



Information systems and evidence-based policy in multi-agency networks: The micro-politics of situated innovation

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Abstract

The global prevalence of public sector reform, generically dubbed the New Public Management, offers wide-ranging research challenges for the IS field. This paper addresses two important, though neglected, strands of the modernisation agenda, evidence-based policy and partnership work. The development of a Geographical Information System (known as MADE) to support multi-agency collaboration is described in the domain of crime reduction. The application of MADE to support policy work is contrasted in two local partnership contexts: the statutorily constituted Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, and an ad hoc forum instigated by the police to address the specific issue of licensing reform and its impact on alcohol-related violence. Although the GIS infrastructure is the same, the manifestation of EBP was markedly different. This is interpreted in terms of differences in the situated micro-politics of the two settings. In the former, strong regulation by central government has “translated” MADE into a tool for generating performance targets and indicators. The second setting comes much closer to the true spirit of EBP, reflecting the greater autonomy of the network and the strong commitment both to evidence and partnership of its main player. In general, the findings demonstrate the importance of GIS to the policy process, particularly in the domain of multi-agency partnerships. There are a broad range of opportunities for IS research within the modernisation project. The need for ethnographic studies of change at a local level is highlighted, and for the adoption of a more critical stance than has been characteristic of mainstream eGovernment research to date.

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1. Introduction

The UK public sector, like its equivalent across the world, is subject to much contemporary reform, generically dubbed the New Public Management (NPM). Although the content has shifted over time and there are international variations, there is arguably a discernible global pattern to the change agenda (Hood, 1991, 1995; Christensen and Lægreid, 2001; Schedler, 2003). In the UK, managerialism was the “dominant strand” up to the late 1980s (Rhodes, 1996), succeeded by an increasing emphasis on market competition, through contracting-out, quasi-markets and so on (Hood, 1995). Permeating NPM are several leitmotifs, generally synergistic though not without some cross tensions. There is an over-riding emphasis on performance and accountability, manifest in the pervasive use of numerical targets and performance indicators (Jacobs and Manzi, 2000). Other “doctrines” (Hood, 1995) include the clamour for greater discipline in resource use, the disaggregation of traditional bureaucracies and the shift towards inter-agency collaboration. IT/IS is integral to the reform programme (Heeks, 1999), giving rise to the burgeoning discourse on eGovernment within our field, marked by an efflorescence of dedicated conferences and special issues (e.g., Hackney et al., 2005).

Here, we address an important theme of the reform agenda, thus far largely unexplored within IS, namely the increasing emphasis on “evidence” as the basis for policy-making and governance. Typically such evidence denotes structured, quantitative data of the sort characteristically stored in information systems. For our discipline, the rise of evidence-based policy (EBP) is thus an important development. The paper will examine the nature and problematics of EBP in the context of multi-agency partnerships, a context of significance in its own right. Although central to the “modernisation” programme, scant attention has been paid to public sector partnership within our field, despite the prominent discourse on IS/IT as an enabler of new organisational forms in the business domain.

1.1. Evidence-based policy

Like other democratic states, many influences traditionally interweave in the production of public policy in the UK (Jones et al., 2001), including: ideological conviction, party-political wheeler-dealing, democratic debate in parliament (and other forums), the technocracy of the civil service and pressures exerted by institutional interests (e.g., trade unions). In the present era, “evidence” and “what works” pragmatism are in the ascendant (Davies et al., 2001; Mair, 2004). Hough (2004) argues that EBP embodies a “scientific rationalism” that resonates well with the rhetoric of modernisation. EBP is now prominent in most areas of UK social policy: healthcare (Niessen et al., 2000), social welfare (Walker, 2001) and crime management (Nutley and Davies, 2001); it was the central driver in a major national Crime Reduction Programme launched in 1999 that involved extensive collaboration with the criminological research community (MacGuire, 2004). Drawing on Davies et al. (2001), evidence is defined here as empirical data that have been garnered and analysed through a systematic process of enquiry and are available for independent

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