



Transitions of power in multi-actor information system projects

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Abstract

Power and politics play an important role in multi-actor information systems where balancing change and stability can become a goal in itself. To investigate this, the paper looks at a project on the implementation of the electronic system of business registration in Albania, a developing country in transition. The study introduces the concept of Obligatory Passage Channels (OPCs), building on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the Circuits of Power Model (CPM). An OPC is defined as the mechanism that gives momentum to the flows of power in a multi-actor project network. Findings show that the social circuit of causal power is characterized by OPCs related to need and vision. The systemic circuit of facilitative power is shaped by OPCs related to coordination and capabilities. The episodic circuit of dispositional power is characterized by the interoperability OPC. This study contributes to a better understanding of network politics in multi-actor information system projects.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly complex multi-actor information system (IS) projects are being implemented in both public and private sectors. In practice, the focus of discussion moves between technical development, project implementation and power structures in work processes (Torvinen and Jalonen, 2000). However, the study of power in management information systems research has been rather peripheral and poor in terms of theoretical constructs (Jaspersen et al., 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to explore transitions of power in multi-actor information system projects by looking at the design and implementation of an e-government project in a developing country, Albania. This study contributes by revisiting and redefining the Obligatory Passage Point (OPP) concept initially proposed by ANT (Callon, 1986) according to the CPM (Backhouse et al., 2006; Clegg, 1989) for a better understanding of power dynamics in multi-actor projects.

Political behavior related to transitions of power among organizational actors is labeled by previous research as either pluralistic (Markus, 1983), in order to manage conflicting goals among actors for accomplishing project objectives, or rational (Kling and Iacono, 1984), focusing on efficiency and productivity. The duality supports the argument that management and governance need to be considered separately (Too and Weaver, 2014) due to their complexity (Pitsis et al., 2014). These previous works identify the problems and key issues related to project management and power, but what happens inside the project networks remains largely unexplored.

From a theoretical point of view, the pluralistic perspective can be linked to theoretical approaches about stakeholders, and the rational perspective to project management and implementation views on power. Stakeholder theory (Flak and Nordheim, 2006) has been used in information systems research to provide some theoretical conceptualization of power in projects by looking at the salience of actors and their interactions. Research on e-government stakeholders suggests that they need to be managed (Chigona et al., 2010) and require leadership (Luk, 2009). The idea of shared power

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through stakeholder inclusiveness (Axelsson et al., 2009; Cogburn, 2009) has also captured the interest of researchers. It appears that the intensity of engagement among stakeholders can have diverse effects on single projects or project portfolios (Beringer et al., 2013). Mapping the relative power distribution over time can help to explain changes in implementation processes (Cavaye and Christiansen, 1996). A consolidating view on network dynamics in complex mega-projects suggests that power has to be understood as relational effects (Clegg and Kreiner, 2013). This would mean that higher project complexity is associated with more formal authority (Hekkala and Urquhart, 2013).

On the other hand, the project management perspective tries to combine stakeholders' collaboration with their exploitation of knowledge (Sarantis et al., 2009), but we already know that the transition of project values from one phase to another is problematic (Van Marrewijk, 2007). Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) advance this argument by exploring how the relationships between employees and the project organization are produced and reproduced, and how power relations create and sustain social relations. However, the project life-cycle model of initiating, planning, execution and closing (Project Management Institute, 2013) is limited to explaining power in complex multi-actor projects due to its deterministic and instrumental nature (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Hällgren and Lindahl, 2012; Packendorff, 1995; Pollack, 2007). Cicmil et al. (2006: 681) criticizes the instrumental rationality of the project life-cycle model, which is served as "a universal representation of the true nature of 'projects'", and as "a decision-making tool with predictive and explanatory power", for often being contrary to practical wisdom.

More recent views propose forward-looking activities (Havas and Weber, 2017) or recognize the predictive power of planned value towards earned value (Chen et al., 2016) as being possible drivers to project-based changes. In trying to reconcile the dichotomy mentioned earlier, these views recognize the relationship between transitions as processes that need to be managed carefully (Wittmayer and Loorbach, 2016) and projects as mechanisms of change. In e-government projects, for example, the problem can be attributed to complexity, vision failure, or lack of clear goals and commitment that may originate from conflicting value traditions which are often poorly understood (Rose et al., 2014). Governance and management have to be understood separately, the former being the framework under which the latter operates (Too and Weaver, 2014). However, the ever-changing, non-linear, and often unpredictable nature of a megaproject (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern, 2009) requires better theoretical conceptualization to explain power dynamics. Research on the reconciliation of change and stability in public sector information system projects identifies the role of discourse in institutional reforms and e-government transformations (Kromidha and Córdoba-Pachón, 2017). Yet, without a careful look at the mechanisms of power within or across project organizations, our understanding remains limited.

This study adopts the view that project management is a way of exercising power, but suggests a new way of looking at it by focusing not only on the actors, but also on the situations in which it is expressed. The e-government project reform can provide a good background for investigating power and cross-

level network phenomena (Brass et al., 2004) because it involves multiple actors. These include the government, donors, information technology (IT) companies, civil society organizations and end-users, with none of them having ultimate control over the project. Focusing on a developing country on the other hand will add another layer of complexity related to transitions of power in changing environments, an area of research we still know little about.

Introducing the structure of this paper, the following section presents a new framework based on Obligatory Passage Channels (OPCs), informed by ANT and CPM in order to study the transitions of power and network politics in multi-actor projects over time. The proposed framework is then used to design a research methodology by following organizational actors and their expressions of power in different project processes and stages. A critical discussion of power dynamics in a multi-actor project environment in Albania then concludes the analysis by summarizing the contributions of this study and leading to directions for future research.

2. Actor-networks and circuits of power

Actor network theory (ANT) introduced by Callon (1986, 1987), Latour (1996, 1999, 2005, 1987), Law and Callon (1992) and Law (2003), has emerged as a prominent theory which studies the heterogeneous arrangements of interests, people, organizations and standards (Walsham and Sahay, 1999: 42). An important aspect of ANT is power, which is summarized in the following paradox: when an actor has power, nothing happens and the actor is powerless, but when an actor exercises power, others are performing the action and not the actor itself (Latour, 1986).

ANT has been identified as a sense-making framework for understanding complex change programs (Pollack et al., 2013). This research shows that a stable actor-network of practitioners and researchers can contribute to the effectiveness of project management information systems (ibid.). However, ANT is not just an alternative way of looking at human and non-human actors equally and in general. The framework has been applied to explain inter-organizational e-government networks (Heeks and Stanforth, 2007; Stanforth, 2006) where the topic of power cannot be ignored. Stanforth (2006) applies Callon's (1986) translation model to an e-government project in Sri Lanka, assisted by the Asian Development Bank, in a similar context to the one of this study. Following Callon's (ibid.) ideas, she summarizes that "power over something is a composition that is made by many – the primary mechanism – and attributed to one – the secondary mechanism". Stanforth (2006) follows by explaining that the amount of power exercised depends on the number of actors in the network, thus summarizing the consequence of a collective action, but without being able to explain what holds the collective action in place.

ANT has been criticized for having a naturalizing ontology, an almost nonexistent epistemology and performative rather than anti-performative politics (Whittle and Spicer, 2008). To address this problem, CPM (Clegg, 1989) builds on the ideas of ANT, in that power is relational to the network of actors by

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