Chapter 28
Accountability and Information Technology Enactment:
Implications for Social Empowerment

Richard K. Ghere
University of Dayton, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the use of information technology (IT) in government and its possible impact on governance, particularly in terms of addressing the equity concerns of meeting the basic needs of regional subpopulations. In Building the Virtual State, Jane Fountain develops her theory of technology enactment (in essence, a variety of bureaucratic behaviors reacting to IT) and then applies that framework in three case studies in the book. This inquiry examines government IT enactment in various global settings to assess (1) where and how enactment occurs and (2) what, if any, effect enactment has upon governance in particular settings. The first section traces relationships between a nation's IT development policy and that technology's potential to promote equity in that society. The next two sections report (respectively) on the study and observations that emerge. A brief case study about the Gyandoot, an intranet system in rural India, examines the reality of e-government as a means to promote social equality. A concluding discussion reviews those observations as they relate to the human initiative in efforts to harness information technology to achieve public goals, especially those intended to improve social wellbeing in poor societies.

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2005, some twenty-five members of the American Society for Public Administration attended a conference held at the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China in Chengdu. Among the 191 papers presented there, more than forty focused upon some aspect of e-government, mostly within local governments in China. Nonetheless, current scholarly interest in e-government in China and elsewhere generally follows a broader stream of public management research on the effects of computers in government dating back three decades, and that research in turn

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-699-0.ch028

stemmed from earlier attention to socio-technical-systems by mid-twentieth century organization theorists.

Yet the current Chinese interest in e-government appears theoretically salient for a variety of reasons—foremost among them that it emerged amid national governmental and "free market" economic reforms during the 1990's that paralleled the New Public Management (NPM) movement in the U.S. (Lan, 2005, p. 9). Advocated by political conservatives, the NPM calls for government to reduce bureaucracy and operate "more like a business." Thus, Chinese experiences with e-governments evoke broader questions about public sector uses of information technology (IT) and the quality of governance in various national settings, particularly regarding causality—does public IT use affect (improve) governance or the other way around? And if this IT-governance relationship does exit, can it bridge the divide between rich and poor in particular nations?

This chapter focuses on IT use in government and its impacts both on the quality of governance and its potential for reducing economic and social inequality within nations. In Building the Virtual State (2001), Jane Fountain develops a theory of technology enactment (in essence, a variety of bureaucratic behaviors reacting to IT) and then applies that framework in three case studies in the book. This inquiry examines government IT enactment in various global settings to assess (1) where and how this enactment occurs and (2) what (if any) effect enactment may have upon governance in particular settings. The first section offers brief discussions of the three primary concerns under examination in this chapter: (types of) information technology systems, information technology enactment, and governance in a cross-national perspective. The second and third sections report (respectively) on the study—how cases of technology enactment were accessed—and observations that emerged from the study. A forth section discusses those observations in regard to technology enactment as it applies to cross-national settings. Supplemented by a brief case study below traces efforts that enlist e-government in central India, a fifth section examines the implications of those observations for government use of information technology to promote social end economic equity.

BACKGROUND: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND GOVERNANCE

This section offers brief discussion of the three conceptual issues inter-related in this chapter.

IT System Type

In *Building the Virtual State*, Jane Fountain differentiates among four types of information systems found in government agencies—agency websites, interagency websites, agency internal networks, and cross-agency integration and system—ordered in terms of complexity and also of potential to bring about institutional and/or operational changes within bureaucracy (2001, pp. 99-100). In regard to the latter, she postulates that the more complex system types are especially likely to illicit reactive behaviors (that she identifies as enactment) within the organization setting.

Since devotees of the New Public Management (NPM)—committed to improving government *performance*—typically advocate technology utilization in government, it is useful to compare IT systems in terms of design intentions, or more specifically, the type of performance improvement designed into the system. Melvin Dubnick's work differentiates among four distinct characterizations of institutional 'performance'—production, competence, results, and productivity (2005, pp. 391-394). In particular, he suggests that the "production-oriented" view of performance represents "The most basic form of performance focuses attention on tasks being carried out by the performing agent. It is the view of performance associated with the process of "production" in the