

Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy: Public Administration in the Information Age

by Akhlaque Haque

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What are the key challenges awaiting public administrators in the information age? How should contemporary societies properly use technology in general and information and communication technologies (ICT) in specific? Why and how is the administration/practice dichotomy becoming crucial in the debate about government and citizen interactions? What are the distinctive (and contrasting) values of formal versus informal knowledge and of quantitative versus qualitative information in shaping public policies and debates? How might we conceptualize and combine these oppositions in creative and constructive ways to best serve the public? Can we reconcile thinking and doing by being equally concerned with questions of why and how in the design and delivery of public programs and services? What are the most important leadership and ethics challenges in today's public organizations and services dominated by technological determinism, instrumental rationality, and private sector influence? Could emerging social

networking tools and information contextualization help public administrators sustain citizens' trust through encouraging informal practice-based governance?

Akhlaque Haque's *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy: Public Administration in the Information Age* attempts to address these questions, albeit with varying degrees of depth and success. The book's range of topics related to the implications of ICT for public administration is extremely broad, from the increased role of information in public policy making to critical perspectives on its limits, from ensuring transparency in the public's business to protecting privacy of citizens, from ways of avoiding public technology failures in supply-driven markets to the values and means of learning from context and practice in the information age. At the outset, Haque writes, "This work seeks to fill a void in the literature dealing with the role of information and information technology in government ... [by

discussing] how technology can be [an] effective (and democratic) vehicle for organized institutional reform” (p. xv). Given the significance of interested, informed, and involved citizens in shaping and sustaining public policies and programs across democratic societies, grasping both the enabling and constraining features of technology, especially of ICT, becomes a critical task for scholars and practitioners alike. Thus the book under review is both timely and relevant.

Apart from a lengthy and informative introductory chapter, *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy* is organized into two thematic sections, each covering issues of significance to the theory and practice of public administration in the information age. Part 1, “Value of Information,” is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1, “Introduction to the Theory of Information,” succinctly discusses the complementary (at times contradictory) roles of formal and informal knowledge in public policy making as well as the principles, classification, and flow of information. Chapter 2, “Information Technology in Action,” critically reviews interactions between information technology and human experience, focusing especially on the consequences of employing various rationalities when it comes to choosing and evaluating technology in public administration (e.g., instrumental versus political rationality). Part 2, “Value of Public Service,” consist of three chapters. Chapter 3, “Information Contextualization,” demonstrates the importance and implications of contextualizing information by mobilizing both the science and art of decision making in public administration. Chapter Four, “Leadership, Ethics, and Technology,” discusses the crucial roles of ethics and leadership in making choices regarding use of technology and data in institutional and societal settings. Finally, Chapter 5, “The End of Surveillance,” builds on and expands on the previous chapters to emphasize “the missing link between information and practice” (p. 107) as well as of “the practice-administration dichotomy” (p. 115) in the information age.

Haque aptly cautions against “technology the hero” (p. 49). The very same technology that

can contribute to democratization of public institutions and policies by empowering citizens might also be used as tools of undemocratic surveillance and control. Specifically, Haque writes that

the disconnectedness between information and action cannot be blamed on technology when our morality is not attuned to the social relations that bind us. . . . We must acknowledge that as we rise up to make ourselves better protectors of humans and nature, our technologies will also reveal solutions that bind them for the same cause. Information technology can either *constrain* human creativity by routinizing human activities or it can *enable* (as interpretive lenses) new and emerging ideas to be incorporated into future actions. How it will be used depends on our own morality and judgment of good and evil. (p. 84, emphasis in original)

Yet, Haque does envision “administrator the hero,” so to speak, when it comes to addressing the challenges stemming from the rapid growth of ICT. This role for public administrators, unfortunately, is unrealistic given the supply-driven nature of many ICT-related programs and projects. The increasing influence of private sector vendors and values in determining public sector technology creates an array of dilemmas and difficulties for public administrators. Haque furthermore largely eschews discussing the roles and responsibilities of citizens and private sector actors, such as ICT entrepreneurs and executives, in reconciling emerging technological tools with existing democratic values. Also missing is even a brief discussion about the causes and consequences of the “digital divide” between the West and the rest. Finally, the book could have been improved by discussing questions such as, How might “interpretive capacities” be developed in public administrators? Who should be the guardian of the public interest when “institutionalization” simply means penetration of not-so-democratic values and habits into public policies and organizational practices? What should be the

roles and responsibilities of politics and politicians in the information age?

In conclusion, despite its shortcomings, *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy* is a welcome addition to the literature addressing the challenges facing public organizations and managers in these early years of the 21st century. It raises important questions about contemporary public administration in democracies, especially those related to interactions between advancement of ICT and protecting such values as privacy, trust, transparency, and participation. In addition to offering a critical approach to these issues, the book provides an extensive list of references for further reading and research. Thus I strongly recommend *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy* to researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and citizens engaged in contemporary debates surrounding ICT. The book is also especially relevant for undergraduate and graduate teaching, particularly for courses related to ICT use in public administration, ICT development and evaluation, critical perspectives on contemporary public administration, and emerging ethical issues. Finally, the book could prove useful as essential reading in faculty professional

development and executive training programs, especially those involving ICT specialists, managers, and evaluators.

REFERENCES

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Muhittin Acar is professor of public administration at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. He earned his bachelor's degree from Ankara University, his Master of Public Management from Carnegie Mellon University, and his doctorate from the University of Southern California. His major research topics are transparency, accountability, and integrity in public governance.