E-Government Development Trends

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INTRODUCTION

Information technology is changing the role of government, its functions, and its power. The long process of transformation of public sector organizations and the applications of computer technologies have started the talk about electronic government.

In the last ten years, the debate concerning e-government has been the subject of various studies, promoting analyses, research approaches, and empirical surveys. Even so, there is still much confusion about the meaning of this term and the word e-government is often used in reference to e-voting, e-democracy, or e-administration. Therefore here we intend to provide the reader with some guidelines, trying to explain a concept that, although little more than ten years old, finds its roots in the ancient idea of the information society.

We can start by saying that e-government represents just a single fragment of the broad discourse about the impact of information technologies on society. It is not an administrative experiment but a permanent part of the governmental process. According to Jane Fountain's (2004) idea, we can define e-government as "the production and delivery of information and services inside government and between government and the public using a range of information and communication technologies" (para. 2). In this prospective, the Internet can be considered as a variable, which has been grafted onto the wider ground of factors leading to the transformation of government roles.

Moving from this point, e-government will be analyzed as an intersection of two main trends. The first of these is the overall transformation of public sector organization. In this respect, the Internet variable has to be considered in the entire process of the government reinvention that made scholars talk about a major new revolution after the industrial one. The second trend is the information society development, a process that started since the 50s catching very soon the interest of governments.

BACKGROUND

Let's try, now, to observe the long process of modification, which, in the last 30 years, has involved the intrinsic nature of governments influencing their functions, structures, and processes. Welfare State crisis, economic, and ideological pressure, change of the public perception of government roles make United States and European scholars talk about *Reshaping the State* (Wright, 1994) and *Reinventing Government* (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). A frame of general changes where the development of information technology becomes one of the main pressures leading to the transformation of government roles can be identified as such:

a.   Creation of international markets, which has created problems of international and transnational administrative coordination, dimming governments identity and responsibility

b.   Economic and fiscal pressure, which has caused problems of deficiency in public budget

c.   Strong ideological prejudices of the new right theorists towards the state, *big government*, the inflated bureaucracy and the determination to re-plan State borders

d.   Technological changes, explosion of information technologies that are strongly affecting traditional public bureaucracies and leading towards the introduction of the new public management (NMP)

e.   General feelings of dissatisfaction and suspicion from public opinion towards governments. Although they have got various features in different nations, they share a common point, that is a charge of inefficiency, a lack of transparency and corruption against the public sector

f.   Managerial revolution, which has strongly affected procedures and techniques in order to reach an upper degree of efficiency and flexibility. In fact, the proposal of a new public management (Hood, 1996; Pollitt, 1990) is based on the idea that most of the public sector problems are the results of bad management of governments (Peters, 1995)

g.   Problems (only regarding European context) of coordination and regulation among different administrative cultures due to the process of Europeanization

Looking at these issues, it is easy to understand that information technologies are only a part of the wide series of changes involving all governments. But, at the present

time, they represent a flywheel for a deeper action of renewing. They are leading to the decentralization of the traditional functions concerning political/administrative direction of governments, aiming at a more flexible government structure, pushing a process that reduce discretionary bureaucracy.

In fact, the idea of *reinventing* an increment of the administrative effectiveness of a bigger responsibility of governors and of the efficiency of public administrations is regenerate since the 90s with the development of the modern computer science technologies. The new technologies and the Web make the government reform cheaper, faster, and better but bring about issues such as redesigning government structures and processes.

This is the reason why now it is important to take into consideration all the opportunities, challenges and problems that the "*e*" points out for governments: actually electronic government is more about government than about "*e*" (OECD, 2003).

INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH TRADITION AND E-GOVERNMENT

As the background analyses have shown, the importance of electronic media in governments began long before the term e-government appeared. Governments have always used new technologies as an instrument to improve the effectiveness.

The following pages will show that e-government is not only a segment of governments change but also a part of the larger discourse about information society. The studies on the information society began well before the e-government concept emerged: they started in the 60s, when the theoretical discussion developed different approaches on the production, elaboration, and distribution of information. Many scholars have discussed the development of the information and communication activity. The first was Fritz Machlup (1962), who pointed out that already in 1958 about 29% of the American gross national product was derived from what he defined as the "industry of the knowledge." In the same way Marc Uri Porat (1977) spoke about "the information economy" as a new field of the productive activity connected to the development of new technologies; Daniel Bell (1974) was the main theoretician of the post-industrial society; Peter Drucker (1998) and Alvin Toffler (1980) developed different aspects of information as a resource and Kennet Laudon (1986) with his *Dossier Society* put the first key matters on the development of new technologies.

If in the early 60s the analysis was concentrated predominantly on the American panorama, from the first half of the 70s until the beginnings of the 90s studies began to be expanded in other States and the initial interest for this type of theme began slowly to decrease. But the emergence of the Internet in the 90s focused the attention on the (global) information society with new actors and new situations (May, 2002).

The information society, driven by new technologies of information and communication, started a new revolution similar to the industrial one (Bell, 1974). In the governmental offices as in the factories, information technologies were introduced not only to increase productivity and profit, but also to ensure the managerial control on the productive process, to make the administrative procedure more efficient, to favor centralization and social control.

This is why the idea of an information society and a global society of knowledge interested governments and international organizations since the beginning. And they started to entrust to scholars and technicians hypotheses and projects of intervention.

In Japan in 1971, Yoneji Masuda was one of the authors of the national plan policy Jacudi (Japan Computer Usage Development Institute) for the bulky introduction of the new information technologies in Japanese society. In France Simon Nora and Alain Minc were the authors of the report on the information society *L'informatisation de la société* (1978). In the United States, Zbigniew Brzezinski, political theorist at Columbia University of New York and National Security Advisor of President Carter, was the main theorist of globalization. In his book, *Between Two Ages, America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (Brezinski, 1970), he outlines a global sight of the new society, defined "technetronic society"—a society established on technologies, particularly on information technology, and telecommunications—and introduces the idea of a "diplomacy of the net" that should replace the "diplomacy of force."

Today a growing number of non governmental organizations (NGOs) identify in the global information society a strong tool for economical development: examples are the *1998-99 World Development Report: Knowledge for Development* of the Word Bank (1998), the report of the United Nations *Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development* (Mansell & When, 1998), and *Towards a Global Information Society* of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Oecd, 1997).

But it was in 1993 that a speech on the information society—after it had characterized for different years the policy on the economical development—took on a new development and became a part of the direct interventions of the government. On March 3, 1993, the American government during the Clinton administration developed the program of the *National Performance Review* (NPR)

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