

WORKSHOP ON ETHICS AND E-INCLUSION (12 May 2008)

Summary of Contribution: 'How Ethical is the "Forced" Use of e-Government Services?'

My basic starting point is the following principle: the introduction of e-government services should entail no diminution in the quality of citizenship of individual citizens. In other words, e-government should be at least neutral with respect to the quality of citizenship or, preferably, enhance it. Thus my answer to the main question is: however much it may be regarded as being in the interests of citizens, it would be unethical to impose e-government in ways that would be unacceptable in other areas of policy.

Of course there are areas where governments do impose policies on people 'for their own good', or at least contemplate it. One example is education: all states do require attendance at school for a number of years, irrespective of the inclinations of pupils. But in this case, pupils have not reached the age of citizenship, so there is limited overlap with the case of e-government. Another example is health-care: governments do sometimes raise the possibility of refusing or curtailing care for conditions where patients have engaged in harmful practices that have caused illness or injury, which raises the cost to society of treatment – for example chronic smokers who develop lung cancer. But in practice, governments are very reluctant to act on this, except at the margins, e.g. alcoholics may find themselves barred from liver transplants.

A nearer parallel would be states requiring passengers in cars to wear seatbelts, which usually involves the threat of a fine, but does not prevent citizens from driving in general. It is 'merely' a restriction on the way that they can practise that right.

So the principle of not restricting the quality of citizenship, which must involve the right to benefit from all the services that the state offers, would seem to stand.

There are some further implications. Firstly, the state should not penalize people who choose not to use e-services but continue to avail themselves of government services in more traditional ways. Illiterate citizens are not prevented from obtaining state benefits. Nor should e-illiterate people. Illiterates may require assistance in filling out government forms. The same could apply to those who are e-illiterate. We know that the elderly and claimants of social security benefits have a greater rate of e-illiteracy than the population as a whole. They should not be prevented from obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled – and it would be advisable to provide facilities to help such people make on-line responses.

Secondly, the state should provide facilities to enable people to become minimally e-literate if they wish, though it is not necessary to require a very high standard for this. E-literacy is a variable concept: what is needed for a programmer of computer games is quite different from what is needed to write e-mails or fill in on-line forms.

Thirdly, governments can offer incentives for people to become e-literate. If e-government leads to more efficient and cheaper provision of its services, it would be fair to share some of those benefits with those who make it possible, i.e. e-literate

citizens. Companies offer discounts for using their services on-line. Governments could do the same – and some are beginning to do so.

Fourthly, governments are under an obligation to their citizens to ensure that e-data is not subsequently misused, either deliberately by the state itself, or through carelessness on the part of its officials. This does mean that government servants should be made very conscious of the need for a high standard of care for data protection. It also means that considerable efforts must be made to preserve the integrity of on-line data from outside hackers. There is a need for strong safeguards and institutions to ensure transparency of use so as to reassure the public. And lastly, insofar as the EU is aiming at a common information space with governments sharing their electronic data, there is a very strong need to ensure that data collected about an individual citizen within certain parameters in one EU member state are not then used against that citizen by another member state where the parameters for use are different. Examples of the opposite would excite widespread media coverage. Nothing would undermine the appeal of an information society at the level of the EU more. Harmonisation of the practices of member governments may be a slow process in this respect as in others, but it is a necessary objective.

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