

# E-government and the Electronic Transformation of Modes of Rule: The Case of Partnerships

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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines some aspects of the discursive and material transformation of government as a result the deployment of the internet and new information technologies. Particular attention is given to the constitution of partnerships and network forms of governing. The paper illustrates the dynamics of e-government through two case studies of e-government projects in Australia's social security/welfare system.

**Keywords:** E-government; Electronic Service Delivery; Welfare; Social Security; Australia.

## INTRODUCTION

Governments have rapidly embraced the internet as a means by which to reshape and enhance the operation of government. It is envisaged that the internet enables a shift to joined-up government providing personalised services through one-stop shops and whole-of-government portals. These visions are premised on a proliferation of partnerships and networked forms of governing, which the internet constitutes with ease. How e-government imagines such new forms of governing and the practical ways in which partnerships are constituted to provide e-government is the focus of this paper.

The paper begins by developing a governmentality approach to examining e-government. Rationalities of e-government are then analysed, highlighting how the term 'e-government' is often incorporated into new governance discourses. The second section outlines two e-government projects currently being conducted in Australia's social security/welfare system, giving particular attention to the use and operation of partnerships. These projects provide the details for a critical examination of the claims of technological transformation of government in the final section.

## THE GOVERNMENTALITY OF E-GOVERNMENT

The Foucault-inspired governmentality analytic<sup>1</sup> provides an innovative way of examining and analysing e-government [11]. The governmentality approach gives

analytical attention to the conceptual architecture of governing and how that constitutes the way government is thought, justified and conducted, i.e., to 'governmental rationalities', defined as:

a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practised [10].

Following from Foucault, such rationalities are not conceived simply as lofty ideas, but are also located within governmental technologies, practices and devices. The governmentality approach also attends to the more material means by which governmental objectives are realised. Diverse devices – from architecture, weapons and computers to paper forms, ledger books and passbooks – and routine calculative practices and procedures all constitute domains amenable to government. Less obviously, however, technologies also provide the means by which new domains are constituted and made calculable, thereby giving rise to new objects for governing.

A governmentality approach to e-government therefore seeks to highlight the rationalities and technologies of e-government, their interplay and effects.

### E-government rationalities

The term 'e-government' emerged shortly after 'e-commerce' was devised to denote the conduct of business through the internet. To some extent, the term has encompassed earlier conceptions of 'digital government', 'electronic government' and government 'electronic service delivery'. While the meaning of 'e-government' might seem to be straightforwardly descriptive, as the term has become evermore widespread a wide range of descriptive and normative meanings have been associated with the term.

Perhaps the most immediate meaning of e-government, which also draws on the parallel with 'e-commerce', is the conduct of business with the state through the internet. This includes the electronic delivery of government services, but also other transactions such as paying taxes and fines, and applying for permits and licences.

<sup>1</sup> Key overviews include [1, 2, 6, 7, 21].

Consider, for example, the British government's use of 'e-government', where Hudson notes that 'e-government' is often used to refer to electronic service delivery, which includes delivery through telephone call centres as well as on-line provision [12].

Similarly, Fountain uses 'e-government' and 'electronic government' interchangeably to refer 'to the current potential to build government services and practices using existing technologies and applications' [8].

A different conception of 'e-government' focuses on the way the internet contributes to and transforms the workings of the parliament, the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives and the conduct of politics. The internet becomes the way in which citizens make their views known to their elected representatives, party members contribute to party policy making, and citizens contribute to government policy formation [22]. Embedded in these ideas is the notion that e-government transforms the conduct of government and politics: policy development embraces public feedback; policy making occurs through on-line polls; and parliament might even become redundant. Such notions of e-government include a normative aspect, namely, that the internet enhances participatory democracy.

This transformative and normative aspect of the internet is increasingly evident in e-government as conceived as the on-line conduct of business with government. In these cases, the internet is not simply viewed as an alternative medium for conducting business alongside telephones, local offices and post. Rather, 'e-government' denotes major transformations in the way government business and service delivery is conceptualised and enacted.

This is evident in Britain, where the internet (and other new ICTs) becomes the means for 'Modernising Government' [3]. In this account, technologically-enabled 'modern' government must be joined-up, convenient, responsive and personalised.

The Australian government sees e-government in similar terms:

E-government is the term that describes the use of available and emerging technologies to create seamless, responsive and citizen-focused government for the benefit of all Australians. ... E-government involves a fundamental re-thinking of how technology can improve the very process of government [17].

These themes are also evident in writings of the OECD.

E-government is here defined as "the use of ICTs, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government". ... **e-government is more about government than about "e"**. It enables better policy

outcomes, higher quality services and greater engagement with citizens [19].

The President of the International Social Security Association has defined e-government as follows.

E-government is a way of making the delivery of government services more efficient by "integrating" or perhaps "clustering" them, and making them available through a single point of access on the Internet: the so-called "single window" that provides "one-stop shopping". E-government is also information-based government. In this view, e-government involves creating a series of overlapping information networks and encouraging the practice of information networking. E-government is smart government too. E-government will improve exponentially the quality and quantity of data in the coming years [23].

These latter rationalities of e-government constitute a world that does not simply reproduce governmental processes and practices through other, namely electronic, means. Rather, they involve a hazy narrative that combines the observation that new ICTs make new forms of doing government possible, with normative ideas that such technologies must be used in order to bring to fruition a certain vision of government. In doing so, these narratives can also be seen to fudge the line between technological determinism – that new ICTs bring about new governmental forms – and a recognition that work must be done to reconfigure organisational operations and relations to bring about visions of new government.

Some of the features of the new governmental forms that are encompassed in these normative definitions of e-government are not new. For example, participatory democracy through citizen interaction and treatment of the whole person have been advocated well prior to the internet's beginnings as pressing objectives for government reform. However, what is especially telling about the particular way 'e-government' envisions government is its confluence with contemporary objectives of public sector management reform. New Public Management [5, 15, 16] and recent concerns with governance [14, 18, 20] also emphasise the need for customer service, accountability processes, flexible management, performance targets, and use of markets and/or partnerships. In the minds of public administrators, IT professionals and IT activists alike, it appears that the internet has become both the means by which these reforms become feasible and the reason why these reforms are necessary. E-government simply means e-governance.

### Governing through partnerships

Of the several objectives of public sector management reform that a normative conception of e-government embraces, I want to focus on the use of partnerships. Partnerships have become the recent governmental

buzzword. The traditional means by which the modern state achieved its aims were through hierarchical bureaucracies that operated as distinct ‘silos’, each responsible for their own policy and administrative territory. In response to bureaucratic state failure, neoliberalism and its New Public Management offshoot sought to transform government operations through the mechanism of the market and the ‘hollowing out’ of the state. Competition, outsourcing, privatisation, purchaser-provider arrangements and contracts were key elements of this approach. Partnerships played some role in these arrangements, such as Britain’s Private Finance Initiatives and Public-Private Partnerships. Such partnerships were often contractual in nature, the dominant party defining the roles and responsibilities of the other. In recognition of the realities of market failure, there has recently been a shift to more network forms of governing. Governmental aims are achieved through self-organising partnerships between relatively equal parties. Government thus operates by steering, not rowing. Jessop [13] describes network governing as a ‘heterarchy’, contrasting with the hierarchy of bureaucracies and the anarchy of markets.

Partnerships have now become a widespread form of governing [9]. Governments increasing opt for partnerships as a way in which to achieve its objectives. In policing, partnerships between the community and local businesses are now seen as essential to curb crime and enhance security. In welfare, partnerships between benefits agencies, housing associations, welfare service agencies and community groups are seen as the means in which to enhance individualised services to the disadvantaged. Partnerships between hospitals and community health agencies are being established to enhance the provision of health services which is patient-centred and reduces health costs. Partnerships with the private sector are being used to provided the funds and distribute the risks for the provision of public infrastructure. There is a wide variety of partnerships, ranging from high-trust, autonomous arrangements between equals, to more contractual, low-trust arrangements enforced by government policies [13, 18, 20]. Regardless of this variety, the discourse of partnerships has become paramount.

In the area of e-government, partnerships are quite evident. During the 1990s, IT functions in public sector agencies were progressively outsourced as part of the New Public Management shift to minimise the state to ‘core’ activities. While computing hardware had always been purchased from private companies, the private sector were increasingly contracted to manage computing processing and undertake software development. While conceptualised through a ‘contractual’ rather than a ‘partnership’ model, they did involve the increasing co-production of state functions. Less directly, the new institutional arrangements envisioned by the New Public Management – such as (quasi-)markets and purchaser-

provider relations – combined with performance measures, created the need for (electronic) information infrastructure. Such infrastructure provided the technical means by which large information flows between agencies could be conducted on an efficient, accurate and regular basis. This made possible both the co-ordinating of activities and functions between agencies and the scrutiny of private agencies to meet government standards and performance targets.

More recently, e-government is often envisaged as a technology by which partnerships in public administration can be made practicable. At the heart of most conceptions of e-government is an image of joined-up government providing citizens with a one-stop shop that treats it as a whole person. Joined-up information infrastructure of the sort just mentioned is an important element of this vision. It provides the means by which the ‘silos’ of government agencies can be breached. It enables personal information held in various locations to be brought together at once to get a bigger, more adequate image of an individual. The internet is arguably more important than information infrastructure in imagining partnerships in government. The internet creates a vision of virtual government that transcends government bureaucratic boundaries. For example, the government portal creates a virtual one-stop shop. It provides the means by which citizens and business can transact business with all tiers of government without knowing or understanding the structure of government. Such an idea envisages underlying partnerships between governmental agencies at all levels. Increasingly, portals involve partnerships between public and private sectors. The internet, it seems, provides the means by which the governance project of partnerships becomes possible.

Underlying these conceptions of new ICTs as a technology of partnership is the notion that these technologies represent a break from previous ways of administering government. Almost magically, they make information flow easily and efficiently. As a result, organisational boundaries dissolve, government can be ‘joined-up’ and partnerships become the natural form of operation. Unfortunately, as our case studies illustrate, the reality is somewhat. Both technology and partnerships are not this simple to construct nor maintain.

## **DELIVERING WELFARE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS**

A critical assessment of the shift to governing through partnerships and the contribution of new ICTs is greatly enhanced by detailed empirical studies. The case studies examine e-government projects in Centrelink, Australia’s national benefit delivery agency. Data were obtained from interviews with Centrelink senior executives, national managers, IT professionals and front-office staff, from

field observation of the use of the technologies, and from relevant Centrelink documents.

## EDGE

The EDGE system is a decision support system or expert system used to assess eligibility for family-related government benefits provided by the Australian government. Processing such benefits through EDGE contrasts with the former approach directly through the mainframe system. Instead of a standard sequence, the questions asked are tailored as a result of earlier responses. Moreover, EDGE provides explanations for why each question is asked and provides a detailed account of how it arrived at its decision. When used with claimants in an interview situation, the system produces a personalised claim form for signature and a preliminary assessment notice for the claimant explaining the assumptions on which eligibility and rate have been calculated.

As an expert system, EDGE embodies the legislation (and administrative) requirements associated with family-related benefits. As a result, users of the system do not require a detailed knowledge of the legislation. Because of this, and its plain language interface, novices are readily able to learn and use the system. This key factor of expert systems makes them highly suited to involve other parties in the use of the system to assess claimant eligibility. For example, EDGE should make it possible for Family Assistance Office (FAO) staff in Medicare offices, who do not have detailed knowledge of family benefits legislation, to undertake claims processing and assessment interviews. In the same way, workers in community groups and other welfare bodies might also use an internet version of EDGE to assess eligibility, and individuals could also self-assess. At present, the Medicare scenario is highly likely, but an internet version of EDGE is still a long way down the track.

Partnerships play an important role in the EDGE project. In the first instance, EDGE was developed in a three-way public-private partnership between Centrelink, the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and SoftLaw. Centrelink, a public sector agency, is responsible for administering Commonwealth social security benefits on behalf of FaCS through its large service delivery network. It owns and maintains the computer systems to do this job. As such, the focus for its use lies here. FaCS, which has responsibility for policy development of social security payments, contracts Centrelink through an agreement to deliver it payments. SoftLaw was a small Australian IT company specialising in legal expert systems.

Each of these agencies has different objectives and agendas which needed to be mutually reinforcing to work. FaCS, which itself contracts Centrelink to deliver social security benefits in a purchaser-provider relationship, was

a key driver behind EDGE. FaCS believed that an expert system for benefit assessment would help to enhance the accuracy, consistency and accountability of Centrelink's benefit decision-making. This is an increasingly pressing issue as policy has become evermore complex. Increased accuracy is also seen as a way in which to reduce appeals and minimise overpayments. For Centrelink, with key objectives of customer service and efficiency of decision-making, EDGE promises to curb claimant dissatisfaction, decrease the number of repeat visits to Centrelink offices and increase the legitimacy of Centrelink's operations. As a private company, SoftLaw was keen to develop its business, build its reputation and produce a profit. At the time, EDGE was the largest project undertaken by the company. It tripled the company's size and gave it international visibility. Despite different agendas, they each shared the objective to achieve greater accuracy and consistency in administration of the FAO program.

While partnerships were crucial in the development of EDGE, they also play an important role in its anticipated deployment. Given that EDGE embodies and enacts the benefit legislation, in theory it can be operated by anyone with computer competence. Such expert system technology makes EDGE readily suited for creating partnerships for the co-delivery of benefits. Indeed, it is likely that EDGE will be made available to FAO officers in Medicare Offices. This will greatly enhance the role of Medicare offices in family benefits processing and increase the level of service offered to potential claimants. Currently, Medicare Offices' role in the FAO is minimal. They simply receive written application forms and check proof of identity. They can not undertake assessments nor update client's details. Furthermore, as Medicare staff have minimal knowledge of family benefit policy, the advice they can offer is minimal.

It should be noted, however, that the FAO as a virtual office partnership between Centrelink, the Health Insurance Commission and the Australian Taxation Office was created prior to any technological vision of partnerships. Technology did not create the partnership, political vision did. Technology does, however, make the partnership more mutual and more meaningful both in terms of each agency's contribution and in level of customer service. With the network technologies, the long-standing vision of one-stop shops becomes more readily achievable.

Perhaps a more interesting development that EDGE makes possible is its use by community groups to help assess claimants and individuals to self-assess, through an internet version of EDGE. In this scenario, the work of Centrelink extends out into other organisations. Community workers become *de facto* Centrelink officers. Organisational boundaries blur.

In its potential to shift benefit assessment beyond government agencies, EDGE highlights the way in which the technology also transfers the locus of assessment decisions from Centrelink staff to an expert system. Computers become government decision-making bureaucrats.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the tantalising possibilities of Centrelink's assessment processes oozing beyond its organisational boundaries to community sector partners and beyond, there are considerable organisational, policy and technical realities that need to be overcome. There are also competing visions about what is the desirable future shape of benefit service delivery.

### Community Connect

The other Centrelink case study is of a project called Community Connect. Presently, Community Connect is a password-protected internet site hosted by Centrelink. The site currently provides access to some benefit tools used by Centrelink, such as benefit rates calculators and electronic versions of the *Social Security Act* and the *Guide to the Act*. It also includes a searchable directory of welfare service organisations in Australia. By providing these tools to relevant welfare organisations, Centrelink is hoping to develop more joined-up services to its clients through the creation of partnership relations between Centrelink and welfare agencies. While the Community Connect site is still in its infancy, Centrelink hopes that other agencies will provide useful tools on the site to share with the welfare sector. It is also envisaged, that the site might become the means by which personal information might be transferred – with client consent – between organisations to enable speedier and more accurate service provision across different agencies.

The development of Community Connect represents a remarkable illustration of what technologically enabled partnerships might achieve. It also represents a significant change in the way Centrelink does its business. Typically, Centrelink concentrated on assessing and delivering benefits and ensuring that only those who are eligible receive them. The benefits Centrelink offers define the prism in which it views claimants. This has meant that Centrelink has limited services to offer to unsuccessful claimants or those in crisis situations. For example, if someone in a financial crisis approaches Centrelink, they are typically referred to organisations offering emergency relief (such as the Salvation Army, the Smith Family and community groups). Centrelink staff are not trained to have a good understanding of the services these agencies provide and are therefore unlikely to know the possibility of the person obtaining help. There is also no follow-up to

<sup>2</sup> This transfer of decision-making is not new. For some years, a number of decisions under the *Social Security Act* have been automated. Indeed, the Act had to be amended to give legal authority to computers to do so.

see if the person's needs have been met and, of course, there is no wider 'duty of care'.

Unfortunately, people's financial and personal problems do not fall neatly into organisational boundaries. Such fragmented services may be manageable by many people, but for those with complex and multiple disadvantages they have little chance of producing positive outcomes. A more holistic approach is often required. The impetus for this redefinition of the way Centrelink perceives its government service delivery comes from Centrelink's CEO, which was subsequently supported by government.

But this new vision of Centrelink's service delivery function does not equate with Community Connect. This tool is simply the more tangible part of a broader array of processes and practices required to make the vision a reality.

This was clearly demonstrated in a pilot project between a local Centrelink office and the Smith Family. In pursuing the goal of providing a better service for those in financial crisis, it was necessary to better understand each other's services and their operations. Through regularly meetings between staff from each agency, new co-ordinated ways of working were devised. This involved changes in work practices in each agency and the deployment of networked IT in order to improve the overall service for those in financial crisis. These new organisational arrangements meant that each agency began to take on some perspective and even activities of the other. Each agency breaks out into the other. As a result, organisational boundaries blurred.

Although new ICTs had a part to play in this partnership, it was not the central focus. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the technology was necessary to achieve the outcome. Rather, the critical component was the willingness of two parties to sit together, to understand each other and to make amendments to each agency's working practices in order to provide an overall benefit for their shared client.

## PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORK GOVERNMENT

The above case studies provide detailed evidence of the merging of network technologies with network forms of governing. As such they enable us to assess the extent to which network technologies are creating networked governing, or simply being used to implement already present activities and visions of networking. To be sure, it is not possible to identify a primary driver. Rather, rationalities and technologies are tightly intertwined.

In particular, it is notable that the rationality of governing through networks reaches its zenith at the very time significant new network technologies come available. Visions of networks help foster the development of network technologies, and the material reality of network

technologies creates new visions of acting through networks [4].

This is certainly the case in the welfare state. Data networks have been used for some time to electronically transfer data within and between government agencies. In many cases, this has been driven by welfare fraud measures and mundane transfer of monies, rather than enhanced service delivery. Wider commitments by government to joined-up service delivery are more recent, and appear to be associated with the rise of the Internet

The advent of the Internet and its use in other domains has certainly precipitated new ways for imagining government, particularly through the enhanced use of partnerships and organisational networks. It extends the realm of possibility and makes it substantially easier to operate through partnerships and networks. In constituting network technologies for e-government, partnerships become normalised and routinised, and their breadth and depth has greatly grown.

However, we should be careful in overstating the extent to which the Internet makes partnerships possible. Partnerships were conducted prior to the Internet, and as the Centrelink Community Connect pilot project suggests, partnerships could be established and maintained without it.

Furthermore, network technology does not simply create government through partnerships. Partnerships require a lot of organisational, relationship and technical work to establish and maintain. They require that all partners continue to extract mutual benefits from the partnership and maintain levels of trust. As such, partnerships constantly need to be made and re-made. As such, partnerships are rarely justifiable from a strict definition of efficiency, which often motivates an organisation's use of IT.

In conclusion, the advent of the Internet has precipitated a growth in governing through partnerships. Materially, the Internet has made it technically more feasible to conduct extensive partnerships. But, arguably the Internet's main contribution towards governing through partnerships is symbolic. It has been in helping to imagine what networked governing might look like, and thus contributed to the formation of rationalities of network governance.

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