The First Leg of E-Government Research: Domains and Application Areas 1998-2003

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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive analysis of 110 peer-reviewed journal papers published from 1998 to 2003 suggests that the conceptual domains and application areas covered by e-government research focus predominately on capabilities and interactions, whereas value distributions and policy orientations are largely ignored. Onwards, e-government research is more concerned with conceptualizing government and e-services than in exploring the governmental role in technology diffusion and the role IT plays in democracy and participation. This orientation of the current research body is an indicator that the legacy of IS research themes dominates the e-government research body and that interdisciplinary research involving core public administration research along with IS research is yet to emerge. It is proposed that the field could be more unified if it considered both the e and the government of e-government.

Keywords: governmental IS; IT in public administration; literature review

INTRODUCTION

The dot-com meltdown and the subsequent debate on the role of IT in transforming the private sector (Carr, 2004; Porter, 2001) contrast a firm belief that IT can transform the public sector. This firm belief on IT in policy settings has been materialized within the areas of internal administration and services, legal control, and law enforcement. Consequently, on a global scale, there is a set of labels, such as e-government, e-governance, one-stop government, digital government, and online
government, that captures the governmental quest for online government services.

The policy commitment to transform government using IT has been echoed in the academic research advocating the necessity of strategic visions as part of the transformation (Armstrong, 2002; Burn & Robins, 2003; Deb, 1999; Luling, 2001; Stamoulis et al., 2001; Watson & Mundy, 2001) and guidelines on managing the transformation to the more dynamic interaction brought about by the technology (Lenk, 2002; Tan & Pan, 2003). Within the research community, however, there has not been agreement on whether to applaud the intended IT-led transformation of the public sector or whether to view the developments as old wine in new bottles. It has been argued that “this [belief] sounds all too familiar. Almost 20 years ago a similar debate arose ... pitting proponents of new IT against those who suggested that existing organizational and political relationships would dramatically influence any use of new technology” (Bretschneider, 2003).

Although there have been published papers devoted to defining e-government (Marche & McNiven, 2003; Silcock, 2001), there is evidence of a persistent myth that not much has been published on e-government and that e-government still appears to be in its infancy. It is therefore in a state where no core common references or theoretical assumptions guide the research. A study of the research methods of the e-government literature at three international conferences (DEXA, HICSS, and ECEG 2003) found that, in general, there are few rigorous research methods applied and that theory building and testing are the exception rather than the rule (Grönlund, 2004). In general, studies often take a normative or consultative approach (Chadwick & May, 2003; Collins & Butler, 2002).

Possibly the most focused and longitudinal studies on IT in government during the 1980s and 1990s was done by the University of California Irvine group. They found, for example, that IT seems to reinforce existing organizational structures rather than revolt them, and that “the primary beneficiaries have been functions favored by the dominant political-administrative coalitions in public administrations, and not those of technical elites, middle managers, clerical staff, or ordinary citizens” (Kraemer & King, 2003). No sources known to the authors have assessed whether that is still the case in this second wave of IT in the public sector. The present study is seen as the first step toward uncovering this issue.

The objective of this paper is to identify the methodological approaches to research within the domain of e-government and to access the ontology of e-government research. Our underlying assumption is that IT in the public sector as a research discipline has had a revival after the burst of the dot-com bubble, now under the label of *e-government*. Furthermore, it is assumed that the field of e-government research is populated by a heterogeneous group of researchers, some coming from the e-commerce research domain, while others are successors of the field of IT in the public sector stemming from the 1970s.

Hence, it is assumed that the (many) disciplines involved in e-government re-
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