

Editorial

Information Polity – Developing a truly international journal

The ambition that underlies the development of this new journal is both high and strong. The journal will be *international*, as evidenced both by its substantive content and by its authors. Its content will enable comparisons to be made between different country experiences of the uptake and application of ICT, the Internet and other new media in and around government and democracy. Its authors will come from many different countries, thus bringing to bear upon the analysis of these phenomena a greater spread of theory, concept and modelling than would otherwise be the case.

The journal will also be *engaging of both academics and practitioners*. It should provide for sound and strong learning between them, enabling enhanced applicability and relevance of its academic content on the one hand and more reflective practice on the other. Where possible, the journal will carry pieces by practitioners and it will also carry reviews of practice-oriented reports and other such papers where those are deemed to be having a significant shaping influence upon thinking and practice in these areas of government and democracy.

Finally, the journal will be *scholarly* in the strongest sense of the word. It will support rigorous and evidence-based analysis, whether written by academic or practitioner. It will encourage intelligent speculation and reflection. It will be strong on theory and concept as well as upon scientific deployment of research findings. It will subject submitted manuscripts to rigorous refereeing.

In this second edition of *Information Polity*, this new journal's identity is further secured as a number of these core objectives are realised. This edition carries the first contribution of a practising politician, Roger van Boxtel, a Minister in the Dutch government until July 2002. Van Boxtel had special responsibility for co-ordination of ICT policy for the public sector in The Netherlands. That it should be attractive to practitioners both as readers and writers is one of the stated aims of the journal.

This edition also carries articles that cover extensively the spread of debate in a variety of aspects of both government and democracy. At a macro level, for example, the edition carries a study of pan-African e-government by Richard Heeks, one which raises what Heeks refers to as 'large design-reality gaps' in the application of new systems solutions throughout that continent. In so-doing Heeks raises profound questions about the applicability of Western conceptual domains and systems for what he calls African 'reality'. How universalistic is the e-government movement and, more profoundly, how universalistic should it be?

Heeks' questions are applied against a pan-continental context. Bannister, by contrast, focuses upon a single-nation approach to e-government, that of Ireland. He writes about the enormously ambitious yet relatively unspecified REACH project, one designed to create a 'public services broker' in Ireland. Here is governmental ambition at its loftiest, it would seem. REACH will create a single portal between government and the citizen with 'virtual public servants' sitting at that doorway. As Frank Bannister suggests, it is a project that will bear much further research, not least work that bears upon the prospects for deep organisational shifts that might derive from such a heroic programme of e-government.

At a meso level in conceptual terms, Klaus Lenk has contributed an article to this edition on deficiencies he perceives in the e-government paradigm. Thus, he argues, e-government has come to centre conceptually upon the realisation of new and narrow gauge transactional relationships between governments and their citizens, rather than engaging with the much broader panoply of expectations and opportunities that can reside in a more expansive view of e-government. Lenk's view is a totemic one for this particular journal. This journal has not adopted 'e-government' or 'e-democracy' in its title precisely because our interpretation of these terms is that they are typically used in reductionist modes of the kind to which Lenk draws attention. The term 'information polity', by contrast, opens up opportunities for the social scientific and more general academic enrichment and broadening of these debates and issues, thereby enabling both deeper and broader analysis and understanding.

Articles by Victor Bekkers and Vincent Homburg, on the one hand, and by Jorgen Svensson, on the other, direct our attention to the internal workings of the bureaucratic machine, examining respectively, as they do so, the detail of 'information relationships' and the application of expert systems between and within government organisations. Bekkers and Homburg's article should be read closely by anyone involved with, or interested in, 'joined up government', for they provide both evidence and analysis that "the exchange of information [particularly in 'supervisory relationships'] is often part of game playing between relatively autonomous organisations . . ." As Frank Bannister asserts in his article, we need more research on the nature of, and opportunities for, organisational change within the public services. Bekkers and Homburg provide some of that research, and its conclusions do not make for contentment amongst those who hold that deep changes are occurring in the organisational arrangements of governments as they bend under the weight of new ICT.

Svensson on the other hand draws our attention to the shaping influence of law upon administrative systems, thereby providing a further corrective to any lurch, intentional or otherwise, towards technological determinism. The 'corset' of law acts as the perfect framework for the implementation of expert systems, he argues, as well as for sustainable administrative change. Jorgen Svensson argues that in the particular areas of administrative work to which expert systems have been applied following changes in the legal framework, reversion to previous, more interpretive, administrative practice will not occur. In some parts of public administration, expert systems have a sustainable future in the delivery of new and enhanced forms of administrative justice.

Finally, as Editor, I am keen that this journal should be a strong *point of reference* for scholars and practitioners alike. Articles are one such strong point and so too are reviews. For this journal reviews will be of two kinds. They will be 'standard' book reviews and they will be reviews of government reports that we judge of wide significance for scholars and practitioners; reports whose significance goes beyond the boundaries of their country of origin. Two such reviews in this latter category are carried in this edition: one is an extensive British study of 'government on the Web', and the second a detailed analysis of electronic voting, and also a British study.

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