

eGov onwards – broader or deeper?

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Abstract: This paper addresses an issue I keep returning to, what is eGov and do we need the concept? I illustrate by some example how the development seems to go in the direction away from a holistic, government, perspective and...well, where? Business thinking and disciplinary research is one proposal I suggest here, but I really leave it up to discussion.

Electronic Government (eGov) is typically defined as a positive development concerning 3 main actors; government administrations; users of government services, i.e. citizens and companies; and the political system due to “better democracy” typically meaning more openness. eGov definitions across the globe unanimously point to these three things, more efficient operations, better services and better democracy. An example is the EU definition:

eGovernment is the use of Information and Communication Technologies in public administrations combined with organisational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes

There are many other definitions. Researchers typically use more narrow definitions such as “electronic services from government”, sometimes even more narrow like “what is there on national web sites”.

Even given the broad definitions, there are great differences in how eGov is treated. In developing countries, eGov is seen as an impetus for radical change, “development”, with governments as the central actor. Connecting rural areas, providing a market and startup businesses for the budding IT sector, building government portals.... Almost anything is eGov, and it is funded externally as projects. An example is the World Bank definition of eGov:

E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies that have the ability to **transform relations** with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: **better delivery** of government services to citizens, **improved interactions** with business and industry, **citizen empowerment** through access to information, or more **efficient government management**. The resulting benefits can be **less corruption**, increased **transparency**, greater **convenience**, **revenue** growth, and/or **cost reductions** (<http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/>)

In the industrialized world, eGov is no longer a project. It is part of the daily business and it is a tool for rationalization, not development in the “ICT4D” (Information and Communication Technologies for development; the commonly used term for what is described in the World Bank definition above) sense of that word. This is not just, or even mainly, due to the fact that ICT systems and services over the web are so commonplace. It is even more because the “New Public Management” style of government makes each government agency think of itself as a business. They are regulated by goals and budgets. Budgets are cut to enforce efficiency, and ICT is often used to deliver. The following example is from the Annual Report for the Swedish Student Loan Agency and exhibits some of the factors they point at to show how they have improved:

CSN (student loans):

39 % automatic decisions

Process time down from 2,22 days to 1,5 days 2004-2006

10 m visits to web (1,5 m customers)

Reply time (phone) down from 6,5 min to 2,5 min 2005-2006 (1,3 m calls)

Any company could produce such an annual report. It boasts improved efficiency. They don't call it eGov, not because it isn't but because they see it as regular business. There is nothing about "development".

A fruitful way of describing the eGovernment history so far is in terms of 4 stages (Behn, 2007)

1. Information (e.g. putting information online)
2. Automation (of existing procedures, with some improvement in effectiveness e.g. by introducing call centres)
3. Reengineering (remodeling procedures, e.g. by integrating several departments)
4. Innovation (doing new things by way of analyzing information in new ways, hence creating new knowledge and new policy)

While many individual government agencies, such as the CSN, have achieved considerable gains by streamlining their processes by means of at least partial automation (i.e. stage 2 above), scaling up such gains to all-of-government by cross-agency integration seems an elusive hope. Not only are there traditional obstacles, there is also a new one, the very business model of government. The traditional reasons stem from that governments are typically organized in silos where many factors work against standardization and synchronization. Examples include many factors ranging from issues regulated by laws, such as citizen privacy, professional responsibility and department budgets and evaluation criteria, to more informal ones such as professional integrity, competition, and traditions, and indeed to the sheer magnitude of the problems of making many organizations separated by many years of dispersed development converge. While there are indeed incentives to be seen at the horizon, these are further away than the costs and efforts for achieving them.

The new, business model, obstacle stems from the New Public Management principles as illustrated above. Because budgets and evaluation criteria are the main incentives and because these are tied to each other at department level anything that includes whole-of-system benefits will not happen unless it can be formulated in such agency-specific performance criteria. Many things cannot. Looking at the way eGovernment is evaluated we find that they typically do not reach further than to level 2 as of the Behn model. This is in contrast to not only the academic discussion about eGov value creation but also to evaluation models by both EU and OECD. The academic discussion distinguishes among three types of benefits, each of which should also be considered from the perspective of stakeholders, i.e. at least citizens and governments (Lau, 2007):

	Governments	Nongovernment stakeholders
Direct financial costs and benefits	Reducing costs, increasing value of services	Better services, reduced administrative burden
Direct non-financial costs and benefits	Synergies across delivery channels, sharing and reusing data resources	Increased user satisfaction, increasing privacy
Indirect costs and benefits	"Good governance"; supporting legitimacy, supporting growth	

In the government world, the EU EGEP project developed the following framework for economic evaluation of eGov services:

1. Efficiency
 - Tangible financial gains
 - More efficient operations
 - Better empowered PS employees
2. Effectiveness (better services for users)
 - Reduced administrative burden (for users, and companies)
 - Increased user value and satisfaction
 - Increased access to opportunities
3. Openness
 - Transparency and accountability

- Openness and participation
- Better cooperating PA

This model directly corresponds to the three “pillars” of eGov quoted above, and it devises measurements. This “eGov thinking” is clearly miles away from the current state of the art as exemplified by CSN above. It is also very different from New Public Management thinking; at least there is quite some distance to go to implement all these factors as performance measures for each agency individually.

This leads us to the question stated in the title; will eGov become broader or deeper. “Broader” would mean more universally applied, such as in the CSN case. “Deeper” would mean more in line with the three pillars of the definitions. These suggest “better government” as meaning something about the special characteristics of government, including “public goods”. They do not suggest the business thinking of CSN as the goal (this is why I say broader OR deeper, not AND). However it might well be a means. A question is whether it really is a means to that end or a means that either has become a goal in itself (market thinking) or a means to another goal, namely to efficiency only.

Emerging from this discussion, at least in my mind, is the issue of whether, and if so, how, e-government research should be seen in the future. So far we have used a broad definition, but the CSN example suggests more narrow perspectives. If the perspective is more narrow the whole concept of eGov might not be necessary. Focus could be on efficiency, user-friendliness, effectiveness, social issues or whatever; there would not necessarily have to be a whole-of-government perspective other than in special cases such as , e.g., enterprise architectures, definitions of public goods etc.

1. Is the concept eGovernment “dead” in developed countries? Should it be replaced by models for economic assessment, benefits management and the like?
2. Is the concept still, and onwards, valid for developing countries where government is more at the center of general development? Or is it replaced by the concept of ICT4D?
3. Is there a future at all for multi-disciplinary research in this field? Or should we also there break it down into smaller pieces more easy to handle within single disciplines? This issue is important for all those who arrange eGov conferences, for example. Is it time to shut down and let people go (back) to their core discipline conferences?

Behn, R.D. (2006) The Challenge of Evaluating M-Government, E-Government, and P-Government. In Mayer-Schönbeger & Lazer (eds), *From Electronic Government to Information Government*, pp 213-238. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press

Lau, Edwin (2006) Electronic Government and the Drive for Growth and Equity. In Mayer-Schönbeger & Lazer (eds), *From Electronic Government to Information Government*, pp 39-58. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press