Information in Electronic Government

Marcella Corsi
University “La Sapienza” of Rome, Italy

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology (ICT) is radically changing productive processes in both the private and public sectors. Institutions that are more efficient eliminate production diseconomies and enable a more functional market. Specifically, institutions can multiply the incentives for human capital accumulation both by reducing the endogenous uncertainty in social-economic relations and by providing additional input to human capital generation itself (think of schools, universities, and research institutes).

Mainstream economic thinking generally accepts the argument according to which the transaction and information costs that are inherent to policy-making are largely greater than those incurred by the private sector (Dixit, 1996). If this is true, then public sector intervention is denied the possibility of achieving more efficient results than those obtained by the private sector (Holstrom & Milgrom,1991). Yet, ICT is radically transforming the way government entities perform their activities, which makes a timely debate on public sector information, in all its forms, all the more crucial.

Public administrations are following the example of the private sector by harnessing the efficiency-boosting potential of these new technologies. This development goes under the name of “electronic government” (e-government) and it encompasses both the internal and external applications of ICT in the public sector.

The importance of this development is increasingly evident in many countries of the world. Experiments are underway in Europe, at all levels of public administration (local, regional, national, and supranational), to improve the efficiency of public services and to increase interactions with the external world. ICT not only facilitates the inner workings of administrative machinery, it also eases communication between different branches of the administration and its interaction with citizens and businesses. This latter aspect is one of the main advantages of e-government, as it brings public sector entities, businesses, and citizens closer together, as well as improving the standard of public services.

In September 2003, the European Commission issued a Communication on “The Role of E-government for Europe’s Future”: it stated that e-government “is an enabler to realise a better and more efficient public administration. It improves the development and implementation of public policies and helps the public sector to cope with the conflicting demands of delivering more and better services with fewer resources” (p. 7).

BACKGROUND

In order to understand just how complex the impact of ICT on public sector information actually is, it may be useful to start with a clear definition of the scope of e-government.

E-government is defined in the literature as “the process of transforming public administration’s internal and external relations through network-based activities, information and communications technologies, in order to: (1) optimize service delivery, (2) increase citizen and business participation, and (3) enhance government capability” (Di Maio, 2001). This is probably the most comprehensive of all of the different formulations suggested so far to mark out the contours of this process, in that it identifies two macro areas—increased internal efficiency in the public administration and improvement of external relations with all parts of society—in addition to setting the medium-to-long term objectives. The implementation of these strategies is part of a broader process of re-definition of the administrator-citizen relationship, in an effort to respond to the need for change in the mechanisms of participation in the democratic life of a nation and also to boost efficiency—in terms of quality and cost—of the public services delivered to the community and to business, enabling the largest possible number of individuals and businesses to enjoy the advantages of the emerging Information Society (Aichholzer & Schmutzer, 2000).

Many of the definitions advanced at an international level go much in the same direction. European Commission (2003) defines e-government as “the use of information and communication technologies in public administrations combined with organisational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies” (p. 7). EPAN (2004) and IDABC (2005) identify seven types of interconnected benefits: (1) improved quality of infor-
mation and information supply; (2) reduction of process
time; (3) reduction of administrative burdens; (4) cost
reduction; (5) improved service level; (6) increased effi-
ciency; (7) increased customer satisfaction.

All definitions imply a rather broad vision of e-govern-
ment, which is perceived not only as an evolution of the
activities linked to the public sector, but also as part of a
more generalized transformation of the State, through a
deep re-examination of democratic practices and pro-
cesses. For instance, in Zulfiqar et al. (2001) e-government
is portrayed as a process that entails a complex and
dynamic transformation of the entire state apparatus, at all
levels, with ICT being used to involve citizens (C), busi-
nesses (B), administrations and governments—including
foreign—(G), and public employees (E). These four cat-
ergories represent the so-called “constituency”—the ben-
eficiaries—of e-government strategies: in practice, it cov-
ers civil society and its democratic apparatus as a whole.

In a knowledge-based approach, a successful e-gov-
ernment plan hinges on the full-fledged participation of all
of the categories of stakeholders in the process. The
combined contribution of all of these agents is the only
way to achieve the “dissemination of information and
knowledge” which—together with a profound re-think-
ing of relations between social “communities”—may not
only bring about a powerful infrastructural and concep-
tual evolution of the administrative apparatus, but also
modify the way individual rights and duties are exercised
(Lenk & Traumuller, 2000).

The use of ICT in the implementation process of e-
government closely reflects the two macro areas men-
tioned above. On the one hand, these new technologies
contribute to an improvement of the internal efficiency
of public administrations, by streamlining information and
administrative process management—which will have an
impact on relations between administrative apparatuses
at both a horizontal level (between agencies, departments
and ministries) and a vertical one (between central and
local agencies). On the other hand, ICT enables better
management of external relations—with the constitu-
cy—ensuring higher standards of service and informa-
delivery to the public, as well as—at least poten-
tially—enabling levels of democratic participation that
were previously unimaginable (Caldow, 2001).

Understandably, ambitious objectives such as the above re-
quire not only broad-based support, but also the imple-
mentation of a series of preliminary steps, including the
following (Aichholzer & Schmutzer, 2000):

- Policies to facilitate access to information and pub-
lic services (tax policies for the spread of screen-
based technology, education and training policies,
infrastructure endowment, services planned in a
multi-media approach, so as to minimize the exclu-
sion of potential users in a given country (digital
divide)
- The reorganization of the internal structure of
public administrations in a user-centered approach,
more than based on an “administrative” allocation
of competence

Figure 1 identifies 4 stages in the implementation of e-
government, each of which might be broken down, in turn,
on the basis of policies; measures concerning employees;
processes underway; and the adoption of technologies
including: (a) presence of the public administration on the
web, (b) interaction with the public, (c) development of
transactional services (enabling the full-fledged imple-
mentation of self-service applications, as well as the use
of the web as a tool that is complementary to other
communications channels), (d) complete transformation
of the public administration’s modes of interaction with
its branches and with the citizens.

In a context in which e-government is fully imple-
mented, public sector information management extends
well beyond the straightforward supply of services to the
public. It becomes the nerve center of all relations in the
newborn Information Society. However, the somewhat
embryonic state of the current “frontiers” of e-govern-
ment appears (at least in Europe) to call for the need to
kickstart the major shift forward that—alone—can trans-
form e-government from a simple improvement in relations
between public administrations and citizens to a new
paradigm of government and growth in the future Informa-
tion Society.

**SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF PUBLIC SECTOR INFORMATION**

The expression *public sector information* is used to
describe the depository of documentation that is pro-
duced, collected, and, to a degree, disseminated by the
public administration. It does not cover the documenta-
tion regarding the public sector that is produced by the
private sector.

This concise definition hides a far more complex clas-
sification. The wealth of public sector information and
documentation may be categorized on the basis of distinc-
tive and, partly, overlapping criteria, such as: type of
entity generating the information; legal norms regulating
its production and dissemination; different users and
addresses; agents processing and managing the docu-
mentation; material and formal characteristics of informa-
tion, etc.
Related Content

E-Government and Opportunities for Participation: The Case of the Mexican State Web Portals
www.igi-global.com/chapter/government-opportunities-participation/42574?camid=4v1a

Trends in Government e-Authentication: Policy and Practice
www.igi-global.com/chapter/trends-government-authentication/64877?camid=4v1a

Understanding Researchers Collaboration in eParticipation using Social Network Analysis
www.igi-global.com/article/understanding-researchers-collaboration-in-eparticipation-using-social-network-analysis/147644?camid=4v1a

The Role of Social Media in U.S. County Governments: The Strategic Value of Operational Aimlessness
www.igi-global.com/article/the-role-of-social-media-in-us-county-governments/126348?camid=4v1a