Book Reviews

Public Sector Information in the Digital Age, Georg Aichholzer and Herbert Burkert (eds) 2004.
Between Markets, Public Management and Citizens' Rights, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK. p. 342.

This book deals with an important, but vexed, question, one which should be of interest both to scholars of the digital society and to governments that must regulate it. This question is the extent to which public service information (PSI) – a collective noun for the myriad data generated by public service agencies in the course of their work – should be regarded as a public good, to be made freely and publicly available, and the extent to which it should be regarded as a commodity, to be bought and sold. The book sets the debate within changing political and ideological contexts, including the impact of public services liberalisation, on the one hand, and the strengthening of human rights legislation, including the right to personal privacy, on the other. The result is a timely contribution to key debates in national and pan-European public policy for the digital age. So far as I know, it is also one of the first books to enter this field. As such, it is very welcome.

Many of the papers in this collection first saw the light of day at a conference in Vienna held under the auspices of the EU's COST Action A14 on Government and Democracy in the Information Age. The collection has since been revised and extended for this book. This format has allowed the editors to bring together many acknowledged experts in this field, and the book benefits greatly from their extensive knowledge of policy debates and developments in a wide range of countries. The result is neither an exercise in comparative social science nor a balanced review of a substantive field of public policy: the authors do not seek to explain cross country differences in information policy, nor does the collection, as a whole, provide a forum for protagonists from various sides of this debate to state their various arguments. Rather, this book offers a platform for a wide range of international experts to make a common argument: that open access to PSI – where governments charge no more than the marginal costs of making PSI available widely and freely – is of much greater economic, social and political benefit to their nations than policies which allow, or encourage, the commodification and exclusive exploitation of information.

The overall conclusion, ably stated by Herbert Burkert and Peter N Weiss, is that governments should therefore develop policies that support full, open and unrestricted access to PSI. It is important to note, however, that Burkert's and Weiss's argument – along with that of several other contributors – goes way beyond (what is often presented as) the standard case for Freedom of Information. For the purpose of this book, PSI not only includes public service administrative data and information about government policy, but also cultural artefacts produced by public services in the course of their publication, educational and broadcasting activities, and research data, spatial data such as maps, and meteorological data. In other words, it includes information that is offered for sale by many governments in Europe. Nevertheless, Burkert and Weiss argue that governments should encourage the private, commercial sector to meet the needs of citizens for value added information services by making all forms of PSI available for commercial exploitation at marginal cost, and that governments should also avoid the imposition of copyright or other kinds of intellectual property rights.

The dilemmas governments face in making information policy is laid bare in the opening chapters in this collection. Charles Raab's chapter deals authoritatively with the many layered tensions in national

and pan-European policy between increased accessibility to PSI and the securing of privacy for citizens who have no choice but to surrender increasing amounts of information about themselves to a wide range of public services. Likewise, Corien Prins presents a short, but masterly overview of the complex problems posed by the assertion of a constitutional right for citizens to access PSI in a world where information is increasingly regarded by a growing range of knowledge industries as a commodity to be owned and exploited for commercial advantage. Maeve McDonagh and Dag Wiese Schartum show clearly that, faced with these dilemmas, European governments, in particular, have adopted no very clear, consistent or successful stances.

Faced with what might thus be seen as equivocation by governments, two chapters in Part Six restate the case for open access for individual citizens, mainly on grounds of effective delivery of public services and enhancing democracy. Georg Aichholzer and Puay Tang offer an interesting account of the winding paths to open accessibility taken by governments in the UK and Austria, while, Herbert Kubicek provides specific suggestions for legislative and business process change on the basis of his award winning work on e-government for the municipality of Bremen.

For this reviewer, however, the four chapters that deal with the most controversial and fundamental issues raised by this book are those by Yvo Volman, Robert Gellman, Peter Weiss and Bargmann, Pfeifer and Piwinger. All these authors believe that the new knowledge-based industries of the digital age are critical for the economic health of contemporary nations. They argue accordingly that access to PSI at no more than marginal cost is essential for the health of these industries and is justified on grounds of economic efficiency as well as on democratic and social grounds. The normative case is argued systematically in the valuable chapter contributed by Bargmann et al. Robert Gellman, a consultant on privacy and information policy on Capitol Hill, uses his intimate knowledge of American policy to support his thesis that the United States has achieved the most vibrant information market place in the world as a result of constitutional, legal and administrative changes at federal level. These changes, he believes, have not entirely kept up with technological change, but are nevertheless sufficient to show that constant change in each of these spheres is required for the US's continuing economic health. Volman, an EU Commission insider, presents a similar argument with equal passion and clarity in relation to pan European information policy. In what for this reviewer is, perhaps, the most powerful chapter in the book, Peter Weiss, a policy analyst in the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, makes the case for unrestricted access to PSI, particularly scientific, environmental and statistical information. He argues, firstly, that government information should be regarded as a valuable national resource, and that the benefits to society – economic, social, scientific and cultural – will be maximised if all forms of information funded by taxpayers are made available as cheaply and widely as possible.

The changing relationship between government and commercial interests is illustrated in some detail in four case studies of policy on, respectively, meterological data (Michael Kampas), spatial data infrastructure (Massimo Craglia and Michael Blakemore), public broadcasting (Peter Dusek, Philipp Marouschek and Martin Szerencsi) and cultural heritage (Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger). These chapters not only provide substantial grist for the overall conclusion of the book, but also offer detailed analyses of the changing policy frameworks in these important fields from both academic and practitioner perspectives.

This, then, is a book that takes sides in an important policy debate. Not all readers will agree with the side it takes. It deserves wide attention, nevertheless. The contributions are generally well-written and stem from deep inside knowledge and experience, or from meticulous, well-referenced scholarship, and oftenfrom both. It has also been carefully edited – an important consideration in a book co-authored by

people from so many countries and backgrounds. I am therefore happy to recommend it as a useful and authoritative survey of an important academic field, as well as an interesting contribution to policy.

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Measuring e-Government: Refining approaches – influencing governments. Accenture; *Leadership in Customer Services: New Expectations, New Experiences*. Booz, Allen, Hamilton; *Beyond e-Government: the world's most successful technology enabled transformations*. INSEAD, Paris, November, 2005. The [UK] Cabinet Office; *Transformational Government: enabled by technology*. CM 6683. November, 2005

Readers of *Information Polity* are familiar with the burgeoning 'industry' of e-government measurement and evaluation. In recent editions we have carried comprehensive articles on this subject, articles that have looked across the spectrum of e-government metrics, comparing and contrasting what is being measured as well as seeking to establish the likely usefulness of these measures to governments [Janssen et al, 2004; Kunstelj & Vintar, 2004]. Janssen and his colleagues refer to the "booming industry" of measurement and are concerned that governments should not slavishly follow the outpourings of this industry with all of its emphasis upon 'top down' generic measures. Instead governments should seek to evaluate the 'findings' from these studies in a quest for establishing genuine applicability to their own circumstances. Kunstelj & Vintar are critical too of the way in which measurement has settled upon e-government. They have argued that the main focal point for the assessment of e-government has been Internet and consumption dominated, thus effectively excluding the efforts made to use digital tools to re-engineer the back offices of government, for example. In scanning a myriad of measurement efforts they call for an integrated approach to measurement, covering all of these various aspects.

And so we come to the three additions to the debate reviewed here. They vary in their approaches quite markedly yet they all have one major feature in common. Each of them, commensurate with what we might call the new wave of thinking about e-government, downplays the autonomy of the 'e' that has for so long shaped debate. No longer are we reading about e-government as if it were a separable domain of activity, to be analysed in its own right. Now at last we see consultancy firms and national policy makers, such as the e-Government Unit of the UK's Cabinet Office, working towards a new paradigm, one that places policy goals as pre-eminent and one that sees digital opportunities for performance enhancement resident in the realisation of those goals. It is an approach, therefore, that is beginning to place due emphasis upon the wider considerations of the 'information polity' rather than upon the technical and narrow gauge managerial issues that have predominated in the e-government debate. Thus the Accenture Report argues that whilst e-government can lead to service improvements what it cannot do

"is lead to the sweeping transformation of government service that will lead to high performance . . . this change is bigger than e-government alone; it implies an entirely new vision of leadership in customer service . . . e-Government is a catalyst of this change, it is also only one component of the change".

Also wanting to change course in the ways in which e-Government is evaluated is the Booz, Allen & Hamilton study. They argue, in keeping with Janssen and his colleagues [2004], that

"all-encompassing e-government indices must be treated with care. Our view is that *concrete examples of successful practice* [their italics] are more interesting and instructive".

And the UK Cabinet Office paper being reviewed here argues in similar vein that

"technology alone does not transform government but government cannot transform to meet modern citizen expectations without it".

Thus far, so refreshing.

Each of these consultancy studies and the UK Government paper will repay reading by those interested in both the measurement of performance in this field and in the way in which plans are laid to deliver improvements. The Accenture Report and the UK Government paper have close relationships, not least that the gradual slippage in the international league tables compiled and reported by Accenture provides one of the reasons why the UK Government paper has come forward at this time. The Booz, Allen and Hamilton paper sits somewhat differently however and it is to that paper that this review first turns.

Booz, Allen and Hamilton's title gives away their core position. 'Beyond e-Government' begins with the clearly articulated view that e-Government is now in its third wave of development. Infrastructures and basic service deliveries are in place leaving ICT-enabled business transformation the next thing to achieve. And this latter is significantly more than re-engineering existing services; it is about finding and implementing new ways of realising policy objectives using ICT. In keeping with my earlier comments in this review, here we are moving away from an implied technicism and towards a strategically sophisticated perspective on policy-led, ICT-enabled shifts in the way Governments realise their objectives. The fourth wave of e-Government suggested by this report and yet to arrive is more heady still. Here in 'next generation government':

"ICT becomes so engrained that defining e-Government as a separate entity ceases to be helpful"

This study offers the reader two rewards in particular, in addition to its generally high quality analytical thrust: it is a source of rich overarching data, tracking trends and movements in the 9 countries studies – Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, UK and the USA; and in its qualitative case studies from different public service domains within these 9 countries. In the first of these we can see, for example, that the service domains displaying most sophistication in the utilisation of ICT in these countries are 'Revenue/Tax [unsurprising], Education and Transport whilst the laggard domains are Health and Public Protection [both somewhat surprising given the level of investment in these services]. The second of these rewards comes from summary case studies [the *concrete examples of successful practice*- as above] from within each of these service domains. So, for example, in Transport we find a neat summary of London's Oystercard initiative and Japan's electronic toll collection scheme. Very high uptake of the Oystercard is one key measure of its success, according to this report, and another its widely applauded environmental benefit as paper based transactions are replaced by digital [paperless] communication. In the Japanese case of electronic toll collection beneficial results include massive downturns in road congestion coupled with huge 'buy-in' to the new system. These brief summaries provided in this report can only be 'taster' studies and that is all this particular report offers for them. For policy makers and those on the systems development side they offer potential first ports of call for their own development work; for academics they offer teaching vignettes that will help to supplement deeper and more critical evaluations.

The Accenture Report, one of a series stretching back for 5 years, places its emphasis upon the development of leadership in customer focussed government. It brings forward new measures for understanding what is going on in forms of e-government particularly in support of what it considers to

be one of its key questions "how much measurable value have governments actually delivered in putting services on-line?"

The Report covers 22 countries from a wholly revised perspective compared to previous reports from this company. It draws 4 main conclusions that reveal something of the strength of this report as a whole, offering an explanation of why it has been taken so seriously as it was in the UK case discussed below:

– E-government as conventionally understood is well advanced and, in keeping with the earlier discussion in this review, should now be absorbed into a much broader agenda of public services delivery. Once leadership in public service becomes the prime focus then leader countries in conventionally measured e-government begin to slip in league tables.

– Strength of performance in this context will in future be judged by across-the-board performance in all aspects of public service provision to include the development and evaluation of multi-channel implementation.

– Citizens want e-government forms of provision more than governments are able to deliver them, to an extent that they are willing to cede personal data to governments in order to enhance such provision.

– Governments are making decisions to invest in forms of e-government without a clear idea of the impacts they wish to achieve. There appear to be insufficient attempts by many governments to find out citizen preferences for service delivery and to respond to those in positive ways.

I began this review by referring to 2 studies that have been reported in the pages of *Information Polity*. Each of those studies was critical of aspects of measurement regimes employed in e-government. It is of particular interest in this context that this Accenture report breaks new methodological ground. There are 2 component parts to the methodology employed by Accenture: first they measure 'service maturity', capturing both the breadth of services that are available on-line, and their depth ie whether they are simple uni-directional information services or more complex forms of transactional service. These components sum to 50% of the total score available. The second component covers 'customer service maturity'. This measure captures the extent to which "government agencies manage interactions with their consumers [citizens and businesses] and deliver service in an integrated way". Again these aspects account for 50% of the total score available.

This change to a more holistic and certainly more customer-centric measurement device has caused the rankings of the 22 countries involved in the study to change markedly. The headline outcome is that Canada and the US are the top 2 countries in the world ranking with the UK a comparatively lowly 12th, sitting just on the median average score for the 22 countries surveyed. Scandinavia is well represented above the UK [Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden] and other European countries in the top 12 are France and The Netherlands.

For the UK the gradual realisation that the country was slipping in international league tables such as those produced by Accenture has had a bearing upon the search for a new e-Government strategy. The third report under review here *Transformational Government: enabled by technology* is testament to the strength of the political pressure to improve international performance. So what measures does the UK propose in this document that will improve its relative position? First it argues that the challenge is: "not just to do IT better... but also to do IT differently to support the next phase of public service reform". Second, and importantly UK government sees the need for 3 "key transformations":

– The design of services around the needs of the citizen or business and not the producer of the services.

– The development of a "shared service culture" between front and back offices.

– The broadening and deepening of professional approaches for planning, delivery, management, skills and governance.

Thus the UK provides an example of a profound reaction [an effect] as the outcome of a profound critique [a cause] of its performance in e-Government. Perhaps league tables do have merit after all, or should that judgment be reserved until we see evidence, perhaps in the next Accenture Reports, of the UK improving its overall performance?

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