Chapter XVIII

An Information Technology Research Agenda for Public Administration

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Abstract

Research questions are outlined, forming the dimensions of a research agenda for the study of information technology in public administration. The dimensions selected as being the most theoretically important include the issues of the impact of information technology on governmental accountability, the impact of information technology on the distribution of power, the global governance of information technology, the issue of information resource equity and the "digital divide," the implications of privatization as an IT business model, the issue of the impact of IT on organizational culture, the issue of the impact of IT on discretion, the issue of centralization and decentralization, the issue of restructuring the role of remote work, the issue of implementation success factors, the issue of the regulation of social vices mediated by IT and other regulatory issues.

Introduction

If anything has mushroomed faster in the past quarter century than information technology, it is perhaps literature about information technology. One large chunk of this literature is theoretically descriptive of various IT projects, another large segment is on the order of how-to manuals, and yet more centers on policy guidelines about computer security, privacy, access, and other management concerns. When one seeks theoretical social-science literature on information technology, one is apt to find empirically disconnected speculation infused with utopian optimism or dystopian cynicism. There remains, however, a growing body of work which is empirically grounded yet raises issues of broad theoretical importance to the public administration community. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to identify some of the primary dimensions of this body of work and to outline the research agenda which it poses.

Political Issues

The Issue of How Information Technology Affects Governmental Accountability

The increasing importance of accountability in public administration was signaled by the change in the name of the Government Accounting Office to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2004. This change is related in part to information technology. A decade earlier Helen Nissenbaum (1994) had argued that "accountability is systematically undermined in our computerized society...it is the inevitable consequence of several factors working in unison—an overly narrow conceptual understanding of accountability, a set of assumptions about the capabilities and shortcomings of computer systems, and a willingness to accept that the producers of computer systems are not, in general, fully answerable for the impacts of their products. If not addressed, this erosion of accountability will mean that computers are 'out of control' in an important and disturbing way." Given the centrality of accountability to democracy, surprisingly little research has been undertaking in the years since Nissenbaum's warning.

For their part, federal managers are aware of the importance of accountability if only in terms of avoiding IT project failure. For example, in early 2006, a GAO report criticized the Department of Defense's Global Information Grid (GIG) project, a massive attempt to weld a variety of programs and systems, including communications satellites and next-generation radio, into an Internet-like but secure worldwide network. The GAO found GIG was "being managed in a stovepiped and bungled manner," with no one ultimately accountable in spite of its estimated cost of $34 billion over 5 years (Onley, 2006). A clear line of accountability is a classic Weberian tenet of ideal-typical bureaucracy, but a variety of forces, including outsourcing and decentralization, operate to undermine it. Public administrationists may seek a resolution by advocating a return to centralization or by seeking some more

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