

ASSESSING UK E-GOVERNMENT WEBSITES: CLASSIFICATION AND BENCHMARKING

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Abstract

Classification permeates us: our being and our world. This paper seeks to extend the information systems literature on classification by suggesting classification as a quest, involving man, in a process comprised of both finding and producing truth. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's etymological enquiry, classification is reinterpreted as a dynamic movement towards order. The essence of technology is an ordering based on such dynamic classification. By exploring two exemplary UK governmental website benchmarking projects, our analysis identifies the means involved in producing the classifications inherent to these benchmarking projects. It further highlights the regulatory implications of dynamic classification within the information systems field.

Keywords: Benchmarking; Zu-Ordnung; E-government; Classification

1 INTRODUCTION

“Crude classifications and false generalizations are the curse of organised life.” George Bernard Shaw

Since Aristotle drew up his classification of nature based on dichotomy, man has been involved in a desire to reach an understanding of perceived systems that order life. In the information systems literature, classification systems have, until recently, received scant attention and have relied on the notion of classification as sorting into a fixed structure. Proceeding by etymological enquiry, this paper attempts to broaden this understanding by adding the level of dynamism. Instead of a static compartmentalisation, classification turns into a process or movement towards order, which we coin ‘Zu-Ordnung’. According to Heidegger, the essence of technology is an ordering. Zu-Ordnung, embodying this ordering, is thus seen as central to the essence of technology. Tracing the mechanism of Zu-Ordnung illuminates man’s role in, and relationship to, the essence of technology.

In a second step this paper uses benchmarking as a practical application of classification as Zu-Ordnung. An examination of two UK government website benchmarking strategies reveals the Government’s dependence on the private sector in its creation of benchmarking criteria. The solidification of the private sector benchmarking methodology within the public sphere further leads to a transformation of the citizen to a customer. Thus, the classification implicit in the benchmarking actively creates, rather than describes, a new discourse between the Government and its public. The structure of these exemplary classifications identifies how Zu-Ordnung operates on a prescriptive level; it forms its ordering and regulates the discourse of further classifications. Whether curse or blessing, classifications are not secondary elements of organised life, but rather the primary motor to organise and reorganise life itself.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section reviews various notions of classification before focussing on a particular, phenomenologically based account of classification as ordering. The paper then discusses the benchmarking of government websites and relates the practical issue of benchmarking with broader questions of the role of e-government and the classificatory role of benchmarks.

2 CLASSIFICATION

By way of addressing our problematic, we must first analyse what we mean when we say classification. Bowker and Star’s (1999) definition of classification has come to be well referenced in the literature (Andersen 2001, D’Ambrosio 2001, Sørensen and Lundh-Snis 2001) and acts as a starting point for our enquiry. Here classification is “a spatial, temporal or spatiotemporal segmentation of the world” which ideally exhibits three defining characteristics. These characteristics are the a) uniqueness, b) exclusivity and c) completeness of the classification criteria.

Once a classification has been created, one has to distinguish the level to which it is standardized. Classifications may be either formal or informal (Bowker and Star 1999). Informal classifications are the subjective, individual and dynamic means we use to operate in the world. In being dynamic, they are visible, that is to say available and open to change. Formalised classifications, conversely, aim to “provide a means of access to information across time and space” (Bowker and Star 1999) which is simply a means of decontextualising a classification. Formal classifications may show degrees of institutionalization or standardisation where they disappear into the background, turning into an invisible frame (Bowker and Star 1999).

This paper seeks to add a further dimension to our understanding of classification to that provided by Bowker and Star’s definition. It is to think of this process as an act of classification, stressing the

dynamism implied in classification. The etymology of ‘classification’ may serve to illuminate this second dimension of the term. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, classification belongs to modern terminology, dating to the 1790’s French word ‘classifier’, which, literally, describes the placing into classes. Class originates from the Latin ‘classis’, a word with which to divide the population of Rome for taxation purposes. Both the Latin and the French seem to underline Bowker and Star’s position, as they stress the fixity of the classificatory divisioning system.

In contrast, the German terms *die Zuordnung* or *die Gliederung* point towards a further level of meaning implied in classification and the act of classifying. The preposition *zu* combines the ideas of ‘to’, ‘to add’, and ‘towards’ while *Ordnung* is similar to our English idea of an ‘order’, ‘arrangement’, ‘organisation’, or ‘system’. The prefix *zu* adds the sphere of movement and mobility to the idea of order. In comparison, *die Gliederung* derives from *das Glied* ‘limb’ and literally means ‘the placing of limbs into a chain, or structure’. Similarly, it ascribes a level of agency or intention, instead of focusing on the static nature of ordering. We may therefore think of the act of classification as a dynamic arranging or ordering of data in order to make sense of the world and thus enable action.

Traditionally, a classification system is seen as “a set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work—bureaucratic or knowledge production” (Bowker and Star 1999). Underlying such a set of boxes are choices of how best to represent reality or truth. In other words it decides which boxes should make up this set. This paper locates its enquiry into the function of such a classification system in the intentions underlying these choices, and the process by which these intentions are shaped.

3 ZU-ORDNUNG

Technology and classification rely on one another. This section develops a lens through which to evaluate classifications, taking Heidegger’s enquiries into the essence of technology (Heidegger 1993) as a point of departure. The lens will be used to examine the possibilities for reinterpreting the functioning of classification as revealing, whilst remaining alert to the inherent dangers of this project.

The Heideggerian examination of the essence of technology and being by thinking and questioning has been introduced into enquiries about information systems, management studies and infrastructure (Ciborra 2002, Dreyfus 1982, Introna 1997, Introna 1999, Whitley and Introna 1998). In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger’s enquiry engages with technology on the following levels: a) technology as instrument, b) technology as a truth revealing process and c) the essence of technology itself. Heidegger rejects the essence of technology as being instrumental in nature. He views technology not as tied to creational processes but as *Wissen* or the ‘knowing’ that reveals beings. He provides the example of a craftsman who, through his craft, makes or brings forth an object. It is this ‘bringing–forth’ or *her–vorbringen* that Heidegger uses to redefine the essence of technology as a way of accessing truth, as “correctness of representation” (Heidegger 1993). Further, technology, as deriving from the Greek *techne* ‘art’ or ‘craft’, implies this bringing–forth in its own name. The artist or craftsman has the knowledge or skill to create an object out of nothing; he gives it presence. But technology is more than this simple presencing. It asks for a pay–back. It claims something out of what it brings forth, such as energy from the wind or music from electrically controlled magnetic vibrations. Everything becomes set upon by technology and loses its autonomy because the objects remain tied by the claim of technology.

Heidegger terms this claim that technology has as *Ge–stell*, or enframing. *Ge–stell* does this by “gathering together which belongs to that setting–upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual” (Heidegger 1993). Crucially, Heidegger sees the craftsman who was part of the creational process as part of this submitting to technology. Where the craftsman may fashion objects out

of a standing reserve, Heidegger sees everything including man as part of this reserve, or *Bestand*, for the revealing that is modern technology. That is to say, man is not the master, standing beyond and controlling the process of modern technology, but finds himself conditioned by this *Ge-stell*; man is himself but standing reserve for this process of revealing or challenging forth. Heidegger's *Ge-stell* acts as a means for making visible the hidden functions that everything plays in the ordering of the world.

Ge-stell is not simply revealing and ordering; it contains in its essence danger, or *Gefahr*. In defining objects through their functions, the enframing process does not only reveal, it also is engaged in concealing the truth because it defines the existence of a thing through its function only. Because *Ge-stell* reveals in its ordering the function of man as standing reserve (*Bestand*) and not objective reality (*Gegen-stand*), the world in which man becomes ordered is one that is removed from truth. *Ge-stell* is then a revealing towards something other than truth. Each onion skin removed reveals the truth of the function of the onion skin to cover yet another skin ad infinitum. According to Ciborra, the danger of *Ge-stell* is "in the fact that *Ge-stell* delivers representations of all that subsists, and these become the real world" (Ciborra 2002).

But how is the essence of modern technology and classification of import to us? In thinking about the essence of technology, certain parallels between the functioning of classification and *Ge-stell* become apparent. A rare meaning of the Greek τεχνολογια as a systematic treatment (Oxford English Dictionary 1989) points to this inherent linkage.

Ge-stell is the frame that encompasses both the revealing of functions and the concealing of reality by this revealing. Here we coin the term *Zu-Ordnung* to name the kind of ordering that is part of *Ge-stell*. *Zu-Ordnung* is thus an integral part of the essence of technology. At the heart of this term lies the dynamism of the act of classifying. This dynamism comes about through the vibration between the modes of discovering and producing truth rather than the traditional definition of classification as a separation or segmentation into boxes. Because it is the ordering that is part of *Ge-stell*, it is not classification in an instrumental understanding. Because *Gefahr* is the essence of *Ge-stell*, *Zu-Ordnung* is not only a mode of ordering truth in *Ge-stell* but also the name for the concealing that is part of *Ge-stell*. In *Zu-Ordnung*, or moving towards an ordering, the ordering is never complete and so classification may never fully reveal. The danger lies in taking for truth the approximation of the world that the classification represents. *Zu-Ordnung* is an always shifting entity that frames the way we think about ordering. The act of classifying is necessarily imperfect, it is never just an access to the objective reality, but always implies the multiple revisions of knowledge that have gone into the creation of any classification throughout its past. *Zu-Ordnung* carries the infinite past of shifting categories and the potential of future realities it will create in each act of classification. *Ge-stell* is revealing and, ultimately, concealing that is contained in modern technology. This revealing is through the ordering of *Zu-Ordnung*, which combines the two simultaneous modes of classification, that of discovering truth and producing truth in a movement that, by the way in which it orders the thinking of man, eventually leads to a concealing of truth.

4 BENCHMARKING GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

This section introduces website benchmarking, with special reference to the UK public sector, as a means to contextualise, apply and further develop the notion of *Zu-Ordnung*.

With the increasing popularity of the internet, website-benchmarking technologies have become progressively more valuable statistical tools of analysis. No longer can a website justify itself merely by being a website—the bottom line is apparently clear: web projects must reach concrete goals and prove their investment. This sense of value is particularly apparent in the private sector where, in order to assess and evaluate websites, complex benchmarking methodologies have been developed (Barnes and Vidgen

2000, Smithson 1999). Benchmarking is a process whereby an organisation evaluates its operations by comparison with similar organisations. The aim of the benchmark is usually to establish best practice by examining and emulating other organisations' strong points (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). In this respect, the public sector has lagged behind in developing its own methodologies (Kaylor, *et al.* 2001). In the UK, the development of benchmarking is marked by a considerable sense of urgency arising from the government's pledge to make all government services available electronically by 2005 (The Cabinet Office 2002).

When applied to government websites, however, this benchmarking gets to the core of the meaning of e-government, and more particularly the electronic delivery of services (Lenk 2002) (Kaylor, *et al.* 2001): Are e-government websites like commercial websites? Can they be classified in the same way? In this case, e-government is seen as a part of the current UK government policy to promote and drive initiatives that aim to "ensure that the country, its citizens, and its businesses derive the maximum benefit from ICT" (The Cabinet Office 2001). Four guiding principles of UK e-government have been developed. These are to 1) build services around citizens choices, 2) make government and its services more accessible, 3) work towards social inclusion and 4) use information better.

To do this, the government sets out a range of targets for public services delivery by transforming the purpose from *informing* to *interacting* and finally *transacting* with the citizen (customer). The concept of citizen as customer becomes increasingly important as the projects move along this transformation ladder and draws from the broad agenda of New Public Management (even if there is no single idea of New Public Management (Bevir, *et al.* 2003) (Hood 1996)).

With the government's commitment to ensuring access to the internet, the web is regarded as an increasingly important channel within which to develop online services (The Cabinet Office 2002). In this context, use and take-up have been identified as key components to judge the success of the initiatives (The Cabinet Office 2001). So far, however, take-up of websites has been disappointing and, when measuring individual usage of government websites across Europe, the UK lags behind many European countries (The Cabinet Office 2002).

What becomes apparent in the case of the UK government drive towards online services is that benchmarking operates through the selection of criteria. It is an applied example of the act of classifying. The remainder of this section investigates two public sector benchmarking projects that reveal the dual workings of discovering and producing truth.

One project was based on a commissioned report that aimed to establish how well the government measured up to achieving its 2005 deadline. To do this, twenty government departments, agencies, commissions and units were benchmarked across a broad range of criteria. The methodology was based on the Guidelines released by the e-Envoy for website development (The Cabinet Office 2002). This benchmarking exercise used the following categories with which to benchmark the twenty websites, see Table 1.

Standard Elements	Standard elements are those elements included in the e-Envoy guidelines. These incorporate such institutionalised items as ‘about us’ links, publications, organisational structure, ‘contact us’ links, news, FAQs, glossaries, help and search functionalities.
Interaction	Interaction measured the speed of reply to email requests.
Search Engine Registration	Marks were given for whether the site came up top of the listing in a search engine or not.
Design	Design was based on a qualitative analysis with marks awarded for consistency, simplicity, appropriateness and conventionality of design elements.
Navigation	By navigation the analysis was looking for consistency, simplicity and ease of navigation. Non-departmental, ‘citizen-focused sites’ were also benchmarked on the basis of content quality and functionality, or whether services were available online or not.
Performance	The benchmark was interested in cross-browser compatibility, accessibility and speed of the site, site errors and warnings.

Table 1 Benchmarking categories (Porter Research 2002).

The report came to the conclusion that “there must be hundreds of Government and quasi-governmental Web sites in need of attention in one area or another” (Porter Research 2002). While not all of the governmental websites failed to rank highly, most of the websites failed to achieve the “crucial mixture” of design, technology and communication.

One of the lowest ranked websites was that of the Prime Minister. Criticisms of the site were based on poor navigation, lack of standard elements, low quality code, slow loading and obfuscation of the site’s purpose. Since the publication of the report, the website has undergone changes to respond to some of the criticisms.

In contrast, other sites were highly rated. While the most highly rated website (pseudonymously known as the Department) receives over 300,000 visits a month, its web management team feels that development of the site has been moderately unstructured and has commissioned an internal government group to facilitate the benchmarking of their website offerings as a means to a) independently evaluate their online offering in comparison to other relevant organisations, b) develop an understanding of best practice in online areas, with especially reference to their target socio-economic groups, c) use this understanding to drive future strategy and planning and d) feed into and develop an implementation plan for recommended changes.

Following the development of the project brief, the process of selecting a private research agency to undertake the research for the Department is underway. The methodology is qualitative in nature and aims to benchmark their web offerings against a small sample of similar organisations both in the public and private sectors in the UK and internationally. The benchmark is intended to provide both an analysis and best practice findings for the following six strands: audience, content, marketing, channel strategy, partnership and business process.

The report moves away from technical aspects towards a strategy benchmarking, a much more qualitative field. The choice of benchmark organisation similarity is more crucial. In this case the choice lies with their senior management.

5 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This section investigates the underlying invisible, and thus unquestioned, assumptions that inform the choice of criteria in the benchmarking process undertaken and relate them to the broader questions of e-government and classification.

The Prime Minister's early website (<http://www.pm.gov.uk/>) failed to achieve a high ranking in PR's benchmarking. As a result, the site has undergone major changes in order to respond to the criticisms made by the evaluation. In doing so, however, the site has oriented itself more strongly to the citizen as customer paradigm. This has not led to an improvement in the site's usability. Instead it displays the pitfalls of a website developed according to best practice guidelines. The site has become unwieldy now, not because it measures up against the benchmark criteria, but because it measures up too well. The bite-sized information on the website now tries to serve too many purposes, see Figure 1. The site contains news, history, tourist information, political content and even a photo gallery. In trying to serve too many audiences the website fails in its intermeshing of fishing related stories with news about council tax rates. Furthermore its purpose seems to be either one of symbolic nature or of advertisement for the post of Prime Minister and Downing Street rather than purely informative, interactive or transactional. The website functions more as a symbol of prestige: it does not fit distinctly into any of the categories forming the inform, interact, transact progression while trying to accommodate the benchmark recommendations.

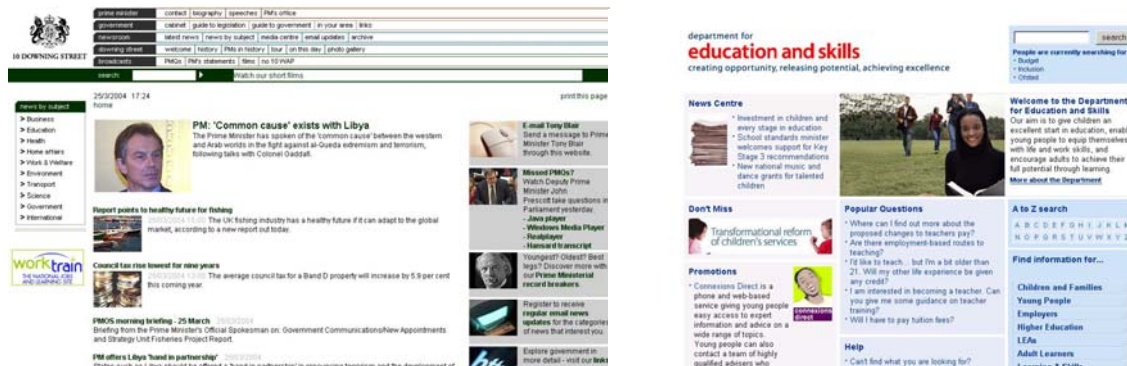


Figure 1 PM and Department websites (25/3/2004)

Once the Department had succeeded as the top ranked website in the benchmarking exercise they are now embarking on a further benchmarking project in order to continue to meet the needs of their key professional audience while attracting more usage of the site by the ordinary citizen. The strands of the proposed research were recently expanded in a process of consultation to move beyond the purely website oriented benchmark. The senior management want these strands to focus primarily on strategy in an effort to help guide and plan excellence. The website benchmark project will include an audit of "search, information architecture and navigation of benchmarked organisations" but also aim to come to consensus about best practice in the six strands identified. While the project is progressing slowly and is at agency tender stage, it relies on benchmarking the web offerings against a sample of 12–15 organisations drawn from the public and private sectors both in the UK and abroad. The benchmark organisations have been identified by senior management as a selection of their most admired sites.

The Department, in its criteria, aims to reach an understanding of excellence based on analysing other organisations' online strategies. The classification is also based on a means of extending the benchmark into an exercise in evaluation in order to measure the organisation's website in strategic terms. In basing the choice of benchmark organisations on a list drawn up by the organisation, the political realm of the

project is revealed. In benchmarking against private sector organisations, the implicit subtext is that government and private sector can be evaluated together and that meaningful comparisons can be made. The regulative effect of the classification is thus seen as a means of introducing into and familiarising the Department with insights gained in the private sector.

These two examples have shown that both benchmarking projects are based around the assumption that there is a shift in citizen to customer, either explicitly or implicitly. Having analysed both the language and the practical application of the two benchmarking projects we can bring the subtext to the fore-ground that underlies their benchmarking methodologies. Focusing on classification from within this process, the why and how of classification are revealed but in this revelation exists a danger.

The language of e-government is cast in the ideas developed by New Public Management whereby management culture emphasises the central position occupied by the individual (Ciborra 2003) (Fountain 2001). In the case of the government, this requires the adoption of many market mechanisms such as transparency of information and the supply of services according to demand. One of the consequences of this shift to the individual-centred state is the recasting of the citizen as customer.

The consequences of this re-identification are manifold. Fundamentally the idea of citizen as customer is embedded within the idea of government acting in a market. Laws of supply and demand and consumer choice are not possible in a governmental context (Ciborra 2003). The idea of equality, sacrosanct in the public sector, is not possible in a market environment.

Similarly, the policy of e-government electronic service progression in the UK (the process of moving along the gradient from inform to interact, and finally transact) assumes and makes explicit this consumer model of democracy (Bellamy and Taylor 1998) (The Cabinet Office 2002). This becomes apparent in the choice of language throughout each of the reports at stake here. In the extreme case, the private sector's web presence is equated with an ideal in efficiency and accessibility, while the public sector marks itself out by lengthy texts and obscure language. "Few (government websites) seem to recognise that the vast majority of visitors to any Government site have experience of sites outside the Government arena, and are used to a professional, user-friendly, inviting and altogether satisfying Web site environment" (Porter Research 2002). Thus the private sector website environment is seen as the benchmark fulfilling the criteria that government should include on their websites. That is to say, the private sector is "professional, user friendly, inviting and altogether satisfying" in their online services. The private sector becomes a model for the public sector's web presence; it produces the truth for the classification of e-government websites.

Basing the recent UK Government website benchmark exercise on private sector offerings (Porter Research 2002) has been justified with reference to the e-Envoy's own guidelines (The Cabinet Office 2002) which are ripe with the language of the minimal service state. In defining which criteria to base the benchmark on, they identify top performing websites and define best practice recommendations for the future. The benchmark is the aspiration towards an ideal model of all a website should be, based on a set of unchallenged criteria of how technology can function successfully. The criteria for benchmarking are based on a formal classification: they are not available for discussion, questioning or justification.

The report presents its criteria as unproblematic, as discovering the ideal format of website presentation, as discovering truth. However, there is no generic 'best' structure for a website and so any ideal is part of the production of truth. However, this does not sufficiently problematise the fact that criteria are not just created ad hoc but that they carry an historical frame within which the ideal criteria were developed, a frame that in this case is firmly rooted in the private sector.

Every act of classification towards best practice is thus not a classification from first principles but rather a latest step, drawing to it elements from the classifications that came before. As in the case of the Prime

Minister's website the site is reworked to be consistent with best practice norms based on a progression. Similarly, the classification making up the benchmark includes an understanding of what makes up a 'good' classification and the implicit basis of the classification is to inform the production of websites to meet this truth.

In this case, looking at the mode of truth production reveals as a subtext that public sector websites are benchmarked against criteria developed in private sector benchmarking projects. The choice of criteria highlights the difficulty that public sector benchmarks have in reaching elementary standards expected by customers used to using private sector websites. The regulative effect of this production of truth is to orient the development of and institutionalise best practice for governmental websites based on what one internal specialist called 'vanilla', or 'technical but not useful' criteria and accept the subtext that government websites should be benchmarked against an ideal private sector model.

The Department's project also shows how the standards inherent in benchmarking have shifted from online to offline, from the mainly technical elements of a site to the strategy for management. The danger in *Zu-Ordnung* is the collapse of the revealing by the continual enframing of the revealing process. In order to reveal the truth about websites, the choice of criteria used to benchmark governmental websites are drawn from the private sector and contain within them implicit assumptions about the role of the organisation towards its customer. These benchmarks are enframed by these assumptions and, in turn, enframe the creation of best practice. The danger is located in the ordering of the government / citizen relationship according to principles that at first are explicit (The Cabinet Office 2002) but then become invisible as they become institutionalised and pass from the informal to the formal modes of classification. These invisible principles act in turn to create a frame with which the government benchmarks itself and drives innovation. *Zu-Ordnung* is an enchaining process and sets upon the government in its ordering. The government is not immune from this rolling out of classification. No longer, for instance, is the Department intent on a benchmark of its website; *Zu-Ordnung* is deepened and rolls towards a further ordering. Having succeeded in achieving top marks in the website benchmark, the Department now aims to benchmark not only their website but also their management strategy according to principles based on similar assumptions. Using this lens, the Department orders and is ordered itself, building best practice and becoming part of the framework of best practice based on a classification that draws upon assumptions that the citizen, as customer, is the priority.

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