

Chapter XLV

Local E–Government in Brazil: Poor Interaction and Local Politics as Usual

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ABSTRACT

E-government has the potential to enhance democracy and transparency, increasing opportunities for citizen interaction. Literature has given many examples of successes and failures in its implementation, especially at the national level. Now, there are claims that the greatest opportunities for e-government are at the local level, because local governments have more contact with citizens. However, little attention has been paid to the highly bureaucratic and paternalistic government structures at local levels, and to how information and communication technologies (ICTs) may affect interaction and participation. Most of the literature fails to cover this relationship, and most of the time tries to emphasize just the technical obstacles instead of obstacles of a non-technical nature, such as political and bureaucratic barriers. In this study, an attempt is made to show that ICTs in municipal government in Brazil are designed in such a way that they resemble the traditional political structures, maintaining politics as usual and avoiding new forms of interaction and participation.

INTRODUCTION

There is no universal definition of e-government, but its increasing popularity is well recognized in a mushrooming literature. Basically, e-government means the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public administration. The

European Commission defines e-government as:

...the use of information and communication technology in public administration combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services, and democratic pro-

cesses and strengthen support to public policies. (Europe's Information Society, 2003)

Although some authors have mentioned citizen needs and participation in democracy in the concept or definition of e-government, a technology-driven or economic approach is used in the mainstream literature of academic journals and conferences. This makes it hard to publish any more critical or pessimistic view of e-government, especially if it comes from developing countries.

In public administration, the distinction has to be made between economic, legal, political and democratic values. Legal values are concerned with legislation as the guiding principle in public administration; economic values deal with efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility and customer orientation – the citizens as customers of public services; democratic values are concerned with transparency, accountability and social equity. In this case, all citizens should be treated in an equal manner and must be able to influence and participate in decision-making processes in public administration (Snijders, 2005). In the mainstream literature on e-government, especially in the discourse of the New Public Management (NPM), efficiency and effectiveness – economic values – are emphasized, “nevertheless other values like political and democratic values or legal security belong to the core of public administration” (Snijders, 2005, p. 2).

According to Cordella (2007, p. 268), “e-government is often driven by technological determinism assumptions”, neglecting the importance and “the role of bureaucratic organization as mechanisms for enforcing fundamental democratic values such as impartiality and equality of citizens. He is in favor of the preservation of the bureaucratic organization “where it is able to provide coordination better than alternative organizational structures, taking into account all factors” (Cordella, 2007, p. 271).

Unfortunately, the dominant perspective is supported by the public sector itself, in which the delivery of public service is always organized according to the needs and wants of the administration, instead of the needs and wants of the citizens. Under the economic perspective that supports the recent e-government rhetoric, there are many examples in which ICTs hold the potential to improve efficiency in service delivery, accountability and transparency, and to renew the public sector through the integration of online services.

Consequently, expressions such as “transformative e-government”, “reinventing government”, “innovative government” and “citizen centric government” are heard with increasing frequency with the promise that, through the use of ICTs such as portals, it is now possible to improve the provision of services, transactions and interaction at all levels of government – central, regional and local.

Conversely, the pessimistic view is that ICT also has the ability to perpetuate existing inequalities without reducing the democratic deficit. In the developed world, specifically in Canada, it is mentioned that “if the state continues to follow its current trajectory, e-government will perpetuate a system of muted democracy that fails to promote equality and entrenches existing social inequities” (McNutt, 2004, p. 11). With regard to the UK, it is stated that “For the past decade, e-government (projects) promised to change the process of governance through digital service delivery; yet in reality it is confined to using e-mail and the world wide web to communicate with private bodies and citizens and static web sites where one can view or download and print forms for manual submission to the agency” (Sarikas & Weerakkody, 2007, p. 154).

Now, there are claims that the greatest opportunities for e-government are at the local level, because local governments have more contact with citizens than do higher levels of government. However, little attention has been

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