

The coming of age of e-government studies

The earliest studies of the impact of information technology on government were undertaken in the United States in the 1970s by pioneering scholars such as John King, James Perry and Ken Kraemer. In the mid 1980s, the centre of gravity in this research moved to Europe with the founding of the Permanent Study Group on Informatization under the aegis of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) conference in 1986. Over the past twenty-five years, this study group has produced a rich vein of scholarship and, now renamed Permanent Study Group on e-Government, it continues to add new insights and ideas to this body of knowledge.

The study of e-government requires many different perspectives and levels of study. We need to understand specific practices, but we should also understand how these practices relate to broader developments in government and society. We need strong empirical analyses, but we must not neglect the need to develop new theoretical perspectives on e-government. A variety of approaches is required to understand and debate the rapid evolution of ICT use in and by government. The papers in this issue consider e-government from a variety of angles and contain important messages for practice as well as provocative implications for theory. These include considering how the impact of the Internet affects the structure of government, the relationship between openness and trust, the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms, how technology can integrate values and the future nature of the regulatory state.

This special issue of *Information Polity* presents the best papers¹ from the meeting of the permanent study group of the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA) at EGPA's annual conference in Toulouse in September 2010. The contributions show how rich our field of study has become and how researchers have developed a complementary variety of research approaches to a wide range of research questions. The contributions range from worldwide developments (Bannister and Wilson) to specific local systems (Alfano); from theoretical discussions of new public management and public governance (Trotta et al.) to an empirical study of the relation between transparency and spin (Grimmelikhuijsen); from comparative empirical work of government policies for coordinating service delivery (Van Os) to a normative analysis of e-government (Bannister and Wilson).

As chairs of the EGPA study group we are proud to present this broad selection of papers. The papers show how our research community has matured and how we continue to find ways to advance our field through both empirical studies and theoretical analyses. What is particularly encouraging is that all but one of these papers have been written by PhD-students or young researchers who have only recently completed their doctorates. This young generation is building upon work done by established scholars since the group first met in 1986. It is greatly encouraging to see that, 25 years on, new, insightful and stimulating work continues to be produced. We also note that the field is slowly becoming more international. Until quite recently, most of the publications emerging from the study group came from the North-European countries. This special issue includes two excellent papers from Italy. There is now a growing amount of research emerging from southern and Eastern European countries as well as from

¹Best of all papers was awarded to B Jaeger & K Lofgren for their paper on Danish e-government. This was published in *Information Polity* Vol 15[4].

Asia, as we have seen from papers published previously in this journal. This is yet another sign of the maturity of e-government as an academic field.

This special issue starts with an analysis of the relationship between new technologies and the structure of bureaucracy by *Giuseppe Alfano*. In particular it looks at the impact of the fast response expectations of the contemporary Internet user on the slow moving processes of a traditional bureaucracy and the consequences of this. This paper makes an important contribution to the discussion about the relation between technology and bureaucracy. Alfano presents some thought provoking conclusions suggesting that 'transparency' is becoming an outdated concept and that Internet communication should be focused not on general rules, but on individual needs. He argues that the structural elements of the Weberian bureaucracy need to be redefined and that his case study of Venice supports structuration theory and its idea of a reflexive relationship between formal Weberian structures and the interpretive schemes of those working in the bureaucracy.

Marta Trotta, Daniela Scarozza, Alessandro Hinna and Luca Gnan take up the challenge of relating the field of e-governance studies to broader debates about New Public Management (NPM) and Public Governance (PG). Since the emergence of NPM, concerns have frequently been expressed that the managerial values it espouses are incompatible with other public values such as equity and impartiality. PG is a more recent movement aimed, in part, at redressing this balance and its values would, *prima facie*, appear to conflict with those at the core of NPM. This deep and reflective paper shows that technology can enable organizations to overcome the seeming conflict between these two philosophies of public management. Using an extensive study (including 44 interviews) of an Italian public agency, the authors conclude that modern information systems support everyday work by putting in practice and combining both New Public Management and Public Governance reforms and, as in other articles in this issue, they offer a number of ideas for practitioners.

The political issue of government spin and how that spin affects citizens' trust forms the starting point for *Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen's* paper. This paper is an unusual one in that it is based on experimental research, a form of research that is common in some other fields, but not that often found in either information systems or e-government. Grimmelikhuijsen's findings have important implications for government practice as well as saying interesting things about how citizens react to information. They suggest, somewhat disconcertingly, that honesty may not always be the best policy. The paper concludes that a little spin leads to more trust in government since it provides citizens with the image that government knows what it is doing and where it is heading. This leads to the uncomfortable conclusion for our democratic age that governments may sometimes have to choose between being more trusted and being more open.

We have argued many times for more comparative work and *Guido Van Os* presents a piece of empirical research that meets this request. The paper presents an intriguing analysis of differences between the Netherlands and Denmark in their coordination of the integration of electronic service delivery. Although both countries are often regarded as similar, the paper shows a clear difference in their coordination mechanisms for local e-government; the Danes use a centralized and top down directive approach while the Dutch system is based on standard setting and guidelines. In a surprising finding, the resistance of municipalities to these projects is strikingly similar with local authorities taking matters into their own hands and asserting their independence of attempts by the centre to corral them. Remarkably while steering approaches may differ, resistance takes the same form; another lesson for government perhaps? Van Os plans to extend the research in this paper to other countries and we await his findings with interest.

In the final paper of this special issue, *Bannister and Wilson* take up the challenging task of relating developments in e-government to wider debates about the size of government and the regulatory state.

They suggest that the true scale of the state can be measured by the number of rules and regulations that it imposes on its citizens. Their provocative argument highlights how new technologies enable fine-grained forms of regulation and specific forms of activation which have been heretofore logistically impossible or economically unattractive. New technologies enable governments to overcome long standing resource limitations and, consequently, can result in what the authors label as 'over-government'. They suggest that even a well meaning and benign state can end up undermining important social and community capabilities by weakening both individual and community self reliance and that excessive imposition of technology enabled standardisation may result in a loss of creativity and vibrancy in society.

We are proud that most of these high quality papers have been presented by young and promising researchers in our permanent study group and we hope that the group will continue to be a place where researchers can come together to have rich debates about a variety of subjects relating to public administration, government and ICT. We sincerely hope that the readers of *Information Polity* will appreciate the quality of these studies and we hope to see many of you in Bucharest in September 2011 for our next meeting.

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