Chapter XIV
The Paradigm of E–Commerce in E–Government and E–Democracy

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ABSTRACT

During its relatively short history e-commerce, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in business has been more successful and glamorous than e-government or e-democracy, the comparable use of ICT in governments and administration. This may be the reason why many government initiatives try to emulate the success of e-commerce by using concepts, processes, technologies, and approaches pioneered by businesses. This paper analyses the relevance and limits of this use of e-commerce as a paradigm in government. For this purpose it starts out by distinguishing between e-government and e-democracy. In the following step the paper discusses which factors have led to the success of e-commerce and might therefore be applicable as parts of the paradigm. It then discusses the strengths and the weaknesses of e-commerce as applied to government. The conclusion will be that there are good reasons to use the commercial paradigm in e-government and e-democracy. However, this may lead to an unintended shift towards e-government. E-democracy may even be weakened by the paradigm which might turn out to be detrimental to the democratic legitimacy of e-government and e-democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Many governmental initiatives aimed at promoting the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for the purposes of government and administration try to transfer ideas from the area of e-commerce to the area of e-government. Most notably, one can find any number of initiatives world-wide that emphasis the idea of citizen-centeredness which is based on the example of customer-centeredness in e-commerce. Furthermore, governments try to take advantage of the strengths of e-commerce in order to improve their e-government initiatives. Such attempts to import successful examples from e-commerce into e-government refer to all sorts and aspects of information systems. On the one hand governments buy hardware and software that was originally developed for the private sector and apply it to their tasks. On the other hand, governments take over arguments and whole discourses from the commercial sector. Customer or citizen-centeredness is only one example of this. Others would be the ideas of efficiency, optimisation, or cost-benefit analysis. While these ideas are not confined to the commercial world, they have a strong association with it and during the last decades have mostly been developed in the context of private enterprises.

The attempts by governments to improve and optimise their services are usually met with approval. One of the central and frequently-voiced criticisms of governments is that they are slow, don't react to the demands of their citizens, and that they are generally bureaucratic and wasteful. The business world, on the other hand, does not seem to be bothered by these problems. Businesses are deemed to be efficient, quick, and responsive. Commercial entities that do not take their customers seriously are quickly replaced in the marketplace by those that do. A large portion of the criticism levelled at governments and the way they do their business can therefore apparently be taken care of by doing things the way they are done in business.

However, things may not be quite as simple as they seem. While citizens are the customers of governments to a certain extent, there are also limits to this analogy. The question that this paper will analyse is therefore where the limits of the application of commercial ideas to government are. In order to be able to discuss this question on a meaningful basis the paper will start out by discussing the concepts of e-government and e-democracy. In the following section the strengths of e-commerce are analysed insofar as they are relevant or translatable to e-government. After that the strengths and weaknesses of using the paradigm of e-commerce in e-government are discussed. The result of the paper will be that the commercial paradigm is useful for most service delivery tasks that we find in e-government but that it is quite less useful for most applications in e-democracy. At the same time the strength of electronic service delivery along the lines of e-commerce is such that it threatens to blend out e-democratic applications. If this is so, then the commercial paradigm may turn out to become a threat to the legitimacy of democratic e-government.

E-GOVERNMENT AND E-DEMOCRACY

In order to understand the impact of the commercial paradigm on e-government and e-commerce we will first of all have to clarify the concepts. This section will therefore start out with a brief introduction of the concept of a paradigm and will then continue to discuss e-government as well as e-democracy. The importance of the distinction between the two will be the reintroduction of the separation of powers which in discussions about e-government is often neglected.

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