Book Reviews

Dangerous Enthusiasms. E-government, Computer Failure and Information System Development, by R. Gauld & S. Goldfinch, 2006, Otago University Press, 160pp

Comparative Perspectives on E-government. Serving Today and Building for Tomorrow, edited by P. Hernon, R. Cullen, & H.C. Relyea, 2006, Scarecrow Press, Inc., 412pp

Computerisation and E-Government in Social Security: A Comparative International Study, by M. Adler & P. Henman, July 2005, Research report published in E-Government Series, IBM Center for The Business of Government, 55pp

Compared to the vastly increasing number of consultancy reports on e-government there are not so many academic publications in this field. Offering empirical insights on e-government developments in a large variety of countries, also in comparative perspective, each of these three studies are welcome additions to the scarcely existing academic literature in the field and deserve closer reading therefore.

Dangerous Enthusiasms is the intriguing title of what turns out to be one of the first academic publications on e-government developments in New Zealand. Interestingly it is also one of the very few academic publications offering in-depth empirical insights on the introduction and further development of large ICT systems in public sector organisations over a substantial period of time. The authors present four major e-government projects in varying policy domains in the New Zealand public sector: 1) information management and ICT development in the New Zealand health sector through the 1990s and into the new millennium; 2) implementation of a Health Care information system in a larger public hospital organisation; 3) the Integrated National Crime Investigation System project in the New Zealand Police Force; and 4) the Land Information New Zealand project.

The uniqueness of this study is particularly to be found in its empirical focus: each of the case study descriptions moves way beyond a reporting on system specifications and presents in detail the interrelated story of more established impact factors, such as strategic decision making and planning, information management and information system development, and less conventional impact factors like multiple stakeholders involved, public policy developments, unexpected costs, market competition, standardisation problems, key individuals, staff and low uptake levels. Each of the case studies therefore clearly demonstrates the richness of issues, as well as their complexities, of introducing and managing ambitious ICT systems in different public sector domains and organisations over a substantial period of time. Moreover these case study descriptions show us how important it is to take into account the policy, financial, institutional, political and societal context of e-government project management to look for clarifications of both the dynamic and static outcomes of change management attempts.

It is a pity, therefore, that the authors have put so much emphasis on what they observe as the dangerous side of e-government projects, i.e. failures caused by the introduction and implementation of information systems in the public sector. Although they seem to acknowledge that the assessment of what a failure may be is highly subjective, IS failures in their opinion can be considered as an exception: due to their overwhelming 'ubiquity', IS failures can – or perhaps even should in the authors' view – be held as a norm. Having provided an extensive overview of the literature on IS failures, to explain why large e-government projects are still initiated, the authors propose a model containing four pathological enthusiasms (pp. 17–20):

1. Idolisation: public servants 'idolise' IT and see it as leading to great benefits;
2. Technophilia: more and better technology prevents or fixes problems;
3. Lomanism: feigned or genuine belief of IT suppliers and sales staff in their company's products; and
4. Managerial faddism: new management or structures bring benefits and prevent or fix problems.

In the authors' view, linking each pathological enthusiasm to a key actor within public sector IS development, these four enthusiasms would mutually reinforce each other and create a strongly held belief that new IS or e-government projects will be a good idea – a dream world almost compared to the real story.

When trying to look more objectively at each of the case study descriptions it is actually quite difficult to point at concrete failures or pathological enthusiasms as set out in the analytical framework. For instance, what can be analysed as 'failures' often can be seen as uncertainties or unexpected situations as well; similarly, what can be looked at as pathological enthusiasms can be analysed in terms of trying to develop and implement a vision on e-government. Compared to the very rich empirical data, the analysis and conclusions offered in this book appear to be somewhat forced, unfortunately.

What these case study descriptions clearly show, however, is the complexity of e-government projects and the need to make use of a broader, multidisciplinary perspective to be able adequately to analyse and assess the full story of e-government projects. Institutional and organisation theory, literature on policy coalitions and networks, relationships between politics and bureaucracy, project management and change management are just a few examples of areas that can help to explain these stories – in a more realistic and therefore less negative way however. With that, this book seems to be successful in proving that 'IS failure' is indeed a subjective concept.

A book that provides a somewhat broader perspective in describing and analysing e-government is the edited volume *Comparative Perspectives on E-government.* This publication is an ambitious attempt to cover both an overview of e-government developments in five individual countries, namely Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and a range of topical issues on e-government divided in Foundational Issues:

– Trust in government,
– Access and security,
– Trends and challenges in archiving e-government records,
– Audience Issues such as Citizens' response to e-government and (more) Citizen perspectives on e-government,
– and issues related to evaluating e-government and consequences of e-government (eg digital divide)

The book offers a large variety of interesting descriptions, perspectives and perceptions of e-government. For those readers who are interested in more detailed overviews of national e-government and information policy developments the country studies provided in this volume, particularly those written by local experts, can be especially recommended.

In their final chapter, two of the three editors, Hernon & Cullen, observe that although e-government is still an evolving concept and not fully understood for what it is or what it should be, it is slowly becoming incorporated into the fabric of government (p. 349). This important observation may explain why the editors themselves have chosen a rather restricted notion of e-government to work with throughout this volume. Linking e-government to information management, e-government predominantly is understood as Web-based e-government, ie the provision of government services and information via the Internet for citizens and businesses. In their introductory chapter Hernon & Cullen present a generalised model

of e-government that depicts seven facets; 1) information provision and access; 2) delivery of services; 3) e-commerce 4) emergency response (natural disasters or reporting terrorist threats); 5) procurement; 6) governance or e-engagement; 7) e-compliance (for large and small businesses and for individuals).

By using a restricted web-based and information management-inspired approach towards e-government, the editors predominantly are focused on the "E" of the e-government concept and not so much on the "Government"-side of it, therefore. Consequently, e-government issues dealt with in this volume are specifically targeted on the front-office and not on the back-office of e-government. On the one hand this is a pity, as important issues related to the transformation of government – as well as management of this transformation – as a result of the introduction and use of the Internet in public service provision, are lacking in this volume; on the other hand this choice is understandable when looking at the range of issues already tackled in this 412 pages edited volume. For readers however, to be able to understand better the structuring of this volume and the specific choices made regarding issues as well as presented country examples, it would have been beneficial to have more insight on how each individual chapter fits into the analytical framework provided in the introductory chapter.

A third publication on e-government informs us about international comparative developments in a policy sector where, from an historical perspective, the application of IT started quite early and social security organisations have become heavily reliant on computer technologies for their operations. The research report *Computerisation and E-Government in Social Security* provides comparative data collected in mid-2000 and in late 2004 on the impact of computerisation on social security service provision to citizens in 13 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Countries in this study were selected from three 'welfare state regimes' and included four Scandinavian 'social democratic' countries (ie Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), four continental European 'corporatist' countries (ie Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands), and five Anglo-American 'liberal' countries (ie Australia, Canada, Ireland, the UK and the USA); the late 2004 study included only 10 countries however, as Belgium, Finland, and Germany did not take part in that follow-up survey.

Before presenting any data to the public the authors provide their readers with a 'health warning': as findings are based on, in the majority of cases, the opinions of two, and, in a few cases, even only one expert informant in each country, the authors treat their findings as provisional outcomes. With the aim of obtaining an abstracted overview of the experience of computerisation in social security in each country, these findings are intended to serve as a platform for more systematic research in circumstances where no other relevant data sources are available.

Presenting findings in strong, numerical ways, this 'health warning' certainly should be strongly taken into account when reading the outcomes of this study. The methodological basis for the presented findings shows so many weaknesses that readers really need to be critical about whether they are confronted with actual, realistic comparisons and what the implications of these findings may be. This situation should not deter readers completely however. The fact that the authors were able to use well established expert informants in each selected country, often academics but also top-level practitioners, has led to an interesting comparative snapshot reporting of something similar to a high-level expert group meeting on the history, aims, and process of computerisation in social security. For example, an interesting, perhaps counterintuitive finding indicates that liberal welfare states (Australia, Canada, and the USA) appear to have been the most innovative in using new technologies while the Scandinavian social democratic welfare states (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland) appear to have been less so. Other examples are the finding that whereas most countries computerised their social security systems during the 1970s and early 1980s, Germany, Australia and the USA did so earlier (mid 1950s), but Belgium did not do so until mid 1980s; a combination of two findings indicating that paying benefits, assessing entitlement

to benefit, and maintaining contribution records were among the first functions to be computerised, and that the most widespread computerised functions today are paying benefits, implementing changes to benefit rates, financial accounting, assessing entitlement to benefit, and maintaining contribution records; and finally the finding that computerisation has led to an increase in the importance of bureaucracy and managerialism in the delivery of social security.

Although this study rambles quite a bit from a methodological point of view, findings like these examples make readers wonder and ask for more in-depth social scientific research into their origins and backgrounds. With that, they appear to meet the authors' aim of this report to obtain a provisional, abstracted overview of the experience of computerisation in social security in 13 OECD countries.

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