

Editorial

Digital Visions and Digital Identity

This edition of Information Polity takes us through a revealing historical account of the movement for e-government in Denmark to a series of vitally significant articles clustered under the heading of ‘Identity Management’. The first of these is a prizewinning paper from this year’s European Group on Public Administration [EGPA] conference written by Birgit Jaeger and Karl Lofgren of Roskilde University. As Editor of this journal I am hoping that we will have the opportunity to run more of these ‘best papers’ in the future too. The cluster of papers on the topic of Identity Management has been brought together by Miriam Lips of Victoria Wellington University in New Zealand. Identity Management is a hugely important topic for public administration and politics in the digital age and one upon which Information Polity is well placed to offer insights for policy and practice. More papers on this topic will be welcomed.

Jaeger and Lofgren in their prize-winning conference paper adopt an historical perspective on e-government, arguing that doing so provides insights that the assumptive world of much scholarship on the subject has hitherto neglected or ignored. By examining e-government in this historical way the authors track the nuances of policy shift that reveal counter-intuitive consequences for understanding the development of e-government in Denmark. As these authors state

“the empirical data regarding Denmark presented here demonstrates that some of the claims that the Danish strategy was more ‘democratic and inclusive’ [15], represented the retreat of government and a shift towards other forms of governance [3], and entailed important voluntary commitment [2], cannot be supported.”

And as a summary of their main finding they further state that e-government policy is

“no longer part of an overall visionary future policy of an inclusive information society, but has become an integrated part of apolitical administrative processes of pay-rolls and public procurement.”

It is perhaps a paradox of this era that whereas many scholars have declaimed against the heady expectations that early visions of e-government have led us towards, visions which in turn have inevitably produced under-achievements and even failures, those same scholars, including myself, would nonetheless regret the diminution of that vision by stealth, as in Denmark, with e-government becoming merely a prosaic adjunct to governing and government.

The remaining four papers in this edition are on the subject of identification, identity and identity management in what Lips refers to as the ‘age of digital identity’. Working from three major empirically based studies of identification practices in and around government in both the UK and New Zealand Lips raises important questions for policy, practice and research perspectives as she unfolds the arguments of this paper. It is clear from this paper that government departments are increasingly drawn towards issues of personal identity as they seek to provide service in this era. But how should citizens react towards what governments are doing in this respect? Should we use the interpretive lens of ‘surveillance’ with its largely negative connotations or should we see it as a necessary part of government service providing that brings new and desirable qualities to the implementation of public policy? Lips looks again at each

of these perspectives, the ‘surveillance state’ and the ‘service state’, and at the same time introduces a further concept that might aid interpretation, that of the ‘fair state’. This latter is provocative for it raises important questions of trust between citizen and state but, in Lips’ view, it seems that citizens may indeed need to put their trust in those that administer identification processes on behalf of the state. Here perhaps are the new ‘Guardians’, simultaneously pursuing service gains whilst watchful of overweening intrusions into citizen privacy, resulting in the delivery of fairness for the citizen in the state.

Malcolm Crompton comes to his article as a leading practitioner in matters relating to citizen privacy. He was Australia’s first Privacy Commissioner. Crompton draws out what might be referred to as the technocratic perspective that dominates identity management [IDM]. Here, as he says, the citizen is perhaps the last to be consulted on his or her identity and the issues that surround its digital capture and use because this aspect of governance has largely been reduced to matters technical, to be organised on behalf of governments and their citizens by technical experts. Earlier, in reviewing Lips’ paper, I referred to the issue of trust. Can we and should we put our trust in government actors working at the heart of these identification processes? Crompton’s position on this question, looked at from an identity management perspective, is a resounding ‘no’ if that trust is based on acceptance of the remoteness of these actors from the citizens whose identity they seek to manage. Crompton is clear that citizen acceptance of IDM is crucial if it is to succeed and that acceptance can only derive from a citizen-centric approach to its design and implementation.

Marie Shroff, New Zealand’s Privacy Commissioner, and her co-author Annabel Fordham offer a further dimension to the issues confronted in digital public administration. They examine the ‘identity-privacy nexus’, asking to what extent the individual citizen can control identity in the digital era and maintain a desirable level of privacy at the same time. They raise too the profoundly related issue of the extent to which our societies are slipping into surveillance societies. Identity, they argue, is the essence of humanity yet now in the digital era many citizens have their ‘identities’ managed by business firms and governments alike, yet these formalised and technicised approaches to identity bear little resemblance to the subjective senses of self a citizen will have at different times of their lives and in different social and employment roles. Shroff and Fordham draw upon the work of artists and writers to develop a sense of identity in this thought provoking paper. And they finish with a paragraph that should haunt those responsible for designing our digital identities:

The challenge for those working in identity management is to raise their eyes from the bits and bytes, the fascination of the applications, new products, delivery and efficiency gains – and think about the real impacts of identity management. For it is dealing not just with milliards of noughts and ones, but also with the very fabric of how we define ourselves as individuals.

Finally in this edition we have a paper from Simone van der Hof, of Tilburg University in The Netherlands and Esther Keymolen from the Dutch Scientific Council in Den Haag. They look at the ‘electronic child record’ [ECR] system that is replacing all paper records on health and ‘psycho-social’ development of children aged between 0 and 19 in The Netherlands. Their excellent title captures perfectly the essence of these authors’ concerns as this giant database begins to take on an impetus that goes beyond its original stated intentions as it becomes more and more involved with ‘Shaping Minors with major Shifts’. They paint a portrait of future Dutch society that seems Orwellian in its implication when they say:

“In this scenario, extensive monitoring of children well into adulthood is paramount to be able to determine how they will (potentially) develop themselves – physically, socially and emotionally – and what risks they may (potentially) pose to others or society or run themselves. In other words, with

the help of the ECR and the growing number of parties involved, policy-makers attempt to predict the likely future of each child. They want to be able to impinge on the natural course of children's lives if the sum of their data adds up to a great likelihood of danger and damages.

As with other papers in this edition these authors take us back to the importance of trust relationships if big systems such as ECR are to gain social acceptance, and yet, they lament, this building of trust is not seen as a priority element within current policy. Simone van der Hof and Esther Keymolen have provided a paper which should provoke thought and comment both from those inside our systems of government and those external to those systems whose adopted role is to analyse new systems such as ECR in the public interest. I trust this paper together with the others in this edition will be widely read.

JA Taylor, October, 2010.