Discursive Institutionalism for reconciling change and stability in digital innovation public sector projects for development

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

A good deal of research and practice on digital innovation public sector projects takes for granted a stability-change dichotomy which positions these two phenomena as opposite and difficult to conciliate. In this area There is a shortage of studies focusing on how projects as the main vehicles for digital innovation could mediate between change and stability in the public sector. To address this gap this paper proposes Discursive Institution-alism (DI) to better understand the dynamics of this type of projects. A case study of a multi-actor project in the Albanian context extends the scope of the analysis to the transitional institutional environment in which the pro-ject unfolded. Findings suggest that large-scale multi-actor digital innovation public sector projects can not only be seen as temporary endeavors but also as strategic points of interaction for multifaceted stakeholders whose ideas and discourses could converge at levels of policies, programs and philosophies in order to keep required sta-bility in the face of change. Using DI, a number of propositions are formulated and empirically validated to draw insights and implications for future project policy formulation, research and practice.

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1. Introduction and research question

Facing increasing pressures, many public sector organizations have to work through local and global networks of state and non-state actors in order to adequately adopt and sustain change in the face of uncertainty and complexity (Janowski, Pardo, & Davies, 2012). Information and communication technologies are conceived as essential elements to build and maintain such networks (Fountain, 2001; Janowski, Pardo and Davies, 2012) and promote transparent and accountable collaboration between public and private organizations. Yet, our understanding of collaborative public management and how digital innovations could impact its realization remains fragmented in conceiving of change as a single-sided, homogenous and inevitable process (O'Leary & Vij, 2012). This is more the case, given that digital innovations in the public sector rely heavily on the success of projects as temporary efforts to close perceived gaps between existing and intended ways of working (Heeks, 2005, 2006) and without further consideration of long-term project impacts.

Established research approaches investigating the dynamics and ef-fects of digital innovation projects in the public sector have often relied on institutional theory (Avgerou & Walsham, 2000; Brown & Thompson, 2011; Ciborra & Navarra, 2005; Cordella & Iannacci, 2010; Criado, 2009; Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2011; Luna-Reyes, Zhang, Gil-García, & Cresswell, 2005; Luna-Reyes et al., 2005). The main idea behind these studies is identifying practices, values, norms and other el-ements of institutional contexts where digital innovations are adopted and which could hinder or facilitate collaborative change. To date many of these efforts stem from Fountain's (2001) seminal work in ex-ploring the adoption of digital innovations in the US public sector. Fountain's institutional approach, according to Yang (2003) and Schmidt (2008) can be considered just one of several theoretical institu-tional possibilities. An inherited limitation of Fountain's work according to Yang (2003) is an emphasis on digitally-enabled collaboration as 'sta-ble' manifestation of intended and achieved isomorphism. This leaves little room for considering other aspects (i.e. agency) in promoting both wider change as well as stability.

For developing countries, adopting foreign collaboration and tech-nology driven models could result in focusing on knowledge and tech-nology transfer at the expense of context-sensitive life improvement transformations amidst the global socio-economic order (Avgerou, 2008). This suggests that change (driven by digital project innovation) and stability (driven by organizational inertia and/or social accommo-dation) need to be somehow managed simultaneously in these contexts to enable adequate and widely beneficial transitions. Hence, a key re-search question that needs to be addressed in the study of digital inno-vations in the public sector is: *How can change and stability be reconciled in digital innovation projects?*

To address the above question this paper proposes Discursive Insti-tutionalism (DI) as an alternative theoretical lens which could shed

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new light on such dynamics and on how innovations could be better conceived. Using DI as a critical interpretive lens (Walsham, 1995a, 1995b, 2005, 2006) a case study of a multi-actor project in the Albanian context is examined. The first contribution of this study is presenting a DI model and set of definitions that can be used in digital innovation public sector projects, adopting DI from the domain of political sciences where the theory originates. The second contribution is a theory-led methodology that captures discourse elements and ideas from both organizational and individual project agents into a rigorous coding framework that can be easily replicated. Thirdly, three propositions inform the theory by positioning the change-stability dichotomy into the coordinative-communicative dimension of policies, programs and philosophies initially proposed by DI. Finally, we discuss practical implications for project policy formulation, research and practice in digital innovation public sector initiatives and the reforms they are designed to support in the context of a developing country.

2. Discursive Institutionalism (DI)

Discursive Institutionalism or DI is a theoretical approach initially developed in political science (Schmidt, 2008, 2011, 2012). Its main aim is to reconcile, as well as extend, the potential of institutional theories to study stability and change as proposed by Schmidt in a number of papers (Schmidt, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012). The main argument of DI is that existing theories (rational institutionalism, historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism) provide little in the way of explaining the dynamics of politically-oriented change, and constrain the role of diverse agents, be them political or non-politically oriented, in the process. Such theories and their approaches become too simplistic because they subordinate agents' interests or motivations to dominant goals of achieving political isomorphism, institutional conformity or historical stability. In other words, Schmidt argues that existing institutional theories assume fixed preferences, locations and interest orientations of agents. This assumption is reflected in how processes of change in digitally driven innovations in the public sector are often conceived as 'freezing' (discarding existing stability), changing (introducing or transferring knowledge and technology) and re-freezing (institutionalizing its use) (Pan et al., 2006).

According to Schmidt (2008), traditional institutional theories conceive institutions as entities that are external to agents, policies, structures, processes, values, norms, rituals or meaning systems. Common to all these, is that they can all be considered ***ideas*** in people's minds. For Schmidt (2008) ideas can act as roadmaps that funnel interests and subsequent actions down specific directions. Different types of institutions then become different types of carriers of ideas or collective memories. They can become taken for granted but also, they can be changed by actors, individually or collectively (Schmidt, 2010: 10–11). In this twofold role of ideas, Schmidt (2008) follows Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus and Searle's (1995) notion of speech act to argue that through discourse people create and then take for granted ideas as if they exist in the 'background'. Through discourse and also following Habermas' ideas on communicative action (Habermas, 1989; Habermas & Rehg, 1996) as well as ideas on discursive democracy (Dryzek, 1994, 2000), Schmidt also argues that people are able to convey ideas and take some distance from them in order to reflect, discuss, debate, adopt, reject or change them. This would mean that in a general sense, stability and change are the medium as well as the outcome of ideas in discourse, with stability informing change and vice-versa.

The following definitions stemming from DI can then be formulated:

Definition 1 (Def 1). Institutions are internal entities to agents in the form of ideas they represent.

In terms of their level of generality Schmidt (2008, p.306) provides a classification of ideas that considers how they define what is to be done as well as how and why:

Definition 2 (Def 2). Policies are ideas to specific policy solutions for perceived societal problems.

Definition 3 (Def 3). Programs provide overall rationality, problem spaces, issues to be tackled within such spaces, tools, methods and ideals to guide the implementation of policies. Programs act as intermediaries between policies and philosophies (see below).

Definition 4 (Def 4). Philosophies are ideas that express public sentiment, values, worldviews (Weltanschauung) and underlying assumptions that provide background or justify the need to define and tackle societal problems.

In terms of content, policies, programs and philosophies tend to contain two types of ideas (Fountain, 2001; Janowski, Pardo and Davies, 2012):

Definition 5 (Def 5). Cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests and define what is and what to do.

Definition 6 (Def 6). Normative ideas are those which appeal to human values and define what is good or bad about what is in the light of what one ought to do.

However, an excessive emphasis on these two dimensions could lead to an underestimation of institutional forces to which these frames are subject to (Surel, 2000). Given that sometimes "good ideas fail and bad ideas succeed" (Schmidt, 2008: 307), a key issue in DI becomes how some ideas become accepted and adopted whilst others get rejected by people. To address this issue Schmidt introduces a second element in DI to cover its dynamic aspects related to change and stability: that of ***discourse***. For Schmidt, discourse involves ideas as well as the interactive processes by which they are conveyed, adopted or rejected. Discourse "is not only what you say, however; it includes to whom you say it, how, why, and where in the process of policy construction and political communication…" (Schmidt, 2008: 310). Therefore discourse not only includes the 'text' of ideas but also their context.

Using the above definitions as well as the discussion on interactive discourse we now intend to formulate some theory-led propositions. They will serve as interpretive lenses to consider the dynamics of change and stability in digital innovation public sector projects. This follows the interpretive tradition of information systems research (Walsham, 1995a, 1995b). Within this tradition, a theory could be used to guide the selection of topics and the approach of empirical work as well as being part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis leading to review initial theoretical assumptions or to formulate new theory (Walsham, 1995b).

The following theory-led propositions will guide this study and will be revisited later:

Proposition 1 (P1). *Coordinative discourse occurs between networks or coalitions of groups (i.e. policy actors) and involves the creation, elaboration, justification and conveyance of policies to solve specific problems.*

Proposition 2 (P2). *Communicative discourse happens between political actors and the public and includes the presentation, deliberation and legitimation (or rejection) of policies.*

These propositions show a clear distinction between the spheres of public policy and politics. Their scope is not purely to validate DI, but to guide and advance our understanding of the theory in the chosen context. Schmidt (2008) explains how coordinative and communicative discourses could be related to different types of polities or groups of individuals which vary in their composition and complexity. According to her, some instances of discourse can be found in simple polities whereas others could be found in more complex ones depending on the number and role of actors involved. This generic distinction leads to formulate two further propositions stemming from DI as follows: