Chapter X
E–Government and Accountability in EU Local Governments

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ABSTRACT

This work tries to assess to what extent e-government enables transparency, openness and, hence, accountability in public administrations. For this purpose, local European Union (EU) administrations are analysed, encompassing all the different types of public administration styles of Western countries. Although almost all governments have opened a Web site and reports from multilateral organizations highlight the benefits of e-government initiatives for transforming the relationship between administration and citizens; the results of our analyses show that these benefits are far from being achieved because the e-government projects are still in their early stages. Even though the capacity of the Internet for the dissemination of information improves accountability and makes benchmarking easier, our research results also show that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) do not promote financial accountability beyond legal requirements. In conclusion, ICTs have not had a dramatic impact on public accountability in practice, even in countries that are at the forefront of digital technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of Web-based technologies has become a common element of the public administration modernization programmes of Western democracies, as well as a global trend in public administrations. The diffusion of Information and Communication Technology innovations among public administrations has been triggered off by the dramatic development of e-commerce which has encouraged citizens to demand more customized services. Citizens -who are the e-commerce users- demand the same level of responsiveness and service from their governments as they are receiving from the private sector (Edmiston, 2003). So, in the same way as in the 1990s there was global trend for undertaking public sector reforms based on the New Public Management (NPM) postulates, nowadays globalization is also creating an offer of interactive initiatives and demands in national public administrations which are putting public bureaucracies worldwide under pressure to follow the way in which innovator governments relate to citizens regardless of their national traditions and public administration style. Notwithstanding, NPM reforms that originated in Anglo-American countries were not always regarded as a desirable model to emulate in European Continental countries. The NPM doctrine was adapted, instead of adopted, in European Union (EU) countries with non Anglo-American public administration styles, and its implementation underwent multiple mutations and variations across countries (Hood, 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaer, 2000; and Torres, 2004).

The interaction capability of the Internet has been deemed by governments as a trouble-free way of: improving responsiveness to citizens, generating greater public trust in governments and making governance function better than it currently does (Markoff, 2000). According to Clift (2003), e-government interactivity is an adequate tool for involving stakeholders, improving government decisions, increasing citizen trust in govern-ment, enhancing government accountability[1] and transparency and accommodating the public will in the information age. More information delivered in a more timely fashion to citizens is expected to increase the transparency of government and to empower citizens to monitor government performance more closely. Today, governments worldwide recognise ICTs as powerful tools for enhancing citizen engagement in public policy-making and as a way of increasing citizen trust in governments (La Porte et al., 2002).

E-government may refer to narrower or broader areas. The narrow approach is simply the translation of private sector e-commerce experiences to the public sector. The broader approach of e-government extends to key issues of governance such as the online engagement of stakeholders in the process of shaping, debating and implementing public policies. Although a growing number of e-government studies are emerging in this field, previous research has not analyzed the EU local government innovation towards digital government from a comparative perspective. Benchmarking studies of e-government are undertaken regularly by the Center for the Business of Government, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Accenture, Cap Gemini, the United Nations and the American Society for Public Administration. Unfortunately, most of this literature focuses on central and federal governments in terms of examining trends in digital government. These are frequently little more than simplistic 'bean-counting' exercises that measure the number of services provided online. According to Schedler and Schmidt (2004), there are two kinds of studies: those which have been published by governments or by consultancy firms such as US Executive Office, UK Cabinet Office, Andersen, Accenture; Cap Gemini Ernst & Young (a large majority of the publications) and those carried out by academics. The former have a vested interest in the development of e-government, so, *a priori*, the results of the latter should be more objective.

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