



ICT, public values and transformative government: A framework and programme for research



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ABSTRACT

Many adjectives are used in the context of transforming government including making it more open, transparent, participative, agile, responsive and so forth. Most, if not all, of these adjectives are either in themselves public values or reflect one or more underlying public values. This paper examines the relationship between information and communications technology (ICT), transformative government and such public values and proposes a framework for further research. A study of the literature on public values is used to develop a typology of public sector values likely to be affected by ICT. This impact is examined for a number of these values. For others hypotheses about the impact of ICT on other values are then posited. It is argued that ICTs can and do have transformational impacts on public values, though not always for the better, concludes that values are a potential powerful lens for considering such impacts and sets out a programme of research into these relationships.

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1. Introduction

Transformation is about change, but more than mere change. Transformation implies a degree of change that, *inter alia*, creates a recognisable and significant difference in the *ex ante* and *ex post* states of the transformed entity. When considered in the context of government, transformation may take the form of a new *modus operandi*, an important new service or a major shift in a level of performance (Bannister & Connolly, 2011a).

It may also involve a change in values or in the value system. This article will argue that no matter what form transformation in government takes, the outcome involves a change of some nature in, or related to, one or more public sector values. This may take the form of a new value, it may involve a change in the importance of an existing value or a step change in the delivery of a value. The term 'value' has yet to be defined and this will be done in the next section, but almost any transformation that is discussed in this context is value-based; otherwise it would have little purpose. Sometimes the value in question is single and explicit in the form of the transformation itself, for example greater transparency or efficiency. On other occasions multiple values are implicit in a given change. Transforming responsiveness, for example, enjoins values of efficiency, effectiveness and possibly accountability and other values.

This paper provides a theoretical examination of the relationship between ICT and public sector values. In doing so, it seeks to build upon and extend the ideas proposed by Bonina and Cordella (2009) on the relationship between e-government and public value. A key objective is to enquire whether values can be used as a method of defining what is meant by the otherwise ambivalent term 'transformation'. 'Transformation' has been a frequent theme of e-government discourse in recent years, but what differentiates transformation from mere change has yet to be adequately explained. This paper endeavours not only to clarify this difference, but also to question what makes technology-enabled change transformative and to what extent ICT can and does transform public sector values? One uncomfortable conclusion that will emerge from this discussion is that when such transformation occurs it can be for worse as well as for better. Either way, a deeper understanding of technology-enabled transformation can help government to use ICT to deliver beneficial improvements in these values.

2. The nature of public sector values

2.1. Value and values

The English word 'value' has a number of related meanings and ambiguity about which of those meanings is intended can sometimes cloud discussions of the subject. Two interpretations are widely used in public sector discourse and it is necessary at the outset to distinguish between them. One way to make this distinction is to put the words 'the' and 'a' before 'value'. When discussing the value of something, we are, broadly speaking, referring to what it is worth. Economists, for example, talk

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about value in exchange; governments talk about 'value for money' or 'value for the taxpayer' and both theorists and practitioners talk about 'public value' (see Subsection 2.2). Value in this sense can in principle be measured although this may often be difficult to do in practice (Bannister & Remenyi, 2000; Remenyi, Bannister, & Money, 2007). The second meaning relates to a value that is held by people (and can be held collectively by organisations). The exact meaning of 'values' in this sense is similarly difficult to define with precision. For the purpose of this paper therefore, a value will be defined as a mode of behaviour, either a way of doing things or an attribute of a way of doing things, that is held to be right. Whilst not a perfect definition, it is a tractable one.

In defining the word 'values', it is worth noting that there is a debate about the exact meanings of the three words: values, ethics and principles. The definition of values presented here is similar to, but not the same as, that sometimes used for ethics. Ethics is concerned with the nature of right and wrong, but some definitions of public sector values extend well beyond this conceptualization of ethics. Often public sector values are described as 'new' values, examples of which include leadership and innovation. Henry (1998) maintains that values may be ethical, non ethical or unethical. The same issue exists in relation to principles. Principles are broader than values, although, as Kernaghan (2003) points out, the words 'principles' and 'values' are often used as if they are interchangeable. The definition of values that is employed in this paper embodies a broader sense of the word 'right' than is normally understood in ethics. For example, being efficient is considered the right thing for public servants to be, but efficiency is, at best, a borderline case for consideration as a question of morality. This will turn out to be a subtle, but important, distinction when considering the impact of ICT on values.

Three further comments are worth making. The first is that the definition of public sector values used in this paper implies that values are expressible using a verb. Thus, using this definition, 'efficiency' is not a value, but 'doing things in an efficient manner' is. In stating a value it is unnecessary pedantically to include a verb every time provided it is clear that an action or mode of behaviour is implicit in the value stated. Whilst this may seem like a slightly odd way of defining values, it has the advantage that it avoids other potential problems with meaning.

Secondly there is the important question of 'held to be right' by whom? Traditional answers to this include the public, citizens or the so-called 'reasonable man'. In an attempt to address a parallel question in ethics, Pemberton (1998) suggests an 'Ethical Litmus Test' of eleven questions including 'Would you be happy with this action if your role and that of the subject of your action were reversed?' and 'Is there anyone, particularly your mother, from whom you would like to conceal this action?' Despite such ingenious attempts to deal with this question, it remains problematic. There are values such as transparency about which there exists a broad spectrum of views (Bannister & Connolly, 2011b). In this article, something will be considered to be right when all or nearly all citizens of the state consider it to be right.

Thirdly there are other definitions of 'values'. Economists sometimes define values as tastes or utility functions (Aaron, Mann, & Taylor, 1993). Yankelovich (1993) discusses values in terms of beliefs that people hold dear. He defines a set of American core values which include some that fall broadly within the definition used in this article (fairness; equality of opportunity) and some which clearly do not (achievement; luck). Waldo (1980) talks of 'ethical obligations'. Some of the other definitions are discussed below. The approach used in this article will be to consider how public servants or, more broadly, public administrations should behave. To be meaningful in the context of ICT, values must therefore be convertible into some behavioural form that ICT has the potential to modify or transform.

2.2. Public value and e-governance

A further distinction worth making at the outset is the distinction between public sector values and the broader concepts of public value

and (good) e-governance. The concepts of both value and values come together in the managerial concept of public value as set out by Moore (1995) (see also the discussion of public value management by Stoker (2006) and the various contributions in Bennington and Moore (2011)). Kelly, Mulgan and Myers (2002) propose a typology of public value as services, outcomes and trust. This typology has been adopted by a number of scholars, for example by Castelnovo and Simonetta (2007) in their examination of public value in Lombardy and by Kearns (2004) in his discussion of public value and e-government.

A parallel thread in the literature is the relationship of ICT and good governance. Bonina and Cordella (2009) analyse values as those supporting public sector reform and those supporting good governance, *i.e.* between managerial values and democratic values. Other authors have examined the role of technology in public governance and tried to develop the concept of e-governance though the latter has proved a somewhat slippery concept (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Grindle, 2010; Löffler, 2003; Misuraca, 2012; Misuraca, Alfano, & Viscusi, 2011; Misuraca, Reid, & Deakin, 2011). Whilst public value and good governance *per se* are beyond the scope of this paper, what is clear from the literature is that public sector values underpin both public value and good governance in a variety of ways. A pertinent illustration of this is provided by Kearns (2004, p21) when he comments on the fact that fairness of access is "not the guiding principle of e-government policy in the UK". Any transformation in a value will therefore have implications for both of these. This issue is discussed further in the recommendations for further research at the end of this paper.

2.3. Scope of this paper

Both ICT in government and public sector values are large fields of study. To keep the scope manageable, discussion of value/ethical issues in ICT/e-government will be confined to the field of public administration, here meant in the European sense of the core civil service that administers the state, and the judicial systems (policing, prisons and courts). Wider public domains such as health and education are not considered. This is in part because they are not, with some exceptions, generally considered in the public administration value literature and in part because fields like health give rise to ethical and value questions that are less matters of politically neutral public administration than of political or even religious conviction. Furthermore, in many countries, health and education are partially or even wholly in the private sector and the applicability of many public values (such as equality of access or accountability) in such circumstances is problematic. Whilst this constraint risks omitting some sector specific values from this discussion, the focus will be on values which are universally accepted or as near to this as makes no difference. For the purposes of this article, ICT in government is therefore defined to mean the use of ICT to facilitate the administration of the state by the central civil service and local or state/municipal government and the services that these bodies and their direct agents provide, as well as the delivery of such services electronically (*via* the Internet, the Web, SMS or other electronic media) to citizens. The nature of the central administrations varies considerably, even within Europe (Andersen & Eliassen, 1993; Brans, 1997; Frissen, Brussaard, Snellen, & Wolters, 1992). Whilst much of the discussion that follows is based on the UK/Irish model, the concepts and values discussed are applicable in most democratic states.

ICT impacts on the majority of public service values because it is both an enabler and an embedder.¹ It is an enabler in the sense that it makes possible actions or activities that would be impractical in its absence. It is an embedder in the sense that it is possible to build values into systems. In discussions of ICT ethics/values in the public sector, certain

¹ 'Embedder' is not a word in dictionary English. It is used here in the sense of something into which one can build (embed) values.

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