illogical, there is a need to employ an analytical lens that would provide insights on both aspects for the DEST institutionalising phenomenon in a PS context. We contest that unless the roles of actors and structures are explored and understood – the institutionalisation of DEST will constantly be impeded by mounting, recurring challenges. Not just that, we also posit that by employing a conceptual lens that expands afar ordinary context can enable the contributions towards both - the body of knowledge and practice.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to assess if utilisation of both Institutional and Structuration Theory concepts in exploring the institutionalisation of DEST in PS would keep the 'research talking' (i.e. potentially generates new knowledge), filling the gap in the field of e-government research. This paper examines the nature of such two subliminal social theories by focusing on questions concerning their coherence and potential utility as a non-native analytical lens to explore digitally enabled service transformation in public sector. There is no need for the domination of one approach over another in a large and diverse discipline dealing with equally diverse versions of government. It is nevertheless obvious that advocates of rational choice approaches are attempting to impose that orthodoxy on the discipline. The question then becomes whether institutionalism and structuralism has sufficient analytic power to be a worthy counterpoint to that one attempt to create dominance.

To do so, firstly this paper provides explanation on significance of theory in research, by understanding its contribution towards research as well as how to identify good theory for any research. The next section enlightens about the existing research paradigm, where common theories in e-Government research and different levels of theories are discussed. This is followed by a section that discovers the potential of Institutional and Structuration Theory as new research perspectives, and finally the reflection section as concluding remarks.

THEORY IN DIGITALLY ENABLED SERVICE TRANSFORMATION RESEARCH

Theory is important in research for many reasons. Citing Sahay and Walsham's (1995) work, Bannister and Connolly (2015) outline that a theory is a mean for the scholars to communicate - with practitioners or among themselves, to accumulate knowledge, and also to legitimise (and acknowledge) certain field as a discipline. Dubin's (1978) four components of theory (i.e. definitions, domain, relationships and predictive claims) will help the researcher to answer the questions of who, what, when, where, how, why, could, should and would in a particular context of study (Naor, Bernardes & Coman, 2012). A (good) theory will not just elucidate new facts when it was tested in different context, but also elevate understanding of the relationships, mechanisms, models, and concepts – before providing a roadmap for the future directions (Shalley, 2012; Humphrey, 2011). Adopting Campbell's (1990) description about theory, Shalley (2012) account that a theory will facilitate the identification of important variables, describing how they are interrelated, and explaining the conditions where the relationships varies.

Theories provide multiple analytical lenses for the researchers to examine any problems or issues, by constraining their focus on particular aspects of phenomenon and take them to the framework of analysis that guide them in answering the burning research questions. Theories are particularly useful

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