



Chapter III

E-Government: The Future of Red Tape

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, governments are using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to communicate internally, with citizens, and with corporations. The electronic interactions between governments, citizens, and/or corporations are usually referred to as e-government. E-government as such attempts to increase the efficiency of government operations and of service delivery (i.e., “reduce red tape”), but also to increase citizens’ trust in public administration. Some authors even foresee democratic renewal, in conjunction with a drastically reengineered government apparatus. This chapter explores the normative, managerial, and technological antecedents of e-governments and explores the manifestation of e-government. It does so by focusing on goals, visions, and beliefs (“rhetorics”) at national and supranational policy levels (i.e. the American and European e-government policies) and by analyzing the technological and managerial problems encountered at the shop floor of municipal e-government initiatives (“reality”).

INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, western public bureaucracies have been constructed and constrained by a paradigm known as “traditional public administration.” As noted by Wilson with respect to the American administration in the end of the 19th century, traditional public administration is a reaction “... the poisonous atmosphere of [city] government, the crooked secrets of state administration, the confusion, sinecurism, and corruption ever again discovered in the bureaux at Washington” (Wilson, 1887, p. 206). In order to curtail the influence and power of the tiny cogs in the wheels of public sector organizations (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002) and, in general, to map ways to restrict personalistic, patrimonial, and patriarchal modes of governance, the ideal type of bureaucracy has its value. However, actual manifestations of bureaucracy also bear a number of well-known drawbacks with them, such as diminished performance, cumbersome operations, lack of citizen orientation, and other phenomena usually referred to as “red tape.” Therefore, the classic public administration paradigm has been criticized since the 1970s. With the expansion of the scope of markets, citizens increasingly began to think more as customers even in their experience as users of public services. At the same time, a governance discourse—also labeled “new public management” (NPM)—emerged, in which “reinvention,” “re-engineering,” and “entrepreneurial government” played an important role (Hammer, 1990; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Guy Peters (1996) has identified four basic, dominant patterns in new public management practices (1996):

- market government (emphasizing “pay for performance”);
- participatory government (emphasizing empowerment and flatter organizations), which enables citizens to speak up;
- flexible government (virtual organizations, temporary allocation of staff to tasks); and
- deregulated government (managerial freedom).

In general, it can be stated that underlying all patterns of practices is a notion of departure from the classic public administration paradigm. This change of view on how governments should work has been fueled by a new kind of rationalization or reform: e-government (or, in general, the use of Internet technologies). Initially, it was focused on improving and reengineering internal processes, but later it also included the redesign of external relationships in order to improve public administration’s accessibility and quality of service provision. E-government has a techno-optimistic, analytical flavor and seems

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