Chapter 5

Anthropological Thinking about E-Government Evaluation

Marc K. Hébert
University of South Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

E-government evaluative practices are examined here anthropologically by questioning their theoretical and methodological assumptions. The scope of analysis focuses on the manner by which e-government evaluation is conducted, the objectivity it invokes, and the discourse around which its findings are generalized to the broader public. The intended audience of this chapter is policy workers and academic researchers who rely on online surveys to assess the citizen-experience of e-government and seek to expand their evaluative repertoire ethnographically. Practical recommendations are offered in an effort to enhance the e-government evaluator’s toolbox.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropological thinking is a habit of mind that begins by questioning fundamental categories of meaning (Aaron Podolefsky 2011, p. 81).

The following narrative (truthful by all reports) is meant to encourage an anthropological state of mind when conceiving of e-government evaluation. An experienced anthropologist, Sidney Greenfield (2008), was in Brazil researching spiritist healers. They provide treatment for various ailments by serving as a spiritual medium for saints or others who have died. In one, not atypical instance, Greenfield witnessed a healer invoke the name of God, plunge a scalpel beneath a patient’s eye, remove it from its socket, clean it with a well-worn blade, and return it to its groove in the skull – all without anesthesia or the patient expressing agony. The evocative account leads one to wonder how such an invasive procedure can occur without pain, as reported by patients...
during and after the operation. Greenfield offers a scientific explanation how it is possible and why most of those he interviewed described positive results months after treatment. Greenfield does not reject alternative explanations, but is concerned principally with a scientific one. The dedication to science while not discounting the veracity of other ways of knowing is an example of thinking anthropologically.

The belief structure shared among the patients and the spiritual healer, however, explains how such treatment is possible without recourse to science. We could dismiss their explanation in the spiritual by asserting the authority of science. Alternatively, in considering other forms of knowledge, we may recognize that the way we come to know the world is shaped culturally, including the authority granted to the scientific method. This recognition opens the possibility that the assumptions underlying the theories and methodologies widely practiced in e-government evaluation deserve more explicit reflection. That is, common evaluative practices may not be as “objective” in being the product of unbiased observation as they appear.

The structure of this chapter follows two guideposts. The first is theoretical and the second more applied or practical. The two are connected through an iterative understanding of the research process. The overarching objective of this chapter is to improve the effectiveness of e-government evaluation by questioning the assumption that evaluations are essentially value-neutral, impartial instruments for generalizing findings to the greater population. Recommendations will also be offered to develop a more holistic and ethnographic approach to e-government evaluation.

BACKGROUND

One can conceptualize research in various ways. The approach researchers take is partially the product of assumptions about the nature of the world or worldview, which has implications for the research questions asked, hypotheses pursued, and which methods of data collection and analysis will be most appropriate. Three research approaches will be covered here in relation to the e-government literature: interpretive, critical and positivist (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The approaches can overlap. Separating them here is for analytical purposes.

The first approach is “interpretive” in that it posits our interactions with others and the objects or things we produce as important influences on our understanding of information and knowledge (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Geertz, 1973). Worldview is the foundation to our understanding of reality. The worldview from an interpretive approach to research sees reality as “culturally constructed” through subjective, contextual experiences rather than objective, essential truths. Diverse worldviews can produce vastly different explanations of observed phenomena. In the spiritist healer anecdote prior, patients’ reported lack of pain is a good example of these alternative interpretations – scientific and otherwise. Worldview can be an important element to consider in an interpretive approach as well as in contexts that may appear more mundane, including how to design and deploy e-government evaluation.

Another example of an interpretive approach would be scrutinizing the cultural values associated with welfare and how they shape an e-government application process for food assistance. These values can range from society viewing someone requesting welfare as being “down on their luck” and “deserving” of assistance because they lost their job, to other welfare applicants viewed as “lazy” and “undeserving” for various reasons. Our interpretation of what welfare means and who should receive public assistance (and who should not) are shaped culturally and influence how people manage, design, experience and evaluate an e-government welfare application process.

One of the challenges of an interpretive approach is effectively addressing the possibility of