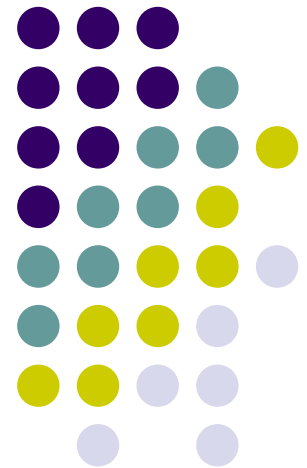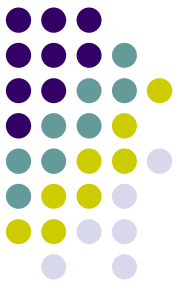# e-government: Which Interpretive Key?

3rd IT STAR Workshop on National Information Society Experiences, NISE 08

8 November 2008, Godollo, Budapest (Hungary)
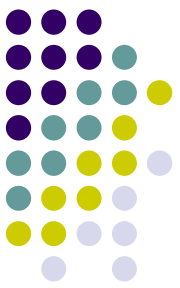
Maddalena Sorrentino
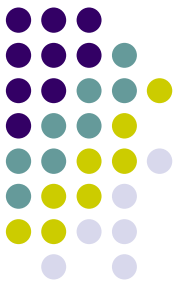University of Milan, Italy
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Outline

- Introduction: the current discourse
- E-government as a new source of constraints
- An alternative perspective
- Implications
- In brief

Introduction: the current discourse

- Up to now the prevailing discourse on e-governement centres on the technical aspects, but this approach risks capturing only a small part of the whole picture
- ICTs are considered a neutral and highly versatile tool, capable of transforming work practices and of promoting new relations with citizens
- ICTs 'are not a problem'
- But how true are these basic assumptions? Why e-government implementation is so tricky? Are the argument in favour of e-government supported by an adequate conceptual framework?
- We need to investigate e-government in a less deterministic and simplified way
- The core message is: **one perspective alone is not enough to analyse and interpret e-government**
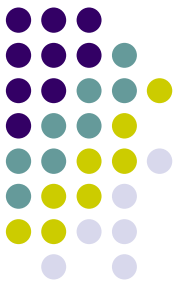
Three dominant perspectives

- Italy's public sector has always used approaches that are essentially based on an algorithm whereby: "applying the same procedures means obtaining the same results".

- That assumption is considered the logical foundation for safeguarding values such as *impartiality and equity*, which – obviously – are not even in discussion.
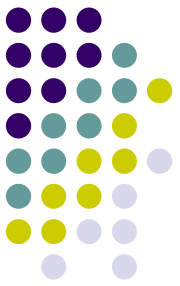
Three perspectives predominate in PA discourse:

- The *legal perspective*, the most consolidated.

- The *economic/managerial perspective* (e.g. New Public Management).

- The *technocratic perspective* directly correlated to the intensive use of ICT.

A more realistic scenario

- The Italian public sector is *apparently* highly structured.

- In reality, though, the PAs tackle the rigidity of the rules by using practices supported by 'elastic' interpretations of the constraints.

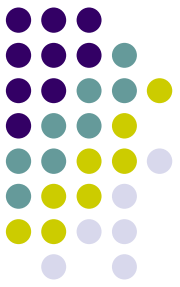- Further, the PAs are often the first to buck the legal requirements.

Paradoxes

- The PA are often the first not to comply with the legal provisions, e.g., by delaying implementation
- ICT systems (e.g. Computerized Correspondence Register) are used at the lowest level of their potential
- There is a gap between the supply of the e-services and the demand, e.g.:
  - Quick-strike projects are helpful in demonstrating technical feasibility, but the services are often fairly insignificant and, therefore, are little used by the takers
  - The current average number of online services is highest in smaller municipalities (<1000 inhabitants), that is, where the need to prevent long counter queues is less pressing
- Outsourcing is very much used in the municipal IS/IT depts. but not when it comes to (as we might expect) simple operational activities such as data entry or ICT-related administrative activities. Surprisingly, the external suppliers handle the IS management, planning and upgrade, and system security
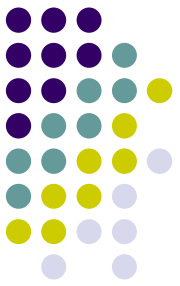
Not surprisingly….

- E-government is often seen by the agencies themselves as:
  - just another source of constraints;
  - a removal of discretionary power;
  - a toll to pay to obscure directives issued from above;
  - a tool that penalizes efficacy instead of promoting it.
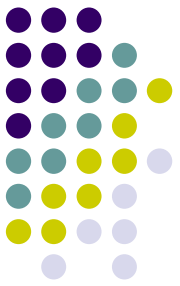
Alternative perspectives

- *Organization science* presides over the process logic that puts in order the technical goals and actions in organizational settings.

- *Policy inquiry* offers useful ideas for understanding 'what happens': decision-making in the public sector is the result of reciprocal adjustment between "partisan" actors.

- Therefore, every public project (e.g. e-government) can be seen as an uninterrupted process that reveals an unbroken chain of decisions taken at various levels. Rationality is stimulated by the interaction.

- As a result, we cannot take the effects (whether positive or negative) of even the best-laid plans as a given.

Implications

- Considering e-government initiatives as processes means maintaining that their identity is manifested only when the statements of principle (e.g., a national plan, a provision, the code of digital administration) translate into concrete actions.
- Adhering to this *processual* view means:
  - surpassing the linear logic inspiring the dominant rational view;
  - believing that the outlines of the problem cannot be established once and for all at the start of the project or when the provisions are formalized, but, vice versa, means admitting that change is ongoing (i.e. implementation = development).
- Therefore, if we really want to understand whether a provision has been successful (not only to prevent making the same mistakes twice or to pursue the presumed responsible parties), we must necessarily expand our horizons also to what has happened AFTER the launch of the new ICT solution.
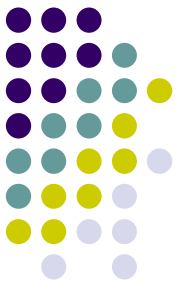
Evaluation: but of what?

The true crux of the matter (still unresolved today) is to distinguish between:

- The observable results, e.g., waiting times, availability, accessibility of e-services (*output*)

- The short- or medium-term effects that emerge when the output reaches the target market – citizens, businesses, other PA (e.g., number of registered users, adoption rates, level of citizen satisfaction, accessibility of services, response time, trustworthiness) (*outcomes*)

- The *impacts* or effects compared with the problem that the plan seeks to address (e.g. social inclusion, democratic participation, equity). Which factors indicate the success of an initiative? How have the conditions of the service takers changed?

In brief

- A multidisciplinary view of the PAs helps us to place the e-government discourse into a more realistic context.
- In e-government deployment, the focus should be extended to the *processes* inherent the ICT solution, i.e.:
    - design and planning;
    - adoption; and
    - use of technical artifacts.
- Organization studies help us wipe the plate clean of the assumption that e-government is neutral.
- In addition, organization studies and policy studies enable us to address a key theme, that of <u>e-government evaluation</u>, which has been inexplicably neglected in Italy up to now.
- The pitfalls of e-government can be addressed.