

## Book Review

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**Governance and Information Technology From Electronic Government to Information Government**, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger & David Lazar [eds]. London: MIT Press, 2007.

This book promises much. Its title alone is enough to whet the appetite of this journal editor whose own publications, including this journal, have been largely devoted to the idea that social scientists including political and policy scientists and public administrationists should devote their energies to the study of information and its flow in and around government. It follows that these same scholars should reduce their focus upon information and communication **technologies** [ICTs] and concentrate instead upon those adjectives that precede the T in that abbreviation. What do we know about the ways in which government actors are using information? Do we understand how information-intensive and much vaunted ‘evidence based’ policy making works in practice? Have we as scholars sufficiently focussed our attention upon how information that shapes policy formation is derived, how it is structured, what assumptions does it hold within it, whether it is more or less accommodating of specific socio-economic interests? Questioning such as this is needed on so many of the polity’s and society’s information-rich programmes and projects. As social science scholars we need to research freedom of information more than we have; we need to understand the informational implications of identity systems in the polity; we need to know more about the detail of how government actors manage their databases and how they arrive at data-matches and forms of ‘social sorting’; and although privacy has been written about extensively by social scientists, many related questions remain about what we mean by personal privacy in contemporary society and whether the current social contract between government and its citizens has moved us away from notions of privacy as they might have prevailed only 10 years ago, let alone decades and centuries before that. The issues in studying the information polity are legion and remain a relatively unexplored backwater of the social scientific research referred to above.

So, my appetite was whetted on picking up this book, I may have found manna from heaven or was it to be more stale bread? Now that I have read all chapters of the book, both those written by the editors and those written by contributing authors, I come to a judgement: taken as a whole the book does steer us towards this new way of thinking. It does so gently and largely atheoretically throughout its 300 plus pages. It does so through its interesting mix of well written chapters and equally well written case study material. This book may not stand as a watershed volume taking us along the relatively untrodden pathways to which I refer above. It will however stand as a better volume than most in the study of ICTs and Government. Whilst some of the contributors remain within the all too familiar tracks of e-government studies, some do try to enlarge our vision of the information polity.

The first chapter, written by the editors, takes both an overview of conventional e-government and then sets out “our vision of an ‘information government’ paradigm which focuses upon the flow of information within, to, and from government”. This vision is developed in part by linking the development of so-called ‘network governance’ and networked technologies. A particularly well written short case study of changes in Austrian passport policy shows how new information flows first enable a highly decentralised delivery system for issuing passports yet later facilitate one that is highly centralised. As the authors say, cases such as this remove any technologically deterministic inclination on the part of policy makers and scholars and reveal a politically determined set of outcomes instead. And they assert too that cases such as this show how the study of information flow sheds light on the detailed nature of the policy process.

Darrell West's chapter stays firmly within the e-government camp, concluding after a *tour d'horizon* of the state of e-government, that expectations, often Utopian, deriving from the widespread adoption by governments of ICT, fall far short in practice. So too the chapter that follows, by Edwin Lau, derives from an e-government perspective. However, Lau widens the perspective when he concludes that there are other gains to the polity than the direct financial benefits often purported to derive from narrowly perceived e-government initiatives. He argues that there are wider non-financial gains to be had from better informational relationships across the polity, not least between governments and their citizens.

The following chapter is by Jane Fountain and it strides more fully than its predecessors along the intended direction of the editors. Here, Fountain argues with great clarity that public officials face perverse incentives as they come to terms with the new informational intensities that they face in their work. As new informational capabilities make working across departmental boundaries easier to achieve in principle, so the public official must somehow retreat from the incentives of the past that have led her or him to pursue departmental gains rather than whole system advantages. Such system-wide thinking needs "*strong governance, coordination, communication, and control systems that must nevertheless be implemented in a collaborative way to sustain the participation of actors*". Here in a nutshell is one of the fundamental dilemmas of information era governance.

The next four chapters form Part 2 of the book and have a somewhat more 'natural' informational perspective. Cary Coglianese examines the potential for broadening the democratic input into rule-making or regulation. Can rule-making be moved out of the bureaucratic domain and into the democratic milieu? Coglianese's conclusions are measured. To bring citizen input into rule-making can only be very limited given the disengagement of most citizens from that arcane process. However, the Internet does hold some promise for greater inclusivity than has previously existed.

Following Coglianese's acknowledgement that opening up government in respect of regulatory rule-making can only be very limited in impact, Herbert Burkert's chapter on freedom of information and electronic government also adopts a measured perspective. Burkert argues that the dominant concepts of e-government contain the field within the parameters set largely by e-commerce. There the relationship between citizen and government is viewed as transactional. A full-blown freedom of information environment leads to an holistic view in which transaction is embraced by transparency. Burkert asks whether civil society organisations are strong enough to develop the information requests that will stimulate transparency and indeed whether access legislation is sufficient as more and more public activities are located in the private sector, a point which from a UK perspective has especial relevance as this matter is taken forward through a current enquiry.

Monique Girard's and David Stark's chapter covers the rebuilding projects that have been developed in Lower Manhattan, New York, following 9/11 and the role of enhanced information flow within that context. Information flow has been more important in citizen to citizen relations in the city than it has been in coordinating government. But, more importantly, that information flow about projects and means of renewal in the city has stimulated a new 'interpretive dimension' amongst citizens and groups that fed in to specific projects. However, the authors also point to a further dimension of great significance in such settings, that of 'memory'. The temporary nature of many projects has led to a parallel temporariness of the web-sites that supported them. If collective learning is to be a valued outcome of these collective interpretations and new projects then archiving becomes a matter of urgency so that knowledge is not lost forever in a nether world somewhere beyond cyberspace.

Section 2 concludes with a chapter by Matthew Hindman on 'open source politics', focusing on the 2004 Presidential election and at the web-sites that were put in place to activate citizens as well as to convince them of the way to cast their votes. Hindman shows that 'winner-take-all' patterns have

emerged as this form of politics favours the organised few over the many and as only a very small number of web-sites are successful. Those running the success stories are unrepresentative of the US public and consequently “the egalitarian rhetoric used to justify open source politics is increasingly in tension with the elite nature of its leadership”.

The three chapters in Part 3 of this book ask searching questions about changing evaluation processes that ‘information government’ [as opposed to electronic government] demands. Robert Behn provides a stimulating chapter that introduces us to the concept of P-Government [performance government]. Here we find Behn analysing 4 levels of e- and i-government. These move us from e-government information provision, through to e-government automation which improves existing flow of information between citizen and government, on to e-government re-engineering which captures and creates additional information and thence to p-government, a new mode of information-intensity in which information is treated as a resource for analysis leading to performance improvement. However, the core issue for Behn is how these approaches are to be evaluated and the tools of analysis for such evaluation are weak and under-developed.

Eppler’s chapter that follows examines information quality. Such quality he argues must be addressed at four levels: the relevance of informational content; ‘content validity’; the process of information flow within interactions; and ‘underlying infrastructure’. Written from a normative perspective Eppler concludes that to achieve information quality improvements in public management settings will not be easy. How do we motivate public servants to improve continuously their information holdings and the management of them?

Finally, David Lazar and Maria Christina Binz-Sharf offer a critical account of the human context of new forms of networked governance. They ask how an extant human network affects the diffusion of information and how does a human system bring about the creation of new information. ‘What is the role of soft networks in the development of hard networks’, they ask.

In concluding, the editors state “we are thus at a pivot point in the role that information may play in governance”. They have certainly attempted in this volume to stimulate interest in the nature of that pivot point; to stimulate awareness within scholarly and policy communities of the case for moving on from e-government to i-government and for that alone I recommend this volume wholeheartedly.

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