

Chapter 6

Debating Digitally-Enabled Service Transformation in Public Sector: Keeping the Research Talking

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ABSTRACT

Digitally-enabled service transformation (DEST) in the public sector (PS) offers a unique opportunity for public administration (PA) and information systems (IS) disciplines to interlace. Such uniqueness has enabled a deviance in the theoretical selection from the adoption of native PA/IS theories to imported social sciences theories including institutional and structuration. Institutional theory provides a way of viewing and explaining why and how institutions emerge in a certain way within a given context, but it falls under the criticism of structural bias as it avoids explanations situated at individual or same level of analysis. Such a gap is filled with structuration theory adoption, focusing on how institutional structures arise, or are maintained through the interplay process. The fusion of such concepts would potentially enrich the debates on DEST in PS by provoking new insights to keep the “research talking.”

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INTRODUCTION

Only attention to what solves concrete problems as defined by user communities might allow organisation studies to rise above multiparadigmaticism (McKelvey, 2003).

The Digital Darwinism Era has plotted a completely different institutional landscape within both domains of public and private sectors, demanding fierce competition against unforeseeable future crafted by fast-pace of technology and social evolution. Abruptly, such evolution has molded a new template for people's behavior and expectations, which is the reason that underpins digitally-enabled service transformation (DEST) in many organizations. DEST refers to the use of ICT to change an existing service radically, in pursuance of achieving dramatic improvement in any critical measure of performance, including cost, quality and speed (Omar & Weerakkody, 2016). In the domain of public sector, DEST is attributable to the e-Government (eGov) phenomenon. While the economics reason appeared as the main motivation driving the changes in private institution, the public institutions perceived DEST (and eGov) as the solution to fundamentally improve their services through enhancement of interactions with citizens. Having said so, plenty of digitally-enabled changes were applied in both transactional and complex government services, from the tax payments to the healthcare and benefit system. Along the line, the obsessive races against Digital Darwinism had produced both – successes as well as disappointments. Such phenomenon had enticed the attentions of many, especially the scholars in the domain of Public Administrations (PA) and Information System / Technology (IST) who attempted to rationalize the derailments of the DEST cases. To the PA advocators, much of the arguments raised were constructed against the public policy design and delivery. Meanwhile, the paradigm of IST academia was largely clustered into two perspectives of behavioral and design science of such transformation. While these issues inhibit and dominated the discussions, much of the proposed recommendations rarely revealed the practical insights to assist better DEST adoption and diffusion in the future.

Although various theories have been utilized to study the eGov phenomenon, plenty of DEST's dogmas remain unchallenged (see Janowski, 2015; Majchrzak, Markus & Wareham, 2016; Omar & Elhaddadeh, 2016; Omar, El-Haddadeh, & Weerakkody, 2016; Omar & Osmani, 2015). Hence, it was said that the scope for potentially better theories to discover more about the e-government phenomena are limitless (Bannister and Connolly, 2015). To discuss the validity of this assertion in any detail is well beyond the scope of our discourse here, but indubitably the argument that the DEST researchers need to be exploring beyond both views is conceivable. Having said so, the opportunity to escape the PA and IST paradoxes stays open. Besides, our disagreement on the claim that eGov is a finite academic

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