

**Social Policy and E-government: How are they connected?**

A paper presented at the *Social Policy Association Conference 2009*, 29 June – 1 July,  
The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

Paul Henman

Social Policy Unit

The University of Queensland

Australia

[p.henman@uq.edu.au](mailto:p.henman@uq.edu.au)

Since the late 1990s, electronic government – that is the use of advanced electronic information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the conduct of government activities – has received considerable attention by politicians who seek to ‘modernise government’ and create more efficient and responsive public services. Academics in the fields of computer science, management and public administration have also rapidly focused attention on this domain. The disciplines of social policy and public policy have largely be absent from e-government research.

This paper demonstrates that e-government is important in understanding the dynamics and effects of social policy. It begins by outlining a framework for understanding and analysing the relationship between e-government and social/public policy. The main focus of the paper reports key findings from a major empirical and theoretical study of the role of e-government in reconfiguring public administration, policy and power (Henman 2009). That study is based on in-depth case studies of six Australian e-government projects in the fields of social security/welfare, taxation and health, which are located within international developments.

This paper argues that e-government has contributed to the mobilization and extension of ‘risk’ discourses in policy framing and formulation, the growth of targeting in social policy, services and administration, the emergence of new forms

of conditionality in social policy, and the proliferation of policy and administrative complexity. The implications for state-citizen relationships, the forms of power and rule exercised by the state, and the nature of citizenship are finally briefly discussed.

### **The relationship between social policy and e-government**

Electronic government, also known as e-government or digital government, involves the use of electronic ICTs for the conduct of all facets of government. Perri 6 helpfully delineates e-government as involving e-democracy, e-service provision, e-management and e-governance (2004: 15-17). For 6, *e-democracy* involves the use of digital networks by which government solicits or receives the views of citizens, businesses and other organisations 'on matters ranging from full-scale legislative change to the tweaking of the management of services and programmes' (2004: 15). *E-service provision* refers to the use of electronic technologies for the delivery of public services. *E-management* designates those activities which use digital technologies to allocate resources within government under the terms of existing government policy, whereas *e-governance* involves 'digital support for policy formulation and the scrutiny and oversight of the achievement of policy goals' (2004: 16).

It is of course, not new that governments have made use of electronic ICTs. Indeed, governments were the creators and first users of electronic computers (Ceruzzi 2003; Goldstine 1972). Moreover, prior to computers, a range of information and communication technologies have been used by the State. Immediately prior to computers were a range of mechanical devices – such as mechanical calculators and accounting machines, card punch machines, typewriters and telephones (Agar 2003; Beniger 1986: 390-425; Dudley 1991, 221-268). Before that a range of more mundane technologies were central for the nature and constitution of government, including paper forms, paper files, staples, paper clips and filing cabinets (Higgs 2004: 28-98). The conduct and practice of (modern) government has always been intimately interwoven with information and communication technologies.

Despite their long and central involvement in government, the role of ICTs in government and more particularly in social and public policy processes has, until recently, been poorly studied. ICTs have been given some attention by academics in the discipline of information technology, public administration and political science (e.g. Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Fountain 2001; Frissen, 1999; Heeks, 1999; 2006; Margetts 1999), but virtually no consideration in public policy and social policy. The major exception is the long-standing concern about privacy and data protection, which has generated considerable debate and policy formation. The relative absence of ICTs from understanding government and public/social policy is largely a result of the view that ICTs are mundane technologies that are simply tools to implement government policy decisions. This also reflects a widely held view that policy making and policy administration are two distinct domains, with ICTs being relegated to the domain of public administration. A second reason for the limited consideration of ICTs in social policy and particularly human services has been the traditionally low tech nature of many human service organizations in which considerable professional discretion is involved and where services are delivered by small-scale, voluntary, non-government organizations.

There are three different ways in which ICTs relate to social policy in particular, and public policy more broadly. First, there are a range of social policies *about* ICTs. Some social policies respond to the social problems that ICTs are perceived to bring, while others seek to utilize ICTs as a specific strategy to address social problems. A long-standing policy concern arising from the use of ICTs – both by government and business – is privacy and data protection. The ‘digital divide’ is another social problem which has said to have arisen as a result of ICTs. The argument is that as digital ICTs – and the internet in particular – have become increasingly essential to the conduct of everyday life (such as banking, education and learning, interacting with government and participating in social networks) those without access to those technologies and/or the ability to use them will become increasingly excluded from mainstream society (Norris, 2001; Servon, 2002). A range of social policies have developed to address this concern, including enhancing education, increasing use of

ICTs in schools, encouraging markets for low-cost ICTs and providing public access to ICTs and training in their use.

A second way in which ICTs relate to social (and public) policy is their directed use in policy processes, from policy analysis, evaluation and development to the implementation and administration of policies. This relationship is characterized by the demands of policy processes to initiate and make use of ICTs. Policy processes determine the use of ICTs. For example, the needs of policy workers to assess the probably financial and social impact of new policies often make use of complex computer models. Similarly, the efficient and effective administration of social and public policy now makes the use of computer databases indispensable. Indeed, in calculating benefit eligibility for social security and taxation benefits, ICTs automate policy. Contemporary public administration, with its emphasis on the collection and assessment of performance indicators and regular reporting from contracted non-government providers of government services, also requires electronic networked ICTs for the administration of social and public policies. ICTs can also be utilized by policy actors as a political tool in policy processes (Kling 1978; Henman 1997; 2002).

Thirdly, ICTs *shape* social policies. It is the way in which ICTs operate and the uses to which they are put to in government that can contribute to new forms of social and public policy. Rather than the use of ICTs being initiated and defined by policy processes, this relationship is characterized by the reverse motion; ICTs initiate and shape the nature of social (and public) policies. For example, the expanding capacities of ICTs to store, generate and circulate digital data provide new ways to administer policy thereby making new policies feasible. Similarly, by modeling the dynamics of complex relationships – such as interactions between tax and social security policy, or between business activity, greenhouse gas abatement policy and the economy – computer models make the dynamics knowable and understandable, enable policy responses to be thought, thereby shaping the shape of policy. The remainder of this paper focuses on this aspect of the contribution of e-government to social and public policy.

To be sure, the development and evolution of social (and public) policy arise from a complex dynamic involving economic and social realities, social imaginaries, institutional structures, political actors and non-human actors. Unfortunately, the contribution of non-human actors is largely ignored or cast as a supporting and secondary player so that their very real and significant contributions go unnoticed.

### **E-government and the reconfiguration of social policy**

With the increasing centrality of computers to the administration of social and public policies, computers come to define what policies are implementable. They can close off some policy options and while opening up more complex options. In particular, it has been long recognized that electronic digital computers embody a quantitative, calculative and formally-defined form of operation (Henman 1995; Roszak 1988; Weizenbaum 1984). This mode of operation has made social and public policies more focused on quantitative elements of social problems and reduced professional discretion in human service delivery as a result of computerizing their administration (Alexander 1990; Garson 1989; Henman 1999). In addition to these long-standing contributions of ICTs to the nature and practice of social and public policy, more recent reconfigurations in policy can be argued to have arisen (partially) as a result of the contribution of ICTs. These include the proliferation of targeted risk government, the new conditionality, and policy and administrative complexity, each of which are now considered.<sup>1</sup> The implications of these developments to the nature of social citizenship are briefly examined in the paper's conclusion.

#### ***Targeted risk government***

Discourses of risk have proliferated over the last two decades in public parlance, social and public policy (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002) and academic analysis (Beck 1999; Lupton 1999). In policy domains the notion of risk has become a frame within which to conceptualise social problems and policy responses.

---

<sup>1</sup> An extended consideration of these arguments are provided in Henman (2009).

Yet risk can be conceptualised in a range of ways, and accordingly does not designate a specific policy approach. The locus of risk can be conceptualised as being located on a continuum from the individual to society. The burden of governing such risk can be similarly conceptualised as lying on the same continuum. For example, the risk of unemployment can be conceptualised as a result of systemic or social risk and governed systemically through collectivised social insurance and macro-economic management. Alternatively, the risk of unemployment can be understood as an individualised problem, the result of psychological dispositions and personal failure which require reformation of the self.

Lying between these extremes is a form of 'profiled' risk government that conceptualises risk as differentiated within a population, with some sub-populations with relatively higher levels of risk. The governance of such differentiated risk is then often targeted towards such 'at risk' groups or sub-populations. An example of this might be the risk of AIDS being seen as largely contained in Western societies to gay men and intravenous drug users. Similarly, the risk of unemployment might be conceptualised as being differentiated with lower educated and minority ethnic groups being at greater risk. With this understanding managing unemployment risk is likely to be differentially governed with greater policy focus on 'at risk' groups compared to other unemployed sub-populations.

In recent years, such differentiated forms of governing risk through the use of risk profiles has greatly increased in social and public policy and also in the administration and delivery of government policies and services. Risk calculations are now used by child protection officers to differentiate and respond to allegations of child abuse and neglect. Employment services are graduated to target those most at risk of long-term unemployment. Social housing is prioritised to those groups most at risk. Compliance and fraud assessments of beneficiaries are targeted to those who fit high risk profiles.

The argument of this paper is that e-government has significantly contributed to the proliferation of differentially governing risk. The affinity of ICTs with quantitative data and their ability to readily calculate and analyse such data has led to a proliferation of statistics on users of government services and the operations of government. Through the analysis of such statistics the differentiated nature of risk across populations has been revealed, thereby constituting a differentiated understanding of society and social dynamics. In developing policy responses to such knowledge, e-government has also been crucial in helping the administration of differentiated policy and service delivery by both enabling the profiling of each client and managing the corresponding differentiated delivery of government policies and services.

In summary, e-government (and the analysis of e-government generated statistics) has constituted, mobilised and advanced a differentiated social imaginary of social risk, that in turn has stimulated and extended targeted policy and service responses to govern differentiated risk, the implementation of which is made possible through e-government.

### ***The new conditionality***

The use of *networked* ICTs has enabled the instigation and growth of what I denote as the 'new conditionality' in social policy. Social policy has always had elements of conditionality. Such conditionality has largely been to designate the purpose of the policy and eligibility criteria devised to designate the target group. For example, receipt of age or retirement pensions are conditional on being of retirement age, and family benefits are conditional on households having dependent children. Similarly, benefits to the poor have been conditional on income (and assets) tests. Some conditionality has also been behavioural. In particular, unemployment benefits have largely been conditional on the recipient actively looking for a job (Walters 2000: Ch 3).

New conditionality in social policy is distinctive in its joining together of two separate policy domains, by making receipt of a benefit or service in one domain conditional on activities or information from another policy domain. In doing so, the new conditionality crosses over and connects two distinct policy logics, rationales and intents. Thus, the most widespread example of new conditionality, workfare, links together the logic and rationale of social protection (or social security) with the logic and rationale of employment services, making receipt of the former conditional of engagement in the latter.

The new conditionality in social policy has proliferated in recent years, particularly in Anglophone countries. Income support and other social security benefits have been made conditional on school attendance, identification of the biological father and receipt of child maintenance/support, absence of child abuse or neglect, and childhood immunization. Government funded health services (and income support) have been made conditional for drug and alcohol dependent persons participating in substance abuse programs. Maternity benefits and food schemes are conditional on receiving mothers meeting with healthcare professionals for advice and support. IVF services has been made conditional on prospective parents passing policy checks. Social housing is conditional on acceptable social behaviour (Dwyer 2009; Henman 2009, Ch 9; Karger and Stoesz 2010: Ch 11). New conditionality is also applied in developing countries under the World Bank's conditional cash transfers program (World Bank 2008).

Political imaginaries, specifically neo-liberalism and neo-paternalism, have provided the political momentum for the new conditionality in social and public policy. Yet, e-government is argued to have also contributed to this policy dynamic. Through the development of increasingly seamless data transmission networks, the data transmissions, that are required to make receipt of benefits or services in one domain conditional on data from another domain, are made possible. Moreover, such networked ICTs can be argued to provide a networked rationality in thinking about policy and its administration. To be sure, not all new conditionality in policy and administration requires electronic data transmission. Some operate on more

mundane processes. Yet national policies involving large client populations require such networked electronic information infrastructure.

### ***Complex government***

These two policy directions – targeted the governance of risk and the new conditionality – to which e-government has been argued to contribute have contributed to an increase in the complexity of policy and administration. The targeted governance of differential risk necessarily involves the delineation of the social body into separate groups according to risk profiles and responding to each in different ways. A uniform approach is differentiated. This clearly increases the complexity of policy and its administration.

The new conditionality in social policy also increases policy and administrative complexity. It firstly makes the policy which is conditional more complex as it requires outlining what the conditions of receipt are, and also what occurs if they are not met. Secondly, the administration of such policies is clearly more complex in linking together the two policy domains for data/information transmission be it electronic or otherwise.

Computer modelling is increasingly used to assist policy makers assess and understand social and economic futures, as well as estimate the implications of proposed policy changes particularly in complex socio-economic and policy environments. By making real these futures, such models have also assisted policy makers to design increased detailed and thus complex policy responses.

Developments in the New Public Management have also added to administrative complexity. In particular the emphasis on purchaser-provider, outsourcing, competitive tendering and partnership working (Christensen, Tom and Laegreid 2002; Pollitt 2003; Minogue et al 1998; Newman 2001) require networked information infrastructure for the transmission of data for administrative, performance and financial reporting , to which e-government is significantly

contributes. Not only does this add complexity to the work of government administrators, but also the users of government benefits and services. For example, unemployed persons are now often required to report to both benefits and employment services agencies in obtaining and maintain their unemployment benefits.

By enabling complex policy and administration, e-government helps to both give rise to it, but also has extended it through the relative ease with which e-government constitutes such practice (or at least the perception that e-government does). Indeed, coupled with the long-standing policy practice of 'muddling through' (Lindblom 1959; 1979), such policy complexity has seemingly begotten further complexity.

### **Conclusion: e-government and the reconfiguration of social citizenship**

This paper has argued that e-government – through both its informational and material capacities – is a key player in a number of social policy and associated administration dynamics. Although it is acknowledged that e-government's contribution is enmeshed and entangled with social, political, legal, institutional and economic realities and processes. The argument here is that the contribution of e-government is significant and worthy of academic recognition. The question that remains is, 'what then does this contribution of e-government to reconfiguring social and public policy and their administration mean to the experience of citizenship?'

There are, of course, many factors involved in the experience of citizenship. To conclude this paper, I focus on the implications of seemingly increasing policy and administrative complexity and targeted risk governance to which e-government has contributed. To be sure, it is not being argued that this is the only direction of citizenship, but that these e-government-induced dynamics create particular implications for citizenship that demand further investigation.

The increasingly conditional nature of some government policies and services has prompted some authors to comment on the emerging conditional nature of social citizenship (Dwyer 2000; 2004; 2009; Clasen and Clegg 2007). Dwyer argues that such policy developments construct 'a new type of social citizenship in which individual responsibility and duty take precedence over rights to welfare' (Dwyer 2009: 209). This conception of social citizenship is consistent with what was referred to earlier as the 'new conditionality' in social policy. However, this conceptualisation of the reconfiguration of social citizenship through the conditionality of social and public policy does not get to the heart of the emerging political arrangement. It is notable that most of the new conditionality in social and public policy relates to policies and programs utilised largely by disadvantaged, mainly poor, populations. In other words, the conditional social citizenship mostly pertains for disadvantaged sub-populations, or parts of the citizenry. Conditional social citizenship is not universal.

Such an observation is also consistent with the growing practice of targeted risk populations, in which governments engage differentially with disparate sub-populations according to risk profiles. In this regard the relationship between the citizen and the state can be argued to be differentiated. Such an observation contrasts to the Marshallian and Keynesian imaginary of social citizenship as universal. But it also contrasts to the neo-liberal imaginary of social citizenship as individualised. Instead of individualising the social and associated individualisation of service delivery, as some authors has suggested (Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Yeatman *et al* 2009), the increasing targeted mode of governmental action segments and fragments the social into sub-populations which are differentially engaged through policy and service delivery. In short, the increasingly conditional nature of social citizenship is overlaid with its increasingly fragmented/differentiated nature.

While these observations reflect the largely formal constitution of social citizenship through formal policy, to appreciate the realities of citizenship it is also necessary to take account of the way social citizenship is experience in everyday life and the

actual conduct of administering government policies and services. Indeed, it is the legacy of Michael Lipsky (1980) and other street-level studies that bring to light the significance of lived experience of policy that demonstrates that social citizenship is also informally defined through the ways policy is practiced. It matters whether government benefits and services are delivered in a courteous and respectful manner or not, and this matters to the nature and experience of social citizenship.

With this in mind, the increasing complexity of policy and administration, identified above, is important in assessing the nature and experience of contemporary and emerging social citizenship. Complexity matters to social citizenship in several ways. Firstly, it increases the administrative and organisational demands on both administrators and citizens alike. This has implications for personal and collective temporal and financial resources. A corollary of this is that it places increasing intellectual demands on both administrators and citizens in order to understand the policy, understand the appropriate mechanisms through which to access the policy and services, and implement it correctly. It is notable that the impact of such intellectual burdens is felt most acutely by marginalised groups who often have limited education, literacy and numeracy difficulties including poor (English) language skills, and limited resources with which to access skilled professionals who can assist them. Furthermore, it is notable that a significant amount of complex policy relates primarily to these disadvantaged groups, in terms of the conditionality of social security benefits and social services.

Complex policy and administration mechanism inevitably increases the risk of administrative errors. Wrong decisions to deny benefits or services effectively undermines people's social citizenship rights, part of what Lipsky (1984) denoted as 'bureaucratic disempowerment'. Furthermore, in the context of policy complexity and wrong decisions are made, citizens are unlikely to know otherwise, accepting the official decision and not exercising their administrative appeal rights. As the comedy show *Little Britain* illustrates, 'the computer says "no"' and that is the end of the matter. Such a situation represents a further *de facto* diminishing of social citizenship.

In summary, it has been argued the use of e-government has helped to give rise to aspects of the reconfiguration of the nature and practice of social policy in concert with wider social, political and economic realities and dynamics. These reconfigurations in policy and their administration also reconfigure the nature and experience of social citizenship. To be sure, it is not being argued that this is the entire story of contemporary social policy trajectories. Rather, it is a statement of some elements in contemporary social and public policy. Furthermore, e-government is also being used in other ways which cut across the dynamics highlighted in this paper. It is hoped that by highlighting such dynamics that social policy academics come to take a stronger interest in the role ICTs and indeed other technologies (eg biotechnologies) take in social and public policy, with a view to critically analysing socio-technical arrangements, and making real their capacity to enhancing and undermine social citizenship.

## References

- 6, Perri (2004) *E-governance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Agar, Jon (2003) *The Government Machine*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Alexander, Cynthia J. (1990) 'Putting the Byte on Canadian Social Welfare Agencies', *Computers and Society*, 20(3), 13-19.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2001) *The individualized society*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, Ulrich (1992) *Risk Society*, London: Sage.
- Beck, Ulrich and Beck-Gernsheim, Elizabeth (2002) *Individualization*, London: Sage.
- Bellamy, Christine & Taylor, John A. (1998) *Governing in the Information Age*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Beniger, James R. (1986) *The control revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ceruzzi, Paul E. (2003) *A history of modern computing*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Christensen, Tom and Laegreid, Per (eds) (2002) *New Public Management*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Clasen, Jochen and Clegg, David (2007) 'Levels and Levers of Conditionality: Measuring change within welfare states', In Jochen Clasen and N. Siegel (ed) *Investigating Welfare State Change* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Culpitt, Ian (1999) *Social Policy and Risk*, London: Sage.
- Dudley, Leonard M. (1991) *The Word and the Sword*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Dwyer, Peter (2000) *Welfare rights and responsibilities*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dwyer, Peter (2004) *Understanding Social Citizenship*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dwyer, Peter (2009) 'The Conditional Welfare State', In Martin Powell (ed) *Modernising the Welfare State*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Fountain, Jane E. (2001) *Building the Virtual State*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute.
- Frissen, Paul H.A. (1999) *Politics, Governance and Technology*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Garson, Barbara (1989) *The Electronic Sweatshop*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Goldstine, Herman H. (1974) *The computer from Pascal to von Neumann*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Heeks, Richard (ed) (1999) *Reinventing government in the information age*, London: Routledge.
- Heeks, Richard (2006) *Implementing and Managing eGovernment*, London: Sage.
- Henman, Paul (1995) 'The role of computers in texturing the micro-social environment', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 31(1), 49-63.
- Henman, Paul (1997) 'Computer Technology - a political player in social policy processes', *Journal of Social Policy*, 26(3): 323-340.
- Henman, Paul (1999) 'The bane and benefits of computers in Australia's Department of Social Security', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 19(1/2), 101-129.
- Henman, Paul (2002) 'Computer Modeling and the Politics of Greenhouse Gas Policy in Australia', *Social Science Computer Review*, 20(2): 161-173.
- Henman, Paul (2009) *Governing Electronically*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Higgs, Edward (2004) *The Information State in England*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Karger, Howard J. and Stoesz, David (2010) *American Social Welfare Policy*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Boston: Pearson.
- Kemshall, Hazel (2002) *Risk, social policy and welfare*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Kling, Rob (1978) 'Automated Welfare Client-Tracking and Service Integration: The Political Economy of Computing', *Communications of the ACM*, 21(6): 484-493.
- Lindblom, Charles E. (1959) 'The Science of "Muddling Through"', *Public Administration Review*, 19, 79-88.
- Lindblom, Charles E. (1979) 'Still Muddling, Not Yet Through', *Public Administration Review*, 39, 517-527.
- Lipsky, Michael (1980) *Street-level Bureaucracy*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lipsky, Michael (1984) 'Bureaucratic Disentitlement in Social Welfare Programs', *Social Service Review*, 58, 3-27.
- Lupton, Deborah (1999) *Risk*, London: Routledge.
- Margetts, Helen (1999) *Information Technology in Government*, London: Routledge.
- Minogue, Martin, Polidano, Charles and Hulme, David (eds) (1998) *Beyond the New Public Management*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Newman, Janet (2001) *Modernising Governance*, London: Sage.
- Norris, Pippa (2001) *Digital Divide?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pollitt, Christopher (2003) *The Essential Public Manager*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Roszak, Theodore (1988) *The Cult of Information*, London: Paladin.
- Servon, L.J. (2002) *Bridging the Digital Divide*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Weizenbaum, Joseph (1984) *Computer Power and Human Reason*, London: Penguin.
- World Bank (2008) 'Conditional Cash Transfers', [go.worldbank.org/BWUC1CMXM0](http://go.worldbank.org/BWUC1CMXM0).