

A Conceptual Framework for Considering the Value of E-Government

Ed Downey

State University of New York, College at Brockport, USA

INTRODUCTION

E-government implementation requires public administrators to respond to stakeholder value. While there are many concepts of value in the field of public administration, an integrated framework that public administrators can use to consider the value of e-government to stakeholders is lacking.

The new public management suggests that public administrators can best produce value by becoming entrepreneurial and more responsive to stakeholder needs (Barzelay, 1998; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Frederickson, 1980; Goodsell, 1993; Kettl, 1993; Kettl & Milward, 1996; Moe, 1994; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Osborne & Plastrik, 1997; Stillman, 1995). Certainly e-government applications hold the promise of strengthening the relationship between public administrators and stakeholders in ways that better respond to needs and thus provide more value to stakeholders and to society in general. Current e-government classification methodologies tend to focus more on the stages of development of e-government applications (Layne & Lee, 2001; Moon, 2002; UN & ASPA, 2001; West, 2004) than on the different kinds of value that can result from meeting stakeholder needs.

There is an emerging emphasis on stakeholder needs and value in the e-government literature rather than on classification methodologies that focus on stages of development (Grant & Chau, 2005; Reffat, 2005; Savoie, 2004; Schware & Deane, 2003; Tan, Pan, & Lim, 2005; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). This article responds to these ideas by focusing on stakeholder value to develop a conceptual framework that public administrators can apply to e-government. Such a framework will provide insight into: whether or not an e-government application is worthwhile; and if worthwhile, what political management strategies might be employed to support it. The framework will also facilitate the comparison of e-government alternatives.

BACKGROUND

This section looks at the new public management debate and how it has focused attention on both market and

politically derived stakeholder value. Current methodologies used to classify e-government are then reviewed with the conclusion that they focus more on development than on value. At the end of this section is a discussion of the emerging emphasis in the e-government literature on stakeholder value and its relationship to a new framework of e-government value.

THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT DEBATE

The new public management represents a change in our views of governance. From the point of view of its proponents it is a shift away from a reliance on bureaucratic rules and rule making, impersonal systems of control, and managerial professionalism. The new public management emphasizes the implementation of business practices that make government institutions more sensitive to stakeholder needs (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). As a consequence, government must reinvent itself in ways that are more entrepreneurial, responsive, and consumer oriented (Frederickson, 1980; Goodsell, 1993; Kettl, 1993; Kettl & Milward, 1996; Moe, 1994; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Osborne & Plastrik, 1997; Stillman, 1995). Perhaps the approach is best summed up by Denhardt et al. (2000) as public administrators who serve rather than steer society: “the primary role of the public servant is to help citizens articulate and meet their shared interests rather than to attempt to control or steer society.” The assumption that underlies this reinvention is that the approach will make government more valuable to society.

Far from being accepted dogma in the field of Public Administration the new public management has caused some lively debate. For example, regarding the implementation of more business practices in government, Terry Moe (1995) is concerned about profound differences between the public and private sectors. These differences are rooted in the contrasting nature of authority upon which the two are based. The authority of the private firm emerges from voluntary, self-interested exchanges, while in public firms authority is not voluntary and often contrary to self-interest.

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Oliver Williamson (1995) who has based his work on the idea that institutional structures in the market are the result of attempts to economize on transaction costs none-the-less finds Moe's arguments "compelling." Williamson agrees that Moe's idea that farsighted politicians realize that they will not always be in office and therefore build inefficiencies into public bureaucracies to frustrate the efforts of successors to reshape an agency creates a fundamental difference in public and private bureaucracies.

One of the more lively debates regarding the appropriateness of the new public management took place between Terry (1998) and Frant (1999). Terry is very much concerned about what he believes to be the undemocratic nature of the new public management and that the:

... public entrepreneur's penchant for rule breaking and for manipulating public authority for private gain has been, and continues to be, a threat to democratic governance. The danger is intensified by the emergence of public entrepreneurs of the neo-managerialist persuasion. (1998, p. 197)

Frant argues that Terry misunderstands the new public management:

Neo-managerialism as presented by Terry, then, is a strikingly bizarre ideology, for its two main pillars, the managerialist pillar and the economics pillar, stand in direct contradiction to each other. The former says managers must be freed from constraints, the latter says that they require extensive policing and cannot be trusted. (1999, p. 268)

Whether or not one agrees with the new public management, it has served the purpose of forcing a reconsideration of the role of public administration and highlighted the relationship between public administrators and stakeholders. In the debate some have cast the public administrator as an entrepreneur and consequently introduced market derived concepts of value (Frant, 1999; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Williamson, 1995). It has also invigorated those who see the public administrator as an integral part of the political process and consequently introduced politically derived concepts of value (Denhardt et al., 2000; Moe, 1995; Terry, 1998). In some instances the debate shows sharp contrasts of views as in the case with Terry (1998) and Frant (1999). But it also shows some attempts at accommodation as suggested by Oliver Williamson's (1995) comments on Moe's (1995) work. The real value here has been the raising of issues surrounding two very important concepts of values as they relate to public administration, those that are market derived and those that are politically derived.

These two concepts of value should be applied to e-government initiatives, but this does not seem to be the case. Rather, current classification methodologies are more focused on the staged development from simple to more sophisticated e-government applications.

E-GOVERNMENT CLASSIFICATION METHODOLOGIES

A great deal has been done to understand e-government from a developmental perspective. The purpose of the classification methodologies has been to provide ways to determine how advanced e-government is in various jurisdictions.

The current state of classification methodologies for e-government applications are typified by West's (2004) approach. West suggests four stages of e-government transformation: (1) the billboard stage; (2) the partial-service-delivery stage; (3) the portal stage, with fully executable and integrated service delivery; and (4) interactive democracy with public out-reach and accountability enhancing features.

Moon (2002) suggests five stages of development "which reflect the degree of technical sophistication and interaction with users: (1) simple information dissemination (one-way communication); (2) two-way communication (request and response); (3) service and financial transactions; (4) integration (horizontal and vertical integration); and (5) political participation."

A joint study done by the United Nations and the American Society for Public Administration also employed five stages of e-government development to UN member states (UN & ASPA 2001, p. 2):

- **Emerging:** An official government online presence is established.
- **Enhanced:** Government sites increase; information becomes more dynamic.
- **Interactive:** Users can download forms, e-mail officials and interact through the Web.
- **Transactional:** Users can actually pay for services and other transactions online.
- **Seamless:** Full integration across administrative boundaries.

Finally, Layne and Lee (2001) look at the stages of e-government development from the perspective of two variables: technological and organizational complexity; and integration. This yields four stages: catalogue, transaction, vertical integration, and horizontal integration each of which have increasing amounts of complexity and integration.

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