

# E-Government and the Risk Society

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## INTRODUCTION

The modern “risk society” does not necessarily focus on an increase in overall risk to citizens. It is more focused on trying to predict and reduce risk in the context of the speed and complexity of globalisation. Anthony Giddens observes that society is organising itself increasingly around the mitigation of risk, and Ulrich Beck notes that the assessment and mitigation of risk is undertaken in a systematic way (as cited in “Risk Society,” 2005). While society has always been confronted by external risks (floods, earthquakes, etc.), the risks within e-government are primarily manufactured risks, produced by largely uncertain outcomes of the integration of information and by the ways in which information technologies are used within government. For example, CCTV (closed-circuit television) can be used in a planned manner to monitor and deter crime in public spaces, but an uncertain outcome can be the risk of all citizens being proactively monitored by government.

## BACKGROUND

Manufactured risks within e-government arise through two primary processes that are themselves aiming to deliver benefits to citizens. First, information about citizens is integrated and shared across functions of government so that services can be delivered more effectively to citizens. Included in this activity are the transformation of government, citizen-centric services, and the rebuilding of relationships between government and citizens, for example, the European Commission’s (2005b) aspiration to “reconnect Europe with its citizens.” Second, using information networks such as the Internet and digital television, government services are made widely accessible to citizens in locations that are suitable for them. The integration and sharing of information, within increasingly complex information systems, is intended both to increase the efficiency of government and to deliver services faster (“killing time”). The network availability of services is designed to make services available anywhere (“killing geography”). The emergent manufactured risks arise through what is termed the “dimensions of unintended consequences” (Lash, 2002, p. 50). For example,

Windows XP, containing over 40 million lines of code, produces unexpected risks through security failures that were not predicted, and the users of XP to some extent are both users and testers of the operating system.

Manufactured risks in e-government are not scientific in the same sense that living next to a river entails a definable risk of flooding. Furthermore, the prioritisation of manufactured risks often is not a scientific process, but is a social, cultural, and political process. Thus, the political prioritisation of the risk of terrorism<sup>1</sup> in the USA influences many of the processes of governance, with significant investment into the integration of information for surveillance purposes (Roberts, 2004). Consequently there is a “cultural and institutional matrix” that determines how risks are constructed and prioritised (Bulkeley, 2001, p. 442). For example, regarding food safety, the prevailing approach to risk until recently was to regularly inspect food premises. That has changed in some nations to a risk-based approach (Food Safety and Inspection Service [FSIS], 2001) that uses information, analysis, and forecasting operations to identify where risks are highest and where staff resources should be invested in inspection: a move away from the routine and reactive to information-driven risk assessment.

## TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION INTEGRATION

While risk is linked to uncertainty, the e-government agenda assumes that more information and better services to citizens will serve linearly to help offset the impacts of the risk society. E-government is focused on the network society. It is a process that on one hand is promoted by governments as being a way in which to improve services to citizens and to engage citizens more effectively with governance. On the other hand, however, e-government is usually performed as certainty, a technological process that can downsize and reinvent government, saving money, improving cost effectiveness, and delivering government primarily through electronic channels. E-government is thus grounded in political planning, assuming that government can automate services and join them up seamlessly to provide citizen-centric services that are individually targeted and consumed via

information technologies, and assuming that information technologies will deliver predictable benefits and few disadvantages (Hudson, 2002).

Both the risk society and e-government involve the utilisation of technologies within organisations and institutions (termed enactment; Fountain, 2001). Underpinning the delivery of e-government is the process of the removal of human intermediaries between citizen and service: This is termed disintermediation. Underpinning the risk society is the process in which citizens are presented with an often bewildering range of advice and information about the identification of a risk and its evaluation, and the potential or proposed responses to risk situations: This is termed re-mediation. Consequently, central to both the risk society and e-government is the production, dissemination, and consumption of information. The production of information for e-government services requires greater attention to information linkage and integration, with associated risks that information quality and consistency may be variable, and privacy and confidentiality may be compromised, along with the risk that governments will engage in “function creep.” Consequently, “government therefore needs to engage with the public and opinion-formers to explore and communicate the benefits and risks” (CST, 2005).

## CONTESTED INFORMATION

The risks, however, are not concentrated on the consumers of government services: the citizens and businesses. Legislation such as freedom of information (FoI) or policies to liberate access to public-sector information (PSI) can lead to government information being used, combined into market services, and critically evaluated by an increasing range of information users who may have locally produced data that are better in quality than government data. This process was seen with the UK 2001 Census of Population, when the cities of Westminster and Manchester successfully contested the official census figures. The basis of the challenge was a claim that the official national census had undercounted residents in the cities. Since much government funding is linked to the official population, there were adverse financial consequences. The enquiry into the census found that it was indeed in error (Statistics Commission, 2003). There is, therefore, a paradox of e-government in that the increased availability of information leads to an increased risk that government policies and information will be contested. There is a further lose-lose paradox for government as well in that no local government area will contest the official figures because the census overcounts its population, and the government cannot contest its own figures because they are official.

## COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

Risk increases as the historical routine life patterns (synchrony) are disrupted by the increasing speed across space (asynchrony) of modern society. It is not just that more information is being consumed by citizens, but also that the risk events are both exacerbated by citizens’ consumption patterns and increasingly difficult to evaluate—the calculation of risk is ever more complex, and the dilemmas about whose risk calculation to trust (the cult of the expert is diluted with access to Internet-based information) also increase. By contrast, e-government is oriented strongly toward the synchronisation of information in predictably constructed services.

Hassan (2005) cited the example of the human form of mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE) that caused major scares, though low human death rates, in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. The UK government enquiry into BSE highlighted the potential contradiction emerging in the traditional precautionary principle toward health risk (Calman & Smith, 2001) and the relatively low probability of being infected with a rare but deadly illness:

*The public was repeatedly reassured that it was safe to eat beef. Some statements failed to explain that the views expressed were subject to proper observance of the precautionary measures which had been introduced to protect human health against the possibility that BSE might be transmissible. (Phillips, 2000)*

Furthermore, the enquiry report criticised government agencies for not releasing information to the public since there was a tension between telling citizens that there was a risk that beef may be infected with BSE and the possible catastrophic decline in beef consumption leading to “the possible effect on exports and the political implications” should news become known internationally that UK cattle were infected with the disease (Phillips, 2000).

What BSE demonstrates is that the geographical, temporal, and structural complexity of globalised food chains, and of business supply chains, introduces manufactured risks that challenge the abilities of governments to process information. However, the more information is released into the public domain, the more likely it is that citizens will evaluate risks in an emotional and not a statistical way. With increased confusion and increased fear of risk there is a paradoxical decline in the communication of risk by government: Indeed, the fear of communicating a false risk can be politically more damaging than the noncommunication of a real risk. The outcome often is a reliance on “technoscience,” the cult of the media expert, the consumption of multiple sources of new authority on the Internet (Burrows, Nettleton, Pleace, Loader,

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