Chapter 14
Social Policy and Information Communication Technologies

Paul Henman
The University of Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the contribution of information communication technology (ICT) to the operation of social and public policy. The governmentality analytic is introduced as a way in which to highlight how ICT is used by the state in governing populations. The chapter identifies four ways ICTs relate to social and public policy. First, social policy can be a response to ICT innovation and use. Second, ICT is used to implement and administer social policy. Third, ICT is used to develop and evaluate social policy. Fourth, the use of ICT can shape the very nature and substance of social policy. The chapter illustrates these theoretical and conceptual approaches by examining the extensive and innovative use of ICT in Australia’s national income security agency, Centrelink.

‘Each individual has a universal responsibility to shape institutions to serve human needs’. -- His Holiness the Dalai Lama

INTRODUCTION

Electronic information and communication technologies are now an indispensable element of the operation of government. Governments utilize ICTs for the delivery of government services, the analysis, development and implementation of public policy, the management of government operations, and the conduct of democratic processes. This chapter specifically examines the relationship between social policy and ICTs. While the focus is on ICT use vis-à-vis social policy, as this is the policy area of human services, the observations are equally relevant to the broader domain of public (or government) policy.

The term “social policy” refers to policies enacted by governments that contribute to individual and collective well being. The term “policy” refers to
decisions and actions undertaken by government, of which legislation is the most formal manifestation of policy. There is no clear cut definition of what is considered “social policy” in contrast to the more encompassing term “public policy”. However, welfare, social security, immigration, education and health are clear examples of social policy as are all human services. Taxation, economic and transportation policy involve aspects of social policy, such as tax benefits, labor market regulation and access to public transport respectively.

Until recently, the role of ICTs in government and more particularly in public policy processes has been poorly studied. ICTs have been given some attention by academics in the discipline of information technology, public administration and political science (e.g. Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Griffin et al, 2007; Frisen, 1999; Heeks, 1999; Heeks, 2006), but virtually no consideration in public policy and social policy. The major exception is the long-standing concern about privacy and data protection, which has generated considerable debate and policy formation. The relative absence of ICTs from understanding government and public/social policy is largely a result of the view that ICTs are mundane technologies that are simply tools to implement government policy decisions. This also reflects a widely held view that policy making and policy administration are two distinct domains, with ICTs being relegated to the domain of public administration. A second reason for the limited consideration of ICTs in social policy and particularly human services has been the traditionally low tech nature of many human service organizations in which considerable professional discretion is involved and where services are delivered by small-scale, voluntary, non-government organizations.

It has been the advent and rapid development of the internet over the past decade that has generated interest in the role of ICTs in government. In particular, such networked ICTs have been linked with public administration reform agendas to “modernize government” and to provide more “joined-up”, individualized and responsive government service delivery. For example, in the UK the link between government reform and ICTs has been made quite explicit in former Prime Minister Blair’s modernization agenda (UK 1999) and in the transformational government agenda through shared service delivery (UK 2005). Definitions of “e-government” (also called “electronic government” or “digital government”) by national governments and international governmental organizations similarly make the link between ICTs and transformation of government operations, as the following example from the United Nations illustrates:

We put ‘e’ in front of ‘government’ to recognize that a public administration is in the process of transforming its internal and external relationships with the use of modern information and communication technology (ICT) ... E-government is a government that applies ICT to transform its internal and external relations. Through the application of ICT to its operations, a government does not alter its functions or its obligations to remain useful, legitimate, transparent and accountable. If anything, this application raises society’s expectations about the performance of government, in all respects, to a much higher level (UN, 2003, pp. 1-2, emphasis in original).

Of the entire and very broad range of ICTs, internet technologies have come to define the lens of much recent consideration of the use of ICTs in government. Indeed, national governments are now annually benchmarked on the extent to which they use and develop internet technologies. National comparisons of e-government are regularly published by the United Nations Division of Public Economics and Public Administration (www.unpan.org/DPADM/MajorPublications/ UNEGovernmentSurvey/tabid/600/Default.aspx) and the Institute of E-government at the Waseda University in Japan (www.obi.giti.waseda.ac.jp/).