

# Plus ça change: defensive translations and resistance to IT-enabled change in local government

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## Abstract

*Although the potential of IT to bring about radical organisational change has been much heralded, many such re-engineering efforts are overtly or covertly resisted and result in failure. Here we adopt Lewin's well-known change framework supplemented by concepts from Actor Network Theory in order to explore the dynamics of resistance to change. The implementation of "electronic government" in a local government organisation is used as a vehicle to explore these ideas. Interviews with senior managers indicated that little "unfreezing" had occurred; in ANT terms, that the innovation has been deflected and marginalized at the alignment stage. These results suggest that the realisation of e-government, and the broader modernisation agenda in which it is embedded, is likely to be met serious resistance and dilution. The findings prompt further theorising on the factors that favour successful change. A model is tentatively developed arguing that the juxtaposition of three predisposing factors is critical: the presence of a genuine organisational crisis, the degree of recognition of this crisis and the perceived readiness of the organisation to carry through the required change effort. Methodological implications for organisational innovation are briefly explored*

## Keywords

IT-enabled change, resistance, electronic government, Actor Network Theory, organisational innovation, Lewin

# 1. The rhetoric and reality of IT-Enabled change

This paper is about IT-enabled change; more specifically, it addresses the all too common failure of such change efforts to achieve the expected performance gains despite the much-touted potential of IT to bring about organisational transformation (Cooper, 2000; Westrup, 1996). This potential is most clearly articulated in the discourse of business process reengineering (BPR) which explicitly champions the potential of IT to effect revolutionary change in organisational structures and processes. Davenport (1993) speaks of “process innovation” in order to highlight the radical, transformational potency of IT. Despite this rhetoric, much IT-enabled change results in failure (Wastell, 1997; Cooper, 2000; Chang and Powell, 1998). In this paper, we examine a relatively novel domain where IT has been heralded as the enabler of radical change, namely electronic government. E-government refers to IT-enabled change in governmental institutions at all levels from national to regional to local. Huge investments are being made across the globe on such initiatives, with the UK regarded as being in the vanguard (Aichholzer and Schmutzer, 2000). The Labour government in its first term of office (1997-2001) put considerable emphasis on the need to modernise local and national government, with IT seen as the key to delivering this policy (Silcock, 2001; Hudson, 2002). Given the radical nature of e-government, how will governmental institutions, considered in the popular imagination to be cumbersome self-serving bureaucracies, respond to the formidable challenges (technical, organisational, cultural) posed by such a reforming agenda? Given decades of unhappy experience with similar IT-based innovations, considerable resistance might well be expected!

In this paper, we focus on e-government implementation at the local level. An interview-based case study is reported in one leading local authority (LA), concentrating on the preparedness of the organisation for e-government as revealed through the attitudes and perceptions of the senior management team. We will use the case study as a test-bed to develop and evaluate theoretical insights into IT-enabled change and resistance. In order to understand the dynamics of resistance we will bring together ideas from two hitherto unconnected sources. Regarding the overall change process, we will adopt a broadly Lewinian view (Lewin, 1947; Dent, 1999) which sees change as a three phase movement, proceeding from an initial phase of “unfreezing” in which the old order is “let go”, followed by a transitional phase leading to the “refreezing” of the new “steady state”. We contend that failed change efforts often reflect a failure to “unfreeze”, to abandon the old institutional order. Extant structures and processes provide organisational members with a sense of identity and security (Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Hirschhorn, 1988; Wastell, 1999). Such psychological fortifications will not readily be given up. Hence the paradox that projects explicitly aimed at change often result in a perpetuation or indeed a strengthening of the *status quo* (Molinsky, 1999).

To Lewin’s generic model of change we will add ideas from Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1987; MacMaster et al., 1997). ANT provides a rich account of the social dynamics of innovation, explaining how new technologies, methods and ideas are either adopted or fail to take root. The concept of *translation* is key to this. ANT discounts the conventional, passive view of innovation, instead seeing it as an active reciprocating process in which the old and the new mutually influence each other. Innovations do not pass un-mutated through this process; they are inevitably changed (i.e. translated) as they encounter the existing socio-technical order. There are three primary steps (“moments”) in the translation process, referred to as the hierarchy of modalisation (Lowe, 2000). *Alignment* is the first. This refers to the initial drawing in of organisational “actants” (human and non-human) through problematisation (i.e. establishing that some problem exists and redefining the

world accordingly, with the innovation as the key to the solution) and interressement, i.e. attempting to impose on others the new roles and identities implicit in the redefinition. If “successful”, interressement leads to the progressive *enrolment* of these actants in a stronger and stronger network of alliances supporting and promulgating the innovation. Finally there is *congealment*, whereby the innovation consolidates itself as an accepted fact of life, a “black box”, as part of the transformed order.

There is a clear congruence between the three moments of ANT and Lewin’s model, with alignment corresponding to the initial unfreezing of the *status quo*, the process of enrolment reflecting Lewin’s transitional phase, and finally the obvious parallel between the concepts of congealment and re-freezing. Resistance, regarded as the failure to unfreeze, clearly reflects miscarriage at the first moment, a failure to problematise the current reality in order to pave the way for the innovation. Instead, the existing order remains firmly entrenched, with the attempt to re-align organisational interests around the claims of the innovation rendered ineffective. The innovation may be rejected outright. More subtly, it may be transformed and reinterpreted so as to align with the extant order, hence failing to engender any internal change. We will refer to such a pattern of resistance as a *defensive translation*. By drawing attention to the social processes involved in innovation, in particular to the rhetorical devices involved at the alignment stage, ANT provides a rich set of complementary notions which help understand the nature of change and resistance, filling out the details lacking in Lewin’s rather high-level model.

In summary, the aims of the research are: to carry out a critical evaluation of e-government implementation in one concrete field setting, and to draw some general conclusions from this regarding national progress towards the realisation of electronic government; to apply ideas from Lewin and ANT, especially the notion of defensive translations, in order to understand the dynamics of resistance, considered as a failure to “unfreeze”; to use the case to develop a preliminary model for analysing the viability and likely outcome of organisational change efforts, and to explore ideas regarding support for organisational innovation.

## 2. Britain’s e-government agenda

The birth of e-government in the UK as a powerful, coherent force may be traced back to central government’s 1999 white paper, *Modernising Government* which challenged all public sector organisations (including local government) to achieve “citizen-centred services”, by integrating policies and programs, “joining-up” delivery, harnessing the power of IT, and getting the best out of staff. Three key aims were espoused: 1) to ensure that policy-making be more “joined up” and strategic; 2) to ensure that public service users, not providers, be the focus by matching services more closely to people’s lives; 3) to deliver efficient, high quality, responsive services. IT was seen as critical to achieving these aims. The White Paper committed the government to the “use of new technology to meet the needs of citizens and business and not trail behind technological development”.

This ambitious agenda is reflected in the target to “electronically enable” 100% of relevant services by 2005. A national performance indicator (BVPI 157) has been created to monitor the progress of institutions towards this target, with the indicator measuring the proportion of transactions between citizens and LAs involving some form of computer-based mediation. Various national initiatives have lent force to the e-government programme. A so-called “Pathfinder” initiative was launched in

2001, whereby £25 million of new funding was set aside for LAs able to demonstrate a leading position in relation to some aspect of e-government. 140 authorities bid for funding and 25 Pathfinders were appointed in April 2001. Another key initiative was the injunction on all LAs to produce IEG statements (Implementing Electronic Government) by July 2001. The creation of a dedicated government office, (the “Office of the E-envoy”) and initiatives such as “UK on-line” (a partnership between government and industry aimed at enabling wider Internet access) have also propelled the e-government vision.

How well are local authorities marching towards the 2005 target? Using data from the Society of IT Managers in local government, the authors estimated at the end of 2001 that only 8% of authorities had achieved the 2002 target of 50% coverage. In a recent report, the Audit Commission (2002) found that over 20% of LAs doubted their ability to reach the 2005 targets. The Report comments that “Implementing e-government appears to be at a very early stage, with more than 50% of the work to deliver e-strategies starting in the past 12 months”. Sixty percent of chief executives “felt that there were more important priorities and that they would need to make tough choices between the e-agenda and providing core services”. Despite the patchy nature of the evidence, there appears to be good reason for anxiety regarding the prospects of the “e-revolution” in relation to local government. The present work investigates the perceptions and attitudes of senior managers towards e-government in a local authority seemingly at the forefront of the revolution. Their willingness to adopt the new discourse and readiness to carry its imperatives into genuine action were key issues to be investigated. To what extent had the old order been unfrozen with e-government embraced as a stimulus for radical change, or had it merely been translated and absorbed into the *status quo*?

### 3. Method

The local authority involved in this research will be known as Erewhon City Council (ECC). In 2001, ECC gained Pathfinder status in recognition of its e-government success. The study was commissioned by the IT manager who was concerned that, despite the Pathfinder success, there was a lack of user “buy-in” and commitment. Nine internal e-government projects were underway at the time of the study. Although most were apparently progressing satisfactorily, there was slippage on some. Not all were being actively led by users and several had not moved beyond design into implementation. The practical remit of our work was to explore “e-government awareness” at a senior level, to assess “preparedness” for implementation and to propose interventions that would facilitate progress.

The study was an interview-based one, heeding the principles of interpretive research as propounded by Klein and Meyers (1998). All heads of service (directors) were interviewed (Housing, Social Services, Environment, Education, Planning, Development Services etc.) as well as the Chief Executive. Prior to the study, a focus group session was held to generate a list of indicative questions to be put to the directors. These were used to compile a semi-structured interview schedule, which was circulated in advance to the interviewees. The study was performed during July 2001. A total of 10 interviews were carried out, all face-to-face and typically taking around one hour. Detailed notes were taken, including direct quotations where these were felt to be relevant and illuminating.

The questions revolved around three broad areas: **The meaning of e-government:** What does e-government mean to you? Can you think of specific examples of e-government projects relevant to your directorate? What level of awareness exists amongst your staff with respect to e-government? **Planning and management:** What are the main features of your plans for service improvement and what role does IT play in this? Does your directorate have specific e-government plans? Do you have a senior person leading your e-government activity? What personal involvement will you have? **Capacity and implementation:** Do you feel you have sufficient internal capacity to address the e-government agenda? What shortcomings do you face and how might these be met? What are the main obstacles to e-government? How many of your transactions will be e-enabled by 2002/2005?

## 4. Results

### The Meaning of e-Government

A variety of connotations of e-government emerged from the interviews: new channels of service access; cost saving; quicker, streamlined services; more effective communications, internally and externally; the flexibility and responsiveness of service provision. These views convey an essentially service oriented view, almost completely ignoring other potential aspects of e-government, such as democracy or policy-making. When prompted, the illustrations given were almost exclusively centred around service improvement within individual departments. Examples included: on-line job applications; housing repairs and estate agency functions to be put on the Web. Very few applications involving cross departmental collaboration were cited with only one specific example mentioned of external partnering. The following quote typifies the preoccupation with service delivery:

“For me e-government means rapid access to joined up services. I’m very committed to this... People expect a 24 hour a day service. It’s all about the standard of service... we need to be as good as the private sector providers. We need to be in a position where receptionists can directly commission work even though resources are in the directorates”.

Several directors questioned whether e-government was fundamentally new, identifying the long history of IT use in their departments. One commented: “E-government is nothing new... we do it anyway”

### Planning and management

Only two of the directorates had specific e-government plans or were in the process of creating these plans. The others reported different ways of planning for e-government, including progressing it through a series of different initiatives or through the normal business planning process. Some saw e-government as being a corporate concern, largely addressed in current plans to set up a call-centre. Although all directors acknowledged that e-government was a priority, with the overwhelming majority indicating that they expected to play a personal role, there was general lack of clarity as to what this would entail beyond being “facilitative”. The gap between espoused commitment and actual engagement is starkly shown in the following quote:

“E-government is about real communication, internally and externally, regarding what the Council is really about... I don't know though how many of my staff use email... perhaps this is a weakness of mine that I don't know...”

Most departments had appointed a given individual as an e-government champion; “e-envoy” was the term used, adopting the rather egregious terminology of government policy discourse. However, this individual was seldom at a senior level and in some cases there was no explicit e-government champion. Most directors reported that their Senior Management Team (SMT) had a role in reviewing and leading e-government activity, but this was generally implicit rather than explicit. Different levels of staff awareness were reported. Although it was felt that staff increasingly thought about the general relevance of IT, the idea of e-government was not felt to be widely appreciated: “People think about IT in it's broadest sense. We have the technology, how can we use it. But they're not really thinking e-government”

## Capacity and Implementation

Five directors identified resource issues as presenting a key obstacle to e-government. They described difficulty with capital investment and pressures from alternative priorities and needs. Other obstacles included: change resistance, lack of awareness/appreciation, legacy systems, the difficulty of delivering IT solutions on time and to budget. Many problems were put down to poor planning and lack of preparedness, and all directors reported that there were issues with capacity. Several admitted that they did not have ready access to information about what transactions were already supported or would be in the future. Despite these prevalent concerns, five directors were bullish that the 2005 e-government targets would be met. One commented: “There's no alternative... we just have to do it. By 2002, we'll have done a lot... by 2005 everything”

## 5. Discussion

The disquiet voiced above regarding the readiness of local authorities in the UK to embrace fully the e-government agenda is substantiated by the findings of this case study. Local government generically has three conventional functions (Pratchett, 1999): to provide the mechanisms of local democracy, to be the focus for public policy-making, and as the provider a range of services. E-government has the potential to enhance all three functions: local democracy (e.g. electronic voting), policy-making (e.g. assessing local needs) and service delivery (e.g. 24/7 service access). Yet the dominant impression from the interviews is of a preoccupation with internal service improvement, rather than integration with other directorates (or external partners) or other potential aspects of the e-government agenda (policy-making, e-democracy). There is little sense that e-government is seen as anything new or radical; it has seemingly, for the moment at least, been translated into old and familiar issues, namely the ongoing need for professional providers, operating largely within their own prerogative and perception of the world, to review and enhance service delivery. This sense of “psychological distancing” comes over in other ways: the dearth of departmental e-government planning, the view that e-government was largely a corporate issue, the lack of real personal engagement, the plaintive comments regarding resources. The unrealistic optimism that targets can be realised without clear plans, departmental engagement and adequate resources suggests a comforting fantasy based on denial rather than genuine conviction. In short, the reforming nature of e-government seems to have been neutralised and absorbed by the *status quo*. There is little evidence of unfreezing and genuine mobilisation for change.

Two primary defensive manoeuvres appear to be the key to this. First let us reflect on the sources of this apparent resistance. Long (1999) uses the phrase *discourse of dependency* to characterise the traditional culture of public sector organisations. Services are seen as the prerogative of a professional elite who “know best” what the community needs and take largely unilateral control over planning and delivery. Long argues this discourse to have been under increasing recent threat from the *discourse of consumerism*, whose main concepts are the sovereignty of the customer and the need to re-frame business practices on the principles of the market economy. The imperative to modernise is integral to this new rhetoric; the “old” is necessarily seen as bad with the implication that any “resistance” or attempt to uphold the traditional is retrograde. By emphasising the need to embrace externalities and to re-organise around the needs of the customer rather than the professional discipline, the discourse of consumerism is profoundly threatening to the traditional discourse of dependency (Long, 1999). E-government poses similar threats as it embodies much of the discourse of consumerism; it is, if anything, more menacing in its explicit championing of joined-up service planning and delivery, notions which directly threaten the prevailing professional empires.

Faced with such a minatory innovation, a defensive ploy (especially if the threat cannot wholly be ignored) is to find ways of translating it into something less threatening to the *status quo*. Two such defensive translations stand out in our analysis. As noted above, a comprehensive definition of e-government would extend over all three areas of local government activity: local democracy, public policy-making and local service provision. The latter appears to dominate the agenda in ECC. The vast majority of comments and observations related to the use of IT to improve services, not to augment other domains of local government prerogative. Moreover, such reengineering efforts were directed at service improvement within individual departments, rather than across functions. The translation of e-government into intra-departmental initiatives is thus the first device whereby its radical edge is blunted; it is mobilised to support and perpetuate, not to supplant, the *status quo*.

BVPI157 itself provides another defensive translation. In essence, this indicator operationalises e-government as the need to provide e-enablement of simple customer transactions, either directly through the internet or by providing front-line staff with IT support. The translation of e-government into an issue of customer access is a highly effective defensive manoeuvre, deflecting and defusing the call for radical change. A key conceptual distinction is critical to this, namely between the front office (the customer interface) and the back office (where the real professional work is done). By splitting the two and identifying e-government with the former, the *status quo* protects itself from change. On the one hand, e-government becomes a “separate entity”, no longer the responsibility of the service departments. It can be handed over to other organisational units (such as IT) and addressed by the creation of new access methods, such as web-sites or corporate call centres (as has happened in ECC). Secondly, critical evaluation of core back-office functions is adroitly side-stepped. This translation suits both the IT and the service departments. Clearly, IT has a key role in the modernisation agenda but as a support function it is in a weak position, unable to operate as a change-agent without the full co-operation of the service providers. The translation of e-government into BVPI157 thus provides a welcome relief, provides IT with a tractable role (e.g. of providing web-based interfaces to existing systems) minimising the problematic need to engage with departments at a deep level. The service providers also have a lot to gain from this defence, as they can escape the invasive scrutiny that fundamental re-engineering might entail. Hence the translation of e-government into BVPI157 is supported by a collusive alliance of both IT and the service departments. Hirschhorn (1988) refers to this form of defence as a “covert coalition”.

Through these two defensive translations, the prevailing political interests within ECC have successfully aligned e-government with the existing political order. In Lewinian terminology, unfreezing has not occurred. The innovation has failed to coalesce a network of powerful interests around itself. Indeed it has failed at the first hurdle; there is scant evidence of problematisation, the sense that the organisation faces a serious difficulty to which e-government offers a natural solution. Rather, e-government is seen as a marginal activity, an extraneous nuisance that can be largely dealt with by the IT department and which requires little serious commitment to change.

Taken together, the present findings confirm the misgivings expressed above, echoed in recent research by Hudson (2002), regarding the immediate prospects for e-government, especially given ECC's position as a "leading edge" authority. It is of particular concern that two key areas of local government activity are being addressed peripherally at best. Is it not the areas of democracy and policy-making which represent the most natural, legitimate future role for local government? It is hard to see any other body challenging for a role in mediating representative democracy, outside handling the simple mechanics of voting; replacing elected councillors by focus groups is imaginable but is not yet being seriously mooted! If democracy is the expression of preferences, policy-making is about making choices and striking equitable compromises between what is wanted on the one side and the resources that are available on the other. IT has a vital role to play in enhancing this process by gathering information regarding needs and aspirations from the local community on the one hand, and developing appropriate short-term and strategic responses within the increasingly fragmented environment of the public sector on the other. IT has the potential to provide the required infrastructure to understand the local socio-economic context and to coordinate appropriate local responses involving multiple agencies (Pratchett, 1999). The MADE project mentioned below provides a successful exemplar.

## **6. Coda: theoretical reflections on change and innovation**

In conclusion, we have argued that unfreezing of the *status quo* is critical if genuine organisation change is to be effected. It is clear that such unfreezing has not occurred in ECC, and we have illustrated how resistance has manifested itself through the deployment of two key defensive translations. The paper makes a theoretical contribution by combining ideas from Lewin and ANT to provide new insights into why and how change is resisted, as well as generating substantive findings regarding the barriers that threaten the implementation of e-government. This final section will explore further ideas relating to change and innovation prompted by the study. Seeing such a radical agenda subverted and neutered in ECC naturally leads to further theorising about the circumstances in which unfreezing will occur, and whether there are interventions that could be used to promote this process. Our current work focuses on such issues.

The case clearly demonstrates the importance of problematisation to the change process. Only if a problem is perceived will there be motivation to change. We are exploring this in greater depth through the notion of "organisational crisis" (Guth, 1995; Edwards, 2001) defined as "a situation that threatens the high priority goals of the organisation and surprises organisational decision-makers by its occurrence" (Edwards, 2001). Such crises can arise from several possible sources, both internal and external. These may be structural, financial (e.g. losses), technological (e.g. IT failures), legislative (e.g. the e-governmental imperative) and competitive (e.g. new market entrants, market pressures). The degree to which the crisis is recognised by key stakeholders, and the innovation

seen as the key to its resolution, is critical. Where recognition is pervasive, the motivation to change will be strong and the prospects auspicious for “unfreezing”. Organisational actants will be readily enrolled and momentum for change will be galvanised. Where the crisis is only recognised by a few stakeholders, there will be a need for these agents to convince and educate other stakeholders. This is a weaker position but there is some chance of “unfreezing” if sufficient peers can be persuaded to “buy into” the idea of a crisis, and convinced that the new systems and processes are the way forward. To these ideas, we would add a further factor, perceived readiness for change (Clark et al, 1997). The concept embraces staff perceptions of such factors as: trust, participative management style, flexible policies, the presence of appropriate logistics and systems support (Eby, 2000). Where perceived readiness is high, the prognosis for change is good; where it is low, resistance is the more probable outcome. Organisational change thus depends on the conjunction of three key factors: the existence of a perceived threat to the organisation, the degree to which the threat is internally acknowledged, and the degree of perceived self-efficacy to implement the change.

Organisational structures to facilitate change reflect another line of enquiry in our current work. Christensen’s (1997) ideas regarding innovation, albeit developed in a free-market context, seem a fruitful vein. Christensen explains the value of establishing distinct entities to facilitate change, arguing that if an innovation requires the creation of radically new processes, then these should be developed by a “heavyweight team” operating autonomously outside existing organisational structures; otherwise there is no guarantee that resources will be provided when an internal group faces a dilemma over priorities. Wastell and Kawalek (2002) use the successful example of the MADE project to exemplify the validity of Christensen’s ideas. Initiated with the aim of establishing a new IS infrastructure to support multi-agency collaboration in the County of Lancashire, MADE was set up as a new entity outside the extant local government structure. It functioned as “an autonomous heavyweight”, wholeheartedly committed to partnership working as a core value. MADE prospered because its very *raison d’être* was dependent on its success in establishing new inter-organisational processes. There was no alternative, no excuse, nowhere to hide!

Applying these embryonic ideas to ECC, we have an external stimulus for change, namely the legislative injunctions to modernise local government. These are accompanied by weak financial incentives and rather distant sanctions (the 2005 target). The sense of genuine crisis is limited to a small group of stakeholders (primarily the IT department) in a low-prestige area of the organisation. Efforts to mobilise other more important decision-makers have been largely ineffective and there is a general impression of low readiness for change. No new structures have been created; responsibility for e-government is being spearheaded by relatively junior individuals operating within existing structures. As a result little unfreezing or innovation has occurred, reflected in the general sense of lip service. Things will undoubtedly change should external imperatives to improve services and to limit public expenditure become more forceful, underpinned by effective sanctions and accountability mechanisms. To drive forward the change agenda once recognised as a business priority, a new organisational entity, powerful and autonomous, could be a key mechanism. But for now the change has been assimilated and has, if anything, reinforced the *status quo*. The departmental empires in ECC are as strong as ever. It is fitting to end as we began with the words of Alphonse Karr’s much quoted maxim: Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose.

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