S. Bhatnagar, *E-Government: From Vision to Implementation. A Practical Guide with Case Studies* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 204 pp. (inc. prelims), ISBN 0-7619-3260-7 (pbk), £14.99.

As follows from the title, this book’s main goal is to provide practical recommendations on envisioning and implementation of electronic government applications (particularly in developing countries). The author is mostly interested in a process of reform in the way governments work, share information and deliver services to external and internal clients, namely how to harness information technologies to transform a government’s relations with citizens, businesses and its own divisions. The author supposes that investments in information and communication technologies are as essential as in other forms of infrastructure, and that the resulting benefits can be significant: less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth and cost reduction.

The book, as a whole, is skillfully framed to move readers from theoretical to the practical knowledge about an electronic government (in particular, here the main focus is on providing case studies describing implementation of various e-government applications in the actual practice of developing countries). The volume consists of two, approximately equal, main parts: the first provides a comprehensive definition of e-government, as well as its history and purposes of development. It also explores the benefits and impact of e-government on effective governance, citizens’ empowerment and poverty reduction, and describes best practices in e-government project design and managing change. There are also clear practical guidelines, provided in the first part of the book, for the creation of a country-level e-government strategy and implementation plans, and the methodology necessary for evaluation and risk analysis while choosing appropriate e-government projects. The future of e-government is also discussed in the first half of the volume. The second half of the book, in its turn, contains 12 case studies drawn from real practices that have been used in several developing countries where e-government has been implemented to address various social and economic development challenges.
The main purpose of the book is to provide useful information on projects and documented research on e-government initiatives, and to be a practical guide for developing e-government at a local, state or national level. Specifically, the volume offers readers a critical exploration of the nature of e-government and its critical success factors that must be present for e-government applications to have an impact on a country’s development and improvement of its governance. The book encourages interested readers to apply what they learn about e-government theory and issues to a selection of practical challenges currently faced by the developing countries, such as: facilitating public sector reforms, increasing their efficiency, controlling government expenditure, bridging the literacy, infrastructure and digital divides in service delivery, reducing the discretionary power of bureaucrats, etc. The author describes corresponding useful strategies, which focus on establishing e-government as a powerful force in everyday social interaction in the developing world.

The book is written for a very diverse audience: IT professionals, civil servants, managers, representatives of various multilateral institutions interested in the implementation of e-government in emergent nations. It can be useful for both researchers and practitioners, as well as for students. Because the author wrote this book as a result of his work within the Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network of the World Bank, the issues and concerns raised are central most of all to the implementation of e-government in the developing countries. Therefore we would recommend translating and publishing this book into all of the main languages of the Third World.

Volodymyr Lysenko

Volodymyr Lysenko has been a Senior Lecturer at the National Technical University of Ukraine ‘Kyiv Polytechnic Institute’ for more than 10 years. Previously he also conducted research at the University of Oxford (UK) and Columbia University (USA). Currently he is conducting a study at the Information School of the University of Washington (USA). He is also an Expert for the Directorate General on Education and Culture of the European Commission. Address: Information School Research, Roosevelt Commons Building, 4311 11th Ave NE, Suite 400, Box 354985, Seattle, WA 98105-4608, USA. [email: vlysenko@u.washington.edu]

K. Scott-Dixon, Doing IT: Women Working in Information Technology (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2004), 244 pp., ISBN 0-894549-37-6 (pbk), CDN$26.95.

While many recent books provide interesting examinations of how the giddiness of the late 1990s new economy boom, accelerated by information technology (IT), crashed into the economic deceleration of the present day, with a
few exceptions there is a nuanced absence of gender analyses in discussing work and labour. Scott-Dixon’s book fills this research gap admirably and should serve as a useful model for scholars interested in pursuing studies of gender, technology and work.

In the 1990s Canadian government policy, through the creation of various programmes aimed to ameliorate the digital divide, tax incentives for IT-intensive R&D, and enticements to develop computer science and technology curricula in post-secondary institutions, had as its goal to be ‘the most connected nation in the world’. Dissecting this discourse, through government and business pronouncements, statistical snapshots and interviews with women working in the IT sector, Scott-Dixon provides us with a solid feminist political economic critique of the multi-faceted dimensions of IT work and, specifically, its implications for women.

She situates her research in what she calls a materialist analysis: a grounded perspective that ‘examines what women are actually doing and experiencing’ (p. 23). The main question that structures the book is: ‘What are the material conditions of women’s work in information technology’ (p. 23). Sixty in-depth interviews with Toronto-based women working professionally or semi-professionally in the IT field complement a critical scrutiny of new economy newspeak, particularly human capital theory and the notion of skills.

The first chapter situates women’s IT work in context, which, Scott-Dixon argues, is a product of structural and individual factors, shaped by power relations and contradictory elements, as IT work both empowers and constrains women in diverse ways. For instance, IT self-employment – such as running a web-design business out of your home – can mitigate the exorbitant price of pre-school daycare, or it can aggravate domestic responsibilities and create ‘more work for mother’. The flexibility attached to IT – its asynchronous and unbounded attributes – can further reinforce occupational and industrial segregation, as women are shuttled into the more service-oriented aspects of IT work, such as call-centre operations, client services and marketing; even graphic and web design, one could argue, reflects a feminization of the IT sector. Gendered trends in IT employment are further reflected in the prevalence of men in ‘hard’ IT jobs, such as software and hardware engineering, Internet architecture, etc., which is often exacerbated by age and educational attainment.

In the second chapter, Scott-Dixon argues that social location – an intrinsic facet of women’s labour force experience – is buried under the mantra of ‘skills development’, where individual self-empowerment is reified in the knowledge-based economy. Skills are further conflated with progress, an underlying premise of human capital theory, which ‘is appealingly simple, fits well into capitalist models of free-market investment and return, and seems to offer us some clue to women’s lower job status and salaries in the
IT industry. It tells us that women make less and are valued less because they have fewer skills’ (p. 72). The women Scott-Dixon interviewed reveal several patterns in their acquisition of technical skills: the most technically skilled women received parental support, particularly from a father; educational environments in computing and engineering discouraged women from pursuing advanced degrees, while acquiring certain vocational IT skills presented cost barriers; and the male-dominated IT workforce was not welcoming to women. Despite this, some women thrived in the IT sector, feeling that their liberal arts background lent an inherent degree of flexibility and a holistic appreciation for certain skills, such as programming, what Papert and Turkle described as ‘epistemological pluralism’.

The remaining chapters raise crucial questions related to changing work practices and the material conditions of work, propelled by global economic competitiveness and neoliberal realities – contract work, non-standard work practices, telework and outsourcing – new forms of IT service work that portend a distinct feminization of the IT workforce. Alongside this gendering are also raced divisions.

Scott-Dixon concludes by arguing for the insertion of feminist voices into the IT industry in order to put an emphasis not on the technology per se but on the labour force itself. Going beyond mere equitable access to IT includes promoting diverse workforces, paying attention to gender and social location, educating workers about their rights, and promoting worker autonomy, creativity and communication.

*Leslie Regan Shade*

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Leslie Regan Shade is an Associate Professor at Concordia University in the Department of Communication Studies. Her research focus since the mid-1990s has been on the social, policy and ethical aspects of information and communication technologies (ICTs), with particular concerns towards issues of gender, globalization and political economy. *Address*: Associate Professor, MA Director, Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke St. W. CJ 4.407, Montreal, Quebec H4B 1R6, Canada. [email: lshade@alcor.concordia.ca]

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L. Geoghegan & J. Lever with I. Megimpsey, *ICT For Social Welfare: A Toolkit for Managers* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2004), 194 pp., ISBN 1-86134-505-4 (pbk), £17.99.

With this handbook, the authors seek to redefine information and communications technology (ICTs) as ‘an instrument through which social interaction is filtered’. The predominant vision in the handbook sector is generally based on a technology-centred approach whose core assumption rests more or less
on the following: acquiring new competences and technical knowledge leads to better provision and enjoyment of social services, i.e. providing know-how and skills is translated in terms of effective improvement of standards in social interaction, without considering the characteristics of the actors involved in the process.

Here the authors take a different approach and maintain that it is necessary to study new technologies, not just to see how they work but rather to find out how people use them and the changes they bring into our daily lives. Hence, the shift of focus is from technology-centred to people-centred — in other words, a focus on practical aspects and on specific cases rather than on the theoretical dimension of the impact of ICTs. Not that this dimension is totally neglected, given that some parts of the book are, for example, dedicated to the analysis of the potential risks deriving from the digital divide or from isolation from the community as a result of the use of ICTs. Rather, the focus lies on ICTs immersed in the real world.

The first two chapters are dedicated to a preliminary analysis of the role ICTs play in the context of social services and social policy. The third, conversely, concentrates on the fundamental role of the resource ‘information flow’ whereby the authors suggest diverse perspectives of horizontal flow integration with that of vertical flow. The assumption is that ICTs constitute, in the context of the dual problem of hierarchy (vertical flow) and that of impact/diffusion (horizontal flow), a medium that acquires relevance on the basis of the content it conveys. A core issue is that of developing information strategies that take into account, in the context of organizations, the training of three different groups of individuals: service users, staff workers and stakeholders.

In the following chapters, the authors reflect on the ‘appropriateness’ of the channel in the light of specific types of content and information flows: ICTs are a channel to be added to pre-existing ones, compared with which they undoubtedly have certain advantages (prevalently regarding the dual notion of time and space) but also specific limits (i.e. the risk of the isolation of employees, the digital divide issue and the lack of face-to-face relationships). Therefore, they are to be used in the context of information management, which includes ICTs strategies.

Using a person-centred approach as the authors do, means considering relevant the use of ICT variables in sociological terms, i.e. gender, social strata, ethnic minorities etc. Accordingly, strategies for ICT use have to take into account the different sociocultural contexts of the work environment. And it is on this point that probably one of the limits of the books lies: the focus on cultural contexts and practice renders rather fragile, on a theoretical plane, the generalization of models in different contexts. It is evident that since the success of a strategy for ICTs is closely tied to the network they succeed in creating, the successful exportability of the model
(best practice) is dependent on the presence of several contextual factors that will not necessarily present themselves in the same way in other contexts; the risk is, in other words, that every case can only be specific and not replicated.

Francesco Amoretti

Francesco Amoretti is an Associate Professor of Political Communication at the University of Salerno, Italy. He is a member of the Directive Committee of the Political Communication Review and his publications include ‘Political Communication’, La Nuova Italia (1997); Communicating is Governing (2004), E-Government Policies: Institutions versus Rights. Towards what Kind of Information Society are we moving? (2005). Address: University of Salerno, Department of Sociology and Politics, Via Ponte don Melillo, Fisciano, Italy. [email: amoretti@unisa.it]

W. van de Donk, B. D. Loader, P.G. Nixon & D. Rucht (eds), Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 316 pp., ISBN 0-415-29785-0 (pbk), £19.99.

The dramatic expansion of the Internet in recent years – in terms of its geographical reach, user numbers and infusion into daily life in many areas – has had a profound impact on social and political interactions. There are enormous differences in the degree of impact this technology is having in different places and many contradictory opinions on the long-term effects of its use by social movements. Much of the research in this area so far has responded to the apparent newness of Internet politics, of necessity addressing real and imagined changes contemporaneously. The focus of most Internet research to date has been on gathering evidence and posing questions as to its real and imagined influence. As a result, there has been little opportunity to historicize the role of the Internet in contemporary political activism and/or to position the technology within longer term movement practices.

Increasingly, academic publications are drawing together theories, evidence and critiques gathered in recent years, compiling in the process a body of literature that provides a foundation for understanding some of the roles and functions of Internet technology in the political arena. Analysis of social movements online is a particularly fruitful area for such endeavours; from the earliest utopian and dystopian perspectives to the most recent empirical analyses it was evident that transnational information-sharing technologies could have a profound impact on the ways social movements operate.

There are no definitive answers to questions about whether the Internet offers something new to social movements and whether the organization and practices of such groups are changed by the technology. As the editors of Cyberprotest acknowledge, the fuzzy and fluid phenomena of social movements
make their use of ICTs difficult to study (p. 3). Coupled with the blurred boundaries of Internet communication, and the multiple areas – social, political, economic and cultural – where its impact may be felt, it becomes clear that any volume will struggle to identify rigid parameters for analysis.

Two themes are central to the book. One of these focuses on the role of ICTs in social movements – i.e. does the Internet change what activists do? The other transposes this concept, centring on the issue of how activists make use of – and, in doing so, contribute to the shaping of – the Internet. In the best traditions of research, this volume notes that it is of necessity ‘explorative’ and aims to address some but not all of the issues and identifies areas yet to be addressed. In doing this, Cyberprotest defines its subject area effectively, provides some fascinating new evidence and raises some interesting new questions, resulting in a valuable volume that brings some cohesion to what has previously been a complex and confused topic.

The book is divided into three loosely defined sections, each of which addresses topics familiar to all Internet analysts as well as taking some new directions, in terms of both case studies and conceptual development. In the first section, which looks at changing levels and domains of political action, Dieter Rucht bridges the gap between online and other forms of media – something that many scholars fail to do – and provides a historical link between the use of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media (anachronistic terms by now, perhaps) and a sense of the continuity of some aspects of social movement activism. The other chapters in this section, on anti-corporate websites and ICTs in anti-capitalist movements, are broad overview chapters with somewhat less cohesion. What they lack in depth they do make up for in scope: both look at activism in a number of different countries, though neither really addresses how differences in the environments in which the technology operates might influence opportunities for activism.

The second section looks at changing online strategies, using three case studies – on the anti-globalization movement, the pro-East Timor movement in Portugal and ATTAC protests in France – along with chapter on the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in networked politics. This latter chapter, by Lance Bennett, is one of the strongest in the volume, explores some of the many dimensions of the media/activism nexus and positions digital communication as one aspect of an increasing personalization of information within movements.

The final section looks at identity, citizenship and virtual movements. Chapters on the Dutch women’s movement, the use of ICTs by disability groups in Portugal, the Queer Sisters in Hong Kong and on Australian women in agriculture provide empirical detail on movement practices. These supply the final piece of the Internet activism puzzle, making evident the links and ruptures between online and offline movement politics.
The book has weaknesses, most notably in its failure to explore or even address the role of ICTs in LDCs and among disadvantaged groups within developed countries. The cases and concepts addressed are drawn almost exclusively from developed countries and scant attention is paid to activism in areas with low levels of Internet access. While debates on digital divides may be familiar these days, some recognition of their significance for movement activism would have lent greater depth to the volume.

The most valuable thing Cyberprotest does is to demonstrate clearly and unequivocally the position of the Internet as a tool in the armoury of movement activists. The case studies and broader conceptual analyses provide compelling evidence that the Internet is extremely useful to some activists in some instances. The multi-layering of personal contacts, interactive technologies and mass media is evident throughout this volume, offering a sophistication that has been lacking to date in much analysis of Internet activism.

This volume demonstrates that the Internet does not create social movements, though it can act as a catalyst for them. Nor can it sustain them in the long term. The chapters in this volume show how the Internet can play a key role in their effectiveness, though, and provide a useful body of evidence and ideas for both scholars new to this topic and for those who have spent the past decade or so seeking some cohesion around the challenges it poses for both academics and activists.

Jayne Rodgers

Jayne Rodgers, PhD, researches and teaches in the field of International Communications. Her specialist research area is the impact of the Internet and global media on politics. She is the author of Spatializing International Politics: Analysing Activist Use of the Internet (Routledge, 2003) and of many articles and book chapters. She is currently researching independent online journalism and exploring links between activist and mainstream media. Address: School of Communication & Culture, Royal Roads University, Victoria BC, Canada [email: f.j.rodgers@leeds.ac.uk or jayne.rodgers@royalroads.ca]

A. G. Wilhelm, Digital Nation: Toward an Inclusive Information Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 184 pp., ISBN 0-262-23238-3 (hbk), US$27.95/£18.95

The book is a mixture of academic and practical approaches to the topic of what the author calls ‘the shift to cyberspace’. It takes as a given the economic argument that ICT skills bring economic benefits to the individual, to companies and to the state and concentrates on the implication of this, particularly for cyberspace as the ‘new frontier of civil rights’. The main argument of the
book is to provide a road map for how both individuals and the wider society can migrate to cyberspace without widening social exclusion.

The book is particularly relevant to those who are interested in both the threats and the opportunities provided by the new technologies and the role that ICTs can play in empowering individuals and overcoming social exclusion.

The book provides a series of case studies to illustrate its vision of a digital society. Whilst many of the case studies are US based, there are also examples drawn from the experience of European and developing countries.

The overall theme of the book is a positive one. It sees technology as potentially aiding economic and civic participation, overcoming social ills and providing the opportunity for a new social contract. It is also a call for action, particularly for the development of a US digital policy. Whilst this is primarily aimed at a US audience, the issue of social inclusion and the role of government policy are just as relevant to the European experience.

Wilhelm is not simplistic in his optimism and takes on the argument of ‘why bother with ICTs when millions are starving’. He emphasizes the role of ICTs in revolutionizing learning and of developing a ‘new culture of lifelong learning’. He quotes politicians such as Al Gore and Gerhard Schroder, and business leaders such as Bill Gates to support his argument that an interventionist stance must be taken if societies are to take advantage of what Rupert Murdoch has called the ‘digital natives’ or ‘millennials’ who are entering the labour market having known no other society than one dependent on digital technologies.

Wilhelm’s central theme that a digital nation must be just as well as efficient is a valid one. His approach, however, is wide ranging and anecdotal and this sometimes makes his argument hard to follow. He moves from discussing e-health and the healthcare crisis (in America) to e-work and the environmental benefits of reducing commuting. He uses examples from government policies in the US (particularly Al Gore’s Internet ABCs initiative), the German ‘Internet for all’ programme and Finnish policies on ICT and training. One of the few UK examples quoted is NotSchool.net (see http://www.notschool.net/) which aims ‘to re-unite young people with education’. This rather odd choice of an Essex-based initiative using Apple computers is indicative of the serendipitous use of case studies.

Nevertheless the book does provide a useful introduction to bottom-up community-based initiatives and the US case studies are both relevant and knowledgeably described. This is then linked to the top-down issues related to governmental and inter-governmental initiatives. Both of these are framed within an interest in the dangers of an emerging digital apartheid, with digital technologies being the new frontier of civil rights.

The book concludes with a clear agenda or set of goals for policy-makers – universal access to ICTs (both for economic gain and for civic engagement); training people to be able to make full use of the ICTS (‘Education as the killer
application’) and the emergence of a new social contract based on liberty, equality and solidarity.

Given the current thrust of US government policy, Wilhelm’s concern about the retreat from an interventionist strategy is understandable and his calls for action are generally sound. From a European perspective, however, the book’s general orientation to the digital nation as largely referring to the American digital nation is a drawback. In particular, UK policy is largely ignored. In particular the development of community-based Online Centres through which everyone, regardless of their income, will have local access to computers and the Internet has been a massive investment that has not had the credit it deserves.

Nevertheless, Wilhelm’s book provides a useful and very readable introduction to the importance of interventionist ICT policies and I would recommend it as such, particularly until such time as a book with a similar focus but more closely linked to European initiatives is available.

Bernard Leach

Bernard Leach is head of the department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has been researching into ways in which computers and the Internet can be used for economic regeneration and for improving social cohesion since the 1990s. At that time he led a team that set up the Manchester Host communication system and a network of Electronic Village Halls. He is currently chair of MCIN Community Information Network (http://www.mcin.net/) whose Web Connect consists of 14 geographic and community of interest web portal sites across Greater Manchester. Address: Sociology Department, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manton Building, Rosamund Street West, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK. [email: b.leach@mmu.ac.uk]