

Chapter 5

Shifting Discourses on E-Government: From Piecemeal Planning to Boundaries and Traditions

José-Rodrigo Córdoba-Pachón
University of London, UK

Kevin Orr
University of Hull, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter develops a synergy of ideas from systems-thinking and public policy analysis to help make better sense of why e-government initiatives unfold in particular ways. Specifically, the chapter emphasizes the importance of critical reflection about systems boundaries and local government traditions. These two notions complement each other and could help practitioners to understand the dynamics of contexts in which e-government initiatives develop. The aim of this synergy is to suggest an alternative for what we see as piecemeal planning and implementation approaches to e-government.

INTRODUCTION

More often than not, information systems practitioners and policy makers commonly assume that they need to plan and implement e-government by focusing on different levels of analysis, service and action. This leads both of them to define *piecemeal* plans which are partial and partitioned. Such plans only make sense at a particular level (regional, local or communitarian) but leave out any critical analysis of the dynamics of such levels. To date piecemeal planning privileges dealing with issues

on e-government like information security and confidentiality. But tomorrow things could change. Will we ever stop planning for the next issue? Can we better ground our understanding about what needs to be attended?

E-government has been served by policies, projects and plans that aim to pervade every aspect of citizen's life. We have plans in areas like infrastructure, telecommunications, services and information protection to name a few. Moreover, a vision of a citizen-centered e-government has been put forward. It requires the fulfilling of certain preconditions in societies so that we prepare the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-860-4.ch005

ground for the achievement of such a big ideal. In all these, there is scope for action, but there are continuous tensions which lead us to suggest that boundaries of e-government are far from clear.

In this chapter we argue that despite this apparently harmless style of piecemeal planning in e-government, we need to consider e-government as a 'whole', not only a collection of pieces, projects, regulations or procedures. This becomes more evident at the local government level, how this is being influenced by different aspects (international, national, as well as cultural and historical issues), and generating challenges for analysis, policy making and management. Local governments have to deal with relations, people and technologies at the same time as they aim to maintain the life of their communities around. They have to fight against the globalization of spaces that technologies like the Internet have brought to their geographical regions (Castells, 2001). If we decide to do 'otherwise' than accept globalization and its discourses in the context of local governments, we are left to our own devices to define ways to understand and conceptualize e-government at this level. This also requires us to critically reflect on the meaning of 'local'.

Our work suggests that using the verb form of e-government—talking about 'e-governing'—may be appropriate. An appreciation of the contested nature of how initiatives in this arena are construed and constructed casts light on the flux and ambiguity of the term e-government. We aim to move towards a more dynamic slant on this, including towards traditions of governing and e-governing in which the goals and values shift according to what is held as important to different situated actors. E-government is a concept which comes alive through its local translation by actors, read through the lens of myriad traditions of governing. This interpretation of e-governing steers our attention to the ideational basis of policy making and local practices. Given this degree of dynamism it is necessary to be critical and able to reflect on what happens within such practices.

To support reflection on e-government, we make use of the ideas of 1) systems boundary critique and 2) local government traditions, also as a way of redressing what we see as negative consequences of piecemeal planning. In our view, this style of planning has contributed to generate islands of e-government and non-e-government developments which to many authors are difficult to bring together (Bannister, 2007; Contini, 2009; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006). To bridge gaps between technologies, government practices and citizens' perceptions, further consideration of purposes, values and ways of doing things embedded in local contexts is needed.

Systems boundary critique can help us surfacing the consequences and impacts of policies and plans. It can show us the terrain of possibilities for action. Applied in a local context of analysis and intervention, critique on systems boundaries can help us identify purposes and values that we use to privilege our decisions and thus to help us become critical of e-government projects or initiatives. Nevertheless, this is only part of what we see as an alternative conception of e-government planning. Boundary critique should be followed by or complemented with a deeper degree of analysis to reveal why and how people in such a context come to privilege values and issues at the expense of others. To do so we propose the concept of traditions in local government (Orr & Vince, 2009); the use of the concept in practice will complement and be complemented by boundary critique. Therefore, this chapter will present the main tenet of both notions and will finish by offering policy makers, information systems practitioners and other stakeholders some reflections resulting from combining them.

The chapter begins by contextualizing the emergence of alternative notions for e-government analysis by highlighting what we see as a traditional (piecemeal) model of planning in the context of the information society. We then present a set of criteria to help us put forward the two notions we have mentioned. Our intention is to shift our

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