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Chapter 1

Electronic Government. Variations on a Concept

Corien Prins

In Spring 2000, a report of the virtual think-tank debate entitled *Boosting the Net Economy 2000* was put online.¹ The debate focussed on four themes, one of them being e-government. A particularly interesting topic raised on theme was the consequences and opportunities which could result from the global character of online communications for local communities and governments. The report states on this point: "There is no natural law that says a citizen must make use of his/her public services from his/her own government. Services may increasingly be delivered by private sector bodies and eventually by the government of another state, using the Internet." Although the report acknowledges that we are a long way from such a possibility, it also underscores that "governments should be aware of the growing number of alternatives available to their citizens for online services and make sure they are well-placed to compete". In an online world where borders seem to be no longer relevant and people have free access to global information, citizens become aware of the differences between what one government delivers and what another government may offer.

Whether the radical scenario of the virtual think-tank will one day indeed become reality remains to be seen. It is, however, inevitable that our online society will affect our government services, the terms and conditions under which political actors and civil servants operate, and more in general the manner in which public bodies function. According to Britain's e-envoy, Mr. Allan, "Government is going to have to behave more like the innovatory businesses on the Internet in recognising the role of individual initiative."² Whether the implementation of the various agendas presently created for electronic governments results in radical institutional and inter-organisational changes, new forms of governance, more efficient and flexible public sector mechanisms, more empowered citizens influencing policy priorities, totally new policy-making processes, or (commercially oriented) governments that sell the public information held in their vast amount of databases largely depends on the strategies proposed in these agendas and thus the roads that public sector bodies will follow to move towards a digitisation of their services and operations. At the moment however, it is still difficult to fully grasp the meaning, opportunities and limits of the concept 'electronic government'.

1 The debate was designed, managed and hosted by the new media and electronic publishing company Headstar (www.headstar.com) and held between April 3 and April 7 2000. The report is available at: <http://www.netecon2000.com/report.html>.

2 Statement in: C. Grande, 'E-envoy vows to raise Internet use by ministries', *Financial Times*, 10 December 1999.

This does not mean that no important steps have been set on the road to a digitised government. To date, governments have widely recognised the potential of new information- and communication technologies (ICT) to bring about fundamental renewal, not only in their functioning but also in their presence towards other organisations, societal groups or individuals. Both in their relationship with the citizen (for instance: democratic processes, public service delivery, or policy implementation), inter-organisational arrangements (for instance: policy co-ordination, policy implementation, or public service delivery), and in intra-organisational activities (for instance: policy development, operational activities, or knowledge management), ICT promises enormous opportunities to increase efficiency and effectiveness in all kinds of policy sectors.

In 1993, the US government was the first to launch an initiative³. Subsequently agendas were issued in among others the United Kingdom (the Green Paper entitled '*government.direct*')⁴, Australia (entitled '*Clients First*')⁵, Canada⁶ and The Netherlands⁷. International organisations such as the G8⁸ and the European Commission also addressed the issue. The Commission launched the *eEurope*-initiative, which focuses among other things on government online. It is the Commission's intention to ensure that citizens have easy access to government information, services and decision-making procedures online.⁹ The initiative was adopted by the European Council at its Lisbon summit in March 2000. Some countries set a step further than a mere agenda. Finland has even implemented specific legislation on the issue. On 1 January, 2000 the Act on Electronic Services in the Administration entered into force.¹⁰ The prime objective of the Act is to improve the smoothness and rapidity of electronic services in public administration, as well as the data security.

In the meantime, the US government has already greatly expanded citizen access to online government information and services and proposed initiatives that build on the 1993 Administration's efforts, led by Vice President Gore. On 24 June 2000, the US government unveiled a series of new initiatives to give the American people - what President Clinton in his first-ever Saturday webcast addressed to the Nation claimed to be - "the "Information Age" government they deserve". Clinton stated that the new

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- 3 National Performance Review, Washington 1993. See also: Office of the Vice President, *Re-engineering Government Through IT*, Accompanying Report to the National Performance Review, Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1993 (<http://www.npr.gov/library/reports/it.html>).
 - 4 Office of Public Service, *Government.direct. A Green Paper on the Electronic Delivery of Government Services*, Cm 3438, HMSO, London, November 1996. Available at: <http://www.citu.gov.uk/greenpaper.htm>. See for a discussion: Ch. Belamy, J.A. Taylor, 'Understanding *government.direct*, *Information Infrastructure and Policy*6 (1997/1998), p. 3.
 - 5 *Clients First. The Challenge for Government Information Technology*, 1 March 1995. Available at: <http://www.dofa.gov.au/pubs/itrg/itrg-tc.html>.
 - 6 *Blueprint for Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology*. Available at: <http://www.ifla.org/documents/infopol/canada/tb-bp.txt>
 - 7 *Actieprogramma Elektronische Overheid*, TK 1998/1999, TK 26387. Available at: <http://www.minbzk.nl/e-overheid>.
 - 8 See: <http://www.open.gov.uk/govonline>
 - 9 Available at: http://europe.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/
 - 10 <http://www.om.fi/2838.htm>

initiatives will “cut red tape, make government more responsive to the needs of citizens, and expand opportunities for participation in our democracy.”¹¹ By the end of 2000:

- Citizens must be able to search all online resources offered by the federal government from a single web site called ‘firstgov.gov’;
- Citizens, small businesses and community groups must have one-stop access to roughly \$500 billion in grants and procurement opportunities.

In the UK, also, follow-up recommendations and targets have been published: by March 2001, 90 percent of routine government procurement is to be done electronically with all public services capable of being delivered electronically by 2008.

Shaping new forms of governance in an information age requires knowledge of the dynamics of the electronic processes and structures in the public sector as well as an adequate insight in the capabilities associated with information- and communication technologies. It also asks for close attention to (new) practical and ethical obstacles and dilemmas touching upon security, fraud, liability, intellectual property, free access, national security, equality and – perhaps most important of all - privacy. In the end, the success or failure of establishing a (fully) digitised government highly depends on an adequate understanding of all dimensions of the endeavour. Only when the dimensions and implications are fully grasped, we are able to answer questions such as if there is a need for specific measures (law making, subsidies, and education) to stimulate certain directions of change. For does not the scope and effect of such measures depend on whether a single design for electronic government is derived from the developments, or that diverging developments towards electronic government, governments, or even governance, are to be perceived?

This book aims to support further understanding of and knowledge on the dynamics of electronic government and hence, the future of this endeavour. The aim of this book is to draw lessons (cross-national, between policy sectors and across administrations) from the design of electronic government and from evaluations of electronic government in practice. Prime impetus for the book was an international conference held in Tilburg, The Netherlands, in May 2000 on electronic government. The book contains both papers presented at this conference as well as chapters specifically written for the occasion of this book.

The book explores both visions on electronic government and gives examples of an already active electronic government. Its prime goal is to focus at directions of developments on the crossroads of technological innovation and organisational change in governments, together with evolving barriers and opportunities for further change. Thus it aims on providing lessons for learning from both designing future electronic government and outcomes of electronic government in practice, across countries, policy sectors, and technological innovations.

Given the aim of this book and the limitations of this traditional - paper-based - medium, not all of the issues which have been risen in relation to electronic government

11 See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/html/e-government.html>

can addressed. Several topics, some of them even high on the policy agenda (such as access to government information¹²), have therefore not been approached here.

The book starts with three chapters that deal with the different clusters of electronic government activities: e-governance, on-line democracy and electronic service delivery. In Chapter 2, Perri 6 focuses on the first cluster: the use of ICT to support policymaking. After discussing the rise of e-governance and tools used, he focuses on the different theories that have been developed on the impact to e-governance systems across government. John Taylor and Eleanor Burt look in Chapter 3 at the second cluster: on-line democracy. They argue that ICT is infusing all democratic impulses within the polity, whether those impulses are towards direct, representative, or pluralist forms of democracy. ICT offers important opportunities to re-shape and revitalise democracy in all its forms. Charles Raab subsequently discusses, in Chapter 4, the third cluster: electronic service delivery. He thereby focuses on proactive service provision. After these three contributions on the individual clusters of electronic government, Klaus Lenk and Roland Traummüller deal with the overall concept of electronic government. In Chapter 5, they advocate a broadening of this concept, thereby discussing four perspectives on a digitised government: the citizen's perspective, the process perspective, the (tele)co-operation perspective and the knowledge perspective.

The Chapters 6 through 9 describe electronic government developments in several countries around the world. From these chapters it becomes clear how e-government strategies are designed in individual countries and how the governmental organisations of these countries implement the concept of electronic government. Miriam Lips explores in Chapter 6 the policy agenda's in countries that played a key role in initiating the concept of a digitised government. She discusses developments and experiences in the US, Singapore and Australia. By comparing the e-government developments in these countries, she explores a possible tendency towards a single model of e-government. Koen Zweers and Kees Planqué subsequently discuss in Chapter 7 the initiatives in the United States, both at a federal and a state level. They analyse various state web sites and consider the trend from an organization-based approach toward a client-oriented e-government approach. Frans de Bruïne, in Chapter 8, looks at e-government developments from the perspective of the European Union. He describes the ambitious e-Europe initiative, explores the strengths and weaknesses of Europe when it comes to introducing electronic government and stresses what is at stake in Europe. In Chapter 9 Roger van Boxtel explains the developments in The Netherlands. He touches upon several policy documents and projects he initiated as the Minister responsible for e-government developments. Finally, Silvio Salza and Massimo Mecella discuss the steps taken by the Italian government in Chapter 10. It becomes clear from their discussion that various legal and organisational questions emerge in the process of introducing e-government activities and that an adequate implementation of a digitised government requires legislative action on a large number of relevant issues.

Having gained both an understanding of the concept of e-government as well as an insight in the initiatives of major countries around the world, the book subsequently focuses on several of more specific developments and challenges surrounding e-

12 New electronic media such as the Internet provide such new and far-reaching information processing functions that they cry for application to government information. It is recognised in various policy documents that the availability of these media asks for a re-interpretation of the governments' duty to provide access to government information.

government. Wim van der Donk and Bram Foederer focus in Chapter 11 on social movements and the influence of ICT on their way of functioning. They aim at generating conceptual tools that may help designing a more systematic comparative research into the hypothesis that ICT's are changing social movements. Matt Poelmans further explores the client-oriented (in his words 'citizen centred') approach, by describing, in Chapter 12, the Dutch initiative 'Public Counter 2000'. Customer orientation, meaning focussing on citizen's needs and establishing citizen's demand patterns are concepts at the very heart of this initiative.

The book ends with two chapters on challenges the concept of e-government faces. First, Herbert Kubicek and Martin Hagen discuss, in Chapter 13, the inevitable interaction between e-government and e-commerce and the implications of this interaction. They argue that e-government and e-commerce need to be integrated to an overall concept of electronic services, because that is what customers and citizens will in the end claim. Using the ongoing Bremen Online Services project in Germany as an illustration, they claim that an integration is the only way to achieve economically sustainable solutions. In the final Chapter 14, another key challenge to e-government is explored: the implications of the use of mobile telephone. Christopher Theunissen describes the present use of this new technology together with possible scenarios relating to its future potential use for electronic government purposes. He thereby specifically addresses the benefits it may have for developing/partially developing states such as South Africa.

In conclusion, having read all of the chapters of this book, it becomes clear that we are standing on the crossroads of E-government development. In the coming years many choices will have to be made regarding the direction E-government ambitions will, can and must evolve. This will at least require an optimal interaction between the goals and ambitions stipulated in the various action plans and day-to-day practice of those who have to implement these. What also becomes clear is that various similarities exist between E-government developments around the world. However, various factors restrict the evolution of a uniform E-government model. These are, among others cultural differences, diverse approaches to public policy as well as technological developments. The E-government of the future thus depends on the choices which are going to be made in the coming years. This book is thus intended to provide the reader with some of the necessary tools to find the possible variations on the E-government concept.

Finally, some acknowledgements are in order. I first would like to thank all of those who contributed to this book. Their willingness to make creative and stimulating contributions is highly appreciated. I further own thanks to all of those who organised the May 2000 conference: Miriam Lips, Monica den Boer, Luuk Matthijssen, Marcel Boogers and Marijke Nobel. This book greatly benefited from this occasion. Likewise, it benefited from the views presented by those who participated in this conference, either by delivering a paper or by contributing in the workshops. Finally, I am indebted to Vivian Carter, who took care of organising the contacts with the authors and edited some of the contributions to this book. She was crucial in helping to make this book what it is.