

E-Government Regimes

Francesco Amoretti

University of Salerno, Italy

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of the reform movement is changing the ways in which governments operate throughout the world (Kettl, 2000). The ICT revolution is fast spreading its reach from private enterprises to bureaucratic agencies. As a result, electronic government (e-government) is both encouraging reform and, in itself, is a way of reinventing traditional structures and procedures and improving how the machinery of decision-making works. The scale of e-government developments is the subject of much research on a global perspective (Kamark, 2004). They show different and conflicting theoretical and ideological paradigms, but very little effort has been made to formulate a framework to define the e-government regimes that emerge in different political and institutional contexts. Since the characteristics of the World Wide Web (WWW) become the parameters from which to evaluate the public organizations and their capacity to innovating in regard to technology policy, the dominant vision of e-government emphasizes service delivery. As Forlano said (2004, p. 35) “the case studies ... bring to life common classification of e-government stages ...,” not to a typology focused on political and institutional features. In this way, a crucial point is underestimated; namely, that the restructuring of the administrative apparatuses because of the WWW is a *political choice*, and does not take place in a institutional and ideological vacuum, which at the end of the day expresses its nature, whether democratic or otherwise (Barber, 1999).

BACKGROUND

The strands of thought that have been used—and are still used—to understand and provide the normative guidelines for electronic government have tended to follow intellectual paradigms already well known in the social sciences.

First, e-government assumed the characteristics of a coming revolution. The information highway would enable the reformed logic of political and institutional power to cope with the expectations of citizens. Later, the coming revolution became the revolution betrayed. Few, if any, of the promises had been realized, and the suspicion was that from the very beginning, initiatives to achieve e-

government were mystificatory: They merely fed into the democratic utopia while the web of electronic control by the administrative and executive power were extended. They were constructing a new *panopticon* (Campbell & Carlson, 2002).

Finally, a different paradigm was diffused, which makes little use of the evocative metaphors of apocalyptic scenarios: neither a revolution, nor a *panopticon*, nor a Big Brother. Instead, an evolutionary paradigm that follows the stages in the development of e-government (Layne & Lee, 2001; Schelin, 2003).

The widespread diffusion of the ideology of best practice sinks its roots into this cultural humus, suggesting that there are practices of electronic government which, once they have been adopted as a model, represent the ultimate aim of the processes of modernization of the administrative and institutional systems at the most diverse levels. That the map of best practices should also include experiences that come from non-Western countries that do not share the liberal-democratic ethos serves merely to isolate the technological and organizational component of the re-engineering strategies from the wider context of the relationships and political significance of e-government. In short, more attention is paid to the suffix “e” than to the effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in redefining the delivery of public services, than to the term “government.” Here, there is a strong temptation to refer interchangeably to e-government and online service delivery (West, 2004), obscuring the political meaning and transformational potential of e-government.

In contrast, we find a greater attention to the transformation of the state bureaucracy and apparatus, due to rising levels of Internet use by governments, the private sector and society in general, in studies that, far from the evolutionary perspective, consider alternative pathways that confront the advanced industrial countries.

E-government used here is defined as the use of ICTs as a tool to achieve better government. The impact of e-government at the broadest level is simply better government—e-government is more about government than about “e.” The demands of Web-enabled government are analyzed in the context of the extensive changes in public-sector organizations that have characterised reform movements in the liberal democracies for more than 20 years (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2000).

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Given the obviously central role that ICTs play in its creation, it would be easy to conclude that e-government is primarily a technical exercise rather than a collection of political and social choices involving special technical considerations. But, to realize its promised benefits of transformation and engagement, e-government must also be seen as being about *normative and political processes*, rather than just the act of automation itself (Riley, 2001).

The use of ICTs can encourage greater citizen engagement and can be a liberating and democratizing force within government, although ICTs can also be extremely effective instruments of control and authoritarianism. It is a function of the policy choices that governments are making with respect to how that technology is implemented and utilized, and of the political, social and economic context of a country (Rose, 2005).

A TYPOLOGY OF E-GOVERNMENT REGIMES

To obtain a typology of different kinds of e-government regimes, we consider first the policies that define the architecture of the network. The nature of the code of cyberspace is a determinant factor in order to specify the processes and characteristics of different regimes of e-government. This code can be more or less open or closed. The selection of one or the other code prefigures a certain type of Net Architecture. Architecture is a kind of law: It determines what people can and cannot do in the real life as in the virtual one (Lessig, 1999).

Nevertheless, the code's effect will depend on the preexisting or current governance practices of a state at the global, national and local levels. Governance is not an abstract idea; it refers to the ways in which the different political levels, the diverse actions and practices inspired by various beliefs and traditions shape policies (Bevir, Rhodes, & Weller, 2003).

From the combination of those factors, four types of e-government regimes emerge, which are described below.

REFORM-ORIENTED E-GOVERNMENT

Every e-government policy is reform-oriented, as they imply a top-down process, and the presence of a strong leadership seems to be one of the main conditions for the success of these policies (Lenihan, 2002; OECD, 2003). Nevertheless, the characteristics associated with this category are not universal, being linked with the experiences and practices of e-government in which the leadership and administrative and legislative networks that are

subordinate to it, and favor a formally open network architecture that guarantees relevant democratic values and principles.

It is the original spirit of the ideology and action of Al Gore (1993-1997) that enabled the United States (U.S.) to enjoy a considerable cultural and technological advantage on the issue of e-government, to the extent that a transition has already occurred from a top-down approach centered on the characteristics of the techniques to be promoted to a bottom-up approach geared towards creating an environment favorable to this diffusion by involving all social actors, including citizens and businesses, in particular (Heeks, 1999).

Another example of reform-oriented e-government policies is the United Kingdom's (UK) experience at the end of the 1990s. The labor government's reform agenda has e-government at its heart, playing an instrumental role in joining up organizations to create citizen-focused public services. In the first e-government publication post-1997, *Our Information Age*, and in the *Modernising Government* white paper (1999), ICTs are a tool for both departmental reform and improvements in service delivery to reorientate it to the needs of citizenry (Organ, 2003). The government's strategy, which required massive coordination at the center, emphasized furthermore the political and institutional meaning of the technological innovations. When the UK *Citizen Online Democracy* (UKCOD) went online, Prime Minister Tony Blair observed that "The *Have Your Say* Web site is a historic opportunity for the public to play a meaningful part in the framing of new legislation ... I support this initiative to help modernize and enhance British democracy in future as part of the legislative process." With cabinet office support, UKCOD had created a constitutional innovation which, if "Blair's hope is realized, will serve as a precedent for the future democratic governance" (Coleman, 1999, pp. 203-205).

This embraces in a definitive manner those e-government practices that reflect, at various levels—supranational, national and local—a strong political will to implement institutional change and to modernize administrative structures (Panagopoulos, 2004). The choice of an open architecture is not made to keep up to date, but rather to re-establish the system, even though it has not yet matured within it all of the resources and conditions necessary to achieve this objective.

In many cases, these initiatives demonstrate many limitations and ambiguities. Their capacity to enable citizens to participate effectively in decision-making processes is minimal, and the institutional mechanisms provided by the administrative apparatuses to receive and transmit demands from below—or rather, from the network—have revealed themselves to be weak or inadequate (Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2005).

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