

## Chapter 21

# E-Government in Brazil: Reinforcing Dominant Institutions or Reducing Citizenship?

**José Rodrigues Filho**

*Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil*

### ABSTRACT

*Despite the popularity of, and blossoming research on the use of, information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the information society, especially in terms of e-government and e-democracy, little research has been conducted to answer questions related to the effects of ICTs on citizenship, which is said to be at risk. It is claimed that the political science research in modern democracy has narrowed citizenship down to voting, turning democracy into something to be experienced at election time only and not between elections. We need a very clear understanding of the opportunities brought by new technologies and the dangers and risks regarding the realization of citizenship and civil rights. If it is true that ICT has done little to change our democracy, and if it in itself does not guarantee the realization of the rights of the citizens, research work must be developed in order to better analyze the relationship between ICT and citizenship. Because this kind of research is almost non-existent, even in the developed world, this paper attempts to see whether e-government projects in Brazil are designed in ways which reflect our best understanding of freedom, social justice, addressing the sources of inequalities, alienation, and injustice.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, in both the developed and developing countries, there was an emphasis on citizens' orientation regarding information technology policy. However, with new reform strategies employed

in the public sector through the rhetoric of New Public Management, based on techniques from private management models as part of the global terminology of good management, it soon became clear that citizens' orientation implies that citizens acquire the role of consumers or clients – recipients dependent on benefits provided by the welfare state. This dependency is evident when people are

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considered to be the consuming rather than the “contributing” part of society. To turn the citizens into clients or consumers seems to be a kind of erosion of citizenship.

The discourse on citizens’ orientation became widespread after it was suggested that it was possible to design government structures with the focus on the citizens as consumers (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 90). Again, this appeared at a time when there was “considerable evidence to support a pessimistic analysis of the prospects of active citizenship in modern society” (Turner, 2001, p. 189).

It is argued that, while information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to improve the democratic process, expand citizenship, and empower the people, they also have the ability to perpetuate or exacerbate existing inequalities and other divides. With regard to the gap in access to ICTs, some authors have stated that “the information revolution could paradoxically become a cause of even greater inequality and worsening poverty” among developing countries (McNamara & O’Brien, 2000). In addition, there have been comments about the dangers of digital opportunities, with authors pointing out that the “unequal diffusion of technology is likely to reinforce economic and social inequalities leading to a further weakening of social bonds and cultural cohesion” (United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN), 2005, p. 3).

In consequence, the debate on e-government initiatives is most often polarized between those who over-emphasize the negative aspects of ICT (the skeptical or “business as usual” view), on the one hand, and those who argue enthusiastically that ICT will enhance the democratic process (the optimistic or utopian view) on the other. Due to the importance of citizenship, we need a very clear understanding of the opportunities brought by new technologies and their dangers and risks regarding the realization of citizenship and civil rights.

Unfortunately there has been little research attempting to show the relationship between information technology and citizenship, even in the developed world. The reason might be too simple – the economic view of democracy and politics in some dominant democracies seems to continue to defend a very narrow concept of citizenship. In developing countries the situation is the worst, because the official propaganda in favor of some technologies as civic tools, along with most debates, has emphasized the condition of the technology without being clear about the concept of citizens’ information society. If it is true that ICT has done little to change our democracy, and it in itself does not guarantee the realization of the rights of the citizens, research must be done in order to better analyze the relationship between ICT and citizenship.

Thus, there is a need for more empirical research surrounding citizenship and new technologies and not just theoretical discussions. It is known that most e-government initiatives both in developed and developing countries aim at promoting the use of ICTs that try to import successful experiences from e-commerce into e-government in order to improve the efficiency of government bureaucracies, traditionally seen as inefficient and resistant to organizational change.

Consequently, the concept of e-government, in many cases, is seen as a “set of market-driven reforms” in line with the narrow discourse of the New Public Management (NPM) rationale initiated in the early 1980s (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Hood, 1995) in the areas of financial management in the public sector, e-procurement, e-health, e-voting, and in tax control. These are solutions to well-structured problems that have worked all over the world as initiatives framed more towards controlling the lives of citizens than offering them some benefits in terms of (for example) the provision of information, focusing on a lean government team putting “your tax dollars” to work more efficiently in the delivery of a few

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