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E-GOVERNMENT: WHICH INTERPRETIVE KEY?

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Abstract. *These notes seek to demonstrate that by approaching e-government as an organizational problem, and not as a technocratic and neutral (by which we mean unbiased) issue, we can identify the problems, contradictions and pitfalls that otherwise remain invisible. It is a question of substance not of terminology (we will not talk about the difference between e-governance and e-government; in our view, e-government is the use of ICT technologies in all areas of the public administration, from front office to back office). The perspective that continues to prevail in the public discourse is a generator of limitations. Only by adopting a less algorithmic method can we highlight the confusion and contradictions otherwise labelled as inefficiencies, misalignments, resistance, cultural inadequacy. Our choice of approach can produce useful ideas to move forward the current e-government debate and formulate ways to intervene.*

Introduction

One perspective alone is not enough to analyse and interpret e-government². Up to now, the prevailing line of the Italian e-government debate centres on the technical content of the various solutions developed for the implementation of digital government services and applications. Without detracting from the validity of that viewpoint (and the disciplines that support it), it is clear that the technological approach risks capturing only a small part of the complexity that characterises the scenario. In other words, it is hardly plausible to retain that ICT on its own can “determine” change in either the central PA or its peripheral structures. A more realistic and convincing picture demands that we expand the field of observation by harnessing other types of contributions, by listening to other “voices”.

The time now seems right to launch a debate based on different foundations, i.e. which focuses on organisational reflection. Albeit with a warning: the experiences

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² M. Sorrentino “eGovernment research: time to switch direction” in A. Grönlund, H. J. Scholl, K. V. Andersen and M. Wimmer (eds.) *Electronic Government, Proceedings of the Fifth International EGOV Conference*, Krakow (Poland) – September 4-8 2006, Schriftenreihe Informatik, Universitätsverlag Rudolf Trauner, Linz. Vol. 18, pp. 17-24 ISBN 3-85487-994-6.

underway stop us from drawing a clear-cut picture of e-government and its implications. Further, the effects that can be concretely captured are traceable in part to univocal tendencies. The need to arrive at a coherent analytical picture that can help us form ideas useful to the action phase has been detected on more than one front.

Despite the fact that information technologies entered the public sector about 50 years ago, the idea of “reinventing government” through intensive ICT use came to light only in recent times: in fact, the idea started to gather momentum in the United States in the early Nineties, after which it caught on in all the main industrialized countries³. ICT was immediately designated a neutral and highly versatile tool. This new “lever” came with a promise to develop brand new solutions to the problems of management and service-user relations and, therefore, was (perhaps too hurriedly) considered a factor capable on its own of transforming internal work practices and, in tandem, of promoting new relations with citizens. The roads embarked on by governments in their recent development plans vary greatly from one case to another, in line with their respective specificities⁴. A common denominator in all countries is that e-government has quickly turned into a public policy of national import. Naturally, the internet takes on a key and decisive role⁵ in such a scenario.

The online circulation of information, resources and services – in the opinion of the mainstream – enables the practical adaptation of a *bottom-up* approach to public-sector *governance*. In addition, the internet allows us to implement new organisational models of the network type, featuring the presence of a multitude of subjects who – together and based on their respective prerogatives – orient their own action towards common goals, i.e. to provide timely responses to different recipients (individuals and collective subjects), inside and outside the public administrations. But just how true is this basic assumption?

It is difficult to respond directly to that question. e-government is a complex creature with a myriad facets. The past few years have witnessed numerous attempts to conceptualise it through interpretive models and frameworks⁶. Surprisingly, and despite their diversities, these proposals reveal an almost one-way approach. In essence, most of the research conducted to date states that, in any event, the technologies “are not a problem” because these have become economically accessible and increasingly user-friendly. If an e-government programme meets with hurdles in

³ OECD, *The e-Government Imperative*. Paris: OECD, 2004.

⁴ Capgemini, *Benchmarking the Supply of Online Public Services*, 2007.

⁵ CNIPA, *Linee strategiche volte ad indirizzare le Amministrazioni nella predisposizione del piano triennale per l'informatica 2008-2010 (in Italian)*, 2007.

⁶ H.J. Scholl, Is E-Government Research a Flash in the Pan or Here for the Long Shot?, In M.A. Wimmer, H.J. Scholl, A. Grönlund, K.V. Andersen (eds.) *Electronic Government, Proceedings of the Fifth International EGOV 2006 Conference*, Krakow, Poland – September 4-8, Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2006, pp. 13-24.

the implementation phase, or if it fails to produce the expected results, the knots and the “blame” need to be looked for “elsewhere”; that “elsewhere” being synonymous with criticality, however, is almost always found in the administrations themselves. The most common reference is to internal procedures, to the institutional cultures and practices, which, as a whole, tend to maintain the status quo. It is no coincidence that the concepts of “inertia” and of “resistance to change” are continually raised in the debate on change management in the public sector.

e-government as a new source of constraints

The current discourse describes the PA as a static entity closed to the outside world with its own peculiar logic that – purely by chance and in rare moments – meets the demand expressed by the service users, although more often than not it counteracts it, generating pernicious effects. This self-referential attitude also would explain the persistence of organisational structures always similar to each other, as well as the predominance of a bureaucratic management culture. That is the perspective that interprets the bumpy road that marks the network organisational models (still poorly diffused in reality) or the low diffusion of services based on interagency collaboration. The weak relations that exist between one administration and another, but also between units belonging to the same structure, appear to give rise to the “leopard spot” logic that characterises the current ICT landscape in the public sector.

The main limitation of that situation – which is partly understandable – is that it assumes e-government differs to the other types of actions and decisions performed by the administrations. The idea of a public sector radically transformed thanks to the “enabling” role played by the new technologies (and, markedly, by internet) has now become an obvious assumption and, therefore, takes for granted all the discourses on “modernisation”. Unfortunately, the empirical reality, also outside Italy, does not support those arguments. Further, there is no lack of paradoxical situations.

For example, Italy’s public sector is apparently highly structured. It has preset procedures for everything: whether for awarding a literary prize or for issuing a passport. On its own, the meticulous scanning and the extreme formalization of each and every step of public choices in e-government implementation should facilitate the identification of algorithms on which to base computerized solutions. In essence, administrative law, which prescribes exactly how to regulate each phase of the treatment of the practices according to detailed types of objects and cases, constitutes a kind of pre-packaged codebook that could help our country compared with other scenarios characterized by a more pragmatic administrative tradition. If it is true that the formalization of knowledge is the basis that enables its archiving, transfer and automatic treatment, it should be relatively simple to put online the didactic proposals of a university faculty or the results of implementing a regional policy. It

should be. But it isn't. Those who try to do so discover that, in actual fact, the public administrations tackle the rigidity of the rules through a number of practices that are supported by extremely elastic interpretations of the constraints.

In addition, the PA are often the first not to comply with the legal provisions: think only of the diffusion of the Computerized Correspondence Register (CCR) in the central PA – still widely underused even today, more than four years after it officially came into effect. Or the solution called the “Civil Computerization Process, which has suffered delays due to the two-year delay in enacting the implementation bill. Those who have an intimate knowledge of the Italian e-government program nurture more than one doubt on the effective practicability of these plans, despite the accompanying array of multicoloured flowcharts and milestones presented by the agencies.

Given that these practices extend across all levels of the public sector, we should hardly be surprised that, in many situations, the introduction of technologies and solutions capable of speeding up and heightening the transparency of the administrative process is often seen by the agencies themselves as⁷:

- just another source of constraints;
- a removal of discretionary power;
- a toll to pay to obscure directives issued from above;
- a tool that penalizes efficacy instead of promoting it.

We believe that the situation of “detachment” between the statements of principle and the reality (in e-government just as much as in other environments) is the result of the rational concept that permeates the PA discourse.

An alternative perspective

The continually suggested view that e-government clashes with how the collective imagination perceives the public administration model often fails to take into account that the ICT applications and systems in the public sphere - even before these became a “fashionable” topic, tagged with the most fanciful labels (G2C, G2B, G2G, etc.) - have always been discussed in organisational studies. Therefore, a solid reflection should seek to use this interpretive key to surpass both the simplifications and the limitations of the dominant technocratic approach. The knot of the problem has nothing to do with issues of terminology, but with the ability to understand the nature of the change and the reasoning behind it. Our theory is that technological change cannot be separated or distinguished from organisational change.

An alternative perspective of e-government enables us to say that any ICT solution (regardless of its intrinsic features or the type of components used for its

⁷ G. Regonini, *Capire le politiche pubbliche*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2001 (in Italian).

implementation) plays a decisive role not only and not so much – as many factions maintain – because it has an impact on the organisation (whether public or private), but because it guides the action of the people and the structures, influencing the relations between actors and the ways in which problems are concretely addressed.

In choosing to adopt that perspective, we deny that the organisational structure must adapt itself to the technology in a passive way, admitting, instead, that there is no predetermination in the technological compared with the structural choices. And with what consequences at the analytical level? Having thrown out the idea that e-government can “determine” or “produce” certain types of impact, it stands to reason that the relevance of e-government must necessarily be evaluated in overall terms, i.e. in terms of the processes of design, adoption and use of the ICT solutions. No solid analysis is capable of establishing (even though some seductive formulas affirm the opposite) what direction change will take as a consequence of the implementation of a specific computerised application, nor which critical factors can determine its success.

We underscore that the inability to make predictions not only stems from the fact that the public sector is an especially complex universe to decipher, due to the combined forces of many variables (internal and external), but also, for example, from the behaviours of the service users, of the type of decisions that the information system is called on to support, and the constraints of both time and public responsibility. The discussion centres on the mainstream view that tends to attribute the technological lever with the capacity to solve organisational problems, a capacity that, however, it does not possess.

The current opinion that likens e-government to a choice capable by itself of optimising the provision of services to citizens and businesses, of increasing democratic participation and of improving the governance of these same administrations is a deterministic theory that should be rejected outright. Just as we should reject the image of an e-government that is invariably linked to the surpassing of the stereotyped model of “old-school” administration presented in its most negative and worst aspects.

Adopting a viewpoint whereby ICT and organisation cease to be distinct elements propelled by their own dynamics means assuming that every computerised solution introduced and used in a social context is the bearer of new rules (and new constraints) that define the action of the individuals and the collective subjects. According to this perspective – harvested from the field of organisational studies – the results of the processes of design, adoption and use of the technologies are not (and cannot be) a one-way street because ICT can be used to introduce or support clashing organisational logics. As demonstrated in real everyday life, which is far more composite and structured than a double-entry table, given that it is, in fact, made up of contradictory trends and hybrid situations where the effects of

contrasting signs (decisional centralisation and decentralisation, the establishing of routines and skill-building, etc.) live side-by-side and interweave.

The interpretive key we propose here is interesting because it lets us discover that e-government, the new passwords (efficacy, efficiency, transparency, and more) that lie under the enticing façade and the most advanced technologies can yield solutions that do not truly break away from the past. For example, the collaboration networks launched between local authorities across Italy would seem to emphasise partnership and inter-organisational cooperation, even though, in practice, these often favour the persistence of control and decisional centralisation mechanisms not unlike those that make up the stereotyped model of public administration.

Nevertheless, the illusoriness and inconsistency of some analyses must not be an excuse for giving up the wish to address, evaluate and control the performance and the results of e-government programmes, but, conversely, must give us a reason for introducing diverse forms of managing change in public organisations. Sometimes, many managers, and, along with these, many consultants to the PA, are unable to react positively to the everyday situations they encounter in the offices, also because they have been trained according to conceptual models that fail to match the practices and conditions in which they effectively work. Again, we underscore that it is not the presence of principles and techniques changed by the management of the business, but the absence of other analytical benchmark tools. Recognising that different effects can be manifested during the development and use of the technologies, on the other hand, enables us to see the change management process as an uninterrupted chain of expected, opportunistic and emerging changes, rather than a series of predefined steps along a road of concatenated actions.

Choice and implementation of the technologies are part of the same continuous process. This “uninterrupted flow” generates new ideas for learning and reflection that can translate into useful implementation strategies on practical grounds: for example, it becomes possible to understand what type of effects the administration can expect from a computerisation initiative. Or which problems might arise in the absence of specific guiding actions by management. Ultimately, albeit not in terms of importance, such a perspective can help us to develop diversified evaluation systems to meet the cognitive needs that tend to appear *in the different stages* of an e-government project’s lifespan. As we know, the evaluation practice in Italy sharply favours the preliminary analysis of public interventions, while the ex-post evaluation is carried out to a far lesser extent.

Attention. When we speak of evaluation, the discourse invariably addresses the methods, models, techniques and metrics (and in the debate: quantitative versus qualitative) and then everything dies there. In reality, the question should not be posed in these terms. The true crux of the matter (still unresolved today) is to distinguish successfully between:

- The economic and technical resources deployed in a specific project (*input*);
- The observable results, e.g., waiting times, availability, accessibility of e-services (*output*);
- the *impacts* or effects compared with the problem that the plan seeks to address (e.g. social inclusion, democratic participation, equity). Which factors tell us that the initiative has been successful? How have the conditions of the service users changed?

Substantial differences exist between these categories of effects. At most, the public programs stop at the first two, and even then often confuse them⁸.

That creates an absurd situation. On the one side, the public sector uncritically translates the managerial practices (believed of higher efficacy), but, on the other, fails to apply the most important lesson taught by the private sector: to focus on past performance in order to surpass and improve it.

To conclude, the rhetoric of change of the “administrative machine” - this latter being a highly revealing metaphor of the instrumental view of the public administration and of its reduction to a “technical device” - that accompanies the use of ICT needs to be overcome using a “toolbox” in which space exists for a conceptual toolkit also of the interdisciplinary type. The scope of e-government remains mostly unexplored, which therefore requires an effort of reflection that, while starting with concrete practices, seeks to decipher the more general reasons, without giving up the challenge to critically evaluate all that is uncritically considered real and true.

In brief

An interdisciplinary view of the public administrations helps us to slot the e-government discourse into a more realistic context. Indeed:

- e-government should be understood as a process of bounded rational actions and decisions that cannot be separated from the other PA processes;
- the focus of the analysis should be extended to the processes of:
 - o Design;
 - o Adoption; and
 - o Use

of the technological solutions.

Organization Science and Policy studies help us to wipe the plate clean of the assumption that e-government is neutral. In addition, these studies admit from the start that the initial plan is subject to shifts and swings, so we must perforce consider the implementation of the provisions, not the provisions as such.

⁸ J. Pressman, and A. Wildavsky, *Implementation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

In addition, these studies can help us to concretely address a key theme, that of e-government evaluation, which in Italy has been inexplicably neglected up to now.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the dominant public-sector discourse takes into account solely the ex-ante evaluation. The attention paid almost exclusively to complying with the formal requirements is a clear indicator of the supremacy of the legal perspective. The economist attributes the shifts in the plans to the presence of inefficiencies. The engineer reads the misalignments not as a manifestation of the margins of discretion anyway insuppressible in complex organizations, but, instead, as resistance and backwardness.

e-government is not a neutral ground. It is a public policy to all effects and purposes. To date, it has been interpreted using an unsatisfactory key that concentrates solely on the formal, design and technical phases. Clearly, that is of no help to the administrators when it comes to avoiding the pitfalls of e-government.