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# INTRODUCTION INFORMATION AND PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS - A BRAVE NEW WORLD?

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## **Abstract**

What topic could be more appropriate for an electronic journal on public administration and management than the use of information (including information technology)? This issue of *Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal* is organized as a symposium on Information and Public Organizations.

The information society poses new opportunities for public administration but also introduces new problems. Movement toward “digital government” promises new efficiencies and new ways of communicating with citizens. However, issues such as the digital divide raise the problem of exacerbating inequities in citizen participation and access to services. Distance learning enhances the availability of education, but changes interactions among students, and between students and instructors. Within public organizations, the use of new technology elevates organizational change onto the agenda, as new skills are needed, tasks are reconfigured, and networking across organizational boundaries becomes possible. In my own prior experience in the public sector, information technology facilitated the development of a collaborative network of job training programs within Detroit’s Empowerment Zone, but implementing inter-organizational cooperation was far from simple, despite the good will of all of the organizations involved.

Familiar problems also persist despite innovations. Technology has reduced the cost of acquiring information by curtailing the time and effort needed for information search. Yet technology cannot solve other problems associated with information use in decision-making. By way of example, the web site of the National School-to-Work Learning Center serves as the anchor for a virtual policy community, which includes the U.S. Department

of Labor, the U.S. Department of Education, research and professional organizations, business organizations, and state agencies. State administrators implementing school-to-work programs have at the touch of their keyboards access to a variety of information sources, including federal legislation, research and evaluation, trends in other states, hundreds of practical tools used by other states, “best practices” and more. (See [www.stw.ed.gov/](http://www.stw.ed.gov/)) A survey of state administrators showed that the web site was widely used (Mossberger and Hale 1999).

Ease of access, however, doesn’t overcome traditional problems with information diffusion. Ideas may spread far in advance of solid evidence of their effectiveness. For example, some state administrators complained about the lack of impact evaluation available on school-to-work (Mossberger and Hale 1999). The quality of information, therefore, may be problematic, even if the quantity of information is vastly increased by searchable data bases and web links to various organizations. This is not an issue confined to school-to-work, or to web-based information delivery, but a more general problem in the diffusion of information about administrative and policy innovations (Mossberger 2000, 202; Wolman and Page 2000). Ease of access may, in fact, increase problems of information overload and information cognition - a familiar theme in public administration since the work of Herbert Simon (1957) and Charles Lindblom (1959).

The initial contributions to this issue demonstrate the continued need for researchers and practitioners to focus on the quality, use, and development of information, whatever the technology. The authors discuss open-source sharing of research, distance learning, and external communications.

The first article represents what one of the peer reviewers called a “paradigm shift” for research and for information networks. Charles Schweik and Morgan Grove borrow the concept of “open-source” information sharing from the software industry, and propose a collaborative model of research that emulates the development of the Linux operating system. The system’s originator, Linus Torvalds, posted his work on the Internet, allowing a global community of programmers to use the operating system, make improvements, and share them with others. The authors argue that the use of the web for open-source collaboration is appropriate for sharing research on complex systems, where problem solving requires

multiple disciplinary approaches. Schweik and Grove are developing a web site for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to promote research sharing and discussion among natural scientists, social scientists, administrators, and policy analysts. Such an undertaking presents challenges as well as opportunities. The authors discuss the incentives, norms, and rules needed to institutionalize productive collaboration. To view the progress that the authors are making on their "peer-review system to support Human Dimensions of Global Change Research," see the web site at [www.open-research.org](http://www.open-research.org).

Faculty from the University of Wyoming use distance learning to provide a Master of Public Administration program that spans the sparsely populated state. Because there is only one post-graduate institution in the state, far-flung areas were previously underserved. The demand for education in public administration was apparent at town meetings held around the state to recruit new students. The implementation of a distance education program has presented some new problems, however, in the creation of a more anonymous, fragmented classroom lacking the traditional advantages of face-to-face interaction. In their article, four members of the faculty share the creative solutions they have devised, as well as issues that demand continued attention. The article is their "story," but includes comparisons to trends noted in research on distance education. Readers who have their own experiences with web-based or distance education are invited to share their comments - or stories - as well. Our electronic format allows an ongoing discussion, promoting learning from the experiences of colleagues.

Covering a different dimension of information management, Mordecai Lee argues that public managers and scholars need to devote more attention to external relations (that is, public information or public relations). Although the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration has recommended more emphasis on communications and external relations, a review of current programs reveals that it remains a "significant but neglected topic," as Dwight Waldo (1992) described it. Lee discusses the purposes and organizing principles that would structure an effective external relations component in public and nonprofit curricula. The expansion of information technology promises to increase the significance of external relations for public and nonprofit managers, according to Lee.

Additional articles will appear in the coming months. We invite new submissions discussing information issues in the teaching, scholarship, and practice of public administration. For the purposes of this symposium, the concept of “information” is construed broadly, to refer to decision-making, learning, and communications, whether or not technology use is a significant aspect.

### References

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