

The authors of this book herald two healthy principles, which makes reading and reviewing this book a thrill, even given the time laps between their writing and our reading. Firstly, in their preface, acknowledging the immense technological change taking place, the authors 'urge the readers to interpret the examples which we use and the technologies which we describe as transient in importance. While the empirical world will move on, in this field more than others, of more lasting value will be the analytical, conceptual and theoretical tools which we use'. Secondly, as one their core analytical, conceptual or theoretical tool, the authors write from a 'social shaping' perspective on the information age. By doing so, they refuse to go along with the naive technological determinism that underpins both the currently widespread utopian as well as dystopian visions about the future of technology's effect on society. Information and communication technology are being approached as 'ambiguous technologies', that can be used as agents of empowerment and as agents for control and oppression.

The book contains 6 chapters. Each covers a specific area of governing and the information age. The first chapter deals with the re-engineering of the government machine. It focuses on the relationship between ICT and change in the organisation of government. A lot of the chapter rotates around the concept of new public management and business process re-engineering. Case studies include the DHSS, NHS and the national strategy for police information systems (NSPIS).

A second chapter deals with how technology can effect the delivery of public services. It does by focusing on the underlying claim of many initiatives that 'new informational capabilities could support significantly improved relationships between government and individuals'. A key concept is consumerism. This is related to developments (or should one say 'dreams?') such as the logical office or one-stop model. In the first scenario, back offices are concentrated and highly automated, while customer-facing offices are decentralized to the level of neighbourhoods. The second related scenario seeks to simplify and enrich first-level contacts with government through such initiatives as information points or first-stop shops. While the technology has evolved dramatically since such scenarios were first described, one can still see this idea underpinning many plans for technology supported government.

The third chapter takes the notion of consumerism further and focuses on citizenship and democracy. It describes the reinvention of democracy in the information age and the widespread coupling of electronic democracy with direct democracy. The available literature and research is reviewed and three archetypes of technology supported democracy are identified.

The following chapter is on telecommunication and public services. Here, the authors start from technology rather than applications in questioning the role of telecommunications and the telecommunications policy debate in the UK. The authors identify three common assumptions: modern digital infrastructures having removed considerations of geography from strategic decisions about organisation of work, good quality technology being available to support remote teleworking and the economic development implications of telecommunication infrastructures mainly being important for public authorities. In describing the telecommunication policy of the past decades (in the UK, but also the USA NII and EU's information society), each of these assumptions is challenged and scrutinised.

The final chapter of the book is entitled 'understanding the information polity'. The strings of the past chapters are tied together and the authors advocate for a new framework to be developed for exploring and analysing change in and around government. To that purpose,

they adopt 'an approach which allows us to juxtapose the potentially radical tendencies of ICTs with the inherently evolutionary and incremental nature of institutional change'.

This book provides a refreshing analysis of the effect of technology on government and contains several interesting issues. The Open University series to which this book belongs, intends to go beyond the usual text book approach to the analysis of public policy and management. Each book describes current thinking and research and explores future policy directions. Surely, this book does go beyond a text book approach. In doing so, unfortunately, it has also limited its relevance to a broader audience. In order to be able to grasp the provided analysis in its full extend, one has to be aware of both the most significant UK projects involving government and technology as well as be up to date with the literature of this area. Once those conditions met, this book makes for interesting reading.

Reviewer

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