

Book Review

Governing Electronically. E-Government and the Reconfiguration of Public Administration, Policy and Power, Henman, P. (2010). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 271 pp.

With societies changing rapidly as a result of the introduction and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), e-Government has become a critical topic for public administration, policy and management. Around the world, the increasing uptake of ICTs by individuals and commercial organisations is forcing governments to consider moving (further) into the digital age and, with that, to reconsider traditional public administration models and conceptions of Weberian bureaucracy, policy development and implementation, representative democracy, and citizenship, for example. In North American and European countries, the financial crisis has put further pressures on governments to explore ICT-enabled public sector reform options, with a particular interest of governments to shift from expensive face-to-face, telephone-based and paper-based relationships with individuals, businesses, voluntary sector organisations, and other government organisations, to more cost-efficient ‘e’-solutions. Simultaneously, we can observe a trend in developing countries, where e-government is seen as an important means to achieve good governance in the public sector as a result of standardised electronic public sector activities.

Strangely enough, public administration and management scholars have largely ignored ICTs as a relevant area of study in their pursuits of theoretical development and empirical knowledge on contemporary government thus far [1–5], with some notable exceptions, such as the work conducted by various Members of the European Group of Public Administration’s Permanent Study Group on ICTs in Public Administration, from 1986 onwards (see for instance Snellen 2007). At the same time, Information Systems scholars working in the area of e-Government have restrictedly focused on the user and organisational aspects of e-Government applications and information systems, without consideration of the unique characteristics of the public sector and its environment [5]. As a result, in this emerging field of e-Government, there is a strong need for more research-informed contributions from the public administration, policy and management scholarly community.

Consequently, a book with the title ‘Governing electronically: E-Government and the Reconfiguration of Public Administration, Policy and Power’ draws the attention. The book consists of three parts and 12 chapters. Part I, titled ‘Examining E-government’, includes three chapters: an introduction chapter, a chapter on ‘Conceptualising Technology and Government’ and a third chapter on ‘The Governmentality of E-government’. In Part II ‘Domains of E-government’, six empirical case studies are presented in three chapters on ‘E-Welfare’, ‘E-Tax’ and ‘E-Health’, respectively. Each of the case study chapters provides an overview of the international context, background information on the Australian policy system, a presentation of the two case studies within that e-government domain, and an overview of future directions. Part III then, is about ‘Reconfigurations of Government’ and includes chapters on ‘Reconfiguring Public Administration’, ‘Speed, Time and the Future’, ‘Networks and Conditionality’, ‘Risk and Targeted Government’, ‘Complex Government’ and a final chapter ‘Reconfiguring Power, Citizenship, Society’.

In many respects this book is not only disappointing, but also highly problematic. First of all, the book does not have a clear research design, including a guiding research question, an explicit analytical framework systematically derived from available literature in the field, and a consistent and

systematic methodological approach. On several occasions the author is quite pragmatic and open about the shortcomings of his research, as for example demonstrated in a statement about the collection of data from citizens: *“To keep the overall research manageable, citizens were not interviewed. How e-government has and is reconfiguring citizens’ experience and relationship with government was surmised from other data, personal experience and abstract reasoning.”* (p. 16)

Consequently, basic requirements of scholarly research, such as inter-subjectivity, reliability and validity, are not met in this publication. Instead, the author presents a substantive set of rather ambitious ‘key messages’ and ‘key arguments’ to the reader and, in so-doing, presents more or less his own personal perspectives. As an example of a key message: *“this book addresses the question of what the power effects of e-government are on contemporary governmentalities. It asks what does IT do to the way in which we think about the nature of government, the way it operates, the objects and subjects on which it operates and the end to which government acts. Some aspects of these questions are to be addressed later in this chapter by applying Heidegger to understand how IT discloses the world in particular ways”* (p. 25). An example of a key argument is the following statement: *“Moreover, and this is the substantive claim of this book, the internet and related technologies have enabled government agencies to act in ways that were not previously possible. In short, the technologies have brought about new modes of governance”* (p. 41). Key messages and arguments such as these are repeated several times and in slightly varied versions throughout the book, as if the author wants to make sure that the reader has understood and, more importantly perhaps, is convinced of the main ‘lessons’ from this publication.

A second problem area has to do with the fact that theoretical arguments presented in this book are often contradictory. The opening sentence of the book is illustrative of the type of problems the reader encounters throughout the book: *“It is undeniable, we are governed by technology today.”* (p. 3). Without any further clarification or back-up from empirical data, this first sentence summarizes one of the key messages the author wants to convey in this book: although people make decisions about using the technology, *“... the very operation of that technology independently can generate unintended outcomes”* (p. 5). This thinking is called in scholarly terms ‘technological determinism’: the idea that technologies drive societal developments, they have effects on society that are inherent, rather than conditioned or driven by society. Technological determinists therefore perceive technology as a governing force in society. Throughout the book, technological deterministic statements are presented interchangeably with theoretical notions about socio-technical systems and the problematic distinction between the technical and the social (e.g. *“[digital information technologies] are not simply tools which humans utilise, but it is the human-IT collective that acts”*, p. 24), or even with theoretical notions referring to social deterministic viewpoints or the idea that social constructs and interactions, not technological artefacts, drive human behaviour and, with that, shape the technology and determine how the technology is used. As an example of a social deterministic viewpoint in the book: *“it is not so much innovative technologies that generate new insights, but innovative uses of technologies ... for undertaking public administration and policy processes”* (p. 12). Another example of contradictory theoretical statements is offered on page 10, where the author points out that he wishes to avoid macro-statements of writers such as the later Martin Heidegger who saw the emergence of a technocratic way of life. Interestingly, in the next section, the author indicates that he draws largely on Heidegger’s later work for the conceptualisation of technology in this book.

The application of Heidegger’s thinking in this book may very well explain many of the problems identified here. Heidegger’s notion that a tool, such as a computer, is not simply an object, but ‘something in-order-to’ which discloses the world in a particularly way, is an observation that receives support in several theoretical statements presented throughout the book. Where, according to Heidegger, the hammer discloses the world as items to hammer, Henman acknowledges the computer to disclose the world

as items to computerise. The well-known adage about the hammer equally applies to Henman: when the only tool you have is a computer, everything looks like computerised information. In his attraction to Heidegger's perspective of technology in combination with the thinking of another internationally recognised scholar, Foucault, around power and government, the author claims to see the 'world-view' of the technology, including a calculative mode of operation of the technology or 'productive power', everywhere: that is, in the reconfiguration of public administration, policy and power, in the data from the six case studies, and even in dinosaur animation.

Unfortunately for Henman however, the empirical case study descriptions do not support this Heideggerian perspective of the 'world-view' of the computer. The author must have sensed this particular problem, as he advises the reader on p. 10: "*Readers not interested in the details of the e-government case studies can bypass these and read Part III for the lessons from their analysis.*" In general, we can observe many conflicts, tensions and mismatches between the theoretical perspectives offered in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, and the empirical case study findings presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Although the reader is not provided with any insights about the analytical, ontological and epistemological frameworks used for conducting the case study research and, with that, about how the empirical foundations of these case study descriptions need to be assessed, it is interesting to note that the descriptions offered by the author in each case study chapter under the heading 'The reality – implementation' are rich, in-depth portrayals of the complexities commonly encountered in e-government initiatives, such as problems around e-government project planning, scoping, ambitions and expectations; change management; IT contracts; multi-agency collaborations; existing legislation; maintaining momentum and the need for champions; the costs involved and cost-benefit analysis; uptake, accessibility and usability; data quality; privacy and information security. Consequently, for readers interested in the realities of Australian e-government projects, these case study descriptions can be recommended. Unfortunately, the author does not do much with these rich descriptions presented in between international context descriptions and expected future directions within each e-policy domain. Instead, he moves on to Part III where, in each of the chapters, he introduces new theoretical insights about public administration; speed and time; networks, conditionality and policy; risk and governing risks; and, finally, complexity management. Subsequently, support for these newly introduced theoretical insights is sought by providing illustrations from the case study findings. For example, Chapter 7 introduces insights about New Public Management (NPM), followed by a presentation of NPM characteristics visible in the case studies.

Another problem area in this book is that there is no systematic exploration and explanation of the selection criteria for the six case studies. The explanations offered by the author include vague statements about "*some of the case studies representing recent innovations*" whereas "*others are more mundane and longstanding*"; some cases have been "*immensely successful*" while others have been "*failures*"; and some have been accorded "*high public visibility*" whereas others have been "*quietly operating in the background*" (pp. 12–13). Unfortunately the reader does not receive any further insights into the meaning of these conceptualisations around innovation, immense success and high public visibility, or about the classification of the selected cases. The author summarises the overall explanation for the selected cases by pointing out that "*all projects have the potential to significantly impact on a major activity of government [in welfare, taxation or health] and thus have implications for the experience and nature of citizenship in contemporary capitalist countries*" (p. 13). Furthermore, the selected cases are all based in Australia, which the author considers to be somewhat of a problem. Although the author also sees certain advantages, such as obtainable access to case studies, international recognition of Australia as an early adopter of ICTs and consistently high rankings of Australia in international benchmark studies, he doesn't consider an international comparative study to be the most relevant approach for an in-depth

examination of e-government innovations at this stage. However, according to the author, “*it is important that the study’s observations rise above its parochial empirical database*”. (p. 13)

If we consider that the key objective of the author is to explore the contribution of e-government to reconfiguring public administration, policy and power, then the three selected policy areas in which the six cases were conducted, namely two e-government initiatives within each of the domains of welfare, taxation and health, appear to be relevant policy domains from the perspective of potential power shifts in citizen–government relationships, especially in the domains of welfare and health where groups of citizens are highly dependent on public services. Unfortunately however, the author does not consider this argument, but narrowly focuses on citizen–government relationships in the domains of welfare and taxation as cash transfers between government and the citizen, and in the domain of health as service relationships, although one of the ‘e-health’ cases seems to cover an administrative relationship by focusing on a government database of children’s immunisation records.

A last problem area I would point out involves several claims from the author about the unique contributions of this book, particularly in areas where various other scholars in the field have already made substantial contributions. To support this argument, the following two examples can be provided: “*In analysing the contribution of technology to policy making processes, 6’s (2004), my previous work (Henman 1997; 1999; 2006) and this book are arguably unique, and consequently offer readers a rare vantage point to appreciate our contemporary technologically-infused government.*” (p. 8); and, on p. 9: “*Not only has the academic rush to join the e-government bandwagon largely failed to incorporate the lessons from earlier studies of ICTs in government, but it has on the whole been uninformed by theoretical and empirical insights from social studies of science and technology. This book seeks to address these shortcomings in current e-government literature by undertaking historically and social theoretically informed empirical research on contemporary technologies in government.*”

In summary, despite some interesting rich descriptions of the implementation of e-government initiatives in Australia, this book is not suited for scholarly use. It is further waiting on substantial research-informed contributions from scholars of public administration, policy and management in this important and complex domain of e-Government.

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