

Fostering the Success of E-Government Initiatives by Improving User Take-Up

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ABSTRACT

The concept of e-government describes the increasing offer of e-services by governments and the growing use of those by citizens. Drawing on an academic literature as well as public reports, this paper will argue that despite the existence of a wide range of concepts to define e-government, international norms roughly sketch a model and a purpose towards which governments should tend. As failures in the implementation of ICT-driven changes can hinder entire policies and arguably societies, this paper proposes the use of vicarious learning and behavioural decision science to increase the rate of success of ICT-projects in the public sector.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the development of new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and their appropriation by the private and public sectors have been through an acceleration that has never been seen before. This led to deep changes within governments, as well as regarding their relationships with other actors (the citizens and businesses). As Nora and Minc noted in their seminal report,

If the public authorities allow data processing to penetrate in a disorderly way, they preempt the future. On the other hand, no global scenario can be imposed from a single centre without suffocating society or paralyzing government. Therefore, it is necessary to conciliate a maximum of freedom and a minimum of coordination, to facilitate change rather than impose it. (Nora & Minc, 1980: 113)

Thus, the appropriation of ICT by the public sector implies two issues: improving the society's welfare by bettering its services, and doing so in a way which does not lead to unwanted outcomes. Indeed, the question of "why" implementing new ICT in governments cannot be separated from the "how" to do it question. However, the latter is not studied often in research papers or in ways with which we are not fully satisfied. The purpose of this paper is to try to clarify this by answering the question: how to trigger the appropriation of new ICT by the citizens and the administration to achieve the purposes of

e-government? Therefore, this paper will conduct a literature review on the theoretical models used to define "e-government" ("what") before identifying the digital strategies' trends thanks to governmental or international organisation's publications ("where is it going and why"). Then it will briefly offer new ways to study the feasibility of ICT-driven changes in the public sectors, and focus on "how" to implement it thanks to vicarious learning and the use of behavioural decision science. The main aim of this paper is to offer potential ways to increase the rate of success of e-government: in order to do so, a common ground must be established as to what e-government is and which trends it follows.

What is E-Government?

"E-government" is a concept which is used in various contexts and can have different meanings. We will use the following definition (Jayashree & Marthandan, 2010) in this paper: e-government is "the use of technology to enhance information sharing, service delivery, constituency and client participation and governance by transforming internal and external relationships. This includes transactions between government and business, government and citizen, government and employee and among different units and levels of government". The use of internet in a public management context has been linked (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013) to New Public Management (NPM) for the first implementation processes. Indeed, NPM is the approach according to which "the public sector can be improved by the importation of business concepts, techniques and values" (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011: 10) and the fast appropriation of ICT by the private sector led to new expectations from the citizens and was seen as a model regarding cost-effectiveness. Dunleavy et al (2006) characterize NPM with three traits: disaggregation (the preference for

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small and specialised organisations), competition and incentivisation.

However, as early as 2006, the emergence of a new form of governance born from the use of ICT in the public sector was portrayed (Dunleavy et al., 2006): the “Digital-Era Governance” (DEG) with the reintegration of services, holistic services for the citizens and the deepening of ICT-driven changes within the administration (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). Nevertheless, Cordella offers an interesting angle on the subject by coining the term “e-bureaucracy” (Cordella, 2007) which implies that initially, ICT-driven changes were implemented in a NPM context but, as they led to more equality and impartiality, they favoured the citizens according to the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy. This approach is adequate as the budgetary imperatives nowadays compel governments to justify their expenses, thus an ICT project will only be accepted if it is supposed to lead to greater savings later on; therefore both the cost-effectiveness and the positive impact on citizens are present in the concept of “e-government”. To conclude, we can state that e-government is like democracy, we know it when we see it, but it comes in a variety of forms.

Can a Single Trend Be Identified in E-Government Initiatives?

E-government is a theoretical concept which covers a number of different realities. However, e-government is studied by the OECD in its “e-government studies”, by the United Nations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) and the European Commission has gathered data on the subject since 2001 (OECD, 2009). Moreover, many governments created “digital strategies” to assert their priorities in implementing thoroughgoing ICT-driven changes and the European Commission proposed a 10-year strategy on 3 March 2010 called “Europe 2020” which includes a “Digital Agenda”. We mentioned a double challenge (the appropriation of the new ICT by the administration and the citizen) linked to the concept of e-government; if we translate this idea in different terms, this means that e-government is built on citizen’s capabilities (capabilities is defined here as: “what it takes” to do something) but also on the administration’s capabilities. Also, we cannot help noticing that e-government has positive externalities on the entire society. Indeed, it improves the transactions (Jayashree and Marthandan, 2010) between businesses (B2B), between citizens and businesses (B2C); it facilitates the interactions between governments (G2G), between governments and businesses (G2B) and between governments and citizens (G2C). Therefore, the question of “why” moving towards e-government does not deserve more thoughts: the added value of successful ICT-driven changes in the relationship between public services and societies is significant and this kind of measures is usually widely accepted as it is motivated by cost-effectiveness as well as by the idea of doing what is right for the citizens (supporters of “small” or “big” government cannot really disagree as far as

e-government is concerned).

However, the digital strategies from France and the United-Kingdom differ on a number of points but the studies conducted by international organisations seem to advocate for best practices which would lead us to think that “e-government” is a single and well-defined state. Thus, the question “where is it going” deserves some observations.

First of all, it is quite enlightening to take a look at the subtitles of the UN and OECD studies (OECD, 2009; UN, 2012): “e-Government for the people” and “user-centred approaches”. It is clear that e-government has to be designed with the citizens in mind: the notions of transparency and accountability are extremely significant here. Arguably, this is where the difference between the first wave (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013) of NPM and the second one of DEG lies: the reason for implementing ICT-driven projects shifted from a cost-effectiveness justification to more democratic and interventionist motives. It is interesting though to see that the justification for the state intervention is strongly culturally embedded. Indeed, the webpage presenting the digital strategy for the UK (Cabinet Office, 2012) proudly displays: “digital services so good that people prefer to use them”; whereas the press release presenting the French (Cabinet du Premier Ministre, 2013) “feuille de route du gouvernement sur le numérique” (Government’s roadmap for digital technology) asserts that: “the Government will keep its role as a driving force in the definition of an ambitious European digital policy”. This difference in the justification for the state intervention is probably due to the tradition of Colbertism in France.

When looking at the digital strategies of the French and British government, a significant difference in their approach to e-government strikes the reader: the British plan proposes 14 very concrete actions concerning the way administration has to improve its use of ICT (it is very technical and technocratic) whereas the French plan has three very broad pillars (make digital technology an opportunity for youth, strengthen the competitiveness of our companies, promote our values in the digital society and economy) mostly focusing on the impact e-government should have on society. Hence our impression is that the British plan is more practical; we also have to notice again that e-government is a culturally embedded concept. However, this difference in the approach can also be explained by a more advanced state of digital government in the UK than in France. Indeed, the UK has been ranked third in the “world e-government development leader 2012” ranking (United Nations, 2012) and France only sixth. Or, as stated by the European Commission, there are still 30% of people in Europe who have never used the internet. Thus, France might still have to tackle the challenge of getting people to use e-government services whereas the UK can focus on implementing thoroughgoing changes within the administration because the citizens already use e-government services.

To answer the question on “where is it going” is

difficult because, as we have seen, e-government is a culturally and socially embedded concept. Indeed, international organisations seem to be pushing countries in a single direction by using rankings (United Nations, 2012), formulating advice (OECD, 2009), and setting up agendas (e.g. the Digital Agenda for Europe). But those methods are not coercive and consist in the exchange of “best practices”. However, it could be argued that e-government is evolving towards “lean government and platform-based governance” (Janssen, Estevez, 2013) that is to say, that the government is smaller (less public spending and less interventions) and plays the role of an “enabler” to empower pre-existing capabilities within citizens and businesses. Evidence of this shift is to be seen in the move towards the opening of public data but also in the two national strategies we studied here: the UK is trying to cut its bureaucratic routines as much as possible while France is aiming at empowering its businesses and citizens by taking a different road but with the same final objective. Therefore, the important remaining question is “how” to reach this “lean government” state using lean platforms and inspired by the private sector’s best practices.

How Can E-Government Initiatives Be Made Easier?

The question of “how” to implement e-government is the trickiest. Indeed, one characteristic of every project is that it sometimes fails. Here, failure is defined by the lack of users for the new ICT and/or significant additional costs and delays. This trait seems to be even more frequent for ICT-driven changes in the public sector. However, we could argue that given their size and their ambition IT projects led by governments “benefit” from more media-exposure and every backtracking or small failure draws a lot of attention. Giving up on an ICT project in a multinational company is ill-perceived by the shareholders as it represents a loss of money but is even less acceptable for taxpayers. Politically, there is no way out, ICT projects in the public sector must succeed. Indeed, empirical studies (Arduini et al, 2013; Burn & Robins, 2003; Weerakkody et al., 2010, 2012) on ICT-implementation in the public sector have identified roughly the same issues for this kind of project (Weerakkody et al, 2012): “political, fiscal, social, strategic and organisational issues need to be addressed when formulating plans for deploying e-government”. We find here the two challenges that we have already identified: the political, fiscal and social aspects refer to the appropriation by citizens of the new ICT, whereas the strategic and organisational issues can be linked to the appropriation of the ICT by the administration. In this last part of our paper, we will start by focusing on “how” to make public servants use the new ICT before studying “how” to convince the citizens to use it.

There is a certain bias in the study of information systems: the new technology is seen as a “silver bullet” (OECD, 2009), that is to say that the new ICT is seen as enough by itself to change the organisation, what Markus calls “magic bullet thinking” (Markus, 2004). We find this unsatisfactory as it does not

tackle the issue of the appropriation of the ICT by the individuals. Thus, the angle of Ciborra on organisational change and ICT is very relevant as it emphasizes the importance of “improvisation-bricolage” (Ciborra, 1996), that is to say that actors within the organisation will use the new ICT and modify it by doing so, therefore leading to a change in routines: the organisational change. But this opens a new can of worms: if the appropriation of ICT tools needed for e-government depends on the public servants, how can high-level managers play a role in the success of a governmental ICT project? This is why we think that “extrapolation” (Bardach, 2004) of “vicarious learning” (Barzelay, 2007) is a good solution to tackle this issue. Indeed, by using case studies and examples from other countries, managers should be able, thanks to this method, to tell which projects have a better chance to work in a given context. Indeed, there are a lot of case studies conducted by scholars on ICT implementation in different contexts: local administration in Italy (Arduini et al, 2013), a Legal Aid department in Australia (Burn, Robins, 2003), local government in the UK and in Slovakia (Weerakkody et al, 2012), Qatar (Weerakkody et al, 2013)... Moreover, the OECD regularly conducts studies about e-government in different countries and the UN as well as the European Commission provides useful information. Therefore, there is a number of sources available upon which extrapolations can be conducted by public authorities to pick the projects which have a better chance of appropriation by the administration: this is learning from the experience of others.

The other challenge for every governmental ICT-project is to convince citizens to use the new tools, especially since the “paradigm shift towards Citizen Centricity” (OECD, 2009) which can also be defined as the shift from NPM to DEG in other words (or in our definition and more simply: the continuous implementation of e-government). The OECD identifies challenges to the user take-up which we are not going to study here. However, as we have seen with the European Union’s statistics (30% of the EU’s citizens have never used the internet!) as well as the French “Feuille de route pour le numérique”, convincing citizens to use e-government’ services is a major hurdle. The OECD has identified four types of country approaches to increase user take-up (OECD, 2009, p19) but those classical approaches are not going to be studied here either, we will instead offer an approach based on behavioural decision science. Indeed, when it was possible for the first time in France to pay one’s taxes online, the government offered people an additional week and a small tax discount if they used this means rather than the traditional paper form. This is an incentive, that is to say a category of “nudge” (Thaler, Sunstein, 2009). Nudges are changes in the choice architecture which lead people to take the right decisions without the use of coercion: libertarian paternalism is the doctrine behind this approach. Many good results have been achieved thanks to nudges and David Cameron implemented a “Behavioural Insights Team” (“Nudge Unit”) in the Cabinet Office when he became Prime

Minister. This department uses knowledge stemming from academic literature in the field of behavioural decision science to allow public policies and services to achieve better outcomes. For example, it worked on increasing the number of people registered as organ donors. We believe that this type of intervention could lead to good results to increase the take-up of e-government services by citizens.

Theoretical and Methodological Issues

In this paper we offered two possibilities to allow for an increase rate of success in e-government initiatives thanks to an improved user take-up. However, we must mention the difficulties inherent in the use of these. Indeed, behavioural decision science relies on the belief that people would like to make better choices for themselves but cannot because of their biases. Nevertheless, this idea that governments have to intervene to “protect people against themselves” (libertarian paternalism) in a more subtle way than usual (as no coercion is used) is highly criticised as it is sometimes perceived as plain paternalism. Moreover, the long-term effects are still to be studied. Moreover, “vicarious learning” is a powerful tool, but evaluations “ex ante” are difficult to conduct in the public sector as they are costly in time and resources. Also, the political terms are limited in time and the pressure for quick results seriously jeopardises the possibilities to conduct such studies. These limits have to be taken into account, but we still believe that e-government initiatives could be made easier thanks to behavioural decision science and vicarious learning.

Conclusion

To conclude, the use of information and communications technologies by governments is shaping societies: it modifies the way citizens and businesses interact with other individuals or companies as well as with governments. By creating a different framework within which interactions will take place it implies changes in the concept of “social link” as it was before the implementation of the ICT. Thus, it is necessary to study what “e-government” is, what it is trying to achieve and for which reasons, as well as how it intends to do so: the broad picture is needed to draw conclusions regarding our initial question. We took a tour of the existing concepts and models around the notion of e-government and claimed that e-government is a broad concept embracing all the models stemming from academic quarrels (“what”) and is actually evolving towards a user-centred model based on the use of “lean platforms”: a “lean government” (“where is it going”). This tendency towards uniformisation is motivated by international norms (OECD, UN, Digital Agenda 2020...) and new expectations from citizens who believe that “e-government” will provide better and cheaper services (“why”) even though the national digital strategies assume different shapes.

This study was useful to clarify what the expected changes within governments and societies are

because this knowledge is needed to choose how to implement new ICT (we refer to Nora and Minc’s quote). As we identified a double challenge regarding appropriation of the new technologies (by the citizens and the public servants/ the administration), we draw on a different literature to offer new ways to tackle this issue which is not studied in a satisfactory way in the case studies we read. To finish, even if ICT is not a “silver bullet”, its failure can prove perilous for governments as shown with the failures of the website designed to support Obama’s healthcare reform putting the entire policy in jeopardy. This strengthens our belief that the “how to implement” question should be further studied.

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