Chapter 2
A User–Centric Approach in E–Governmamt Policies: The Path to Effectiveness?

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ABSTRACT

E-government is given a central role in the modernization debate of the public sector. Despite large-scale investments the electronic public services do not (yet) seem to come up to the promising expectations. As a result, consensus seems to exist that e-government policies require a rethinking. In this chapter the origins and objectives of the electronic service delivery are discussed. The authors state that the development of e-government suffers from deterministic conceptions. Consequently, the user seems to be neglected and minor attention is given to the impact of the electronic services on the customer. As a contribution to the theoretical discussion of e-government, the authors explain why a two-fold paradigm shift is needed. The user-oriented rethinking comprises both the development of e-government services as the evaluation of its policies. At the end of this chapter, the theoretical considerations are linked to daily-based activities by presenting briefly some Belgian e-government practices.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s information society, the production, management and consumption of information and knowledge are increasingly seen as prerequisites for societal development and economic productivity. In this perspective, new information and communication technologies (ICT) continuously foster the further development of this so-called knowledge economy, valuable for different kinds of stakeholders (Castells, 2000; Freeman & Soete, 1997).

Also governmental organizations can and should profit from these new possibilities created by ICTs in providing better services for constituents and rethink their ways of working (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Heeks, 1999; Prins, 2001). This way, government will be able to meet the (new) needs and demands of its customers in an environment which is strongly mediated by reduced budgets (Bertot & Jaeger, 2008). At the same time, e-government is
given a central role in the modernisation debate as being pushed forward by New Public Management and Reinventing Government views. Nevertheless, large-scale investments in electronic public services do not (yet) seem to come up to the promising expectations.

Different e-government strategies have been profoundly examined and questioned (Jaeger & Thompson, 2003; Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Titah & Barki, 2006). The criticism towards the current e-government policies is mainly influenced by the relatively low uptake of electronic public services (in most countries) by larger parts of the population. Experts claim that the development of these services is too much guided by supply-side factors, in which users' needs regarding design or functionality have often been neglected (van Dijk, Peters, & Ebbers, 2008; Kunstelj, Jukic, & Vintar, 2007; Gareis, Cullen, & Korte, 2004). Consequently, in scholarly discussions as well as among e-government practitioners consensus seems to exist that the electronic service delivery – as part of larger e-strategies – requires a fundamental rethinking.

Indeed, both in theoretical and empirical research relatively little attention is given to the impact of electronic services on constituents (Bertot & Jaeger, 2006; Jaeger, 2003; Reddick, 2005a). However, a user-centric approach is essential when rethinking e-government strategies, especially in response to the criticism that too much attention is given to technology in e-government provision as well as that its development too often starts from a supply-side point of view. In response of this, the concept of ’user-centered e-government’ gained in importance in developing e-government policies. Furthermore, attention is gradually shifting from efficiency (value for government) to effectiveness (value for constituents) when evaluating the impact of e-government services.

This chapter aims to provide a contribution to the theoretical discussion of e-government policy, by focusing on mindsets that could inspire both researchers and practitioners in re-thinking public e-services development. In first instance, a brief overview is given of the context wherein e-government has been initiated and its several promises are scrutinized. Furthermore, the authors thoroughly discuss the criticism on e-government, pointing at new ways of thinking to make e-government more user-centric and, consequently, to focus also on the effectiveness of these services for customers and businesses. Lastly, some recommendations derived from the analysis of Belgian e-government practices are be presented, illustrating how to (try to) ensure a more user-centric e-government policy.

THE ORIGINS OF ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

Back to the Roots

A Public Sector in Crisis?

The e-government notion can be seen as a buzzword rather than a scholarly concept. It has a variety of interpretations, dependent on the applied framework or perspective. There are many definitions of e-government and the term itself is not universally used. The differences are not merely semantic and may reflect priorities in government strategies (Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Yildiz, 2007; Relyea, 2002; Evans & Yen, 2006).

The concept has its origins in the late eighties - early nineties, a period in which the public policy was subjected to great pressure. A public sector reform became loudly applauded, due to a climate crisis and ideological changes (Heeks, 1999; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). The crisis in the public service sector has a long but steady evolution. From the seventies onwards, certain perception problems arose towards public service delivery, resulting in some countries to a crisis in the public sector. Especially the input (rising costs), output (results) and processes (way of working) were scrutinized (Heeks, 1999).
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