

E-Social Policy and E-Social Service Delivery

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INTRODUCTION

E-social policy is an important aspect of the information society development and e-governance agenda (Fitzpatrick, 2000, 2003; Loader, 1998). To date, it has not received the same amount of critical scholarship and research activity as traditional areas of social policy, but this is changing as policy scholars focus on the whole gamut of e-governance concerns. E-social policy is concerned with the social implications of information technology communication (ITC) technology in its broadest sense. E-service delivery is a narrower term, encompassing the range of ITC used by governments, churches, charities, other non-government organisations (NGOs), and community groups to deliver social and community services online. Initially, most services provided online by governments were of a commercial and business nature (Curtin, Sommer, & Vis-Sommer, 2003), but e-service delivery has evolved quite rapidly in the fields of health, education, social security, and one-stop community information systems. It is better developed in OECD countries and in specific social policy fields (social security, housing, health, education, and community care) whereas in other countries it is very poorly developed and resourced, if it exists at all (Polikanov & Abramova, 2003). Despite this uneven development, there are many innovative examples of ITC use in farming production and trade, e-health services and promotion, education, environmental pollution management, and enhancement of development strategies in poorer nations. However, there is still a long way to go in bridging the digital divide—the unequal access to ITC of richer and poorer nations. This is a global social policy concern.

BACKGROUND

E-social policy is a relatively new field of academic inquiry and research. Pioneer researchers in this field include Fitzpatrick (2000, 2003), Hudson (2002), and Loader (1998). In recent years, Henman [and colleagues] has made a substantial contribution to the critical analysis of e-social policy (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Fitzpatrick (2002) explains the low profile among social policy analysts. Firstly, early figures on ITC use indicated

that it was dominated by the U.S. and Europe, with only 1% of the world's population using the Internet. English is the dominant language of this new technology, and few people predicted the phenomenal growth of ITC around the world. It was, therefore, seen as a marginalised issue. Secondly, social policy analysts failed to see the connections between the global communication explosion; the rapid spread of neo-liberal and public choice ideologies (Melville, 1999) that accompanied economic globalisation (Bardouille, 2001); and the radical restructuring of government and public sector activities and roles with welfare reform, especially in advanced Western post-industrial societies. Thirdly, the primary focus of social and political scientists was on the potential of *e-governance* rather than e-social welfare delivery to enhance democratic, civil rights, and political relationships (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 376).

More social policy scholars are turning their focus on e-social policy. The work of the Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit at Teeside University in social care and delivering community services has attracted considerable attention (Thomas & Loader, 2000). John McNutt, a U.S. academic, has played a pioneering role in e-social policy activism. McNutt has hosted an e-social policy Web site on *Yahoo!* for many years, and recently published an exemplary text in this field (Hicks & McNutt, 2002). The *Journal of Critical Social Policy*; *European Journal of Social Policy*; and the *Journal of Information, Communication, and Society* regularly feature e-social policy initiatives.

From a government perspective, the justification for using online service delivery revolves around public sector management issues, such as efficiency and effectiveness and enhanced citizen or consumer satisfaction. Governments promote the view that e-service delivery reduces costs and provides savings through better use of staff time, increased choice and freedom, and improved time management for consumers and providers. The potential of ITC technology to overcome constraints of time, travel, physical ability, age, and geographic boundaries for disadvantaged individuals and groups is very appealing to policy makers and service users alike. However, many transactions in social service fields are more complex than simple online business transactions such as downloading a form or providing information. They re-

Table 1. Summary of key e-social policy and e-service delivery

| Issues | Authors |
|--|---|
| Major government incentives to use e-service delivery (neo-liberal discourses that emphasise the role of individuals to manage risk, user pay [customer choice] for their social and economic needs, increased economic globalisation, restructuring of work, the welfare state, the reduced role of the state, and new public management emphasis on cost efficiency and effectiveness) | Melville (1999); Bardouille (2001); Clarke (2004); Fitzpatrick (2000); Hudson (2002); Hood (1995); Rhodes (1996); OECD (1998; 2003); Policity.com (2001); Commonwealth of Australia (2002); Cabinet Office-UK (2002); Perri 6 (2004); Snellen and van Donk (1998) |
| Potential of ITC to overcome social problems | Stonier (1983); Wellman, (1999; 2001); Davies (n.d.) |
| Social exclusion and digital divide—social inequality | Hudson (2002); Selwyn (2003); Kirschenbaum, & Kunamneni (2001); Perron (2004); Loader (1998a) |
| Social regulation and increased surveillance of social service beneficiaries | Henman and Dean (2004); Marston (2004); Henman (1999) |
| Technical capacity of ITC to develop complex interactive forms of service delivery and costs of infrastructure, staff time, and resources necessary for 24/7 operations | Hudson (2002); Liikanen (2003); Wittkemper and Kleindiek (2003) |
| Social nature of ITC | Fitzpatrick (2000, 2003); Loader (1998a, 1998b); Kitchen (1998); Ballamy and Taylor (1998) |
| New “virtual rights” instead of “social rights” required in an information society | Fitzpatrick (2000) |
| Inadequate skill levels, ITC infrastructure of non-government sector to deliver social services online | Wyatt and Aitken (2001) |

quire face-to-face interactions in the absence of appropriate technology to deal with multi-faceted transactions.

A key debate concerns *equity* and *access* to e-service delivery, especially among those who have traditionally been the focus of social service and development intervention; for example, the poor, the computer illiterate, the disabled, the aged, and women at both a national and global level. Perron (2004) is an excellent source on the state of ITC in developing nations. Debate about the “digital divide” (Selwyn, 2002, p. 2) and of the role of computer illiteracy in perpetuating poverty and inequality within countries and between countries are common in the literature (Perron, 2003; Norris, 2001). The available statistics on class, gender, age (International Telecommunications Union, 2004) and cross-national comparison of Internet usage (Perron, 2004) suggests that the primary beneficiaries of e-service delivery are the technologically and economically richer Western nations, especially post-industrial welfare-state societies. However, even within these societies, technology does not provide a quick fix for overcoming structural inequalities or social exclusion (Hudson, 2003). It may lead to new forms of inequality and social exclusion. What is important for social policy analysts to examine are the policies and strategies put in place by governments and transnational bodies, such as

the United Nations, to reduce (and eliminate) these inequalities.

Many of the debates about the ITC (including e-social policy) are polarised. They are based on pre-existing assumptions about the social, economic, and political nature of technology in modern society. For example, there are those who argue that technology determines social behaviour and interaction, and others who argue that technology is socially shaped (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998, p. 18-19). Table 1 provides a summary of key debates.

Some writers (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Stonier, 1983; Wellman, 2001) hold a very utopian perspective of ITC—promoting it as possessing power to promote social change (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Stonier, 1983) for all, but especially those in poorer nations. The World Bank and the United Nations are strong advocates in the inherent capacity of ITC to solve their social problems. Barry Wellman is an exemplar of this position. Wellman (2001, p. 40-41) writes “the good news is that the cost of computing is becoming so low that in the developed world the digital-social class divide should get smaller just as the digital gender gap.” Both Perron (2004, p. 180) and Sen (2000) argue that the falling costs of ITC (together with the scientific, political, and academic knowledge available

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