

ICTs and Intra-Governmental Structures at Local, Regional and Central Levels: *Updating Conventional Ideas*

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The Growth of ICT-Enabled Intra-Governmental Structures

One of the emerging changes in structures of governance is the growth of intra-governmental structures. This growth occurs within levels of government, such as the 'one-stop shops' that seek to unite a range of local government service delivery functions. It also occurs across levels of government, such as linkages between the levels of local, regional and central government.

This trend of inter-level initiatives will be strengthened by the growing agenda for regional government in the UK, other countries of Europe and beyond (Liddle et al 2000). It will also be strengthened by growing diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) which can help deliver this "new mode of governance" (Haque 2002:232).

ICTs do this by changing some of the parameters of governance; particularly by enabling networked forms of governance, of which intra-governmental structures are one example. ICTs decrease the costs of building, sustaining and enrolling in networks. Costs are reduced further, and networks made more accessible, as physical, financial and human capital barriers to ICT usage fall over time.

Analysing this ICT-enabled trend towards intra-governmental structures, we can identify a number of conventional models, ideas and activities that are mismatched to the new structures of governance. As discussed below, we need an update that matches the emerging reality.

Governance I: Updating the Model of Governance

Traditional views of governance have often been based on a Westminster model-type approach (Rhodes 1999). This gives primacy to the 'mono-centric organisation': to individual structures and individual levels (Parliament, cabinet, the political party, the official opposition, the separate stratum of local or regional government).

To cope with the growing intra-governmentality between local, regional and central levels, this model must be replaced with a new one that gives primacy to the governance network. This must recognise "the multiple, behavioural, continuous and dynamic exchanges occurring between various officials in the political system" (Wright 1974:4, cited in Rhodes 1999:7). It must also recognise the dependencies and

game-playing that occur in such networks as each player in the network "deploys its resources, whether constitutional-legal, organisational, financial, political or informational, to maximise influence over outcomes while trying to avoid becoming dependent on the other 'players'" (Rhodes 1999:9).

Governance II: Updating Views on New Public Management

There has been an initial assumption that new networked forms of governance are an element, or a continuation, of new public management (NPM). For example, ICTs were seen to be deployed in government in ways very consistent with the NPM market-oriented agenda (Heeks 2001). ICTs' impact in strengthening networks was thus seen as part of NPM.

An alternative view, though, is that networked governance represents a 'beyond NPM' approach, or at least an approach that may be tangential to NPM agendas (Fountain 2001). Indeed, growth of networks may actually conflict with NPM. Networks require greater coordination and control than more traditional forms of governance (Rhodes 1999). Yet NPM's interest in the minimal state and in downsizing may be removing the capacity for coordination and control.

We may therefore need to update the view that whatever emerges in government today – including growth in intra-government networks – is necessarily some outgrowth of new public management. Links between local, regional and central government may be part of a somewhat different reform agenda.

Governance III: Updating Usage Modes for Intra-Government Structures

The dominance of traditional governance models, and association with new public management, have affected how intra-government structures are used. For example, a survey of cross-tier e-government activities in Australia found that "local governments are interacting more with Commonwealth [*central government*] agencies in a compliance or regulatory mode than in a service delivery or coordination mode" (Turner 2003:443). Different tiers of government find themselves merely reporting information to each other, rather than engaging in activities such as joint service delivery. So far, they tend to operate as hierarchies, not as partnerships despite the greater potential benefits of a more collaborative mode of working.

eGovernment I: Updating Politico-Legal Debate

As noted above, ICTs can have a significant impact on structures and processes of governance. They can enable new forms of governance, including cross-tier networks, and can simultaneously alter the quality and transparency of governance. Discussion about the impact on governance should therefore be part of political and legislative discussions about ICTs. Yet presently, this is not the case.

Instead of talking about the impact of ICTs on governance, politicians are typically discussing the governance of ICTs. Borins (2002:206), for example, identifies three basic areas for legislative discussion on the governance/ICT interface:

- regulatory issues (e.g. regulating e-commerce, protecting intellectual property online, competition policy related to ICTs);

- economic issues (e.g. taxing e-commerce transactions, providing ICT infrastructure); and
- privacy issues (e.g. data protection).

There may be a number of reasons for the absence of discussion about impact. Politicians may perceive such issues to be the province of the executive not the legislature. Given politicians' lack of confidence with ICTs, their debate may be shaped by the agendas of external forces, such as commercial interests. Finally, politicians may feel it more pressing to deal with 'front-end' issues related to ICT context, rather than 'back-end' issues related to ICT impact. Despite these motives, one may argue the need for politico-legal debate to be updated to incorporate issues of ICTs' impact on governance, including their impact on intra-government structures.

eGovernment II: Updating eGovernment Models

ICTs are intimately associated with intra-government structures. Our models of e-government therefore inform our understanding of those structures. Yet those models may need updating. One such is the ubiquitous 'stage' model, which sees e-government as progressing through a series of stages:

- Stage 1: Basic site – provision of basic information, usually electronic versions of print documents; no email contact is given.
- Stage 2: Electronic Publishing – provision of extensive downloadable, static information via ICTs; basic email contact is given but there is no online interaction.
- Stage 3: Interactive Publishing – provision of dynamic, customisable information via ICTs; capacity to interact (e.g. via email and online submissions).
- Stage 4: Transaction – ability to authenticate users and register their identities reliably in order to undertake complete transactions online (e.g. submitting a tax return); users may be able to manage their own 'accounts' (i.e. a set of personal interactions/transactions).
- Stage 5: Joined-up eGovernment – interlinking of different government structures/processes to produce electronic one-stop shops; users can access their own files/accounts and manage their relationships with government wholly via the Internet.

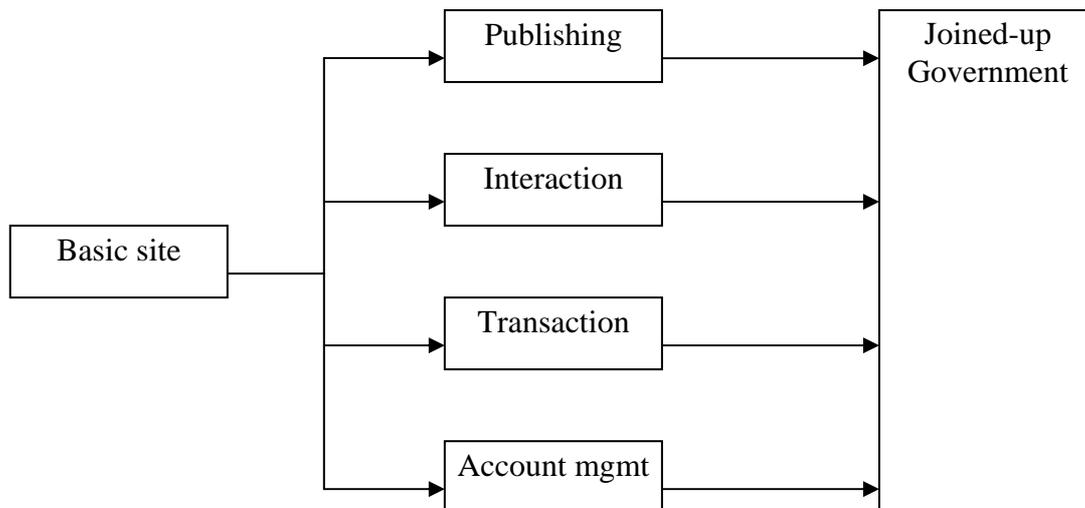
As NAO (2002:12) points out, the stage model "seems to confuse issues about the *type* of agency being analysed with the separate question of how sophisticated that agency's e-government or digital public services strategy is." For example, it fails to grasp the fact that many government agencies – including intra-government structures – do not undertake transactions with the public. Such agencies can find themselves constantly given low scores on stage-benchmarking as they 'fail to achieve' Stage 4 and/or may stop at Stage 3, failing to see that Stage 5 is applicable to their role.

The limitations of the old model for intra-government systems can be shown via an example from Brazil. Early systems that linked central and local government in Brazil enabled quite sophisticated online transactions (around Stage 4 in the old model). Yet little or no information was disclosed about those transactions. This cross-tier system therefore worked well from a technical perspective, but provided no accountability. It was only later that a simple publishing application was put in place (around Stage 1/2 in the old model). This divulged the way in which revenues were

being divided, and enabled some political and social monitoring of this intra-government structure (TCU 2000, Mora & Varsano 2001). Most commentators would probably regard the new situation as an advance on the original one; yet the stages model would almost see it as moving backwards.

NAO (2002) therefore proposes a different model for e-government development and assessment, which can be applied to the new intra-government structures (see Figure 1). This model builds upon the assumption that, for the four core 'routes ahead', "there is no automatic reason why government strategy would favour any one of these routes over others for all agencies." (NAO 2002:12).

Figure 1: New Model of eGovernment



eGovernment III: Updating Techno-Centric Views of Change

Allied partly to the shortcomings of stage models is the danger of focusing too much on the technology when thinking about ICT-enabled intra-government structures. Stage models encourage this and, by illuminating the technology, they tend to cast darker shadows on other issues that constrain the emergence of intra-government structures.

For example, organisations at different levels of government (and also at the same level) often have different systems for defining, coding and inputting data. Such differences must be negotiated and resolved if intra-government systems are to work. This may involve a lot of give and take, and must also stray into contentious issues of who pays for, who owns, and who is responsible for shared data and shared systems when different agencies of government seek to work together. Where regional government is involved, the picture can become even more complex because it may be an intermediary in a three-level structure that involves both local and central agencies.

Matters are difficult enough in just considering data issues. But further challenges will arise in other areas that need to be aligned in intra-government systems – both

harder factors like aligning work processes, or management structures; and softer factors like aligning the strategies and cultures of different agencies. Viewed from this more institutional, contextual perspective, the technology aspect may come to seem relatively trivial. Perspectives that view ICT-enabled creation of intra-government structures as easy must also, then, be updated to a more sanguine outlook.

Conclusions

New networked governance structures are emerging that link different levels of government. These intra-government structures are driven on by, for example, regional government agendas and are enabled by ICTs. This new approach to governance has much to offer both policy-making and service delivery. However, current models and ideas about both governance and e-government need to be updated if such benefits are to emerge.

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