Chapter IV

Public Involvement in Public Administration in the Information Age: Speculations on the Effects of Technology

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ABSTRACT

Public managers in Western democracies have felt growing pressures in recent decades to involve citizens more in the work of public administration, perhaps transforming what was once viewed as a largely solitary technical enterprise into a community production. On the heels of this "participation revolution" has come the "information revolution," wherein a variety of new information and telecommunications technologies, including computers and modem linkages, Internet connections, electronic mail, and fax transmissions, is transforming society, economy and government. Although there has been much discussion of the likely effects of each of these revolutions, relatively

little attention has been paid until recently to the interaction of the two revolutions, especially to how the information revolution may impact public involvement. The purpose of this chapter is to speculate on that impact. After first explaining the specifics of the two revolutions, the chapter will speculate on the possible effects of technology on public involvement in public administration, both for public involvement in general and for various specific techniques of involvement. A concluding section will consider the chapter's action implications for scholars, policymakers and public administrators.

INTRODUCTION

For the last third of the 20th century, public managers in Western democracies have been subject to growing pressures to involve citizens more in the work of public administration. The administrative side of government, once viewed as a solitary enterprise, the domain of scientific and technical experts, is now widely perceived to require regular and continuing input from the public in order for government to operative effectively and responsively.

On the heels of this "participation revolution" has come the "information revolution." As Nye (1999) defines: "The *information revolution* refers to the dramatic decrease in the costs of computers and communications and the effects that has on the economy and society" (p. 7) and to how a variety of new information and telecommunications technologies, including computers and modem linkages, Internet connections, electronic mail, and fax transmissions, is revolutionizing society, the economy, and government. These technologies have as their defining characteristic the facilitating of communication, where information which once took hours or days to transport can now be transmitted almost instantaneously.

Although there has been much discussion of the likely effects of each of these revolutions, relatively little attention has been paid until recently to the likely interaction of the two revolutions, especially to how the information revolution may impact processes of public involvement. The purpose of this chapter is to speculate on that impact. To set the stage for these speculations, I will begin by explaining what I term the "public involvement imperative," that is, why increased public involvement has become essential for public management. As may already be obvious, the information revolution is a central factor in this imperative. In the bulk of this chapter, I will then speculate on the possible effects of technology on public involvement in public administration, including benefits and costs or risks. This discussion will be presented in three parts, the first focusing on public involvement in general and the latter two on specific techniques of involvement. A concluding section will consider implications for action by scholars, policy makers, and public administrators.

THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IMPERATIVE

At the beginning of a new millennium, public managers face twin imperatives from a participation revolution and a technology-driven information revolution. Some of the changes of each revolution may be temporarily sidestepped or mitigated, but on the whole, the two revolutions, separately and in combination, imply that public managers

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