

Book Review

E-Government in Canada: Transformation for the Digital Age, by Jeffrey Roy. (University of Ottawa Press, 2006)

‘Transformation’ is the declared goal of the e-government program of many countries. It has a number of meanings, depending on context. At the very least it implies change at the organisational level, vertical and horizontal integration between government agencies, and between central and local government. For some it means a new citizen-centric focus in the service relationship between government and citizens. For others, it implies a more radical change in the relationship between government and citizens, an evolution of the current model of parliamentary democracy adopted in most Western countries to a new model in which there is greater citizen involvement in government through ‘e-democracy,’ and ‘e-participation’, and “new possibilities for re-conceptualising how power is organized and deployed” in the modern state, as the back cover suggests.

That Roy is intellectually drawn to the last of these, is clear both in the way he defines e-government, and in his final peroration, where he describes the path of ‘transformative collaboration’ (as opposed to transitional change, which he suggests is what has largely occurred to date) as “a collaborative ethos that must ideally render e-government a more participatory model of co-governing between public servants, government officials, and the citizenry.” It is this vision that informs the volume, that drives its analytical framework, and colors its arguments throughout.

Roy defines e-government, using what he describes as a definition adopted by many governments of late, as “the continuous innovation in the delivery of services, citizen participation, and governance, through the transformation of external and internal relationships by the use of information technology, especially the Internet.” The emphasis on *governance*, rather than *government*, is critical; e-government, the application of information and communications technologies across integrated IT infrastructures, integrated service delivery models, dependant on the networking of information and managerial systems across government, is contrasted with the fluidity of *e-governance*, changing structures and relationships within the public sector, and in its external relationships, necessary to create “more radical organizational, socio-economic, and political adaptations to new governance realities, more digitally networked, participative, and empowering.” (Roy, p. x). This perspective places *E-Government in Canada* at the heart of the current debate about the nature of (as well as the desirability and achievability) of this kind of transformation. To address aspects of this debate, the book goes well beyond the limits of the title to incorporate a wide-ranging discussion of the changing dynamics of the 21st century world, at both the national and international level. The role of information and communications technologies (ICTs) is paradoxically both central and peripheral to many of these issues.

E-Government in Canada is divided into three sections. Each section has a short introductory essay, and each chapter has a similar introduction, setting out the main themes, and arguments. Part One identifies four dimensions of change, that is, aspects of government where ICTs are changing practice: service, security, transparency and trust. In Parts Two and Three, these dimensions are used as a ‘lens’ to investigate the way in which e-government has evolved in Canada at the federal, provincial and local levels, and the extent to which it supports internal organizational change and external institutional

adaptation. This approach is based on Jane Fountain's foundational treatise on the Virtual State¹ which argues the interdependence of technology and organizational structure, a thesis central to Roy's approach. Thus, the first part is an extended essay on key issues in e-government, theoretical, rather than empirical, based on an analysis of the existing literature on the subject, and structured around the four key themes. In exploring these Roy highlights the tensions between an increasing demand for customer-centric service across service agencies, dependant on a secure and integrated infrastructure, and growing pressure for more openness and accountability and participation in government. Thus, Roy argues, the era of service and security-focused e-government is giving way to a later phase of e-governance where the emphasis is more on transparency and trust. In developing this argument, through a high level overview of the existing literature, Roy focuses on some more practical issues such as the changes necessary to create seamless enterprise-wide service delivery; the impact of greater state surveillance of citizens through ICTs in an age where awareness of personal information privacy is growing; the conflict between managerialism and competitive outsourcing of IT projects on the one hand with the need for increased cooperation between agencies, and the impact of open source software on the other; and the need for more appropriate information policies in order to enable agencies to manage the tension between FOI requests for information concerning the internal workings of government, with the integrity of decision and policy-making processes.

In many ways, Roy suggests, the use of ICTs, as in the ability of online information provision to meet increased demands for transparency and accountability, could be driving broader political change in new directions, directions that need more reflection. He highlights, for example, the potential conflict between participatory democracy and representational democracy, a topic he comes back to discuss in more depth in later chapters, noting that "it is important to acknowledge that certainly not all of the democratic changes contemplated or introduced at present can be characterized as e-democracy, for many such reforms may have little direct connection to the Internet or digital technologies. Nevertheless, there is a correlation between the nature of these changes and the broader transformation of social, economic, and political activities taking place in an increasingly open, informational, and networked environment." (Roy, p. 107).

In Part Two, Roy uses the four dimensions to examine the dynamics of e-government in Canada, exploring how well service, security, transparency and trust have been addressed in e-government policy and initiatives at the federal level (Ch 5), at the provincial level (Ch 6), and at the local government level (Ch 7). Chapter 5 examines the achievement of online service delivery at the federal level "as a central tenant [sic] of the Canadian government's efforts to achieve more citizen-centric governance." (Roy, p111) Here, Roy analyzes policy changes and initiatives, the development of the Service Canada initiative, and the impact of individual experience and leadership on many of these developments. In particular, he seeks to identify examples of interoperability and integration between agencies at all levels, as an essential precursor to transformation of service. Where such integration fails, he attributes this failure by and large to "the cultural and structural tensions of Canadian federalism," although in many other countries similar failures are not necessarily attributed to the same cause. The delivery of integrated services, the first level of transformation, is more than just a question of applying federated enterprise architecture, but involves considerable changes in organizational culture, and governance, as the author notes. Thus, a major national initiative, such as the implementation of the Kyoto Accord to reduce greenhouse gases, Roy argues, should be seen as an e-government initiative, requiring as it does, effort

¹Fountain, J.E. *Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change*. (Washington, DF: Brookings Institution Press, 2001)

across a wide range of agencies, and communities, all dependant on electronic communication. National security also demands integration of information across all agency levels, and related e-government issues of privacy, identity management, and authentication, as well as larger e-governance issues of data sharing within and across national boundaries, (especially Canada's highly sensitive US border) are thoroughly addressed.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide examples at a lower level of government, and include the Province of Ontario's Collaborative Senior's portal, and initiatives in the health sector, that similarly demand inter-agency collaboration, and especially in the case of the health sector, data sharing within a secure environment. These are also presented as challenges to the ability of government agencies to collaborate with each other, and as Roy states "to engage citizens and communities. . . as more participatory forms of democracy take hold." At the same time, they are treated as a prism, along with initiatives at the federal level, through which to evaluate progress in Canada towards effective e-government, on the dimensions of service, security, transparency and trust.

In the final chapters, which form Part Three of the volume, Roy engages in an ambitious attempt to combine the four 'dimensions' of e-government (service, security, transparency and trust) with three 'transversal' issues: (organization and accountability; participation and engagement; and transnationality), which he defines as the main determinants of public sector reform. The discussion of the inherent tensions, and conflicts in each of these transversal issues that impact on the ability of government to deliver on the four dimensions form a series of intelligent, wide-ranging and interesting essays, and make the final section of the book the most successful section. Chapter 8 focuses on accountability, the conflict between vertical accountability, from the lowest levels of each agency up to the individual minister, and the demand for across-agency integration for delivery of service; the current political climate of adversarial exchange which inclines governments to 'risk aversity' in an area where they should be looking at new models of service delivery; and the challenging issue of the demand for openness in public sector tendering in light of the increasing use of public private partnerships to achieve e-government goals, and the interdependence of public and private IT systems and networks as these develop - making it difficult to open tenders to full scrutiny or all potential tenderers.

Chapter 9 focuses on participation and engagement and comprises an interesting essay on the future of parliamentary democracy. Highlights here include reflections on the role of parliament itself vis-à-vis the growing use of consultative processes (both on and off-line) to enhance citizens' participation in the decision making processes, and the nature of e-democracy, along with the danger of raising expectations of government by plebiscite. These are important issues, part of the ongoing debate about whether ICTs, and e-government can revitalize the political process, increase the engagement of citizens (especially youth) in both the political process and civil society. At the same time, the author acknowledges the potential of e-democracy to disenfranchise those who do not want to engage in ongoing consultation, (or join that online world of opinion and prejudice and self-promotion – the blogosphere), but who are satisfied with the existing system of representational democracy. Roy makes passing reference to the currently 'contentious, conflictual and sensational way' the media presents political issues, and policy debates, and the impact of this on both on public trust, citizen participation, and the ability of government to openly consult on contentious issues, but does not make the point that many of the same drivers and tensions, arising in part from the digital revolution, are impacting on the media as on governments, as was graphically illustrated by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his speech on the media during his last days in office.²

²Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6744581.stm.

Chapter 10, the final substantive chapter, discusses the issue of transnationality; the global nature of the Internet and its governance; and the tensions between global interdependence and the perceived need for multilateral approaches to global issues such as climate change and security, contrasted with the unilateralism of the current US administration. Much of the detail of this debate is focused on Canada's unique relationship with the US, but the discussion is of wider interest, frequently broadening out to political considerations concerning the nature of governance, and ideal models of governance that will support both integrated service delivery and enhanced citizen participation.

The conclusion returns to the arguments being made for a new approach to democracy, enhanced civility in political and media discourse, a willingness to embrace the complexity revealed in the changes that ICTs bring to the networked world of the 21st century, and a revitalized and transformational model of participatory democracy. In his final summary, Roy argues that e-government's first decade has been transitional rather than transformational, but that the way is now prepared for transformation if both citizens and governments will have the vision to embrace the new paradigm of e-governance. For this reviewer, the argument is attractive, and at times persuasive, but in many places the discussion still begs the question – is the transformation only due to a revolution in technology that we have not yet seen the end of, or to many other changing factors in contemporary society as well. What is critical, is that the debate must continue, and must certainly be taken to a wider audience than the scholarly domain it has inhabited so far, in order that all citizens can influence the nature of the society they live in and the system of governance they live under.

Despite its strengths, the book is not without shortcomings. In Part One coverage of the existing literature is somewhat uncritical, and the author on many occasions is somewhat parsimonious in acknowledging his indebtedness to his source material. Too often sources are cited as if they report known facts, rather than opinion. At this stage in an emerging, and highly multidisciplinary field, empirical evidence for much that is written is still sorely lacking. Passages where the author is more confident of his ground, or where another author is quoted directly are both clearer, and more engaging, in that they show a more dialectical approach to the material cited. Some references to Canadian agencies (e.g. HRDC) are not particularly intelligible to an international audience (and given the frequent changes in the names of some agencies, may not be very helpful to a Canadian audience, either.) In addition, it is often unclear why some sources are referenced in the References and some in the Endnotes. Much material in the rather copious notes could usefully be included in the text, especially in Part One, where concrete examples would often be helpful. A somewhat perplexing error (or an unexplained personal quirk) has the Welsh government referred to over two pages as the 'Welch' government (Roy, pp. 96–97). As with many recent publications, editorial standards could be higher – some rather glaring typos (two of which are noted above), problems with referencing, and less than adequate indexing, while not reflecting on the author's scholarly acumen, and the quality of the research and analysis presented in this book, suggest that greater editorial support was warranted.

Overall, this is a very worthy addition to the growing literature on e-government, and a substantial contribution to the debate on key issues that face all countries as they move into the second phase of e-government, and towards their own version of e-governance. It has a coherence of approach that many recent publications lack, being edited compilations by various authors, all with a different theoretical approach, often from different disciplines. Roy's attempt to develop an underlying analytical tool, his use of four consistent themes as a prism through which to view e-government initiatives is praiseworthy, and largely successful. The building of theoretical frameworks is critical at this point in the e-government literature and this book makes a substantial contribution to that endeavour. Within the emerging multidisciplinary field of e-government, it offers a coherent analysis across a range of issues

based on a strong and unifying vision, some coherent and challenging arguments, and a sound basis for further investigations.

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