



This paper appears in *Managing Modern Organizations Through Information Technology*, Proceedings of the 2005 Information Resources Management Association International Conference, edited by Mehdi Khosrow-Pour. Copyright 2005, Idea Group Inc.

The Myths of E-Government: Looking Beyond the Assumptions of a New and Better Government

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INTRODUCTION

In various national policy documents regarding e-government, the image of a new and better government is taking shape. This new and better government is more responsive to the needs of citizens and enterprises, more democratic and more efficient through the use of advanced ICTs. Notwithstanding this intuitive appeal, the implementation pace of many e-government initiatives has been criticized (Gartner, 2000; Moon, 2002; OECD, 2003).

Edelman (1967; 1977) points to the importance of 'language' and 'rhetoric' that bureaucrats and politicians use to tell a story about the necessity of government intervention – for instance to meet the needs of e-government. The real power in policy-making, he believes, resides in the process whereby problems, solutions and actions are constructed and articulated since it is through language that we experience politics. Symbols and language are, in the words of Edelman (1977), capacities that can be used to structure complex problems in ways and words that suit policy-makers to distort the perceptions of citizens. A more positive approach of the role of myths in public administration can be found in the work of March and Olsen (1989). They promote an institutional approach of public administration that focuses on the 'rules' that guide the behavior and interactions of individuals, groups and organizations in and around public administration. These 'rules' and their embodiment into myths, function as a frame of reference within the organization; a frame of reference which is shared among the members inside and outside the organization. This common frame of reference and a shared language or 'grammar' to express common values, norms and experiences enable people - with different back grounds - to coordinate and integrate their behavior in a sensible way by reducing ambiguity (Weick, 1969).

In this article, we address the rhetorics of e-government policies by comparing and analyzing the assumptions behind e-government initiatives in the Netherlands (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 1999; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2000), the United Kingdom (Ministry of the Cabinet Office, 1999, 2000), Denmark (Ministry of Research and Information Technology, 1995; Digital Task Force, 2000), Australia (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 1997, 2000) and Canada (Treasury Board, 1997). Our study has been aimed at analyzing the contents, instrumentation and basic beliefs of national e-government policies in order to illustrate that there is a rather common belief that the promises of e-government will be fulfilled. To some extent, one could speak of an internationally spread e-government ideology in which a number of myths play a prominent role.

THE MYTHS OF E-GOVERNMENT

In this section we aim to distinguish a number of myths with respect to the introduction of e-government in public administration, and expose (that is, discuss their positive and negative meaning) these myths with reference to a number of established empirical and theoretical insights

which have been in studies that use a public administration point of view to examine the introduction and use of ICT in public administration.

The Myth of Technological Progress and Inevitability

In the various national policy documents, there is a strong belief and trust in the promises of modern ICT. The blessings that ICT will bring cannot be denied and are in essence 'good'. Public administration has a moral duty to use ICT and to adjust to these new possibilities by using the most advanced 'tools' to reinvent government. Especially in the Dutch, UK and Danish document, there is a realm of evangelism about the good life ICT will bring.

The dominant view on technology that lay behind the several policy documents is a combination of a determinism and voluntarism. These two positions reflect two 'old positions' in the so-called 'technology debate'. However, research into the effects of ICT in public, but also private organizations (Bijker et al., 1981; Danziger et. al, 1986; Kraemer & King, 1986; Kling, 1987; Bellamy & Taylor, 1997; Snellen & Van de Donk, 1998) show that the effects that are generated by the use of ICT in public administration are not general, but specific and context-driven. In the policy documents studied, the existing political, socio-organizational and institutional setting in which ICT and e-government is introduced is neglected. So we can question the claim of a more open, client-oriented and more responsive government and measures and action that are formulated to realize these goals.

The reason why these effects are limited and context-driven is that the introduction of ICT in public administration is a social intervention in a policy network, which influences the position, interests, values and (information) domains of the actors involved. Choices with respect to ICT influences the access, use and distribution of information and communication and information relations and patterns between the actors in the policy network, and thus the effects that will occur (Kling, 1987; Homburg, 1999).

The general effects that are being claimed in many e-government documents cannot be found in the research about the use of ICT in public and private organizations. This is one of the possible explanations as to why there is cleavage between the rhetoric of e-government, the lagging implementation of e-government and the local effects that occur when a number of measures and actions have been undertaken.

Who benefits from these limited effects? Research shows that ICT in the public sector very often strengthens the existing power relations and positions within a policy sector (Kraemer & King, 1986; Bekkers, 1998; Zuurmond, 1998; Van de Donk, 1998). ICT tends to extend and reinforce the prevailing biases of governmental structures and processes. If we look at a number of internet initiatives in Dutch public administration, we see a process of institutional adjustment rather than a process of de-institutionalization or renewal. For instance, we see aldermen and local politicians chat with citizens about a wide range of topics, but this does not lead to a broad innovation in the democratic participation of citizens. These chat sessions are mostly seen as public opinion polls

rather than as opportunities for people to raise their voice and have an influence on political priorities.

The Myth of a Better and New Government

ICT is seen as a set of instruments that can be controlled by the people who use them. The e-government goals – in terms of a better and new government that is more open, more transparent, more client-oriented, more responsive etc. – can be obtained by applying the right tools in the right way. A new future of public administration, in which organizational and functional boundaries play no obstructing role (in contrast to the past), can be shaped through the use of ICT. The future of public administration is manageable and the use of ICT is malleable. Electronic public service delivery can take place any time, any place and anywhere. Moreover, it is possible to develop new ways of service delivery.

However, the goal of integrated electronic service delivery – especially in relation to contact and transaction services – leads to serious integration and coordination problems. Integrated service delivery implies that several back offices should be working together in handling questions, requests etc. They need to exchange and share information and knowledge across internal and external organizational boundaries. For instance, in the case of the ‘living and building’ digital counter, the co-operation between several offices within local public administration and between public, semi-public and private organizations such as housing societies is a necessary condition for success. In essence, the exchange and sharing of information and knowledge between these back offices implies the integration of several information domains, each with their own legal framework, their own information systems, their own data definitions, their own routines and procedures, and their own frames of reference (Bellamy & Taylor, 1997). In the Netherlands, for instance, more than 200 income definitions exist. The income definition of the Tax Administration differs from the Housing Subsidy Administration or the Student Loans Administration.

The result is a battle of the back offices. This battle is the Achilles heel of e-government. An examination of recent assessments of the e-government initiatives in general (Gartner, 2000; OECD, 2003) and the assessments of e-government practices in the Canada, the UK, Australia and the Netherlands show that the lack of cooperation between these back offices is still a major problem. The call for government-wide or sector-wide information architectures and for infrastructures that cross the boundaries of separate organizations has become louder.

Most of the attention is focused on the “front office” of e-government, that is, on the website. One reason is the assumption that the focus on the needs and questions of the citizen as a customer will force back offices to work together. But this line of reasoning neglects the power of these back offices (Homburg & Bekkers, 2002). And if this coordination and integration problem is addressed, it is primarily seen as a technical problem for which a technical solution exists, like the introduction of middleware, data warehousing solutions or business intelligence techniques. It is not seen as a problem of organization politics, in terms of actors, their interests, their power bases and resources and their strategies, conflict and compromises (Homburg, 1999).

The Myth of E-Government as Information Management

In the UK, Australian and Canadian documents, the realization of e-government can be achieved by using corporate information planning and project management methods and techniques. Information planning and ICT project management is seen as a question of setting goals, formulating action plans, allocating budgets, clear roles and responsibilities which can imply a plea for more centralization. Also in a number of managerial assessments of the practice of e-government (OECD 2003), pitfalls in the effective implementation of e-government, such as bad planning and bad project management, can be seen. There is a lack of central planning.

In the literature about effective business information planning, serious question marks are placed on such an approach. Masof & Mitroff (1981), Gazendam, (1993) and Ciborra (2002) show that the practice

of ICT strategic decision making and planning does not reflect the realm of method, procedure and systematic reasoning that many information management, information systems management and information planning methods suggest. ICT-driven innovations in private and public organizations are mostly the result of the bubbling up of new ideas from the bottom of the organization, whereby the existing organizational reality, the environment and ICT applications are seen anew by relevant stakeholders (Ciborra, 2002; see also Homburg, 1999).

Formulating and implementing e-government can be viewed as a governance problem that takes place in the context of a network of organizations, where on the one hand, standardization and integration in the back-office is needed to allow for interorganizational information exchange, but where on the other hand standardization and integration may intensify existing dependencies and enshrine these dependencies in the technology (Homburg, 1999). Consequently, an abundance of integration fuels interorganizational tension and conflict. In the literature on complex decision making, there seems to be an increased appreciation for specific techniques that are expected to be able to better fit the dynamics and nature of networks and interorganizational relationships, namely *process management techniques* (de Bruijn et al, 2002; Bekkers & Homburg, 2002).

The Myth of the Empowerment of the Intelligent Consumer

What image of the citizen do the several documents show us? We see the image of an intelligent citizen, who uses the possibilities of the internet *in optima forma*. They use the internet to exercise political pressure. Citizens use the internet to organize themselves as a interest group to influence public opinion. They demand a public administration that also uses the possibilities of the internet *in optima forma*; a public administration which enable them to act as an empowered and intelligent citizens.

Fountain (2001) points to the so-called legitimacy paradox of public service delivery. A dominant focus on service delivery (and a focus on the consumer rather than on the citizen) narrows the multi-dimensionality of citizenship and public administration. Citizenship is more than consumerism and government is more than the production of public services (Bekkers & Zouridis, 1999). A citizen is also a voter and a ‘citoyen’, who is also concerned with issues that relate to the quality of the public domain in which he/she functions; issues like public safety and public health problems, the quality of life in the neighborhood or the quality of the public school system. For a number of government agencies, which are machine bureaucracies such as the tax administrations or social security agencies, this legitimacy paradox is not so important. They merely execute legal tasks on a massive scale. For municipalities, which take the largest burden of e-government projects in many countries, this paradox is more important. On a local level, public service delivery and political decision making – balancing between public values and allocation of scarcity (Easton, 1965) – are related to each other. Public service delivery is not always an administrative and technical issue, like the production of a passport. Very often political decisions and normative deliberations lay behind the services that are delivered. For instance, what are the societal effects of neighborhood policing as a form public service delivery? What is the contribution to the quality of life in this neighborhood? Addressing citizens as consumers and defining government as a production company ignores the public and political character of service delivery. The challenge for e-government is to develop participative forms electronic service delivery and to address citizens at the same time as a consumer, a voter and a citizen (or ‘Good Citizen’).

Customer-orientation, focusing on the demands of citizens and companies, is one of leading principles in all policy documents about e-government, which we have studied. The development of these demand patterns is seen as a way of improving the quality and pro-activeness of electronic service delivery. However, if we look at the practice of a large number of e-government initiatives and approaches in the Netherlands – at a local and central level – we see that questions arise about the demand-orientation of e-government (OL2000, 2000ab). First, it is

difficult to (re)construct these demand patterns. Citizens find it difficult to formulate their demands and needs. Second, these patterns are dynamic and flexible. They change all the time. Third, a large number of these public products and services are not market-driven but are based on legal obligations and rights. A municipality has a legal obligation to deliver a large number of services which conflicts with the demand orientation of many e-government initiatives. However, there is a lot of progress to be made in redesigning (electronic) public service in a more customer-friendly way.

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this article has been to look beyond the managerial problems that obstruct the implementation of e-government. In this article we have studied the rhetoric of the e-government programs of the Australia, Canada, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands. Rhetoric, using and appealing to myths, plays an important role in politics. We have distinguished and described a number of e-government myths by looking at the assumptions of relevant e-government programs: the myth of technological progress and inevitability, the myth of a new and better government, the myth of rational information planning and the myth of the empowerment of the intelligent consumer. Rhetoric enables policy makers and politicians to mobilize people and organizations for their ideas. Myths can be seen as beacons, which show us the way to a desirable future, to a new and better public administration. When we look at the rhetoric of number e-government policies, it is important to understand the mobilizing capacities of rhetoric. However, if we confront these rhetorical claims with the body of knowledge concerning the practice of the use of ICT in public administration, we have demonstrated that this rhetoric has dysfunctional effects. In evaluating e-government programs and in the development of new (and adjusted) programs it is important to take the exposure of these myths into account.

Does the exposure of e-government imply that no change will take place in public administration? Will there be no institutional renewal? Numerous examples can be given despite all the critical remarks made. However, it is important to look at the time horizon in relation to the pace of change we are talking about. The promise of e-government is a promise that consists of a large number of small, incremental and local steps that can ultimately lead to a step forward. But we have to be skeptical about the 'canvas cleaning' effects of e-government (to paraphrase Karl Popper) and the promise of a short term and radical change. E-government will be more a matter of 'piecemeal engineering' than implementing a blue print for a better and more responsive government. What is needed are myths which reveal the 'muddiness' of computerization in public administration and which inspire us to overcome the problems of implementing e-government.

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