

Editorial

The Art of the Possible: Innovation, smart government and the enduring braking-power of traditional public administration

Four papers are included in this first edition of the 2015 Volume of Information Polity. That seems like you have one less paper than normal but let me assure you that in content length and quality this edition is at least as long as normal because our final paper is double the normally accepted length and, of course, we maintain our usual high quality throughout. Moreover, the inclusion of this double length paper here is done for more reasons than it meeting our normal quality evaluation. Firstly, you will find it is a very useful resource document for researchers, covering, as it does, so much of the relevant literature on ‘Smart Cities and Government’ and offering a synoptic overview. Secondly, not only that, I have included it in this edition as a herald for a Special Issue that I expect to publish later this year, all of whose papers are looking at aspects of smart government.

The two opening papers of this edition are focussed upon innovation. The first of these is from four German scholars Basanta Thapa [Potsdam], Björn Niehaves [Siegen], Claudius Seidel [EIT ICT Labs, Berlin] and Ralf Plattfaut [Munster]. I take the view that this paper is striking a right chord at the right time. A movement is beginning to grow surrounding public administration, one that argues that old style bureaucratic providers of public services [old e-gov if you like], with their distance from those to whom they provide service on behalf of those who pay for these services, are outmoded and should be replaced by a more energised administration that is more in tune with citizens as a source of innovative ideas and endeavour. This argument reminds me of the new book by Steve Hilton, Visiting Professor at Stanford and formerly senior adviser to the UK Prime Minister David Cameron, *More Human: Designing a World Where People Come First*. His argument, rather as implied in this article published here, is that deep frustrations surround our contemporary administrative systems because of this inherent disengagement with citizens. This German paper is excellent in looking empirically at the attitudinal relationship between administrations and citizens. Administrations are shown not to value the expertise of citizens, at the same time mistrusting motivations citizens might say they have to become involved in policy innovations. From the citizen side, the paper shows that many motivational factors are at work as people seek to become involved in public policy innovation, with the paper lending force to the ‘untapped resource’ argument in favour of citizen involvement.

The second paper published here examines the thorny policy question of how governments can stimulate services innovation in the era of open data. It is written by Iryna Susa and Åke Grönlund from Örebro University, Sweden and Marijn Janssen from Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands. Much has been written about the transformational prospectus of big and open data, a lot of it from Utopian or at least quasi-Utopian perspectives. What these authors do is to examine some of the attendant detail of how companies and thence societies can benefit from this new data availability, if at

all, and what strategies public agencies can best follow if these supposed gains are to be realised. These authors find complex rather than simple pictures emerging from their evidence. Crucially they find that no ‘best way’ exists at two points in the innovation chain. First, motivating factors for businesses to innovate vary widely. There is no single best way. Second, they find that data providers [public agencies for the most part] are giving insufficient attention to what they refer to as ‘facilitating conditions’ for data use and innovational outcomes. As they conclude “generalizing in the open data domain creates inadequate expectations.” Utopia, it would seem, is once again postponed.

The third paper in this edition is authored by Danish academics, Jeremy Rose, John Stouby Persson and Lise Tordrup Heeger, respectively from the Universities of Skövde, Aalborg and Aarhus. Their paper is of central importance for those who, like me, have come into the field of study represented by *Information Polity* from a Public Administration tradition. They identify three traditional themes in public administration and then with their empirical work test which of these themes predominates and in what form. These themes are administrative efficiency, service improvement and citizen engagement with each of these providing its own logic for progressing forms of digital government. Their survey of Danish local authority managers designed to elicit these actors’ value positions shows a “heavy bias towards administrative efficiency and an absence of concern for citizen engagement”. For those of us familiar with the literature on e-government and digital government more generally these findings provide us with rich explanatory material for the expectation – achievements gap that is so much a part of this field.

Finally, J. Ramon Gil-Garcia and Theresa A. Pardo both from Albany NY and Taewoo Nam from Myongji University, Korea have produced the excellent paper to which I refer at the start of this editorial comment. They present their thinking on research and practice in the area of the so-styled ‘smart city’. They provide both a rich conceptualization of the smart city as a resource for public administration researchers and government practitioners as well as bridge building between smart cities research and practice. In so-doing they recognise that there is little clarity about this new concept of the smart city and they proceed towards the development of this concept, one that includes what they see as its main components as well as other more specific features. All in all this paper is a major contribution to this topic in its own right but, more than that, it provides a useful general introduction to the special issue, to be published later this year, as I say above.

JA Taylor, Editor in Chief, May 2015.