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UK government policy on citizens' access to public information

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UK Government Policy on Citizens' Access to Public Information

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Abstract: This paper is based upon early findings of PhD research at the Department of Information Science, Loughborough University, 2007-2010. The research aims to identify the different strands of UK government policies on improving citizens' access to public sector information (PSI) over the last 10 years, investigating how policies were developed and implemented, and by whom. It will particularly look at how the 2007 *Power of Information Review* (Mayo and Steinberg 2007) is influencing government information provision in the era of Web 2.0. eGovernment initiatives have already transformed the provision of PSI, whether directly through digital channels or through third parties, but use of Web 2.0 has considerable potential to expand information services still further.

A review of the literature has so far found that much of the academic writing on eGovernance and eGovernment relates to business/systems re-engineering – ie technological aspects rather than policy aspects – and little has been written in the UK on national information policy, as opposed to IT policy, since 2002. Where policy aspects of eGovernment are covered, they tend to have a more general focus than the specific provision of public sector information, and increasingly address eDemocracy. There seem to have been few investigations into how information policy developed over time: a gap which this research is intended to fill.

Using a critical realist approach, policies will be analysed through a content analysis of the policy documents, triangulated with analysis of published comment on the policies and in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from a range of perspectives. The intention is to gain a three-dimensional picture of the policy-making *process* and make recommendations on how it could and should work in future.

Semi-structured interviews with approximately 50 individuals with different perspectives started in March 2009. Early findings show that co-ordination of policy across government is a problem, there is a need for leadership at the heart of government to make things happen, there is a lack of clarity on who actually makes information policy, and government needs a better understanding of the nature of information and information skills.

Central to the research will be identifying what mechanisms, if any, were used to evaluate the success of the relevant eGovernment policies, and how the results of the evaluation were used to develop future policy. Unlike many other studies, the focus will be on qualitative measures, not just on metrics. Drawing on experience of evaluation in other countries, it is intended to develop a framework for the evaluation of current and future eGovernment information policy on the provision of PSI to citizens. Based on the research findings, we aim to make recommendations on how policy on access to public information might be measured and evaluated, and on future directions for research in this area.

Keywords: public sector information; PSI; information policy; G2C; access to public information; iGovernment

1. Introduction

"To improve the way we provide services, we need all parts of government to work together better. And we need to make sure that government services are brought forward using the best and most modern techniques, to match the best of the private sector including one-stop shops, single contacts which link in to a range of government Departments and especially electronic information-age services." (Cunningham 1999)

This quote from Minister for the Cabinet Office Jack Cunningham introduces the 1999 UK White Paper *Modernising government*, which put forward a vision for citizen-centric services and paved the way for the UK's eGovernment agenda.

In the nine years since the publication of the white paper, there have been many UK government initiatives using digital technology aimed at making open government a reality. 2009 can be seen as a turning point, with many eGovernment initiatives coming to fruition and Web 2.0, third (and even fourth) generation mobile phone, and digital television technologies, enabling new ways of doing business. For example:

- the Transformational Government Implementation Plan (Great Britain. Cabinet Office [n.d.]) is addressing citizen-centric government services
- government websites aimed at the citizen are being channelled through the Directgov website to make it easier for citizens to find the services and information they need (Great Britain. Department for Work and Pensions 2008)
- the UK government is following up recommendations from the *Power of information review* (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2007), which it commissioned to look at how it could improve access to public information in the Web 2.0/social networking environment
- and, most recently, the government has published *Information matters* (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2008a), a strategy to improve the way government departments manage and share information and knowledge, with an action plan due by April 2009.

It is therefore a good time to assess how the UK government has developed its eGovernment policies, from the *Modernising government* agenda to the present.

1.1 Focus of the research

This paper is based on PhD research at the Department of Information Science, Loughborough University which began in October 2007. This research is investigating how a specific aspect of eGovernment services – the provision of public sector information (PSI) to citizens – has been developed by ministers and senior civil servants in the UK and co-ordinated across departments. The focus is on top level policies which have an influence government-wide and the information policy implications of new technologies rather than the technologies themselves.

Whilst the literature review identified the majority of recent research in eGovernment information policy as revolving around technology-based issues, this research is not limited to electronic channels of communication; indeed, observations from the literature suggest that it is important not to forget that there are still many individuals who do not have the skills, the opportunity or the desire to use these channels, points made by Selwyn (2004) and Chadwick (2006). However, eGovernment information-based initiatives play a part in ensuring that those who act as intermediaries to the information 'have nots' have efficient electronic information sources on which to draw.

Semi-structured interviews with approximately 50 individuals in this domain with different perspectives started in March 2009. Early findings suggest that co-ordination of policy across government is a problem, there is a need for leadership at the heart of government to make things happen, there is a lack of clarity on who actually makes information policy, and government needs a better understanding of the nature of information and information skills.

A key driver of the research which has become apparent over the last year has been the difficulty of evaluating implementation of information policy. To address this, the research aims to identify what mechanisms, if any, were used to evaluate the success of the policies, and how the results of the evaluation were used to develop future policy. Drawing lessons from overseas practice, it is intended to develop a framework for the evaluation of current and future government information policy on the provision of PSI to citizens.

It is hoped that the results will be of value to the UK government and the information profession, but also to eGovernment and social policy researchers as an exemplar of policy evaluation over time.

2. Methods used

2.1 Research philosophy

The framework used for this research is that of dynamic policy analysis, looking at the development of policy over time, as described in the work of Adrian Kay (2006), for example. Preliminary results from the literature review suggest that there has been little work undertaken to analyse the development of information policies, rather snapshots of what it is at any one time or future projections for what it ought to consist of. This research adopts an inductive approach (Silverman 2005), and is looking at

what has actually happened, how, why and by whom, in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations for the future.

In doing so, the research will try to uncover the values that underpin the individual policies, and be sensitive to the perspectives of the individual stakeholders. As such, it falls within the research philosophy of critical realism (Robson 2002), rejecting both the positivist emphasis solely on the measurable and the relativist emphasis on the perceptions of the stakeholders. There are specific policies to be objectively analysed but the motivations of policy-makers and critics/commentators on the policies need to be explored to get a fuller understanding of what is happening (Browne 1997).

It is worth noting here that this research is being funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and therefore there is no bias as regards the funders' requirements, as there might be if, for example, it was being funded directly by government for its own purposes, by industry or by a pressure group.

2.2. Summary of methods adopted

This research has identified the major eGovernment policies enacted by the UK central government since 1996 with regard to citizens' access to public information, for example *Our information age* (Great Britain. Central Office of Information 1996) and *Enabling a digitally United Kingdom: a framework for action* (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2004). These policies are being analysed through a content analysis of the policy documents, however published material only gives part of the picture. It is important to capture the views and experience of key players, and triangulate (Denscombe 2007) this with analysis of the policy documents and comment on those documents, to obtain a clear view of how information policy is working and has worked, how it has developed and been evaluated, and what the main influences and influencers have been.

Building on work already done by others, a framework will be developed for evaluating implementation of eGovernment information policies in the 21st century, especially in relation to access to public information. To inform the recommendations, the study will also examine examples of evaluation practice from other countries.

2.3 Interviews

Interviewees were selected using a purposive approach.

The literature review confirmed that internal co-ordination of policy-making and the skills elements of the digital divide (as opposed to the technological elements) were central issues to be addressed in the interviews. However, grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998 and Silverman 2005) is being taken with the interviews, analysing the concepts actually used by the interviewees rather than imposing a set of concepts.

Six categories of players were considered in order to capture the knowledge and understanding of those on all sides of policy development implementation and study:

- *policy-makers*: those who make the decisions about what the policy should be
- *policy implementers*: those who carry out the instructions of the policy-makers and have to cope with the realities and problems that the implementation produces
- *policy regulators and advisers*: those who advise on what the policies should be and assess whether they are being properly/efficiently implemented, ie those who influence
- *academic researchers*: those who have investigated and commented upon policy, and most particularly those who influence government or have been commissioned by government, or who have most influenced academic thinking
- *information professionals*: those who have responsibility for recommending information policy to government
- *other lobbyists*: those who have lobbied government on particular issues, for example the Freedom of Information Campaign.

A total of approximately 50 interviews will be needed adequately to cover the range of appropriate individuals. The initial list of potential interviewees is regularly being reviewed in the light both of interviews already undertaken and changes of personnel in particular posts. These key players are being approached for their specific experience and expertise; they are not intended to be a representative sample from which inferences could be drawn. The individuals will have very different

comments to make from their various perspectives. Citizens will not be interviewed as the research is trying to illuminate the policy-making process rather than the effect of the policies on the public.

The semi-structured interviews began in March 2009 and will continue until September. Initially one representative from each section was interviewed, and the results used to guide the future direction of the interview questions. Fifteen top-level questions were developed, however these were tailored to the individual interviewees to reflect their perspectives and experience and will evolve during the course of the interviewing to reflect the emphasis on issues arising from analysis of the previous interviews. Seven headings for questions were identified, based on the literature review and open interviews held in 2008:

- *values and principles*: importance placed on the provision of public sector information and whether there is a need for an overarching framework of information policies in the UK
- *policy-making*: who has been responsible for making information policy over the last 10 years and how this has changed
- *co-ordination*: how well information policy is co-ordinated across government and how this has changed of the last 10 years, as well as the key relationships across departments
- *access to public sector information*: success of the drive to make services citizen-centric; provision of access for ALL citizens through various channels; who decides content; policy on developing citizens' information skills
- *evaluation*: how implementation of information policy is and could be evaluated
- *Power of Information Review*: opinions on the value of the Review and its influence on government, together with the influence of the work of the follow-up Taskforce
- *Information profession*: the influence and involvement of the information profession in developing and implementing information policy.

3. Early findings

A review of the relevant academic literature has identified much writing that is tangential to the research topic, but little specific research, supporting the need for research in this area. The literatures of information policy and eGovernment have been the most relevant to focus on in the first instance, as issues around access to information, and the skills to make best use of that access, fall at the overlap between the two spheres.

Similar criticisms have been levelled at the research in both areas, reflecting to some extent the relative youth of the disciplines. eGovernment research draws on public administration, public policy, business studies, political science and information systems, but there are now a number of dedicated peer review journals and it is becoming a discipline in its own right (Heeks and Bailur 2007). The majority of information policy scholarship is drawn from the information studies domain; this has been noted by Nilsen (2001) and Browne (1997), amongst others, in the past and still seems to be the case. There is recognition in both that a more interdisciplinary approach is desirable (Browne 1997).

3.1 Gaps in research

Possibly because it is a new field, eGovernment has attracted various senior academics in public information systems to analyse published research in this area – a useful place to start when undertaking one's own review of such a large subject area, both for the findings and the methodology employed. Papers analysing information policy research identified many of the same issues.

Conclusions from various published literature reviews and other academic research papers (for example Hernon 1996) suggest that there is a need for an over-arching analysis of information policy as much research tends to look at individual specific aspects. Trauth (1986), in her analysis of the published research, found a lack of studies that were both prescriptive – made recommendations – and integrative – covered a range of disciplines or policy aspects. This was partly because of the lack of time and/or money for individual research; having three years of research funding for this project will permit a more holistic approach.

Initial findings from a review of the literature undertaken for this study, and confirmed by Grönlund and Andersson (2007), also show that much research has been undertaken on the systems re-engineering aspects of eGovernment – the implementation – but there appears to be less on the policy side and little focussing on the provision of information to citizens, the first stage of eGovernment initiatives. Andersen and Henriksen concluded that: "at present, e-government research is founded primarily on the legacy of IS research and fails to incorporate disciplines such as

public administration and political science in an adequate manner. Changing this path could offer rewarding research and help move the research field to a unique position.” (Andersen and Henriksen 2005, p. 38-39)

This literature review found little research looking at the development of information policy over time to get a broad understanding of how the development process works. As to geographical coverage, much of the research relates to local/state government rather than the national government perspective and research in/about the United States predominates. Benchmarking studies and large-scale surveys are mostly undertaken by international agencies, eg EU, OECD, World Bank and the United Nations (for example United Nations 2008), which have the funding and infrastructure, or large consultancies such as Gartner, Capgemini and Accenture. Much of the writing by academics is based on the work of others or international policy documents, especially from the UN and OECD. Positivism is the most common research philosophy in both eGovernment and information policy, but this is rarely explicit; and descriptive, rather than prescriptive, studies predominate.

3.2 Values and principles

Those interviewed so far all stressed the high importance they placed on the provision by government of public sector information and there has been some consensus on the value of having an overarching framework of information policies, of which this element would form a part. Interviewees external to government felt that government itself did not have a clearly understood view on the value of information, for itself, for the economy and for citizens.

3.3 Policy-making and co-ordination

Chadwick reported that in the UK the e-Envoy “experienced significant problems with spreading the gospel of e-government throughout British central and local government” (Chadwick 2006, p.191). The UK government has now put in place the Chief Information Officer Council and the Knowledge Council, both with a cross-government remit, and it remains to be seen how effective they are in co-ordinating information policy, as opposed to IT policy. Rowlands (1997) points out that seamless co-ordination of information policy across government may not be possible as the players have differing, and possibly unresolvable, visions and goals. He highlights the problems of co-ordination when information policy is so complex, and much is latent rather than explicit.

Co-ordination of services for the users is at the heart of eGovernment agenda (Chadwick 2006). Deloitte’s influential six-stage model of eGovernment progress stressed the move towards clustering of common services, leading to full integration and enterprise transformation (Chadwick 2006). But Fountain, in her 2001 case study on the building of the Business Advisor Interagency Network, backed by Vice President Al Gore’s National Performance Review, found that: “the very concept that made the Business Advisor responsive to the varied needs of business owners – its interagency approach – make the project difficult to sustain politically and organisationally. Although the site was designed to be functionally driven, the limitations of interagency cooperation have constrained its ability to be fully responsive to the needs of its users.” (Fountain 2001, p.161)

From the interviews held so far, no clear picture has emerged of how information policy has been, and is being developed. According to some, it is driven by ministers whereas others consider that there has been very little ministerial involvement or interest, however there was a view that buy-in from the highest levels in government was essential to ensure that policy was rolled out and implemented across all departments. There was disagreement about whether current ministers within the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice, the two main departments with an information policy focus, had sufficient leverage.

Those of the early interviewees from outside government were of the opinion that there was still a long way to go before services were truly citizen-centric and much more needed to be done to improve the design of the digital services to make them user-friendly. There was, however, an acknowledgment that the quality and quantity of information available had improved.

3.3 Information literacy and the digital divide

Providing universal access to public information is wasted if citizens do not have the skills to find and use the information effectively. Access and information literacy go hand-in-hand and government policy should address information literacy skills, not just ICT skills. The ‘digital divide’ is not just

between those who have access to ICT and those who do not, but those who have the skills to access and those who do not.

Too often reference is made to the need for ICT or Internet skills without an understanding of the value of *information* skills (for example Newholm *et al* & Livingstone and Helsper 2007). Selwyn (2004) recognised that the digital divide was not as clear cut as those who have access to IT and those who don't, for example access in the home is very different to access in a public space, but even he refers to ICT skills and not information handling skills.

As computers become more intuitive to use, the level of ICT skills needed may be less but the reverse may be true of information skills; the more information you find, the more you need the skills to evaluate and manage it. Chadwick (2006) argues that information skills are more important in the online environment than elsewhere because of the high volume of unmediated data and a recent report by CIBER (2008) highlights the importance of information skills for children with the move to more self-directed learning. The data also needs to be in a form that is comprehensible to the user. As Heeks eloquently puts it: "Data remains data unless citizens have the skills to turn it into information." (2000, p.12)

The UK government is in the process of rolling out a digital inclusion strategy, but results from the early interviews suggest that government still has not yet fully understood the concepts of digital and social inclusion, or information handling skills.

4. Power of Information Review

This research is firmly rooted in the academic sphere, but engaging the policy-makers themselves in the research process, and drawing on considerable experience of developing advice for policy-makers, should ensure that the recommendations are relevant to government. This is helped by the current (2008) UK government's adoption of the *Power of information review* (Mayo and Steinberg 2007), the most significant policy initiative for this research in the last ten years – public information is on the agenda again. The review recognised the value of social networking in the realm of the provision of public information, the importance of which has been highlighted by Castells (2007), and the UK government has accepted its recommendations about how it should work with outside organisations in providing information to citizens (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2007).

The taskforce to carry forward the work on the recommendations was announced by Tom Watson MP, Minister for Transformational Government, on 31 March 2008 (Watson 2008) and is chaired by Richard Allan, Cisco. There have already been guidelines produced for civil servants to encourage them to interact with third parties (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2008b) and considerable work has been done on data mashing within the Department for Transport (Great Britain. Department for Transport 2008).

The *Show us a better way* competition, sponsored by the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Justice and suggesting new information products that would be useful to the public, has resulted in five projects to be implemented and a further five ideas which will be developed further (Great Britain. Cabinet Office 2008c). The taskforce is also pushing forward exemplar projects in information on criminal justice, health and education, as these seem to be the topics of most importance to citizens (Great Britain. Power of Information Taskforce 2008a). The taskforce blog is already proving a valuable source of information and providing a forum for ideas (Great Britain. Power of Information Taskforce 2008b). The Taskforce's own report with recommendations on the way forward was published in March 2009 (Great Britain. Power of Information Taskforce 2009) and the response from the UK government is awaited.

The implementation of the Power of Information Review recommendations and the work of the taskforce will be tracked throughout this research. However it is worth noting that the Review was a policy exercise and not an academic one, and should be considered in that light.

5. Conclusion

It is recognised that this research is at an early stage but the findings to date suggest that there is a gap in research on how eGovernment information policy has been developed and implemented over time, and particularly how it has been evaluated. It is hoped that a continuation of the research will address this gap in relation to how the UK government provides public sector information to its

citizens and in the development of a framework for policy evaluation that will be of value to policy makers and information professionals.

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