

Chapter XIV

Toward 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 (IT) in public administration. The dimensions selected as being the most theoretically important include the issue of the impact of information technology on the distribution of power; the issue of information resource equity and the “digital divide”; the issue of the use of IT as symbolic action; the issue of the impact of IT on discretion; the issue of the impact of IT on organizational culture; the issue of privatization; the issue of decentralization; the issue of remote work; the issue of implementation success factors; the issue of persuasiveness of governmental websites; the issue of 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” 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 import to the public administration community. In this essay 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 Impact on Power Distribution

Enthusiasts for the Information Age have seen technology as an irresistible force for democratization of institutions and societies. It is an open empirical research question, however, whether the rise of public information technology and e-government does, in fact, increase participation levels or even affect the distribution of power. A number of public administrationists, such as the authors associated with Heeks (1999), argue that properly implemented information technology will “reinvent government” by decentralizing bureaucracy and empowering communities and citizens. This is in line with a number of authors who have argued that the Internet empowers individuals and communities by providing a new, democratic forum for both civic debate and civic action, thereby increasing social capital, as is, for example, the hope of the “smart communities” movement in Canada (Coe, Paquet, & Roy, 1999) and the “digital places” movement in the United States (Horan, 2000). Many authors over a long period of time have articulated this optimistic view of information technology and democratization (e.g., Sackman & Nie, eds., 1970; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Becker & Scarce, 1984; Rheingold, 1994; Jones, 1995; Negroponte, 1995; Mantovani, 1996; Schneider, 1996; Schiller, 1996; Cohill & Kavanaugh, 1997; Alexander & Grubbs, 1998; Warren & Wechsler, 1999; Blanchard & Horan, 2000).

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