Chapter 1
The Vision of E-Governance:
A Theoretical and Historical View

ABSTRACT

The book begins with a discussion of the two major eras that define IT in public administration. It then explores a number of theoretical frameworks that have proved helpful in understanding IT. Specifically, technological determinism, reinforcement theory, socio-technical theory, and systems theory are all reviewed as a means to help appreciate the various frames of references that guide IT development. As this is shown, the theoretical frameworks differ significantly in their approach to IT. The other goal of this chapter is to explore how IT impinges on democratic values of transparency, participation, and collaboration. In short, this chapter presents the concept of democracy from a concentric layering perspective of six critical themes: e-democracy, e-activism, e-campaigning, e-voting, e-legislation, and e-participation. As explored in the chapter, these five layers entail many new roles for public managers, many new challenges, and many new opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

As we begin to explore the role of public information management and e-government, one of the hardest things public managers and policy makers wrestle with is scope, or the boundaries of Information Technology (IT) systems. It will also be a struggle for us as we move through the various topics in the book. IT has become “ubiquitous,” meaning that it is found everywhere and there is hardly a public service or policy issue that does not touch, or is not touched by, IT. Consequently, we are left with the dilemma of what to cover versus what to leave out to explore another day.

The decision on what to explore in this book was largely based on thinking about what was needed in a day in the life of a public manager. Tangential issues are left to the side, but where they may prove instrumental; they are highlighted at the end of the chapter further reading and exploration.
This chapter begins the book with a discussion of a number of theoretical frameworks that have proved helpful in understanding IT. Theoretical frameworks and models are helpful in that they provide a schema around which ideas can be understood. As the reader will see, the theoretical frameworks discussed below differ significantly in their approach to IT. The other goal of this chapter is to explore how IT impinges on democratic values of transparency, participation, and collaboration. Before turning to the main points of the chapter, theory and democracy, a short introduction provides insights on the history of IT in the public sector.

TWO MAJOR ERAS

IT in the public sector can be divided between two major eras: pre 2000 and post 2000 with the year 2000 (otherwise known as Y2K) serving as an important point of delineation.

Pre-Y2K

The modern digital computer actually dates back to 1937 when invented by George Stibitz. But it took until the 1980s to hit the halls of government and become a major policy issue and programmatic issue. The year 1981 saw the establishment of BITNET, the “Because It’s Time NETwork.” This important forerunner of the Internet was initiated as a cooperative network at the City University of New York. It provided functionalities of electronic mail, file transfer, and discussion lists. In 1986, the National Science Foundation funded NSFNet as a backbone network. In 1987, NSF signed a cooperative agreement to manage NSFNET in cooperation with IBM, MCI, and Merit Network, Inc. By the end of 1987, there were ten thousand Internet hosts. Together, the military’s ARPAnet, academia’s BITNET, and the government’s NSFNet formed the triad of networks, which melded to become the modern Internet. In 1981 there was no Internet, by 1984 computer networking had advanced to the point where a formally administered system of addresses was necessary. The domain name system (DNS) was established that year, allowing users to employ mnemonic Internet addresses (URLs—uniform resource locator addresses, such as www.nsf.gov) instead of numeric Internet Provider (IP) addresses.

Through the late 1970s and 1980s, governments employed computer technology, but it was in the form of mainframe computers that were used primarily for the storage of data that had to be reported to oversight organizations. While personal computers made their debut in the late 1970s, it was not until the late 1980s that software arrived on the scene in a format that proved instrumental. Hence, most government processes remained paper based until the 1990s.

The 1990s marked a watershed moment for e-government and information technology initiatives in general. As students of organizational change understand, a number of events coalesced in a manner that resulted in mass automation of government work.

Three critical events occurred that would move government operations from a largely manual paper-based approach to service delivery to full-scale online activities. The first event was the election of the Clinton-Gore administration. The second was the impending Year 2000 (Y2K) disaster, and the third was a significant reduction in computing costs. These three events served to propel government into the information age.

Entering office in 1993, the Clinton/Gore administration was very pro-technology. Several important IT legislative acts were passed during this era. With their “cheaper, better, faster” slogan, and their desire to reengineer government, they pushed the technology agenda at the federal, state and local levels. In 1993 the publication of the first White House Web page and public e-mail to the president and vice president were inaugurated. The federal government also became more sensitive to social problems associated with the growth of
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