

Information rights: Trust and human dignity in e-government

Toni Carbo

The words “rights”, “trust”, “human dignity” and even “government” have widely varying meanings and connotations, differing across time, languages and cultures. Concepts of rights, trust and human dignity have been examined for centuries in great depth by ethicists and other philosophers and by religious thinkers, and more recently by social scientists and, especially as related to information, by information scientists. Similarly, discussions of government are well documented in writings back to Plato and Aristotle, with investigations of electronic government (often referred to as e-government) dating back only to the early 1990s, with the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. At first, e-government was described in glowing, positive terms. Little, if any, attention was paid to two critical questions: Will people trust e-government? and, How will cultural differences affect individuals’ trust in government and their perceptions of the government’s effect on their human dignity? Examinations of trust and distrust by individuals within organisations have addressed questions of motives and intentions, expectations of behaviour, protection of interests, confidence in the accuracy and reliability of information, vulnerability, and reciprocity, among other complex topics. This chapter provides a very brief overview of some of the notions of trust and distrust, concentrating on those concerning trust as it relates to notions of power, trust in organisations, and trust in information and information systems as one part of a framework to address the question of trust in e-government. It also makes a few recommendations on how to build citizen-centric e-government to ensure information rights through a focus on human dignity, fundamental human rights, and earning trust.

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Author’s details

Prof. Toni Carbo

School of Information Sciences and Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh, 602 IS Building, 135 N. Bellefield Ave., Pittsburgh PA 15260, United States

✉ tcarbo@sis.pitt.edu

Rights, trust and human dignity

The words, “rights”, “trust”, “human dignity”, “e-government” (electronic or digital government) and even “government” have widely varying meanings and connotations, differing across time, languages and cultures. Notions of rights, trust and human dignity have been examined for centuries in great depth by ethicists and other philosophers, religious thinkers, more recently by social scientists and, as related to information, by information scientists. Similarly, discussions of government are well documented in writings dating back to Plato and Aristotle, with investigations of e-government dating back only to the early 1990s, with the advent of the Internet and later of the World Wide Web (WWW). Much of the work on e-government has been undertaken by political scientists, economists, lawyers and information scientists.

This chapter will not provide an extensive review of previous studies, but instead one individual perspective (one from an individual from a limited Northern and Western background). It will draw upon some writings on trust and human dignity, and relate them to information rights and the development of e-government.

Rights and human dignity

Although the concept is certainly well known to certain groups of readers, it bears repeating that the Fundamental Moral Experience integrates basic respect for human beings and incorporates compassion, hope and affectivity. This is the foundation for many philosophical concepts and religious beliefs, and for information ethics, it affirms the notion that each individual has basic rights and is deserving of respect and the preservation of human dignity.

Early examples range from Aristotle to Tibetan Buddhism and, in 1948, were articulated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. For example, the Dalai Lama refers to the concept of *nying je*, generally translated as compassion, but connoting “love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, and warm-heartedness”. In its Article 1, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights also states:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason

and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

These oft-repeated principles must always provide the foundation for discussions of trust, information rights and governance at all levels. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) used this foundation in its international discussions to shape the common vision of the information society:

... to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life.

The Declaration also states:

... reaffirm the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms [...] also reaffirm that democracy, sustainable development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as good governance at all levels are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In reviewing these statements, several points of focus emerge:

- The emphasis on the Fundamental Moral Experience and the concepts of freedom, equality, dignity and rights
- The critical need for compassion (or, more broadly, *nying je*) and the spirit of brotherhood
- The importance of a people-centred society, with the key role throughout the entire life-cycle of information being to empower individuals to achieve their full potential and improve the quality of their lives

With this basic set of principles in mind, we can address the notions of trust and its role in effective e-government.

Trust

Views of trust as a foundation for social order span many disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, several social sciences, and business and management (see, for example, Lewicki et al., 1998; Baier, 1986; Doney et al., 1998). Examinations of trust and distrust by individuals within organisations have addressed questions,

motives and intentions, expectations of behaviour, protection of interests, confidence in accuracy and reliability of information, vulnerability, and reciprocity, among many complex topics. As Sissela Bok (1978:31) has so eloquently stated: "Whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives." However, Baier (1986:231–232) reminds us that:

... not all the things that thrive when there is trust between people, and which matter, are things that should be encouraged to thrive. Exploitation and conspiracy, as much as justice and fellowship, thrive better in an atmosphere of trust. There are immoral as well as moral trust relationships, and trust-busting can be a morally proper goal.

Of course, there are many levels and types of trust, and these often change over time based on changes in relationships, personal experiences and other factors. For example, building on the work of Fiske and others, Sheppard & Sherman (1998:423–425) propose four fundamental grammars, or relational forms based on human relationships (communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching and market pricing) and depth of relationship (shallow dependence, shallow interdependence, deep dependence and deep independence). They define trust as "the acceptance of the risks associated with the type and depth of the interdependence inherent in a given relationship". Sheppard & Sherman (1998: 426) also note that:

In all relational forms, however, trust involves the belief that features of the other, the relationship, or the context in which the relationship is embedded will mitigate the risks associated with that relational form.

While noting that trust can be used in connection with relying on natural phenomena, as well as with relying on people, Pettit (1995:204) indicates that the most general use of trust:

... would equate trust with confidence that other people will treat you reasonably well, confidence that they will not waylay or cheat you, for example. We speak in this sense of trusting our fellow citizens or trusting the institutions under which we live.

Pettit's focus is on "active reliance". These are cases in which:

... you rely on others to the extent of making

yourself vulnerable to them, voluntarily or under the force of circumstances [...] you rely in your own individual right on another person [...] in other cases you may rely [...] on a corporate or collective agent that itself involves a number of people.

Understanding trust within the complex series of relationships in which an individual lives and works is key to understanding the interaction of an individual with a government and its representatives. The different types of relationships, levels of government, individuals within the governments and interactions among people all raise a series of issues directly relevant to ethical reflection and moral actions in developing and implementing e-government systems and services. Equally important is the need to address the notions of risk, reliability and vulnerability as essential components of trust. What level of risk is an individual taking by placing trust in an institution and/or information? What are the consequences if that trust is violated? How does one measure the reliability of information? How vulnerable is one willing to be to trade off access to services or information? These and other questions should be addressed at the beginning of planning and well before implementation.

Related to the issues of risk, reliability and vulnerability is the question of power. For this chapter, particular emphasis is placed on those concepts of trust and distrust related to notions of the power of individuals, information content and institutions. For example, as Baier (1986:240) notes:

Trust alters power positions, and both the position one is in without a given form of trust and the position one has within a relation of trust need to be considered before one can judge whether that form of trust is sensible and morally decent.

Related to trust, of course, is the topic of privacy, especially the different understandings of the concept of privacy by people from different cultural backgrounds. Because this topic is being discussed in depth by others in this publication, it will not be included in this chapter.

With human rights, dignity and trust as the foundation – all within a rapidly changing global society – we can begin to address the role of government and the use of technology to provide government information and services. Technology has been a fundamental component of

governments from the earliest days of using the technology of the human voice (such as in Greek and Roman forums and town meetings, or through town criers or travelling storytellers and historiographers); to the use of film, teletype and radio during the first half of the 20th century; and to early presidential debates on television, 24/7 news networks, satellites and other technologies beginning in the 1970s. The introduction and widespread use of information and communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet and the Web, have provided opportunities for improved governance and for governments that are more focused on their citizens.

Government and e-government

Governments

In considering the interaction between individuals and their governments, it is important to consider the level of government (e.g. local or groupings of local such as county, provincial or state, national, regional and international, and others); the types of interaction (e.g. gathering information, making a transaction, providing information) and the sociocultural aspects (e.g. the language or cultural background of the individual). Of course, individuals may interact with different levels of government and for different purposes over time. Individuals also have perceptions of their own power, risks and vulnerability, which may differ from their actual power, risks and vulnerabilities.

The nature of the government, the government's stated mission, its actual practices (which very often differ from stated missions) and – most importantly – the nature and practices of the individuals themselves, are all critical factors in the effectiveness of the government and its services. All of these are enhanced and expanded by the use of ICT, which adds many other dimensions including, but not limited to:

- Wide variations in access as a result of the digital divide, differing information literacy skills, disabilities, restrictions placed by governments, differing laws for intellectual property protection, numerous policies on transparency, etc.
- Language and cultural factors
- Variations and limitations in content resulting in the omission of indigenous knowledge or of

material in appropriate formats (such as those for oral cultures)

- Differing norms for moral conduct (e.g. payments to government employees are seen by some as appropriate gratuities and by others as corruption)
- Variations in perceptions of credibility of information in digital form (see, for example, the extensive study by Metzger et al., 2003)
- Lack of understanding of how to manage the lifecycle of digital information, especially the need for policies and practices for its preservation and removal

Early attempts to use ICT in providing government information and services did not consider all of these factors as fully as needed, but the progression to electronic or digital government (usually referred to as e-government) moved ahead rapidly, beginning in North America and Europe and spreading quickly to most other continents.

E-government

E-government is “the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to transform government by making it more accessible, effective and accountable” (*infoDev*, 2002:1). Establishing the highest-quality e-government services usually requires going through several phases:

- Publish (using ICT to improve access to government information)
- Interact (broadening participation in government through two-way communications)
- Transact (making actual services available online)

In their e-government handbook for developing countries, *infoDev* and the Centre for Democracy and Technology (CDT) argue that successful transformation of a government, not yet fully achieved, requires process reform, leadership, strategic investment, collaboration and civic engagement. Among the key challenges for success is building “trust within agencies, between agencies, across governments, and with businesses, NGOs and citizens” (*infoDev*, 2002: 15). This handbook, while somewhat dated now, is still a very valuable resource for those interested in developing citizen-centric e-government. Building and maintaining the trust referred

to in the handbook requires developing an understanding both of the many levels of interactions where trust must be earned, and of the uniqueness – including important cultural differences, vulnerabilities, potential risks, and power – of the individual citizen.

These interactions are complicated and multi-layered. Individuals interact with others within their local communities (whether geographic or virtual), with their governments at all levels, with other governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporations. They also interact with information content, interfaces (such as webpages), and information and telecommunication systems. An individual may trust information content, but not the system, thinking it is not secure; a webpage may offend an individual's sense of dignity causing him or her to distrust the government that created it; or an individual or a government may distrust another government's information because that government exercises tight control over its information and monitors citizens' searches.

A conceptual model is therefore needed for use in framing questions of trust and e-government. Attempts at cultural taxonomies, such as Doney's framework linking Clark's conceptual domains and related cultural taxonomies with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, associated societal norms and values, and his own categories of influence on the trust-building process (Doney et al., 1998:609), are useful building blocks but have not been used extensively to address issues such as attitudes towards government.

Another challenge in developing and using such a framework or taxonomy is that e-government itself is very dynamic, changing rapidly over time. Trust in content or a system available one day may not carry over when the content and/or system changes dramatically. Components of a framework must include conceptual domains, cultural dimensions, information content dimensions and system dimensions. Of course, these dimensions must be considered in the context of rapidly changing governments, ICT services, the digital divide and other factors. Pertinent to the need to link these dimensions and e-government is the Seventh Global Forum on Reinventing Government, held in June 2007, with the theme of "Building trust in government" (UN, 2007). This forum may well result in new perspectives to help shape this framework.

Recommendations

Frameworks and taxonomies, as described above, should be developed and tested in real-world situations in different communities, and this must be done in the context of the fundamental background of human dignity, basic human rights and earning trust. It would be useful for collaborations among representatives (e.g. senior officials and individuals at the frontline of service provision) of governments at all levels, academics (including ethicists, political scientists, librarians, information scientists and others) and citizens from differing ethnic, cultural and age groups to be formed to apply these frameworks and taxonomies in developing and assessing different e-government services as they are redesigned to be truly citizen-centric. Building on what has been learnt at the first African Information Ethics Conference, earlier conferences and the work of the International Centre for Information Ethics community, collaborations at all levels can be built to address these critical issues. It is only through such collaborative efforts and transformation of government to meet citizens' needs that true information rights can be preserved.

Coetzee Bester (2007) kindly wrote the following addition to provide a perspective, as suggested by reviewers of my original paper, from an African leader to help others use this chapter as part of their mental blueprint to guide in shaping the e-government of the future in Africa. I am very grateful to him for this very thoughtful addition:

It is furthermore important to bear in mind that the position in many traditional African communities towards trust in e-governance is based on the description and significance of the concept of trust and human dignity within the framework of the social infrastructure of these communities. Trust, for example, is sometimes more related to knowledge of the person him/herself or personal interaction with these role-players than a declaration on paper. This trust-in-person mindset should direct the information practitioner in Africa towards a relationship with the authority rather than to the position of the authority when trust in e-governance is developed. The grammar and meaning of trust are therefore rather to be found in the cultural relationship with an individual and are not necessarily based on researched and scientific proof of an experience.

Information practitioners and policy makers in Africa should be aware of the influences of traditions and cultural dynamics that will impact on the processes of creating trust in e-governance. Practical guidelines to manage the impact will have to be developed, but guiding principles towards trust in e-governance would include a service and development orientation, person-to-person support during the implementation phases of e-governance, language and terminology assistance for users, and technical back-up to ensure continuous service. These services would include electricity, well-managed service providers and well-trained staff to assist users of e-governance. The growth towards trust in e-governance is a process and not an event or an announcement. In addition to the challenges in creating trust in e-governance, the path towards this technology in Africa is filled with thorny issues of new technology and terminology, cultural orientations and traditions, as well as a completely different social interaction based on a method of humanity and not yet exclusive use of technology.

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