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The Internet and Public Bureaucracies: towards balancing competing values

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Abstract

Innovation in public administration is one of the central aspects of public sector reforms. Given the procedural nature of government tasks, the adoption of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICT) has become critical for government organisations.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the implications of the diffusion Internet led innovations in the public sector on balancing public values. Rather than diminishing their benefits, we aim at highlighting challenges and dilemmas that can emerge from ICT implementation in the public sector.

The paper starts by reviewing the main trends of e-government research and show a dominant view towards managerial and private sector values embedded in the literature. To propose an alternative approach, we then draw on an empirical example from Mexico, that of the Federal Transparency and Access to Government Information Law. Using Mexico's available statistics and secondary data, the case explores how a quicker ICT-mediated interaction between citizens and government can result in social and political dilemmas. We propose to bring into play the public value paradigm to highlight these issues. Conclusions follow.

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1 Introduction

The rapid diffusion of the Internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) has promised an era of remarkable changes for both economy and society (Castells 2001). Governments are no exception here. The Internet has provided a new platform to alter the nature of the interaction between citizens and the government (Chadwick 2003; Fountain 2001b). Citizens in the information age can easily and directly access both government services and public information. Similarly, government agencies can open new channels of communication and information exchange with citizens, enabling a much faster, efficient and transparent, as well as responsive government. Yet ICT adoption in the public sector (otherwise known as ‘e-government’) is not neutral, but rather political, social and controversial (Fountain 2001b). As in the case of other public policy strategies, the impact of e-government therefore has to be considered within the broader political context in which these strategies are deployed (Moore 1995 p.45).

In this paper we propose to discuss the implications of the diffusion of the Internet and related ICT innovations in the public sector on balancing public values.

Existing research on e-government prioritises the study of the effects of the Internet and related ICT as a shortcut to increase public sector efficiency and improve internal administration and management capabilities (Dunleavy et al. 2006b; Homburg 2004; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Heeks 2002; Bekkers and Homburg 2007). As a result, e-government programmes have mainly looked at ICT strategies as a further step in the re-organization of the public sector along the basic managerial principles of efficiency, economy and parsimony that govern private sector ICT innovations (Fountain 2001; Chadwick and May 2003; Cordella 2007; Dawes 2009; Danziger and Andersen 2002; Moon 2002; Behn 2003; Gupta and Jana 2003; Melitski 2003; Asgarkhani

2005). The broader political impacts of ICT innovations in the public sector have been less studied so far (Bozeman and Bretschneider 1986; Moore 1995; Frederickson 2000; Aberbach and Christensen 2005; Cordella 2007; Cordella and Iannacci 2010).

Although highly valuable, the focus on managerial principles is limited. Given its public domain, outcomes of public sector reforms have an impact on social and political dimensions that are not necessarily accounted for in private sector models and economic indicators (Cordella 2007; Kallinikos 2006; Du Gay 2005). We argue that the increased diffusion of the Internet in society and in government can result in mixed effects on public values. Ultimately, values such as fairness and openness can challenge the ability of public organisations to deliver services efficiently considering that public bureaucracies are usually not flexible and adaptable enough to deal with the workload generated by the growing online interaction (Cordella 2007).

Following others (Avgerou and Walsham 2000; Fountain 2001b; Smith et al. 2010), we approach the use of the Internet and other networked technologies in government not merely as information processing tools and communicating technologies but rather as elements of a larger socio-technical system. As socio-technical, the system is composed of humans, technologies, politics and values as well as knowledge and tensions, which means that the introduction of the Internet and other ICT will not be considered here neutral, or uncontroversial. Within this arena, we argue that ICT developments in the public sector should better acknowledge the complexity that is associated with their implementation and focus on the social and political outcomes of their implementation (Cordella 2007; Moore 1995; Frederickson 2000; Aberbach and Christensen 2005; Bozeman and Bretschneider 1986). Overall, the goal of our paper is to highlight challenges and dilemmas that can emerge from ICT implementation in the public sector, rather than dismissing their potential benefits. In doing so, we seek to contribute to the debate towards the

implications of ICT in remaking public bureaucracies and the overall role of the State (Kallinikos 2006).

This paper deals with these issues head on. We start by reviewing the main trends of e-government research, highlighting the core managerial and economic aspects in which the literature is rooted. We show that there is a dominant view towards a technology-driven approach to study e-government that overlooks the potential political impacts associated to these policies. We draw on an empirical example from Mexico, that of the Federal Transparency and Access to Government Information Law, to illustrate our main arguments. The case explores how a quicker ICT-mediated interaction between citizens and government can result in political dilemmas. We propose to bring into play the public value paradigm, to highlight that ICT intervention in the public sector is a matter of balancing political dilemmas.

2 Public sector reforms and the use of the Internet under the NPM umbrella

Even if not yet extensively researched, the relation between ICT policies and public sector reform drivers is an important area of study to better understand the factors that steer and shape the use of Internet and related technologies in government (e-government) (Bekkers and Homburg 2007; Madon et al. 2007). E-government projects are intrinsically embedded in combinations of political reforms and organisational changes designed to enact, support and drive a profound transformation in the organisation of the public sector.

Research in the field has prioritised the study of the effects of the Internet and related technologies as a shortcut to increase public sector efficiency and improve internal administration

and management capabilities (Chadwick and May 2003; Andersen 1999; Dunleavy et al. 2006a). Danziger and Andersen (2002), on the basis of a substantial analysis of the leading publications in information systems and public administration fields, have concluded that the “clearest positive impacts generated by IT on public administration are in the areas of efficiency and productivity of government performance”. In line with these findings, e-government policies have largely conceived the use of ICT as a further step in the re-organisation of the public sector along the basic principles of efficiency gains and costs savings that have driven many private sector ICT adoptions (Bekkers and Homburg 2007; Homburg 2004; Bhen 1998; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Heeks 2002; Dunleavy et al. 2006b). Thus a vast literature has been produced to discuss the effects of ICT adoptions at the different government levels (Gupta and Jana 2003; Asgarkhani 2005; Melitski 2003; Moon 2002; Denziger and Andersen 2002) and to benchmark countries against indexes of ICT readiness (UN 2001, 2003), as if a better score would lead to more effective e-government programmes.

ICT in the public sector has been mainly discussed as a tool to help create new and better service delivery (Bekkers and Zouridis 1999), and to increasing efficiency and transparency as well as improving accountability in public administration procedures and management (Gupta et al. 2008; Heeks 2002; Dunleavy et al. 2006b). By making government more accountable and transparent through this process of information rationalisation, e-government is often conceived as a powerful instrument to achieve the public administration reforms envisaged by the New Public Management (NPM) ideology (Hood 1991; Barzelay 2001; Cordella 2007; Bekkers and Homburg 2007). NPM proposes a project of reforms to redefine managerial and governance practices in the public sector in line with objectives typical of market economics (Osborne and

Gaebler 1992). The advent of the NPM as the main driver of public sector reforms in several countries resulted in ambitious targets: making the governments more responsive, accountable, transparent and results driven, as well as decentralized, disaggregated, and efficient (Batley and Larbi 2004; Gruening 2001). Another characteristic of the NPM was the importation of several private sector practices (such as contracting out, privatization, customer orientation, competition and personnel management), and the separation of politics and administration (Batley and Larbi 2004; Gruening 2001; Hood 1998). In addition, governments have to achieve these goals with a much slimmer structure, as the pressures for downsizing the State were another indisputable characteristic of the NPM (Gruening 2001).

This radical change in the logic underpinning the organisation and governance of the public sector is associated with a fundamental change in the factors that account for assessing the action of the public administration, not least a shift from effectiveness to efficiency (Pollit and Bouchaert 2004). Probably the most evident transformation proposed by NPM has been to promote a management culture for the public sector that, as in the case of the private sector, becomes results driven, where the managerial efficiency supersedes the need for effectiveness in the delivery of public services (Self 2000).

Under the flag of creating “a government that works better and costs less”, broader and more intense use of ICT gained a place in the reinventing government’s agenda and public innovation efforts (Gruening 2001; Hood 1991; Kettl 2005; Borins 1997). Indeed, the development of automation in the production and distribution of public services, enabled by an intensive use of information technology, was one of the four megatrends that was linked to the NPM emergence (Hood 1991 p.3). Although not explicitly in some cases (Dunleavy et al. 2006a), e-government initiatives became embedded as part of NPM political and managerial reforms in many countries

around the world (Cordella 2007). The recent worldwide economic downturn has put even more pressure to government to innovate and to use public money more efficiently as well as to fostering policies designed to rationalise public sector organisations. As result, a reinvigorated interest in e-government as short cut to public sector rationalisation and cost saving has re-emerged.

3 The NPM its implications for e-government: enabling efficiency trough competitive behaviour

ICT has become a powerful tool implemented to standardise work procedures and smoothen information flows, so that organisational processes become more efficient and accountable, fostering the changes prescribed by NPM (Heeks 2002; Dunleavy et al. 2006a). Given the procedural nature of many government tasks (Meier and Hill 2005) and the central place that information storage, manipulation and communication occupy within the activities of public sector bureaucracies (Dunleavy et al. 2006a p.10-12), the connection between NPM and e-government initiatives lays on the potential role that Internet and related ICT can play in the reorganisation of internal and inter-organisational information flows.

As discussed by the transaction costs literature, ICT can make it easy to access information and facilitate the organisation's capacity for processing and analysing this information (Ciborra 1993; Malone et al. 1987) leading to an overall more efficient organisation setting. Following this rationale, e-government is often described as the right move to implement the changes that are needed to leverage the efficiency of public organizations performances and to promote customized services. Many e-government initiatives have been actually designed following these

ideas (see for example Salem and Jarrar 2010). ICT, and particularly the Internet, provide a more powerful instrument to facilitate the interaction between government and citizens, reducing the transaction costs of these interactions. The goal is to make it easier, faster, cheaper, and smoother for citizens to interact with government agencies, and “to build services around citizens’ choices” (Curthoys and Crabtree 2003).

As in the case of NPM, the search for more efficient and rational information and organisation flows is also part of a rich literature which has informed the design and adoption of ICT in the private sector. For example, it is not by accident that when different stages in the e-government evolution are discussed (Layne and Lee 2001; UN and ASPA 2002) the similarities with private sector ICT frameworks are evident. These stages, which build upon Venkatraman’s (1994) Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) framework, do in fact mainly discuss the technology-enabled functions and reforms needed to achieve a more efficient and rational way of working for public institutions. As in the case of the private sector (Ciborra 2000), it seems that a managerial perspective to e-government is taken to discuss the role of ICT in the re-organisation of work activities. ICT are perceived as the main instrument to achieve these goals. The challenge seems to be the definition of the right technology to achieve a pre-defined outcome.

Following this logic, based on stages of e-government development (Layne and Lee 2001; UN and ASPA 2002), many countries have carried out efforts going from the web presence to fully executable, online service delivery (West 2002; West 2005, 2007; UN 2003, 2008). The rationales for the worldwide popularity and application of NPM drivers and e-government strategies are based upon ideas that are in fact quite similar: perceived unresponsiveness and rigidity of the traditional bureaucratic structures (Barton 1979; Holmes 2001). The resulting public dissatisfaction with government, encouraged reformers to embrace managerial ideas; the

shared political support for the culture of 'bureaucrat-bashing' fostered the development of this trend (Osborne and Plastrik, 1997). As a consequence, the goal of making government more responsive has become one of the most important reasons for the initiation of e-government projects.¹ The underlying assumption seems to be that democracy can only survive by delivering services efficiently, adopting market-oriented control and coordination mechanisms or by reengineering the public service itself, and adopting ICT to support and push these agendas.

Even though the discourse of the NPM reforms has tried to embrace not only economic or managerial drivers, most e-government programmes have overlooked their broader political implications on the access, delivery, and consumption of public services as well as on the potential changes and redistribution of tasks as a result of ICT implementation. We argue that while changes in public service delivery mechanisms can have profound effects on the overall social value (Cordella and Willcocks 2010), literature in the field has mainly looked at private sector practices to inform the reorganization of public sector offices.

To discuss the implications of the e-government deployment in the context of this study, let us present and discuss the case of Mexico's freedom of information and transparency Law.

4 Transparency and access to Information in Mexico

In 2002, Mexico's enacted a new access to information law, the Federal Transparency and Access to Government Information Law (TAIL) (*Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la*

¹ Examples of governments adopting business models and enterprise applications aiming at elevating efficiency in service delivery include approaches such as business process reengineering (BPR) and total quality management, and information systems like customer relationship management and enterprise resource planning. (Bloomfield and Hayes 2009; Thong et al. 2000).

Información Gubernamental). Most part of the XX century, Mexico's political and national life was dominated by a single ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in which secrecy played a key role in sustaining their 70 consecutive years of power. Thus, the passage of the law is a democratic milestone for the Mexican society. Its enactment, however, did not happen in a vacuum; it was indeed a result of a long deep political process and negotiations that started at least 20 years before, when the freedom of information was explicitly recognized in Mexico's Constitution. After some remarkable previous efforts, the passage and enactment of the TAIL allowed Mexico to move from a political, administrative and institutional culture of opacity to a more open one (López Ayllón and Arellano 2006; Michener 2010).²

In a nutshell, the spirit of the law is to “guarantee the access of all persons to information held by federal government entities” (Art. 1). Among the strengths and innovativeness of the act, the TAIL establishes that all government information is inherently of a public nature (Art. 2). Moreover, the leading principle is that “interpretations should favor the principle of publicity” over that of secrecy. In addition, the TAIL grants any individual the right to appeal an agency's decision to deny access to the information requested. To prevent public agencies to remain silent, the TAIL also establishes notification requirements and tight timeframes for agencies to respond. The Law states that failure to answer a request within the term provided, the legal word says, the response can be legally interpreted as affirmative. The TAIL also includes a rule on record management in which federal agencies must put basic public information online (Art 9). The information that government agencies are bound to publicize is called “transparency obligations” (Art 7), and comprises of basic information, such as the organizational structure, the wages of public servants,

² For a review of the political history behind the passage of the TAIL in 2002, see Bookman and Guerrero 2009. For a detailed description of the events and the role media played in the history of the Law, see Michener 2010, chapter 2.

budget information, the goals and objectives of the administrative units, hiring agreements, among others.

In order to enforce and ensure application of the TAIL, the law creates the Federal Institute for Access to Public Information (IFAI). IFAI is an independent body that monitors and regulates the application of the Law, as well as enforces executive branch compliance. Overall, IFAI's role is to guarantee that any citizen can effectively have access to any public document in possession of any federal agency. In addition, IFAI is also responsible for promoting the right to access to information.

Mexico has a federal system with 31 States and a Federal District. The TAIL was the first effort at a federal level, and as such, the Law covers only federal agencies. Since the entry in force of the Law in 2002, each State has passed their own access to information and transparency laws, which means that today, every State (including the federal district) has its own information and transparency Acts.. Some State Laws are more comprehensive than others (e.g. Mexico Federal District), but in general, each State follows the same principles of the TAIL and have thus created their own institutes for access to public information.

There are three option to make an information request: (i) visiting the IFAI (or State level counterparts) Service Centre in person; (ii) going directly to the government agency where one wishes to obtain information from; in this case, the Law mandates every government agency to open a special office called "Liaison Office"; (iii) using the Internet via the electronic system for information requests called *Infomex* (before called *SISI*).

The law was innovative for Mexico but also inspiring for many other countries in the region that follow it as an exemplar of freedom of information acts (Bookman and Guerrero 2009). One of the peculiarities of the Mexican case is the Internet based system for information requests,

Infomex. This electronic feature has been precisely one of the attractiveness of the Act. Given its relative success and innovative mechanisms, the Mexican case has been largely studied (Michener 2010). There have been notable studies at a national level (Bookman and Guerrero 2009; López Ayllón and Arellano 2006; López Ayllón 2005; Luna Pla 2009) and in comparative perspective (Michener 2010). However, although present in some of these studies indirectly, there have been few analyses that focus on the Internet mediated interaction between citizens and government, and on the possible dilemmas that may arise for the remaking of the State.

As we will discuss later, the passage of the TAIL implied a radical change to public administration's organisational and administrative behaviour as well. In this arena, Lopez-Ayllón and Arellano note, the Mexican access to information and transparency Act have "profound implications in the way governmental information is generated, administrated, conserved, classified and destroyed" (2006 p.15), and more generally, on the overall organisation of public administration.

4.1 *The electronic tools in access to information in Mexico*

The Internet and web-based technologies play a key role in the TAIL, particularly by the creation of its electronic system of information requests. The Information Request System (SISI), now integrated into a single website called Mexican Information (*Infomex*), is a web-based tool which allows any person from any location in the world to request information to Mexican government agencies, to follow up the request status and retrieve and agency response as well as to appeal an agency response if the information is not provided.³

³ A Constitutional amendment in 2007, also established that from 2008 every State government had to launch an electronic platform following the same characteristics. This means that *Infomex* is now working at both, federal and state government levels.

A more recent tool, called “Zoom”, serves as a searchable database of all information requests that have been submitted through *Infomex*. *Zoom* allows then to retrieve any petition, its response and IFAI decision (if it were the case) using different criteria (e.g. agency, keywords, date). Overall, *Zoom* works itself as a mechanism to increase transparency of the process of accessing information held by public authorities.

The third digital tool the TAIL enacted deals with the aforementioned “transparency obligations”. Under this requirement, each agency is obliged to put specific information online in their official websites. These obligations can now be found in a single access point called “Transparency Portal” (*Portal de Transparencia* <http://portaltransparencia.gob.mx/>). In other words, the Transparency Portal works as a *one-stop-shop* to access government owned information.

At a first glance, the role of Internet in the Mexican case relays on the easiness and convenience of using these web-based tools for information access, processing and delivery. There is no removal of the human element in decision making, or a high level of automation in the system. On the benefits to those who request information, the electronic system for information requests (*Infomex*) eliminates the costs of going to government offices in person. A further benefit is that the system protects the requestor’s identity by making information requests anonymous over the electronic platform. Furthermore, it provides the user with a written record of the request and the timeframe within it will be responded, and at the same time being useful as proof of the submission.

To the other extent, the electronic platform gives public administration benefits too. For IFAI (and its state level counterparts), the electronic platform means a simple and quick monitoring tool for agency compliance that reduces the cost of supervision. Moreover, it allows IFAI easily monitor trends and identify roadblocks to access and improve the Institute’s ability to regulate and enforce the Law effectively and efficiently (Bookman and Guerrero 2009 p.45). Besides the

monitoring institutions, it also helps public agencies to have a reliable database of information requests, given responses and appeals. This accurate information can be used to better implement the law and policy designs aimed at making access to information more effective.

4.2 Implementation of the TAIL: what are the numbers?

Since June 2003⁴ (date when the TAIL went into effect), there have been more than 545 thousands of information requests, 96% of which have been submitted using the electronic platform. To date (August 2010), the rate of information requests that have been attended⁵ represents on average 97%. The number of information petitions has grown at steady pace year by year. By the end of 2009, the total number of requests tripled since 2004. The proportion of complaints to IFAI has also grown over time in absolute numbers, but they remain on average at around 5.4% of total information requests. In 2010 there seem to be a slightly higher proportion of complaints (7%), although data is preliminary.

	2003 - 2006	2007	2008	2009	2010*	TOTAL
Electronic Requests	163,156	92,261	102,297	114,179	74,191	546,084
Manual Requests	9,013	2,462	2,953	3,418	2,431	20,277
Total Requests	172,169	94,723	105,250	117,597	76,622	566,361
Electronic Responses	145,417	81,439	89,092	97,642	64,774	478,364
Manual Responses	7,668	1,948	2,328	2,880	2,077	16,901
Total Responses	153,085	83,387	91,420	100,522	66,851	495,265
Total Requests Discarded (either the solicitor failed to pay the fees or fail to provide additional information)	13,885	9,107	11,680	15,725	8,642	59,039
Visits to Transparency Portal	n.d.	4,966,618	13,978,771	9,525,069	5,503,431	33,973,889
IFAI Complaints	8,238	4,864	6,053	6,038	5,426	30,619

Table 1: Summary of Information Requests, Responses, IFAI complaints and visits to Transparency Portals. Source: own elaboration based on IFAI statistics (<http://www.ifai.org.mx/Estadisticas/#estadisticas>). *Note: data as 19 August 2010

⁴ Bookman and Guerrero reports that over 1000 requests were submitted on the first day (Bookman and Guerrero 2009 footnote 121, p.32).

⁵ IFAI labels “attended” to those requests that have been processed. The figure includes those requests that have been discarded either because the requestor did not pay de agreed fees or because it did not provide the additional information requested by the agency as to clarify the request.

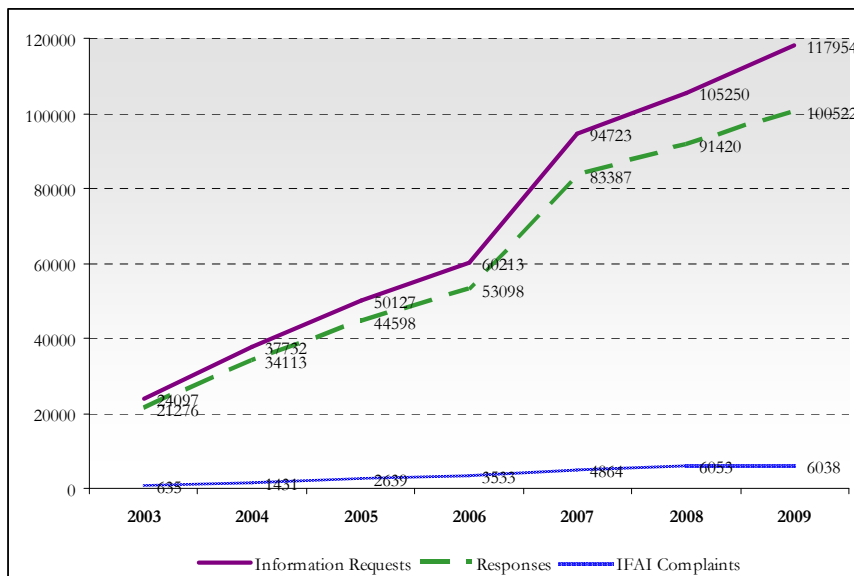


Figure 1: Information Request, Responses and Complaints (2003-2009). Source: own elaboration based on IFAI statistics

The requests, either filled online or manually, have different types of responses. Figure below depicts the agency response pie chart for the answers delivered in 2009.⁶ Most of the information provided is delivered in electronic format (by email, CD or other means), and the percentage has been around the same since 2007 (65%). Considering both, the information delivered electronically and the answers that refer to publicly available information (6%), it can be said that almost 70% of information requests are answered. Requests that are denied because of “inexistence” of information have also maintain a similar proportion, although they have grown in absolute numbers over time. In 2009 they represented 7.8%, and in 2010 the number reached 8.6%.

⁶ According to available data, the proportions are not significantly different to other years (e.g. 2008, 2010).

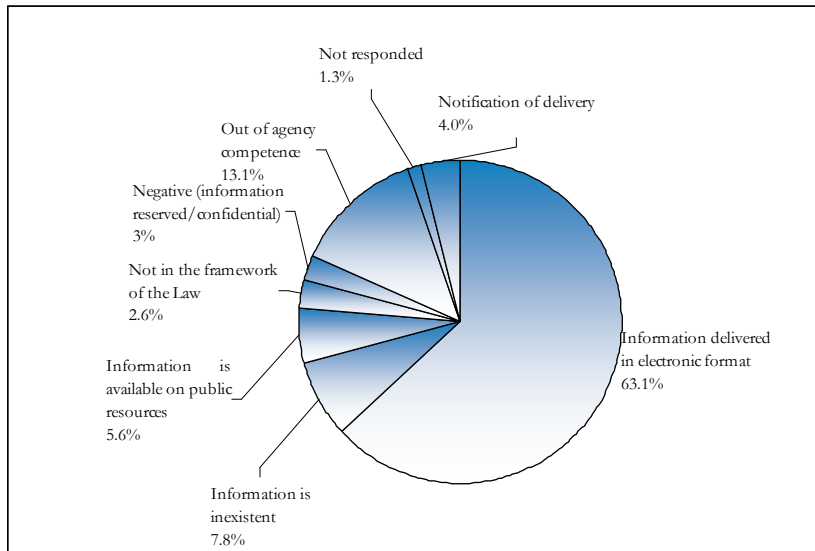


Figure 2: Type of Agency's Responses (2009). Source: own elaboration based on IFAI statistics

Among the agencies that receive the highest number of requests, the Department of Social Security (IMSS) is by far at the top of the list: from 2003 to 2010 it accounts for over 15% of the total request. The Ministry of Education follows IMSS in the ranking, but only with 5% of the petitions. The next in the ranking are the Ministries of Treasury (3.5%), Health (3%), Environment and Natural Resources (3%) and Communications and Transport (2.7%).⁷

Although submitting information on the user's background is not mandatory, IFAI compiles data on the profile of information solicitors based on volunteering records. Of course, the fact that the Law allows any person to submit a request without revealing his or her identity means that data on user's profiles will not be fully accurate. <http://portaltransparencia.gob.mx/pot/>The data on who requests information is thus imperfect, and relies on the solicitor's willingness to provide it.

Overall, IFAI reports that around 65% of users provide further details.⁸ Bookman and Guerrero (2009) report that in general, over 64% of users are male, 55% request data from Mexico City,

⁷ Source: IFAI Statistics (<http://www.ifai.org.mx/Estadisticas/#estadisticas>).

⁸ The authors have themselves place an information request to get updated numbers of this figure. It is worth mentioning that all these statistics are publicly available for Mexico City government in their Infomex system.

and 54% are between 20 and 34 years old. In addition, 32% belong to the academic sector, 18% are located in the business sector, 12% are bureaucrats, and 9% work in media; a further 30% of users were grouped under “other” category.

A further point goes into the level of concentration of requests per user. Considering the same period, just 7,000 registered users accounted for half of the total request. Even further, figures show that only 270 users made up 21% of the total number of requests. In sum there is a high concentration of users that account for most of the information petitions (Bookman and Guerrero 2009).

4.3 Number of requests, complaints, data usability and transparency: further interpretations

There were a number of incentives for users to submit information requests. As shown previously, the use of technology as enabler was key (not only because it lowers the transaction costs for the users, but also because it allows anonymous information petitions). Moreover, contrary to other international experiences, the Mexican Government decided to absorb mostly all administrative costs associated with information petitions and the TAIL administration.⁹ In sum, the overall system is designed to encourage people to request information from the government. This to fulfill the intent of the law which aimed at profoundly transform the previous tradition of government opacity.

The claim of “inexistence” as an agency response to information petitions is cause of concern. Bookman and Guerrero have indeed suggested that the growth in this figure caused a corresponding rise in IFAI complaints (2009, p.49). If the trend continues, one may argue that opacity is growing too, given the youth of the Law and access to information culture. In other words, one could argue that the more information publicly available (an increase in

⁹ Art. 29 of the Law states that Agencies can ask for nominal fees to cover the costs of reproducing documents, and mailing.

transparency), the less information requests would have to be submitted. Then, it would be expectable to see a general decrease in the total number of information requests. If such were the case (e.g. a scenario of greater transparency), one could expect that information requests become more sophisticated as users are willing to get very particular or specific data that may be indeed nonexistent or too difficult to be retrieved. However, at the stage of the implementation of the Law, and given the other indicators presented, the first hypothesis is more likely to be supported. Another indicator of the growth of complexity is the average time to respond an access to information petition. Whilst between 2003 and 2006 agencies responded to information requests in 11.2 working days (on average), the number has grown to 13.4 in 2009 (IFAI 2009).

In terms of data usability and value, neither *Infomex* or *Zoom* seem to work very friendly if the aim is obtaining statistics or aggregated data on information requests, responses or appeals. For example, *Infomex* is designed to generate graphic data from the records available on the system, although results are only available in picture format (and in Spanish). The situation is even more severe when trying to use data from the “Transparency Portal”. Let consider the case in which one is interested in summing up how much money the Ministry of Economy spent in IT hardware. The information provided in the Transparency Portal (or the agency website) is not only limited but hardly usable. The items on IT expending are part of a much longer budgeting file (102 pages), only accessible in pdf format and available for 2010. Whilst getting access to the original document in spreadsheet format is not possible, to compile the information means one has to case by case, manually, page by page. The example seems to be the rule rather than the exception, which bring us to the next step in the paper: discussing the political implications of the case.

5 Lessons from the Mexican case and a call for a different approach

As noted earlier, the managerial values, as inspired by NPM, have been the major initiators of ICT use in government (Chadwick and May 2003). To address the question whether and to what extent e-government programmes are achieving policy goals entails to consider a broader set of values.

Other scholars have proposed a different approach that looks at the socio-technical endeavours taking place around the deployment of ICT in the public sector in general and public sector organisations in particular (Fountain 2001a; Denziger and Andersen 2002; Fountain 2007; Contini and Lanzara 2008; Avgerou and Walsham 2000). Following these principles, we approach the use of the Internet and other networked technologies in government not merely as information processing and communicating tools but rather as elements of a larger socio-technical system. As socio-technical, the system is composed of humans, technologies, politics and values as well as knowledge and tensions. This means that the introduction of Internet will not be smooth, impartial or uncontroversial.

Overall, we suggest that the effects of e-government policies, either positive or negative should not be focus on the impact on the direct economic exchange relationships typical of private sector indicators, as proposed by NPM, but rather on the collective preferences.

The Mexican case reveals that beyond considering the use of the Internet merely as a tool to achieve an efficient an effective channel to potentially increase transparency, further social, and political complexities emerge. In this section, we propose to set the ground for our main argument: a different approach arises if considering the dilemmas that a quicker ICT-mediated access (.e.g. *Infomex*) can bring to public administration and government-citizen interactions.

5.1 *Objectives of the Law: embracing public values*

The TAIL was a result of a long history of political and social negotiations, as we described earlier on. Article 4 of the Law is a good starting point to illustrate the many different aspects the TAIL was trying to embrace:

“The objectives of this Act are:

I. To provide whatever may be necessary so that every person may have access to information through simple and expeditious procedures; II. To promote the disclosing of public administration tasks through dissemination of the information issued by the respective disclosing parties; III. To guarantee the protection of the personal data kept by the disclosing parties; IV. To promote the rendering of accounts to citizens so that they may evaluate the performance of the disclosing parties; V. To upgrade the organization, classification and handling of documents; VI. To contribute to the democratization of Mexican society and the existence of a rule of law.”

There are many key concepts embedded in the spirit of the Law. The first objective tackles access to information as a right. Transparency appears contained in the second objective, whilst a further value appears then, that is the reference to accountability. The Law also establishes the protection of the personal data (part III), and an expected change in the way public administration holds information. Overall, the TAIL proposes to contribute to Mexican democratic processes, an overarching public value, as we would argue later. These objectives are useful to present the potential effects of the Law at least in two different dimensions: government-citizens interaction, and at the interior of public bureaucracy.

5.2 *The Citizen challenge: TAIL and Internet Users in Mexico*

Given the numbers shown in the previous sections, we can argue that one of the most acclaimed impacts of the Internet and ICT within the Mexican case has been precisely its incentives to fill in access to information requests. However, it is not certain whether the electronic tools are indeed

opening up a broader channel for citizen government interaction. Rather, data showed that there is a big concentration of requests (few users made the majority of them), and also, that the average user of information requests in Mexico is a young metropolitan male, with an income and education that are higher than the national average.

A rather bigger concern arises when looking at Mexico's statistics on Internet penetration access. In 2004, only 14% of Mexican inhabitants had access to the Internet. Even though the numbers are growing rapidly, by 2010 only 27 out of 100 Mexicans report to be users of the world wide web. This is not a minor remark considering that, given the numbers, Mexico's access to information system is almost fully electronic.

	Users	Population	Penetration Rate (users per 100 inhabitants)
2000	2,712,400	98,991,200	2.70%
2004	14,901,687	102,797,200	14.30%
2005	17,100,000	103,872,328	16.30%
2006	20,200,000	105,149,952	19.20%
2008	27,400,000	109,955,400	24.90%
2010	30,600,000	112,468,855	27.20%

Table 2: Mexico's Internet Access. Source: World Internet Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/am/mx.htm>).

There are also myths when it comes to perceptions on Internet use in politics. The World Internet Project, an international project that surveys the uses of Internet in several countries, reported that Mexicans have a positive attitude on using the Internet for political engagement. Both in 2008 and 2010, the figures show that a significant proportion of Mexicans believe the Internet can be an effective communication channel between citizens and government. A slightly less majority perceive the Internet can empower people politically. These results are not less significant, bringing into play that respondents were both Internet users and non users.

	Totally Agreed and Agreed		Nor agreed or Disagreed, Disagreed and totally disagreed		Do not know	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
Using the Internet citizens could tell governments what they should do	43	42	51	53	6	5
Using the Internet public authorities could understand citizens better	36	34	60	61	6	5
Using the Internet citizen could be politically empowered	20	21	73	73	7	6
Using the Internet citizens could understand politicians better	19	28	76	67	6	5

Table 3: Internet and political perceptions in Mexico. Source: WIP 2008, 2010.

On the other hand, given the number of submission and the way information is requested, data supports that there are indeed benefits associated with the Internet mediated interaction. Using the lenses of NPM, efficiency and efficacy became at the front, if considering the overall numbers of responses showed in the previous section. We would argue, however, that putting other values at the centre would lead us to a different perspective. From a whole citizen-government perspective, it is hard to say weather the system is indeed increasing transparency, or accountability, given that Mexican Internet users are still few in the country. Moreover, we have showed that the average user of the system is not clearly representative of the overall Mexican society. The results show a biased service towards certain citizens (e.g. those that are technology literate, well educated, with higher income), whilst the spirit of the Law is certainly more universal.

A further concern relates to access to information, transparency and their citizen enactment. We have shown an anecdote about the limits on data usability depicted on the Transparency Portals. The Internet provides a speed access to public information; we would argue that it can also provide a speed frustration. If citizens do not see the value in getting access to public information

that is already out there, posted online, the risks of increasing opacity would be even bigger. Further efforts in terms of increasing information that is “useful” to citizens need to be pursued. This was certainly one of the key recommendations that came out from the survey conducted in 2007 about public servants and their attitudes towards the TAIL procedures, effects and results.

5.3 *Transparency and bureaucratic culture: the role of the Internet and its political dilemmas?*

Probably one of the most salient features of the Law relies in its effort to drive an organisational change in the way public administration work. Thus, “to upgrade the organization, classification and handling of documents” was the fifth objective depicted in the TAIL (Art 4).

Given the locks (“*candados*”) in the legal word, such as the tight timeframes and sanctions as well as IFAI’s compliance role, the TAIL meant that it was no longer acceptable for government officials to deny access to public information for fear of the motivation behind the request. In addition, the enforcements of the Law implied a reduction in the tendency to provide information on a discretionary basis. The expected result for public bureaucrats was to enact the disclosure of information in a new, less threatening fashion. From the beginning, however, the TAIL demanded a dilemma: to comply with additional workload and practically same organisational resources.

Public administration scholars have largely studied the characteristics of the “weberian” public bureaucracy and its lack of flexibility to respond to changes. One of the advantages of the electronic platform designed in the Law was its easiness (e.g. low degree of *automatation*), and also the fact that it meant starting a project from scratch (e.g. no interoperability issues). In this section, we want to highlight the organisational and political dilemmas that emerge from the fact that the electronic platform enables a growing number of access to information requests.

The data we show here comes from the results of a survey conducted by the International Centre of Transparency and Access to Information Studies, at that part sponsored by IFAI. The survey was conducted in 2007 and it aimed to compile several dimensions about public servants and their attitudes towards the TAIL procedures, effects and results. The survey conducted more than a 1200 interviews, chosen from a randomized sample from federal agencies, state and local government authorities. 57% of the interviewed have more than 10 years of experience within the public sector, and most have worked within the same agencies (over 45% have worked only for 1 government agency and 72% only for two), which gives an idea if the general public servant profile in Mexico.

When the public servants were asked about the TAIL, 83% declared they knew about it, and 95% perceived it as a positive tool in the long run. Among the positive effects of the Law, to *create* transparency and access to information were the two more mentioned. 30% mentioned that the TAIL helps public administration modernization.

There was also a perceived duality in the responses. Whilst over 80% considered that access to information has increase internal efficiencies in handling and organizing documents, 58% declared that the TAIL generates unnecessary costs and additional workload. In general, public servants agreed that the complexity in responding access to information requests come from the fact that they are poorly formulated. Further results show even more shocking results: 43% of public servants observed that the majority of information requests are done following strictly personal interests.¹⁰ Furthermore, 49% considered that hierarchical decisions are the most salient

¹⁰ These results are also supported by the interviews we conducted in May 2010 with personnel in the Federal District of Mexico. Although the interviews entailed perceptions about Open Government, there were many elements referring to access to information and transparency Law. On this point, the examples given include a public servant

feature of Mexican bureaucracy; access to information request was not the exemption. Finally, the survey suggested that the main risk was to increase the already shown perception that certain requests are neither useful nor valuable, and that there is certainly additional workload to public servants that can challenge the feature implementation of the Law.

Overall, these results suggest that even though there are positive effects associated to the implementation of the Act, there are political and administrative dilemmas as well. The fact that on average the time to respond to an information request has grown over time, is also a symptom of a growing complexity in the system.

6 Public Value Paradigm and the Internet in Government

Although valuable to assess some of the aspects associated with the deployment of e-government policies, the focus on efficiency, effectiveness and economy is limited. This trend, we would argue, neglects considering broader impacts of Internet adoption in government. Accordingly, ICT developments in the public sector should pay more attention to the complexity that is associated with their implementation, with particular focus on the consequences the transformation of the relationship between citizens and the state can have on government's shared expectations. Outcomes of public sector reforms have an impact on political and social variables that are not accounted for in private sector frameworks (Moore 1995; Frederickson 2000; Cordella 2007; Aberbach and Christensen 2005; Bozeman and Bretschneider 1986). The Mexican case serves as an example of this.

The public value paradigm argues that individual preferences cannot be aggregated to reflect what society wants from the government. The Mexican case can thus be understood following the

asking for data that otherwise would not be released, or a former official asking for certain data, usable for legal purposes.

lenses of this paradigm. Citizens decide together, via elected representative, what they value as a collective and these collective preferences are used to value the outcome of government's action. The IFAI has remarkable stated that the TAIL has emerged "from a social demand of transparency and accountability."¹¹

Therefore, public value is not necessary defined by who produces it -government organisation, private firms, non-profit organisations, or various other organisations- but rather by the citizens who collectively consume it. Citizens value things "because they personally benefit from them. But in many cases, they also value them, and indeed value other things, for reasons that go beyond their individual self-interest. They have goals or aspirations for the society as a whole, founded in social or normative commitments or purposes such as fairness, national pride, care for the environment, or concern for the weak and vulnerable."(Alford and Hughes 2008)

From this initial discussion, a public value approach would entail considerable changes as it provides a new means of thinking about government activities, policy making and service delivery which directly challenge the NPM paradigm. Public value in fact can consist of multiple objectives, such as narrow economic objectives or broader outcomes. Moreover, public value can entail the creation and maintenance of a socially shared expectation of fairness, trust, and legitimacy whose definition cannot be detached form the socially shaped context within they are defined (O'Flynn 2007).

Following the public value paradigm, the identification of the problems to be solved and their managerial solutions is not simply a matter of objective analysis. What is valuable is in fact registered in the desires and judgements of citizens that can have different and conflicting preferences about similar issues; indeed, these preferences can shift and change over time (Alford

¹¹ IFAI briefing on ABC facts of the Mexican Law, 2010. available at: <http://www.ifai.org.mx/English>

and Hughes 2008). The creation of public value is therefore closely linked to the perpetuation of public policies which aim at pursuing the political mandate that citizens give to government as part of the democratic process of elections.

The introduction of the notion of public value suggests a radical change in the public sector management practices. Public value in fact brings at the centre of the action of the government, and therefore of public administration activities, the search for solutions that guarantee the best possible coherency between the expectation of the citizens and the actual deliverables of the action of the public administration. A public sector oriented to the creation of public value should therefore not find appropriate to prioritise management practices which have been designed on the base of critical performance objective centered on efficiency and economy largely reflecting the economic framing of government activities and the reconstruction of citizens as customers, as proposed by NPM. For the same reason in the public value framework, politics is not “confined to the role of initial input into the system of management and final judge” (Stoker 2006 p.46). Because of the nature of public value, politics should be at the centre of the public management practices, aims, and strategies. Public management is therefore deeply intertwined with political processes and collective expectations so that new models of accountability different from the one based on narrow economic performance indicators are needed. This shift privileges a move towards contingent and political dependent indicators which are close related to the public value which the administration is expected to deliver. In this case, the search for objective administrative measurements of the activities of public servants and public organisations is relegated at a secondary level. It becomes only primary when public value is defined by citizens being associated with the implementation of administrative reforms which optimise the administrative processes and performance.

The shift in focus in public management and the relationships between the NPM and the public value paradigm are summarised in the table below:

	Public Value	New Public Management
Rational	Public administration	Private Management
Dominant Focus	Politics enactment	Administrative rationalisation
Definition of public interest	Collective preferences	Aggregated individual preferences
Performance Objective	Multiple objectives, shifting over time	Management of inputs and outputs to ensure economy and responsiveness to customers
Dominant Model of Accountability	Multiple accountability systems	Upward accountability via performance contracts
Preferred System of Delivery	Menu of alternatives selected pragmatically	Private Sector or tight defined arms-length public agency

Table 4. Paradigms of Public Management (adapted from O’Flynn, 2007 and Stoker, 2006)

7 Conclusions: Balancing public values and the challenge of Internet in Government

In line with the public value framework, ICT deployments in the public sector have already been discussed in the light of their political and social impacts. ICT implementation in government is not neutral but political, social and controversial (Fountain 2001b; Bekkers and Homburg 2007). The impact of ICT adoptions in the public sector has therefore to be considered within the public political context within which it is deployed.

Of course, legal infrastructures in democratic countries can be seen as *proxies* of public value representations. The Mexican TAIL remains as an example of this. But one thing is the legal

word and a different one, its enactment within a socio-political and institutional set of rules.

Bookman and Guerrero illustrate this point clearly:

“The power of a normative framework lies on the margin. Whether within the confines of government, such as agency personnel or IFAI Commissioners, or from the perspective of the citizen requestor, including the very impetus to file a request and what information to seek, a robust sociopolitical context can both lead and support the routine exercise of a citizen’s right to know.” (2009 p.25)

Finally, we would argue that ICT intervention in the public sector is a matter of balancing *competing* public values. The Mexican case showed that in the case of government-citizen relations, efficacy versus equity remains unresolved. As in terms of public bureaucracies administration, higher complexity, performance driven measures and an increase in the workload challenge the push for a more open government.

Not only we agree with the fact that reforms influenced by the NPM need to supersede the focus on competition and move forward into a collaborative government (Salem and Jarrar 2010 p.91).

We go even further and propose that applications of Internet in government should consider the political, social and economic context in which they are embedded. To do so, we have proposed to bring into play the public value paradigm.

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