

Chapter 19

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Government: A Challenge to the Concept of Citizenship?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter re-interprets the development of electronic participation and electronic government in the context of an alternative ideology. Bringing back the critique of previous chapters about government as a technology, the chapter shows how it is possible to generate new and socially oriented spaces for democratic processes in which technologies are tools for transformation. This requires expanding the concept of citizenship, of the state and of society.

INTRODUCTION

This paper unfolds two contrasting perspectives regarding the way in which the incorporation of ICTs in governmental sectors influences and affects the notion of citizenship, and also how such incorporation implies and nurtures new trends in current society.

The paper begins its argument on showing that e-government and e-democracy have been regarded as independent processes of incorpora-

tion of technology in the functioning of society which is a misleading conception that assumes independence upon processes that has been historically closely related. Consequently, we attempt to bridge the gap between these two concepts: e-government and e-democracy by showing that government practices in society are in themselves a very powerful technology. Therefore, the process of implementing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in governmental practices should be regarded as a very highly complex and social-historical bounded process that requires a careful comprehension of governmental practices,

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beyond the usually classical approach associated with the improvement of efficiency and efficacy in common operations regarding the management of public resources.

For this purpose, we start showing the governmental technology as a way of managing human conduct at collective and individual level that has provided a process of economization of the government as a goal in itself. This is what we called governmentalization, following Foucault's use of the term, to refer to the historical process through which the State has been conducting human affairs until the present.

A second part of this paper concentrates in showing how the incorporation of ICTs is playing an increasingly relevant role in the definition of boundaries between citizens and the State and their relationships. It is argued that those boundaries are not a result of a political debate regarding the role of the State and the citizens, but instead, they are based upon a taken for granted assumption that this State should be efficient in the performance of current tasks. The process of building citizenship is becoming influenced and controlled by the limits of ICTs, when ICTs could be conceived as tools for the transformation upon the way in which public affairs are managed by allowing a richer process of debate due to an increase of information, flows and instantaneous access to knowledge and decision making processes.

The final part of this paper is concerned with developing a proposal to bring together the processes of e-government and e-democracy by sustaining a need of a re-thinking the concept of citizen as being a more capable and better informed member of society to take part and become responsible of the process of government in local, regional and national affairs. The concept of citizenship is proposed to be expanded instead of being minimized to that role of customer which is the dominant conception at the moment of introducing ICTs into the organizational structure of the State and its relationships with society.

ICTS AND GOVERNMENT: A COMPLEX MIX

The arrival of internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) to large sectors of population and almost every corner of the world, open a wide range of possibilities to the states, governments and citizens alike. Such possibilities range from an improvement of administrative procedures as to the introduction of changes in the relationships between citizens and the political milieu, basically through a more formal and deeper intercourse between those spheres of social action. They are what has been called e-government and e-democracy (Araya, 2005).

A large part of the studies devoted to the implementation of ICTs in the relationships between the State and citizens, are based on the assumption that administrative and political actions are mutually independent, and in some cases, they are linked but not in a very substantial way. Therefore, there is a dichotomy between administration and democracy which ignores the process in which the citizenship is built in a democratic environment and how it affects the ways in which the citizens are engaged in the activities of e-government and e-democracy (Petrizzo, 2005). In the constitution of citizens and the structures and practices of government, the whole set of elements will be affected notwithstanding their administrative or political nature.

In the case of Latin-american societies, such a separation is not only analytical, but also formal in some cases. In these situations, a divorce between public administration and political action has implied the existence of government as an alien element which can be used and controlled by those holding political power and their sectional interests. The absence of a will towards a more ambitious policy orientated to enhance a continuous improvement of the system of activities and procedures of the public administration was inevitable.

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