New Questions for E-Government: Efficiency but not (yet?) Democracy

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ABSTRACT

E-government’s rise to prominence in the early 1990s was met with great enthusiasm amidst the promise that information communication technologies (ICTs) might fulfill the demands and expectations for improved democratic governance. Since then, significant progress has been made in terms of information provision and delivery of public services; yet, dialogue, a core dimension of democratic governance, remains largely unrealized within the digital context. This study employs content analysis within the frame of a check-off research protocol to determine if the population of state websites has the capacity to support digital democratic dialogue. The key question is whether there is an emphasis within the milieu of state websites to support e-dialogue outside the provision of information and e-services. The analysis suggests that efficiency rather than dialogue is the primary focus in the design of the state websites. Is, therefore, e-government a new development in the historical effort to enforce efficiency as a core value of governance?

Keywords: Administrative Efficiency, Citizen Participation and Politics, Democracy, e-Discourse, e-Government, e-Participation, Governance, Public Policy

Starting with the early part of 1990s, an important share of governance shifted into the environment of digital platforms (Lee, Tan, & Trimi 2005; United Nations, 2010). As information communication technologies (ICTs) have evolved, digital applications became the focal point in the pursuit of improved governance (Dawes, 2008), with some scholars describing digitalization as “genuinely transformative” (Dunleavy et al., 2006). E-government is regularly associated with better provision of public services, increased transparency and accountability (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hanberger, 2003). Johnson (1998) additionally suggested that ICTs could perhaps even revolutionize democracy, while Taylor and Lips (2008) allowed that digital governance might be inevitable within the realm of technological progress. Jaeger (2005) noted that e-government has the potential to become an
institutional construct that would support a deliberative democracy through reasoned multilevel reflection and active participation.

Since the use of ICTs by government significantly shapes and alters citizens’ behaviors (Dunleavy et al., 2006), the implication of the embrace of ICTs as a pillar of governance warrants detailed and careful attention. Along these lines, this article presents the results of exploratory research that asked the questions – What is the underlining narrative enforced in the design and the interaction on the governmental websites? Specifically, is dialogue through the means of ICT, e-dialogue, emphasized and encouraged within the design of the states’ websites? Do the websites of the 50 American states “look” and “respond” to citizens who visit them in a manner that would encourage dialogue and democratic participation?

The results suggest instead, a familiar pattern in public administration practice - setting efficiency as a core goal of administrative efforts. Governments and bureaucracies have an affinity towards emphasizing service delivery within e-government (Stahl, 2005); the overarching implications of such dynamics in the realm of e-government have yet to be adequately addressed. In the context of e-government the “design is the message.” Digital might be a new iteration of efficiency, and if so, e-government initiatives may represent a renewed attempt to engineer, through a dehumanized digital bureaucracy, a government that runs better.

Beyond this introduction, the discussion will be organized within three main sections. First, recent research on e-government and the reality of e-governance will be briefly discussed. The next section will introduce the methodological approach and the results. The paper will conclude with the discussion of the implications of the findings.

**IS E-GOVERNANCE POSSIBLE?**

E-government, also described as digital government, typically refers to government’s use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for purposes of governance (Dawes, 2008; Fountain, 2001; Brown, 2007; Moon, 2002). Similar to a number of other terms in public administration, scholars might employ the construct differently, emphasizing certain assumptions over others (Dawes, 2008; Hardy & Williams, 2011). For example Backus (2001), Lenihan (2005), and Lee, Chang and Berry (2011) draw a clear distinction between e-government and e-democracy. In broad terms, the former refers to using ICTs for provision of services, while the latter refers to supporting citizen participation in governance. Dawes (2008), Ahn and Bretschneider (2011) and United Nations (2003/2010), on the other hand, refer to the use of ICT to support citizens’ involvement in governance as e-participation, which does not assume the possibility of a conceptual difference between democracy and e-democracy.

E-governance, on the other hand, “comprises a set of technology-mediated processes that are changing both the delivery of public services and the broader interactions between citizens and government” (Torres, Pina & Royo, 2005, p. 534). Or as Milakovich (2012, p. 9) defines it: “digital governance is a broader umbrella term referring to the networked extension of ICT relationships to include faster access to the Web, mobile service delivery, networking, teleconferencing and multi-channel information technologies to accomplish higher-level two-way transactions.” Hence, e-governance could be thought of as the art of public governance within which the role of ICTs is emphasized. There is an intimate link between participation and democracy that should be noted here. It is theoretically tenuous to refer to the use of ICTs to support citizen participation in the design of policy as e-democracy is theoretically tenuous. This would imply a subtle assumption that the solutions for eluding democratic challenges might be found within improved applications of technology. Only involvement that is intended to lead to changes in policy can be considered as authentic participation; opinion polls and rhetoric driven public discussions can hardly be referred to as anything more than consultations (Hampton, 2009).
E-government became a policy priority in the governance literature as a core dimension of the reinventing government movement, which was importantly informed by new public management (NPM) perspectives (Fountain, 2001; Milakovich, 2012). The actual formalization of the concept was shaped in the 1993 Reengineering through Information Technology Report, part of the National Performance Review initiative (Dawes, 2008; Lenk & Traummüller, 2002). It permeated into public administration largely through e-business and e-commerce initiatives coming from the private sector (Moon, 2002). ICTs were delineated in the dominant discourse as the key to engineering an agile government that would mimic the best business practices (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

E-government has gained a salient role at the core of public administration practice and it receives significant academic attention. Moon (2002) identifies digital government as an integral part of current efforts to reform government. While, Brewer, Neubauer and Geiselhart (2006) argue that the use of technology has a great impact on public administration, both by creating chaos and by providing solutions. Ke and Wei (2004) and Lee, Tan, and Trimi (2005) associate e-government with improved service availability and accessibility, as well as overall betterments in processing efficiency. In the long run technologically permeated governance is expected to have lasting transformational impacts on both government and society (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Fountain, 2001; Kettl, 2002, 2005).

For instance, Sieber (2000), Ghose (2001), Craig, Harris and Weiner (2002), and Gessa (2008) confirm the capacity of geographic information systems (GIS) to empower otherwise marginalized groups. Craig and Elwood (1998) claim that public participation geographic information systems (PPGIS) usage helped community-based organizations to successfully challenge public agencies and to make agencies seek alternative policy solutions. Im, Shin, and Jin (2007) and Im (2011) suggest that e-government adoption might lead to large financial savings and increased effectiveness in organizational performance. Ahn and Bretschneider (2011) associate e-government efforts with greater political oversight of bureaucracy, which in turn could lead to increased accountability. Along similar lines, others have linked improved e-participation opportunities, in terms of voicing concerns and participating in decisionmaking processes, to the introduction of digital government platforms (Ahn & Bretschneider, 2011; Brewer, Neubauer & Geiselhart, 2006; Dawes, 2008; Milakovich, 2012; OECD, 2003; Stanley & Weare, 2004; Watson & Mundy, 2001).

Critics argue that e-government benefits are rhetorical and constitute mainly “lip service” (Thomas, 1995); real organizational costs are routinely overlooked (Goldfinch, 2007). For example Ganapati (2011, p. 425) argues that the “use of PPGIS in decision making by local government – a higher level of participation – has yet to gain a foothold...limited PPGIS adoption is less likely to be related to technological issues, and more likely to be related to institutional issues of participation”. Margolis and Resnick (2000) maintain that internet’s impact on politics and life habits is by no means fundamental – the “digital life” will simply mimic the non-digital one. Ho (2002), Edmiston (2003), West (2004, 2005), Bekkers and Homburg (2007) and Coursey and Norris (2008) consider that a great divide exists between the promise of digital governance and its implementation in practice.

Areas that were supposed to benefit the most from e-governance, such as increased citizen participation and higher democratic permeability, have generated some of the most disappointing dimensions of e-government. Critics have suggested that the impersonal nature of using technology to motivate dialogue conflicts with the participatory construct of democratic citizenship (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Democratic citizenship is not viable when the bulk of democratic interaction on governmental websites is limited to asynchronous communication that focuses on information provisions...
Moreover, it is still not clear who is or will be making up the ranks of the most active e-participators (Brainard, 2003; Elwood, 2006; McCall, 2003; Schlossberg & Shufold, 2005) and what will be the actual uses of the data collected through e-government platforms. In the case of GIS applications, Pickles (1995), Harris and Weiner (1998) and Elwood (2006) suggest possible group marginalization from misuse of knowledge that comes with access to sensitive data.

E-government once appeared to offer the elixir for improved governance and reconciling democracy and efficiency. It seems instead to have evolved into an unglamorous, but nevertheless sophisticated, mechanism for delivering public services more effectively (at a minimum reported as such). Yet, it is by no means unusual for implemented digital platforms to fail to motivate e-dialogue or democratization (OECD, 2009; The Economist, 2008) nor financial savings. Unlike e-service efforts, meaningful e-dialogue and e-participation require significant financial outlays and institutional support (Ganapati, 2011; Goldfinch, 2007). Goldfinch (2007) argues that the idea that technology implementation has led to a better government might be a simple mirage and claims that up to 30% of all ICT developments are total failures. Dunleavy et al. (2006) also confirm that “high scrap rates” are characteristic for IT projects. It is also common for the costs of ICT adoptions to outweigh benefits (Norris & Moon, 2005).

Despite the criticism, in less than two decades, e-government has become an everyday dimension of public administration practice. This widespread acceptance might contrarily motivate critical concerns, especially since the benefits of e-government have yet to be conclusively verified (Fountain, 2001; Goldfinch, 2007). Moreover, the normative theoretical models that are used to support e-government implementation are not linked to broader theoretical framework from political science of public administration (Coursey & Norris, 2008).

Methodological Approach and Data

Due to the complexity associated with understanding e-government dynamics, research in the area is a rather challenging endeavor, which is often criticized for not being ready to provide an adequate theoretical depth in its answers (Coursey & Norris, 2008; Gronlund, 2005; Gronlund & Andersson, 2006; Hardy & Williams, 2011). An important shortcoming of e-government studies is their failure to address broader policy concerns (Yildiz, 2007). Irani et al. (2007), Bekkers and Homburg (2007), Taylor and Lips (2008) argue that the complexity of e-government constructs need further detailed research that would capture contextual implications.

Current literature does not provide an accepted model for examining websites from an e-dialogue perspective. While there is a variety of quality e-government evaluative indexes such as those used by West (2004, 2005), Holzer and Kim (2003), Carrizales et al., (2006), D’agostino et al. (2011) and United Nations (2012), none of these benchmarks were constructed with a specific task of evaluating the underlining narrative present in the design of the websites. The evaluation framework described below utilizes criteria and coding categories derived during the observation of the websites.

Methodological Approach

In order to determine the capacity for dialogue and whether the designs of the websites’ facilitated or emphasized two-way communication – the websites of the 50 American states were critically reviewed. Employing content analysis (Babbie, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998), the review attempted to deconstruct the dominant theme and to identify the implicit assumptions within the information provided and the design of each website.

The websites of the 50 states were observed over the period of March to June, 2011. In addition to examining the dominant themes, the websites were evaluated on the basis of (1) user-friendliness; (2) presence of live-chat; (3) presence of general outlet for voicing concerns;
(4) emphasis on information security; and (5) whether an easily identifiable discussion or presentation of the importance e-governance could be located. An explanation of the core review categories is provided in Table 1.

Four trained coders (two administrators and two IT specialists) were employed for coding website friendliness. This measure was used to validate the coding and to alert the researchers to their own potential biases. The websites were evaluated under the remaining coding categories by the researchers alone.

Results

Summary

All 50 websites showcased noticeable levels of e-services, such as provision of information, payment options or licensing applications. In 18 cases, however, the information available on the broader nature of e-government efforts was nonexistent or limited at best. The necessity and the benefits of e-governance were assumed as self-evident. In 31 cases there were no live help or chat options made available; in 19 cases the websites were coded as user unfriendly and in 15 cases an outlet for voicing concerns was not easily accessible. The information was “there”, but due to the inadequacy of the logarithm of the search engine the information appeared “hidden.” A detailed breakdown of coding results by website is provided in the Appendix.

Table 1. Summary of core coding categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review Categories</th>
<th>Evaluative Dimensions</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Motivation/Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>User friendliness</td>
<td>interface design, selection and combination of colors, easiness of navigation, text presentation, selection of text font, performance of the search engine</td>
<td>1-5 scale (1-not user friendly/ 5 - extremely user friendly)</td>
<td>Website friendliness can be thought of as a proxy for the ability of the website to attract and maintain interest on the part of citizens (The Economist 2008); but also as a proxy for the barrier to participation (websites that are “unfriendly” would make it less likely for increased levels or e-dialogue).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live-chat</td>
<td>the option to engage in online chat with a public representative</td>
<td>yes/no</td>
<td>Presence of live-chat could represent higher responsiveness and interactivity capacity. Responsive and interactive websites might lead to increased probability of e-dialogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General outlet for voicing concerns</td>
<td>options such as emails, blogs, links to policy consultation directories and comments sections</td>
<td>yes/no - the website visitors can identify a location for voicing general concerns within maxim of 3 links or engine searches.</td>
<td>Easy access to voicing concerns could be considered as reflection of an environment that encourages citizens’ voice (Brewer, Neubauer and Geiselhart 2006, Best, Krueger and Ladewig 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>level of efforts taken to guarantee that information and communication is fully secure</td>
<td>low/high</td>
<td>Website security has been suggested as important dimension associated with trust and website use (Mullen &amp; Horner, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-governance focus</td>
<td>level of emphasis in discussion of the importance of e-governance (e.g. power point presentations, open letters to the public)</td>
<td>low/high</td>
<td>Visible discussion of the importance of input from citizens could be considered as proxy for administrative efforts to encourage e-dialogue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on dialogue resembled a monologue more than anything else. While the websites appear to provide a similar level of services and taken as a whole fit within a common denominator, there is also a significant “gap” between the leaders and the laggards. For example the websites of California, Michigan and Virginia were identified as leaders in all coding categories while the websites of Vermont and Wyoming were less user friendly, emphasized e-government initiatives on a limited scale and provided few outlets for voicing general concerns.

Services and information provisions within an efficiency narrative were dominant on all websites. This confirms the conclusion reached by Brainard and McNutt (2010, p. 852), who maintain that “very little” in their findings suggests “collaborative problem solving via continuing conversation”, but rather one dimensional information delivery characteristic to the traditional public administration. Even on the website of state of California, which demonstrated a relatively higher emphasis on e-dialogue, democratic dialogue wasn’t by any means a dominant theme. For example a report by California Legislative Analyst’s Office provided on the state’s website discussed the benefits of e-government as follows:

There is limited data available to document the actual benefits of e-government. However, it appears that there are a number of potential benefits from e-government implementation, including reducing the costs of government, streamlining governmental operations, and making government services more accessible and convenient to the public. (Brannen, 2001)

All the state websites provide an abundance of information, but few outlets to address policy concerns. The citizens would have to “know what and where to look for” to be able to untangle the cyber web of links. The results of content analysis lend support to the realization that citizen-to-government dialogue through the means of websites is perhaps the least emphasized dimension of e-government; and what is available suggests few opportunities for involved democratic interaction (Scott, 2006; Thomas & Streib, 2003, 2005). At this point, it is probably appropriate to think of e-dialogue as complement to traditional forms of democratic interaction, rather than a core pillar. Dawes’ (2008, pp. S92-S96) writes:

...[there is] only modest attention to the processes of democratic participation...The dominant focus...is on one-way communications...citizen engagement receives much less attention in practice than series or management concerns. Little formal policy making has occurred to require, encourage, or guide proactive consultation with citizens or innovative forms of public engagement in government decision making.

Bureaucratic and Organizational Implications

Zuurmond (1994), Fountain (2002), Ho (2002) and Brewer, Neubauer and Geiselhart (2006) assert that the introduction and the wide use of e-government platforms have important impacts on organizational dynamics and in many cases motivate shifts away from the traditional bureaucratic frameworks. The organizational and institutional environments, on the other hand, will dictate and shape the technology implementation process and participation requirements (Orlikowski & Robey, 2001; Zuurmond, 2005). The street level bureaucrats are probably the ones who are being affected the most by the digitalization of governance. First, their job duties are shifting from information processing and collection to facilitation of the two. Second, their discretion is limited to the ability of the software to accept variations of inputs and the workload is increased. Finally, some job types might disappear (typist, data collectors) while others might come in higher demand (managers) (Im, 2011). Large variations should be expected across agencies, depending on type of services that are provided; with the largest reductions in jobs to be expected within departments with high use of IT (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

The analysis of the designs and the presentations of e-government discussions on the
state website, fails to confirm the presence of a genuine administrative concern for democratic dialogue. The administrators, who at least in theory are aware of the public interest and are trained in the area, appear now to have only limited input in the design of the digital platforms. It can be argued that in the long run the “humane” administrator could possibly become “programmed out” of e-government. The websites and the digital interaction are designed to accommodate programming needs and efficiency concerns. This should not come as a shock since it is commonly acknowledged that governmental websites are rarely designed with the end user in mind (The Economist, 2008) and while technologically feasible e-governance faces significant political and institutional barriers (Milakovich, 2012). As such, the web designers and information systems programmers are in reality a new “e-bureaucracy”, possibly under significantly less accountability scrutiny than traditional bureaucrats. The high diffusion capacity of e-government initiatives warrant further examinations into possible consequences of the implicit assumptions and collective action of a few (programmers, private software developers) to be transferred into a dominant theme in e-government design.

The implications of shifting administrative discretion to programmers and web designers are not trivial. Goldfinch (2007) identifies the culture of the programmer as one of individualism, resistance to authority; while describing IT as a heroic challenge and is dominated by technophilia. The pattern of technological developments is one that emphasizes specialization of subsystems (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Dawes (2008) suggests that e-government efforts lead to a less human (citizen-public servant) interaction.

Traditional institutional and organization theory are not well equipped to deal with the fuzziness and complexity associated with these e-government-induced dynamics (Brewer, Neubauer & Geiselhart, 2006; Fountain, 2001; Maureen Brown, 2007). Moreover, it is not yet well understood how technology designs influence and shape organizational processes and roles (Barry, 2003; Moon, 2002) or institutional and legal frameworks (Dawes, 2008). Finally, since the private sector is better technologically equipped and owns most of the knowledge and expertise in e-government tools (Brewer, Neubauer & Geiselhart, 2006) – it is probably not long before we start to hear “we should leave e-government to the private sector”. Hindman (2009, p. 15) argues that:

The network protocols that route data packets around the Internet and the HTML code used to create Web pages say nothing about search engines, and yet these tools now guide (and powerfully limit) most users’ online search behavior. The technological specifications allow hyperlinks to point anywhere on the Web, yet in practice social processes have distributed them in winners-take-all patterns. If we consider the architecture of the Internet more broadly, we find that users’ interactions with the Web are far more circumscribed than many realize, and the circle of sites they find and visit is much smaller than is often assumed. All of this changes our conclusions about how much room there is online for citizens’ voices.

Security Implications

All 50 websites failed to convince or “guarantee” the security of personal information. Since increased uses of ICTs are associated with more complex administrative security threats than traditional administration had to face at any point in time historically, the lack of vital emphasis on informational safety is found to be an important barrier in the development of e-dialogue. Within cyberspace, the security threats are always evolving, are not constrained geographically, and the administration is most of the time slow to react, especially in terms of policy. Who is (should be) accountable? Is it the ICT provider or developer, the local government, the state or the federal government? The websites do not make that clear; nor does the federal government appear to be able to provide a satisfying answer (Harknett & Stever, 2011).

The George W. Bush era was characterized by incremental policy development with heavy reliance on local and state governments.
as well as on public-private partnerships; with
the private sector controlling the majority of the
cyber resources (Harknett & Stever, 2011). This
was supposed to be corrected by a top down
approach taken by President Barack Obama’s
Cyberspace Policy Review: Assuring a Trusted
and Resilient Information and Communication
Infrastructure (Executive Office of the Presi-
dent, 2009). The results, though, have been far
different from what was expected (GAO 2010a,
conclude that:

[the process is off] incremental steps but little
strategy... and ...Obama’s own cybersecurity
director, Harold Schmidt, has adopted a col-
laborative tone reminiscent of the Bush era...If
the forthcoming national strategy for securing
cyberspace remains vested in the incremental
interactions of disparate, self-interested actors
—each without connection to a public good mo-
tivation - the goal of securing cyberspace will
be occasionally achieved in moderate technical,
tactical, and operation advances.

Discussion: Is Digital the New Efficiency?

E-dialogue and e-participation are sellable con-
cepts; yet, in practice they could be politically
risky. In this sense, there might be reluctance
on the part of political actors to emphasize and
demand implementation of digital dialogue
(Scott, 2006; Vigoda, 2002; West, 2005). Siber (2006) argues that public participation
is dependent on the political environment; while, Ganapati (2011) identifies institutional
constraints and political motivation as the most
important barrier in reaching the higher levels
of democratic participation.

Bekkers and Homburg (2007) suggest that
e-government is a mere myth of better and more
rational governance; few empirical studies are
in fact able to confirm improvement in gover-
nance. Political interests might skew access to
information and e-participatory capacities of
citizens (Elwood, 2008). Furthermore, Rethe-
meyer (2006) identifies elitist tendencies and
dynamics within digital participation as policy
argues that in many instances the digital efforts
will simply enforce and replicate the dynam-
ics of the agency “behind the website”. While
Balla and Daniels (2007) posit that the amount
of rulemaking related interaction has not been
significantly altered by “digitalization”.

Overall, the administrators and the public
are asked to take a leap of faith and believe that
technology will make an agency citizen-oriented
on its own (Bekkers & Humberg, 2007). But
Fountain (2001) and Gormley and Balla (2008)
argue that implementation and application of
technology is shaped by institutional decisions
and, consequently, simply translate established
practices to cyberspace. Dialogue through the
means of technology will become a reality only
if the participatory habit is institutionalized both
within the public organizations and citizens’ ex-
pectations (Ganapati, 2011; Milakovich, 2012).
Technology impacts institutions, but institutions
still control those effects (Fountain, 2007) and
Internet based networks might only strengthen
existent power structures (Kraemer & King,
2006). Fulfilling the promise of e-government
would require significant funding, appropriate
policies, and supportive organizational
environments. Making governmental websites
available will not lead to more participation or
aid democratic goals on its own.

Taking an institutional perspective (Scott,
2008) it is easy to discern how the current ef-
ficiency narrative, which is emphasized on state
websites, might generate cultural-cognitive and
normative pressures on extant e-government
efforts, thus leading to unquestioned and
untested implementation. This would eventu-
ally institutionalize e-government, as an
efficiency-satiated construct, on a regulative
basis as well. The lack of empirical evidence
for the existence of demand side push for e-
government should be carefully considered.
None of the exiting literature lends support for
the existence of demand side (citizens’) drive
within the construction of the e-government
narrative. Could e-government be a supply side
driven construct? Researchers should look for
the citizens in e-government research. What is the role of interpersonal human interaction in e-government? Is e-government another attempt to “dehumanize” bureaucracy?

Weber (1977, pp. 215-216) points out that the “dehumanized” aspect of bureaucracy is one of its virtues that might make this form of organization special and better within the modern political and economic contexts. But is a dehumanized bureaucracy really better? Better for what? As Waldo (1980, p. 45) argued: “Why would an instrument designed to be impersonal and calculating be expected to be effective in delivering sympathy and compassion?” which public administration often calls for. Along the same lines, Stivers (1994) argued that a “listening bureaucrat” can ease the tension between democracy and efficiency demands in conducting administration. By actively listening, the bureaucrat can develop connections, understand the “reality” of the citizen and become less prone to premature mechanistic diagnosis of problems.

Listening responsively may, therefore, help promote accountability on the part of public officials as they begin to see citizens as inhabitants of the same public square they themselves occupy and as they engage in dialogue. (Stivers, 1994, p. 366)

Consequently, the removal of the administrators’ ability to listen, by making citizen-administrator interaction digital, may lead to two divergent and distancing senses of reality; but also a decreased level of dialogue, a tendency toward categorizations by type and re-focus on efficiency.

In sum, the use of Internet in bureaucracy is likely to lead to greater rationalization, standardization, and sure of rule-based systems. The rules may not be visible because most of them will be hidden in software and hardware. But they will remain and may increase in power. (Fountain, 2001, p. 62)

It is important to believe in the promise of e-government, but at the same time not to allow the promise to limit one’s ability to ask not only how but also why. It becomes crucial to draw knowledge from different disciplines and perceive knowledge as a process of creation in which both practice and theory are linked (Franklin & Ebdon, 2005; Jeffrey, 2003; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Ramiller & Pentland, 2009). Administrators and citizens are able and should be trusted in developing knowledge in regards to e-government. As Denhardt (2010) elegantly argues, theory is a “personal matter.”

While there is ample research into the implications of ICTs within e-government, it hasn’t been until recently that increased emphasis has been given to its democratic implications (Lee, Chang & Berry, 2011). The impacts of e-design, e-presentation of services and e-interaction should not be underestimated. Digital is a catchy term, but it is definitely not value neutral.

The design of e-government information systems (both hardware networks and software) is more than instrumental plumbing. Design decisions are not merely technical or even merely administrative. They are political acts that have important implications for the conduct of public administration and democracy...public administrators must remain actively involved in designing and implementing e-government information systems....participation alone is not enough to ensure democratic processes and outcomes. (Brewer, Neubauer, & Geiselhart 2006, p. 473)

It has been argued that the digital designs favor consumers over citizens and corporate interests over the public ones (Lessig, 2006). Indeed, e-government does motivate significant shifts in terms of organizational and decisionmaking redistribution of power. It also redesigns, remaps and reassigns the roles of gatekeepers and those who define the “reality” in the policy context. The exact nature of these shifts, however, remains to be determined.
CONCLUSION

Public administration theory and practice has a traditional love-hate relationship with the idea of efficiency. It has been pointed out that flirting with Tayloristic efficiency as a core concept of public administration on the basis of neutrality and promise of democratic fulfillment is inherently questionable (Fischer, 1994; Waldo, 1948/2007). Nevertheless, the efforts of marrying efficiency and democracy within an administration-politics dichotomy, mainly through principal-agent perspectives (Meier & O’Toole, 2006), appear to be a mainstay within the field’s theory (Denhardt, 2010). Variations of the dehumanized or value-free bureaucrat are habitually suggested as hypocritical solutions in the attempt to reconcile efficiency goals within democratic prerogatives (Gawthrop, 1997). What efficiency “is” evolves with time and adapts to the dominant political discourse and management approaches; yet, fundamentally the construct remains unchanged. If digital is indeed the new flavor of efficiency, then one should be concerned with the risk of reenacting failures of the past.

The research presented in this paper suggests that by using state websites as proxies for the current status of e-government, it can be argued that while there is a large capacity for e-dialogue and e-participation there are limited and leery efforts to encourage it. The dynamics associated with the design of the websites suggest the increased probability of development of pattern of dehumanized interaction. The websites “do not look” as if they were designed by administrators willing to listen and serve citizens. Participation is meaningful only as long it is authentic (King, Feltey, & O’Neill Susel, 1998), yet at the level of the websites the results fail to suggest a substantial level of genuine efforts on the part of the states to spark such authentic participation. Also the presentation and discussion of e-government benefits, within the context of the websites, allude to a broader efficiency narrative that can be traced back to the early 1990s and as far back as Frederick Taylor’s scientific management.

It should be noted that the study should be interpreted in the contexts of several important weaknesses: (1) a fast changing interface of website designs that makes general suggestions difficult; (2) the possible bias introduced by coders; (3) the difficulty to generalize that usually comes with this type of research; and (4) this study is primarily exploratory in nature and it perhaps better to interpret it as illustrative snapshot of an evolving target. Still, none of these possible shortcomings appear to contest the leading realizations – (1) efficiency is the dominant narrative within the design, presentation, and “sell” of e-government initiatives on states’ websites, and (2) there are reasons to believe that human interaction and of the public administrator could be “programmed out” from the digital governance.

The idea of replacing the public administrators with ICT is inherently flawed (Goldfinch, 2007). One should probably not go as far as Goldfinch (2007) in demanding a “a pessimism in IS [information systems] development” or a “public official as recalcitrant, suspicious, and skeptical adopter of IT”, but one could argue that within a historical context, digital might be the new shade of efficiency, and that at times it preaches an encrypted version of the “good life.” Putting an emphasis on administrators’ participation in e-governance designs and decision-making is critical to fulfilling the early enthusiastic promise of e-government. As Box et al. (2001, p. 617) argue, “there is much for public administration to do beyond the mandate of perfecting efficient mechanisms for service delivery.” It is within this context that Brewer, Neubauer and Geiselhart (2006) call for an increased role of public administrators in instilling democratic values in e-government. In plain terms, it is inexcusable to take the administrator out of the administration, even in cyberspace. The digitalization efforts will succeed in their democratic pursuit only to the point that the administration behind them does, and only as long as those initiatives do not fail to account for the lessons of the past.

Dunleavy et al. (2006, p. 468) claim that “…new public management (NPM)
has essentially died in the water…the torch of leading-edge change has passed on from NPM…[to] digital-era governance.” Considering that e-government initiatives were one of the core pillars of NPM, one would have to be suspicious of any such categorical assertions. Stating that new public management is dead and long live digital-era governance could be a little premature, since it appears that NPM might be alive and well within the individualistic, control and service orientation of digital initiatives of a “better government.” Even old public administration’s unquestioned goals of objectivity, neutrality and efficiency do not seem that farfetched within the realm of technological possibilities. E-government, in its current form, is not “politics as usual”, but it does appear dangerously close to it. Dunleavy et al. (2006) correctly point out that the effects of technological changes are primarily impacting society at the cultural level—shaping different behaviors, expectations and images of government. It is critical then that “citizen” and not “customer” becomes and is enforced as the username for the individual logging in e-government.

REFERENCES


Hugh T. Miller is a Professor in the School of Public Administration at Florida Atlantic University. His latest book is Governing Narratives: Symbolic Politics and Policy Change (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012). Other books include Postmodern Public Policy (SUNY Press) and, with the late Charles Fox, Postmodern Public Administration, revised in 2007 (M.E. Sharpe).
### APPENDIX

#### Table 2. Coding Summary by State Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Official website</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
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<tr>
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Table 2. Continued

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<th>State</th>
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<th>II</th>
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<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I - efforts to convince that information is secure  
II - emphasis on the significance of e-governance  
III - website is user friendly.  
IV - live chat  
V - presence of a gateway for voicing general/policy concerns (within 3 links/searches or less)