How Do We Meta-Govern Policy Networks in E-Government?

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, an explicit goal of most industrialized states has been to integrate electronic access to government information and service delivery, examples being ‘the 24/7 agency’ or ‘Joined-up governance’. This aim, which goes beyond the establishment of ‘single’ governmental websites, calls for both horizontal, as well as vertical integration of otherwise separate public agencies and authorities who are supposed to collaborate towards ‘joint’ and ‘needs-based’ electronic solutions to the benefit of citizens. While many authors have described this implementation of a policy aim in purely technical interoperability terms, we frame this development as a policy process of metagoverning self-regulating networks. This article is primarily a theoretical think piece in which we will present a systematic framework for the analysis of meta-governing the policy process of electronic government. In addition to the value of framing the process as a metagovernance process, we wish to discuss how the metagovernance approach also sheds light on whether or not the on-going process of vertical and horizontal integration leads to centralization. Our arguments will be supported by empirical illustrations mainly adopted from Scandinavian research.

Keywords: Electronic Government, Metagovernance, On-Line Integration, Policy Networks,

INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the current processes of integrating different governmental on-line information and service delivery initiatives which go toward providing single entry points for citizens and businesses. Based on notions of 24/7 Agency, Gateways, Single-windows, One-stop-shops, Supersites, and Joined-up government, the underlying vision is to make electronic government information and services more accessible and interactive, and functionally needs-based (for example, based on ‘life-situations’ such as e.g. birth, marriage etc). In order to fulfill this vision, systems that span existing vertical and horizontal administrative borders are required, and public (and sometimes private) actors need to coordinate, collaborate and cluster their on-line services (Kernaghan, 2007, pp.104f).

This challenge of integrating and coordinating a number of concerned actors calls for a meta-governor, usually the responsible political leadership, who by discursive and organizational means, can manage a (policy) network of otherwise self-governing and self-
regulating actors, and mobilize, and ‘guide’ them towards a certain policy goal (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007; Triantifillou, 2007). As in other policy fields in modern societies, current electronic government policies are based around a keystone idea that there has been a dislocation of the traditional hierarchical (‘silo’) concept of governing in which a strong and unitary state is at the centre of the polity. It is therefore our contention that the policy processes of fully integrated, electronic, single entry points are taking place in a political setting more characterized by governance than government. In other words direct commands, and legal provisions, have been replaced by institutionalized negotiations between otherwise autonomous actors. The theorization of this transition also includes the prospect of metagoverning these networks, which provides us with a completely different approach thus filling out some of the gaps we are able to see in the current stock of literature on e-government.

First, there has so far been a strong technical bias in the literature on e-government towards the design of integrating different systems, whereas the public administration and policy research of the processes has, with some notable exceptions, been almost completely absent from the field (Dunleavy et al., 2006, p. 469). The traditional information systems literature has some blind spots in terms of the developments in the field. It is too focused on information and process integration in terms of interoperability and interconnectivity, the more technical aspects of system development such as semantic standards (cf. Traumüller and Wimmer, 2004; Klischweski, 2004; Bajaj & Ram, 2007; Guijarro, 2007), whereas the political management, and organization of integration has been notably overlooked. Second, there is still a tendency to envisage implementation processes of governmental information systems as vertical processes (albeit acknowledging that they can be either top-down or bottom-up) in which the individual public agency is at the center of the study (cf. Heeks, 2006). Consequently, the managerial and organizational aspects of horizontal integration processes that take place between several interdependent actors are somehow missed out. Third, the question whether the integration processes should be conceived as a response to the fragmentation of public management caused by either old functional and geographical borders, or by New Public Management (NPM) reforms (cf. Eggers, 2005; Dunleavy et al., 2006), is actually an issue that can be addressed through a metagovernance approach. The process of integrating various agencies’ electronic information and service facilities does not necessarily mean centralization. A metagovernance process can actually, as we will discuss below, perpetuate the existing autonomy of various public agents.

Although the approach presented here does not dismiss previous research, we find it essential to expand the domain of inquiry in order to give modern political management processes a more prominent position. The meta-governance approach is not by default a universal framework for describing all the intricacies involved in the process of integrating governmental information systems, but it provides a novel perspective to understanding the policy complexities involved.

The vision of integrated on-line information and services goes beyond the normal internal use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public management. It also goes beyond various public organizations’ exclusive websites where the electronic services usually are no more than complementary to standard administrative routines. A basic challenge in this process is that the use of strong policy instruments, such as hierarchical commands and legal provisions, is not always ‘appropriate’, or possible, when we span functional and geographical borders. This is due to either constitutional vertical restrictions (such as in, e.g. federal political systems, or where sub-national authorities are autonomous vis-à-vis central governments), or horizontal constraints (such as in e.g. systems with ministerial government, or strong autonomous agencies, or quangos, within bureaucracy). Although these constraints are well-known problems of coordinating policy (Thomas, 1997; Peters, 2006),
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