Chapter 11

A New Model for Transparency and E-Participation: Who Transforms What Policy into Whose Practice?

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of transparency depends on the objectives and the research discipline in which the evaluation is undertaken. This study follows two main lines: to provide a framework for transparency evaluation, and to develop guidelines for the design and management of citizen-orientated Internet websites and e-participation initiatives. This is done in three stages: defining the research discipline, defining the concepts and terms, and defining measures for evaluation. Finally, the suggested framework is examined in the context of real estate planning in Israel, where the use of online systems – designed and implemented independently by a few local authorities – seems to bypass a controversial national planning reform. A close acquaintance with governance processes has raised the inevitable question, perhaps typical to many systems in the public sector: who transforms what policy into whose practice?
The evaluation of Internet websites success depends on the objectives and the research discipline in which the evaluation is undertaken. So is the analysis of transparency which is the main topic of this study. Transparency may encompass additional concepts such as accountability and collaborativeness that are crucial for the effective use of information technology (IT) and systems (IS).

Value of information is a concept that was evolved in the IS literature and is supposed to fit to the point more than common success indicators such as return on investment (ROI) or user satisfaction. These objectives do not capture various externalities, whereas measurements of the value of information might be linked to services that are public goods and to values and norms that are embedded in the IT (Walsham, 2009).

Different IT architectures may provide different levels of access, communication, flexibility and collaborativeness, and accountability. For example: to what extent does the owner of the system – the governor or regulator – hold a direct and exclusive control of the system; initiate open discussions; encourage public debate; publish information; and mainly increase “organizational effectiveness through flattening hierarchies and enhancing public sector creativity” (Chadwick 2006, p.194). This optimistic vision expresses the nature of IT: “the introduction of new technologies not only fostered more rapid communication, it also caused fundamental long-term shifts in internal power structure. Vertically integrated hierarchies of command and control were being displaced by looser, more flexible, horizontally integrated networks. [...] Access to centralized databases allows rapid retrieval of information necessary for good decision making. In this perspective, e-government goes beyond simple task automation” (p.194). Moreover, the concepts of information and power are going through a radical change following the creation of the new Web 2.0 practice of sharing (Ahituv, 2001).

Indexing and theorizing the growing variety of e-participation initiatives, which clearly go “beyond simple task automation”, is a new challenge in e-government research. In an attempt to capture the “Value for Citizens”, Nordfors et al. (2009) proposed the value to “be of personal or private
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