

Aspects of Social Justice (e.Government)

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The UK Government recently published "Transformational Government Enabled by Technology" in which it laid out its "strategy to seize the opportunity provided by technology to transform the business of government". Claiming that, "Technology has a major part to play in the solutions to each of three major challenges which globalisation is setting modern governments economic productivity, social justice and public service reform." One of the key drivers for this report was the recognition that, "The capacity and capability of (particularly central) government organisations and their suppliers to deliver technology - enabled business change has been subject to severe criticism by Parliament and the press over the last decade. Public confidence in governments ability to deliver technology projects reached a low point by the late 1990s."

Social justice is the ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations and social benefits. The government publication contains many statements which directly and indirectly relate to social justice. Some are now considered.

"Overall this technology-enabled transformation will help ensure that citizens feel more engaged with the processes of democratic government." - Current evidence does not seem to support this view. The postponement of electronic voting in the UK was because of lack of public confidence that this would deliver benefit.

"There are new information assurance risks: terrorists, organised criminals and hackers threaten information and services, and theft of identity and of personal data is of increasing concern to individuals and businesses." - Government services are particularly vulnerable to this. In 2003 - 04 nearly 9000 staff of the Department for Work and Pensions had their identities stolen. These were subsequently used in an attempt to defraud the tax credits system in autumn 2005 resulting in £2.7m lost to fraudulent claims. The concern is that this type of successful attack is not unusual. Vulnerability and perceived vulnerability will play a big part in citizens accepting increased technological dependency.

"Despite the difficulties of a fast moving and hostile world, underpinning IT systems must be secure and convenient for those intended to use them." - Convenience is a key issue. Currently some of the access procedures that are in place are laborious,

complicated and require high levels of literacy and technological confidence. Once connected services tend to be text-based and navigation is often very complicated and lacks intuitive feel.

"Technologies have emerged into widespread use for instance the mobile phone and other mobile technologies, which government services have yet properly to exploit". This approach places a cost on the recipient as mobile phone use is never free to those receiving calls and text messages. Some might find the cost inhibiting other might not. Should citizens have to incur costs in engaging with government especially when such engagement is compulsory?

"Over the next decade, the principal preferred channels for the delivery of information and transactional services will be the telephone, internet and mobile channels" - The use of telephone answering menu systems to direct callers to call centre operators is one of society's current irritations. The stress and frustration can be huge of having to drill down through many menu levels to discover that you have to wait for long periods to speak to a real person. This can be intolerable for the vulnerable in need of immediate support from a government agency.

"Sometimes the benefit to society of dealing with government online is not clear. Customer Group Directors and public service providers should also promote responsible channel choice by telling people how much use of more efficient channels saves and what that saving could achieve in terms of reinvestment elsewhere in the public services". There is an implication in this approach that technological solutions by their very nature are best. Recent failures of major government systems point to the contrary. For example the NHS system for booking patients onto waiting lists by GPs is suffering widespread non - take - up by GP practices across the country.

"Government will create an holistic approach to identity management, based on a suite of identity management solutions that enable the public and private sectors to manage risk and provide cost - effective services trusted by customers and stakeholders. These will rationalise electronic gateways and citizen and business record numbers. They will converge towards biometric identity cards and the National Identity Register. This approach will also consider the practical and legal issues of making wider use of the national insurance number to index citizen records as a transition path towards an identity card." - There remain huge differences of opinion within society as to the imposition of identity cards regardless of guise or format. (This subject has been covered in previous ETHIcol editions.) Identity validation is important for accessing some government services but it is not ubiquitous. There needs to be clear justification of why and how identification is sought. A relative approach rather than a universal approach would seem to support social justice more comfortably.

There remain many people in society who are socially excluded. These most vulnerable people are likely to have poor literacy, limited communication skills, poor computer

literacy, an aversion to technology, a lack of access to technology. The reactive imposition of information technology in the belief that it will automatically improve the help and support of such people must be challenged. An enlightened approach which identifies, develops and implements technological solutions which are fit for purpose and truly promote social justice must be demanded. Overall "Transformational Government Enabled by Technology" appears to move in the right direction but it remains to be seen how such a strategy will be interpreted and implemented; the current track record does not bode well for the future.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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