The Neglect of Technology in Theories of Policy Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the impact of e-government studies on theories of policy change. A literature review of key journals in the policy sciences shows that in these journals the relation between technology and policy change receives little attention. Whilst more nuanced analyses of technology and policy change are presented in e-government journals, the major journals of policy sciences do not fully take the lessons into account. We argue that e-government studies could, and should, contribute to theory development in the policy sciences. The paper presents some guidelines to broaden the impact of e-government studies and strengthen academic work on policy change.

Keywords: E-Government Studies, Policy Change, Policy Sciences, Science and Technology Studies, Specialization

INTRODUCTION

Policy scientists are not easily convinced of the relevance of an analysis of the variable ‘technology’ for their field of study. They emphasize that we need to study institutional structures, preferences, interaction patterns, socio-economic developments and ideas to understand policy choices. Technology receives little attention and if technology is considered, it is conceptualized as merely an instrument. In well-known textbooks on policy studies (cf. John 1998; Hill 2005; Birkland 2005) technology is hardly mentioned as one of the factors influencing the direction of the policy change. Most explanations focus on either changes in actors’ attitudes and convictions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993), or changes in institutional structures (Streek & Thelen 2005). The envi-
Enronment of policy systems usually plays a role in the form of socio-economic conditions, diffusion or transfer of ideas or crises/punctuated equilibriums, but not in the form of technological dynamics.

This lack of attention for technology in the policy sciences is a paradox in this technological era. Modern actual policy-making often refers to technology as the main impetus for policy change. It is, for example, impossible to understand the European Union’s ‘Lisbon Strategy’ without taking into account the evolution of information- and communication technologies (ICTs) and how this challenges both current industrial policy, as well as the modernization of European government. Likewise, current policy debates on security (Segal, 2008; McLeish & Nightingale, 2007; Vogel, 2008) nano technologies (Uskoković, 2007; Bouwman & Hodge, 2008; Heinze & Kuhlmann, 2008), biotechnologies (Howlett & Migone, 2010a; 2010b; Lehrer & Asakawa, 2004), and to some extent also climate change (White & Hooke, 2004; Niederberger 2005; Mowery et al., 2010), would be unthinkable without an understanding of the technological character of these policies. And this is not just an academic issue, but something that stretches to actual policy-making. Most policy issues relating to technology – including e-government – are normally treated as something mechanical beyond the reach of human or institutional intervention (cf. Dunleavy et al., 2006).

While the policy scholars seem to adhere to a rather underdeveloped understanding of technology, students of e-government have, based on Science and Technology Studies (STS), developed sophisticated approaches to the relation between social systems and technology such as the social shaping of technology (Williams & Edge, 1996), the structuration approach (Orlikowski, 1992; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), the technology enactment framework (Fountain, 2001; Garson, 2003), and the social construction of technology (SCOT) (Bijker et al., 1987; Jackson et al., 2002). These analyses have been presented in specialized journals, but they do not seem to be connected to the policy sciences. As a consequence, important insights about the relationship between technology and government policy are not integrated in theories about government policies.

This paper explores the value of insights from e-government studies for the policy sciences. A literature review substantiates our idea that technology receives little attention in the policy sciences. Building upon Latour’s (1987) work, we argue that e-government scholars need to make an effort to ‘sell’ technology to the community of policy scientists. We identify the main features of our ‘product’ and develop ‘marketing strategies’: we highlight key lessons from the e-government literature as our ‘product’ and suggest how these lessons can receive more attention in main stream policy journals. The aim of our paper is to show how the e-government community can crawl out of its insular location to influence another discipline.
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