E-government: A Philosophical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

E-government is rapidly growing throughout the world and many governments are spending huge sums on e-government initiatives. However, very few e-government projects succeed. There are technical and economic failures. E-government has also been shown to have serious social, juridical and ethical implications. Little discussion has taken place of how e-government should be viewed. This paper uses Bob Goudzwaard's notion of idols as a lens to examine the nature and problems of e-government. It shows how e-government exhibits the characteristics of an idol and distorts norms. This has serious implications for the strategic direction of research and practice of e-government.

1. Introduction

E-government is a rapidly growing phenomenon in both developed and developing countries. Recognizing the perceived benefits, governments are investing huge sums in e-government initiatives. The trend has been supported by the view that improving the quality of e-services and their delivery will improve adoption of e-government and offer governments a cost-effective and highly efficient means to deliver citizen services (Deakins et al, 2002; Ebrahim et al, 2005; Mutula, 2005). As a result, it has an increasing impact on how governments at all levels function and make their services available to their citizens. In 2005-06, the UK invested over £12 billion in e-government initiatives, including £3.3 billion on local government (Cabinet Office, 2006a).

The term e-government in general refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as wide area networks, the internet and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government. Information and communication technologies are used to improve: delivery of government services to citizens, interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information or more efficient government management (www.worldbank.org/egov). Gartner (2000) differentiates four 'stages' of e-government:

- simple provision of information online,
- allowing citizens to enter information online
- online voting and other governmental activities
- transformational government', by which is meant that ICT transforms the whole way in which government works, both internally and also in its relationship to citizens.

The fourth is, of course, a broad vision that often inspires the uptake of e-government.

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The perceived benefits of any of the four stages include: cost savings in the public sector, widening citizen access to government services, easier methods of transaction, efficient public administration, more effective management of government departments and bodies, and acting as a catalyst for economic development, regeneration and poverty alleviation. The overriding message is that e-government should be widely adopted and made the core of modern government. UK Cabinet Office reports (2005, 2006) declare that it is time for governmental departments to leap ahead by rapidly adopting modern technology and position themselves as service oriented efficient organisations to (in the words of then Prime Minister, Tony Blair) "give citizens choice, with personalised services designed around their needs not the needs of the provider" (Cabinet Office, 2005). E-government is particularly attractive to developing countries, who see it as a means of combating corruption and accountability in government, and leapfrogging directly into the twenty-first century.

1.1 Problems in e-government

However, e-government exhibits problems. First, there have been numerous technical difficulties. For example, the problems with the online facilities maintained by the UK's Inland Revenue for filing tax returns led to thousands of citizens filing their returns late, and being penalized (Moore, 2007). However, many e-government initiatives fail, not just technically, but especially in not delivering the benefits hoped for and even leading to unexpected problems. Jaeger (2005) lays out the need to study the social and political impact of e-government initiatives and indeed the very concept of e-government itself.

This has uncovered a number of potentially serious problems. For example, when government services are made available online, attempts are made to reduce or dispense with corresponding offline services or to drastically reduce offline availability. Angell (2006) examines the cost-savings achieved in the UK by reducing number of personnel, and finds that this might disenfranchise the least advantaged sections of the community, thus jeopardising the very function of government (ZDNet, 2006); such 'benefits' do more harm than good. Griffiths (2002) declares "it is time to consider whether the higher uptake of ICT automatically means e-democracy or even an enhancement in democracy". McHenry and Borisov (2006), citing Alexander (2004), point to the possibility that "authoritarian governments ... may learn to dominate this channel in order to put forth self-serving propaganda and drown out contrary voices" and support Katchanovski and La Porte's (2005) notion of 'Potemkin e-villages', erected to give the appearance of democracy without supporting its substance. The Guardian quotes the SmartGov report issued by the British government 'Internet users should be forced to file their tax returns online rather than on paper' (Guardian, 17 July, 2003). Likewise developing countries are 'compelled' to install e-government by making it a condition of aid (Wade, 2002).

There have been successes, however. One example is the Friends project in Kerala, India, reported by Kumar (2002), UN (2002). It is a bill-payment mechanism by which people can go to one place to make seven different payments, including utility bills and taxes. The single payment is accepted, a receipt issued and a (paper) copy of the receipt was taken over to the respective departments. This was a success because 1. It provided immediate experience of convenience to the citizen, who prior to Friends had to make seven different journeys to make the payments 2. It did not require citizens to be computer-literate UN (2002). ICT was an integral part of this project, accumulating all seven payments into a single figure, speeding up printing the receipts and apportioning the total payments to the various departments. Thus technology was seen an enabler, playing a mundane rather than prestigious role in the process. The penetration of ICT is not vey high, but it offers a service to everyone, and makes a major step change in convenient service delivery to a common public activity. The popularity of Friends system led to banks copying the idea, with Bill Pay, by which the banks apportion one payment into several. The Friends project contrasts with many projects in which the role planned for ICT is more ambitious. For example, an alternative approach to the same multi-payment problem might have been to integrate all the departments by electronic payment systems which are accessed by the public directly via web pages.

Unfortunately, such successes are relatively few in proportion to the failures, both in terms of number, and especially in terms of financial commitment. This leads to the questions: why do so many e-government projects fail, and what can be done to reduce the number of failures and increase the number of successes?

The frequency of problems should prompt questioning of the priority many governments attach to e-government initiatives. Despite this, research into e-government has, in the main, limited itself to looking only into the services available, technical capabilities and usage information, and not these wider issues. Heeks tried to stimulate discussion of the roots of such problems in Heeks (1998), but little discussion occurred. Since then, though there were numerous case studies of e-government failures which highlighted specific problems, these were treated more as identifying barriers in order to propose solutions rather than explore the roots of the problems (Jaeger, 2005; Wade, 2002). There seemed to have been an unspoken assumption that e-government is inherently a good thing, which will deliver benefits once these teething troubles have been overcome. However such widespread commitment to e-government, not only at the project level but also as a strategic way forward, is being questioned by many researchers, such as Avgerou et al (2006), Avgerou (2007), Ciborra (2005), Garson (2005), Jaeger (2006), Stahl (2005).

This study does not seek to add to this growing call for questioning, but rather seeks to explore what makes those who are responsible for implementing e-government ignore the issues underlying the more serious problems rather than critically questioning the claims made for e-government.

1.2 The Problem of Idolatry

One reason that is being increasingly discussed is that of an attitude referred to as 'idolisation' or some equivalent word Hummels (2000), Schaefer (2003), Lotter (2005), Heeks (2006), Gauld et al (2006).

Idolisation of technology occurs at many levels and has diverse effects. For example, at a lower level, we have idolisation of, for example, the Apple Mac computer platform. Such an attitude has been observed among Apple Mac users, who generally idolise Mac products and denigrate products of other companies. This passion is combined by a collective and vociferous criticism of anyone who expresses a negative comment about a Mac product. On the other hand, at a higher level, Lotter (2005) speaks of the idolisation of technology as resulting in a process of technicisation of society as a whole.

Schaefer (2003) discusses glorification of technology among the younger generation, who express their identity through the possession of technical artefacts. Hummels (2000) identifies an attitude of idolisation in the positioning of household products such as blenders as 'symbols of progress', which would provide such benefits as savings in time and costs. This attitude, he says, also a significant impact on the design and styling of these products to present them to the middle class as objects that would grant them an upper class lifestyle. Such positioning fuelled wide scale adoption of these products, and soon the 'kitchen was packed with streamlined electrical appliances to support progressive living' (Hummels, 2000 pg 1.10).

In relation to information technology and specifically its application in the public sector, Heeks (2006) repeatedly uses the term 'idolisation' in relation to e-government.

The United Nations makes extensive use of Heeks' work and has itself adopted the term 'idolisation' to refer to the placing of technology at the core of governmental processes.

Heeks situates idolisation among several attitudes that might be adopted towards ICT:
- Ignore, which refers to ICT not being a part of the reform agenda. Even when computers are available, they remain unused.
- Isolate, which refers to making the procurement and deployment of ICT the sole responsibility of

the technical staff.

- Integrate, which refers to an understanding of the potential of ICT but tempered by recognition that ICT can at best play a secondary role.
- Idolise, which refers to a structuring the reform process around ICT. ICT forms the core of the business of government. We see this in the vision embodied in the term 'transformational government'.

Heeks warns that wherever an attitude of idolisation is noticeable, the possibility of failure is very high. He gives the example of some e-government initiatives in India in which the benefits expected to accrue from the implementation of IT, such as increased efficiency, public accountability, transparent in operations and decentralisation of power, were unrealistic. The reason these initiatives did not succeed was, Heeks suggests, because they placed technology at the core of reforming archaic governmental processes.

Heeks (1998) further warns that when information technology is idolised, the information loses significance and the technology assumes prominence. Because of the prominence of the technological aspect, the information requirements are not met, and the whole project can fail. Striking a similar note, Gauld et al (2006) refer to the idolisation of technology as one of four 'enthusiasms' exhibited towards public sector IS, characterised by policy makers who are 'over-aware of the potential of technology' and so believe merely implementing ICT leads to drastic benefits (Gauld et al, 2006).

Even though policy makers might be aware that that their expectations were unrealistic they are still convinced of its potential. Thus the attitude of idolisation is found in both stages, making initial expectations unrealistic and also at the stage of supposedly more mature consideration, when a firm belief in the potential is preserved.

In this way, the metaphorical notion of idolisation is being enlisted by those who wish to address the major problems of a social or political nature which might have deeper roots and which might, indeed threaten the whole edifice of e-government. Yet, the expression 'idolisation of technology' appears nebulous. The way it has been used depends on our intuitive understanding of what it entails and implies as an attitude towards technology. There has been not been any clear enunciation of what idolisation means and how it occurs, especially in relation to information technology. This makes it very difficult to discuss how to solve or rectify the root causes of these problems. For this reason it would be useful to characterize the notion of idolatry more precisely.

2. Goudzwaard's Notion of Idolatry

Goudzwaard (1984) has discussed idolatry to a useful degree of detail, and tentatively applied it to technology as a whole. Though published more than two decades ago, his ideas might fulfil our needs if we are able to reapply them in a principled way to e-government. He examined the notions of ideology and idolatry, based on the thinking of Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, arguing that there are 'idols of our time', of which technology is a major one. He says "An ideology arises when idolatry takes root in the pursuit of a legitimate end" (p.20). "In its original sense, ideology means an entire system of values, conceptions, convictions and norms which are used as a set of tools for reaching a single, concrete, all-encompassing societal end" (p.18). Then he analyses four major ideologies of modern times, of revolution, of nation, of material prosperity and of guaranteed security. These are all valid in themselves; it is idolatry that has converted them into ideologies.

Though he has published more recently on this issue (2003, 2006), we use his (1984) as the main source because it gives clearer characterization of idolatry that we can develop into a useful lens. His more recent work (2003, 2006) is more comprehensive and learned and contains considerable argument about the

notion of idolatry especially in the realm of global economics. However, these are less amenable to development into a lens with which to understand approaches to e-government.

He explains the concept of an idol succinctly in a short paragraph, which summarises much of the rest of his thought (pg 21):

"First, people sever something from their immediate environment, refashion it and erect it on its own feet in a special place. Second, they ritually consecrate it and kneel before it, seeing it as a thing which has life in itself. Third, they bring sacrifices and look to the idol for advice and direction. In short, they worship it. ... Fourth, they expect the god to repay their reverence, obedience and sacrifice with health, prosperity and happiness."

Goudzwaard makes clear that idolatry is not simply a perspective we might take, one attitude among many, but is harmful in a number of major ways. Goudzwaard exposes some of these:
- Idolatry "distorts genuine norms and values" (p.24) in ways we might not otherwise wish for. "It defines goodness, truth, justice and love as that which serves the end."
- An idol is an end that "indiscriminately justifies every means" (p.23). Increasingly, the means chosen are ones we would not normally agree with.
- That an idol has absolute authority over our lives means that it "demands that men, women and the environment continually adjust to the new laws of the continually developing means. If some aspect of the environment or humankind is ruined, this is justified as an unfortunate but necessary sacrifice. For the good cause: the happiness of all." (p.25)
- The idol "creates its own false enemies. The ideology declares anyone a traitor who because of his position or past forms an obstacle to the goal" (p.25).
- "Worship brings with it a decrease in their own power: now the god reveals how they should live and act" (p.21). "Soon, however, they become dependent on their own creation. No wonder: having given the creation its own life, it has a grip on them" (p.22).
- Basden (2008) adds that an idol delivers the opposite of what it promises.
- As a result of all these, Goudzwaard says, the earth suffers (p.48), and in particular, "The poor developing countries are hit the hardest by the economic spiral" (p.90).

The specific aim of the paper is to explore the nature of idolatrous attitudes towards e-government by employing, and developing, Goudzwaard's characterization of idolatry.

3. E-Government as Idolatry

Taking Goudzwaard's characterization of idolatry quoted above, we will examine each phrase to see how it fits e-government. In applying the notion of idolatry as Goudzwaard has, to economics, technology and politics, we must abstract from the spatio-physical characteristics of 'primitive' idols to the attitudes that worshippers take. So we will reinterpret the phrase in more precise form.

3.1 Sever it from its immediate environment

This refers to stressing the difference of the idol from its origins. E-government is seen as a different and new form of government. The UK Government believes, for example, that e-government plays a central role in what they called 'transformational government'. The Prime Minister expressed this in visionary terms: "This is the time to push forward, faster and on all fronts: open up the system, break down the monoliths, put the parent and pupil and patient and law-abiding citizen at the centre of it. We have made great progress. Let us learn the lessons of it not so as to rest on present achievements but to take them to a new and higher level in the future." (Cabinet Office, 2006). This vision is explained in more detail in (Cabinet Office, 2005) in a section entitled 'Transformational Government Enabled by Technology':
"Beyond 2011 should be a period of further radical change in the delivery of public services, enabled by

technology. The cycle of technological advancement is rapid and hard to predict. But if the broad themes of this strategy over the next five years are achieved in practice, strong foundations will be in place". Such a clear severance from traditional forms of doing government is frequent in government statements, but even citizens expect something new. Evans et al (2005:354) say "Given that citizens of this world have come to expect 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week availability in their commercial interactions, it is only natural that they would expect the same from their government".

3.2 Refashion it
Refashioning entails redefining the things that pertain to e-government. In particular, the notion of government itself is redefined. The dominant view of e-government is that it is the modern government that responds to the needs of its citizens and fulfils their aspirations (Clift, 2004; McDonald, 2006; OECD, 2002), with the in-built assumption that traditional forms of government do not. Vathanophas et al (2006) claims that e-government is a 're-invention' of government to make it more 'outward looking'. Gasco (2005) speaks of a 'new relationship between the government and the governed', based on wide civic participation, which only e-government can bring about. BEA (2005) is more specific about what needs to be, and can be, refashioned by e-government: "The genuine benefits of Internet-enabled government administration can be achieved where administrative workflows are redesigned." According to Heeks (2006), private sector concepts are mistakenly applied as appropriate for the public sector. Reports produced by governments and multi-lateral institutions refer to citizens as 'consumers' (OECD, 2002) and also suggest that being a consumer (of services provided by government) is an integral subset of being a citizen (McDonald, 2006).
Thus, we see widespread expectation that e-government will refashion government itself in not just one way but several, including characteristics of government (responsive, able to fulfil aspirations and outward-looking), civic participation, administrative workflows, new ways of filing tax returns, and seeing citizens as consumers.

3.3 Erect in a special place
In terms of a phenomenon like e-government, this means that we treat it as unique and special, and as something that people are expected to make an effort to come to it rather than it going out to people. Government, business and academia have all given undue importance to e-government and elevated it to a high pedestal. Governments have set up separate departments and in some countries, full ministries. The UK, for example, has an Office of the e-Envoy and a Minister of e-government. Similar departments have been created in several other countries like India, Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. Legislation has been passed to facilitate the implementation of e-government. Examples are Jordan - the King's declaration (Navarra, 2006) and Russia -- Russian Federation Government resolution 98 of Feb 12, 2003 (McHenry and Brasov, 2006). In addition to these, massive e-government projects with their offices and administrative personnel have been set up; examples are E-Europe, E-Russia and E-Jordan. The effort, therefore, is to give e-government an exalted position in government.

3.4 Ritual consecration
This is a public statement that the thing that becomes an idol is 'sacred'. It must be served and those who do not serve the idol are castigated. Serving the idol, we find are many e-government conferences, IS conferences with an e-government track, numerous academic journals dedicated to e-government (for example, 'E-government Quarterly', 'Government Information Quarterly'), and business consultants have e-government advisory and research practices. On the other hand, Da`Briel (2007) criticises Caribbean governments for not doing enough to further e-government adoption. Governments have also been accused of not spending enough on e-government initiatives.

The idol must be protected, and criticism is minimized and questioners are deemed heretics, and those who do not serve the idol are castigated. The failures of e-government are reduced to 'problems' for which solutions are to be sought, and 'barriers' in e-government adoption to be overcome (Cunningham et al,

2005; Deakins et al, 2002; Mimicopoulous, 2004; Nhamposa, 2005; McDonald, 2006; OECD, 2002).

3.5 Kneel before it

This can refer to voluntary, publicly- declared and - agreed submission to the idol, affirming its authority over us. The former is clearly seen in Evans et al's (2005) suggestion that the most important tool for e-government adoption is a willing citizenship. E-government should be widely embraced and made the core of governmental functioning. The authority that e-government has over our research may be seen in that most research so far has focused on the benefits and prescribing solutions to overcome the barriers to its adoption (Cunningham et al, 2005; Deakins et al, 2002; Mimicopoulous, 2004; Nhamposa, 2005).

3.6 Life of its own

The idol determines its own course of development and fashions its environment to its own ends, rather than assuming some responsibility towards its environment. Clift (2004) sees citizens as a market to be developed for e-government. So creating and increasing the market demand of online government services is seen as a goal of the government. Having made e-government an entity in its own right, we have given e-government the means to sustain itself. The setting up of e-government departments, journals and conferences dedicated to e-government has granted it the means to determine its own development. So it is no surprise to find Heeks (2006:3) reporting "Estimated global spend (on e-government) by government (excluding public sector health, education and utilities) of US$ 3 trillion during the decade of the 2000s (i.e. the first five years)." In the UK, the government spends billions in ICT and related services, employs 50,000 ICT professionals and is one of the largest customers of the technology industry (Cabinet Office, 2005). The scale and complexity of government business means its deployment of technology is often pushing the boundaries of what has been achieved in public or private sectors globally."

3.7 Bring Sacrifices

This means that other things are sacrificed to or for it, and we as a community are willing to make such sacrifices. Many examples can be found in e-government.

Governments across the globe have invested huge amounts in e-government initiatives. To protect their investment, The Guardian (17 July, 2003) reports, the SmartGov report on e-government produced for the British government suggests that compulsion should be used as the solution to the 'e-government credibility problem'. Choice is sacrificed.

Cost savings are often achieved by reducing the number of personnel employed to deal with public services. Prof Angell in ZDNet (2006) points out that this results in the least advantaged sections of the community, who are functionally illiterate, being unable to access the technology and hence will be left out of the development effort. Such people need staff to deal with and when technology replaces staff, e-government becomes 'undemocratic'. Moores' (2007) example of the problems with online tax filing is a small version of this. Investment in e-government is sourced from tax revenue and project costs keep increasing (Moores, 2007; Evans et al, 2005). Scarce resources are being diverted to fund e-government initiatives. The final cost of the controversial NHS IT project has been estimated at £30 billion (ZDNet, 2004) healthcare services are rolled back because of funding deficit (Daily Mail, 8 June 2006). The World Bank lent funded e-government projects in the poor nations, but over a half of these projects were failures (Da`Briel, 2007). These nations have incurred debt liability without seeing any positive results.

A third type of sacrifice is that e-government is used as a mask for more authoritarian government. Stahl (2005) cites Breen as saying "communication revolution brought about by IT is on the verge of becoming an undemocratic force that acts against public access to information". "But even if things are not quite so serious," remarks Stahl, "it is clear that access demands intellectual skills, the ability and possibility to use technology, and the possibility to get to information." He then underlines another sacrifice: "Some of these

constraints are of an economic nature which brings us to the next critical point. Information technology and the Internet are increasingly used and paid for by the economy. There is a danger that this process leads to a view of politics as a mere helper of economic interests which would endanger the legitimacy of politics and democracy." Thus we find support for e-government is accompanied by sacrifice of choice, of exclusion of the disadvantaged, of funding for other services, of democracy itself, of the very nature of politics, and even of human life.

3.8 Look to it for advice
If we look to the idol for advice, we fashion our policies around and according to it and alter our logic to suit it. There is little in the literature about this. However, Wade(2002) makes the latter point that research talks about plans, intentions and opportunities but blurs the distinction between these and verified actions on the ground. Griffiths (2002) comments that the mantra is frequently repeated "Everyone is wired, or about to be wired" and this is used as the reason why government should refashion itself to Internet transactions. But, Griffiths points out, "Internet growth is slowing in developed countries. Digital divides aren't disappearing, just changing." (pg 1)

3.9 Worship it
If we worship something, we declare its absolute worth in itself (the word 'worship' contains the root 'worth'). Hesson et al (2007) proclaim the worth of e-government, "Although still in its adolescence, the core transformative capacities of the internet include its potential for radically shrinking communications and information costs, maximizing speed, broadening reach, and eradicating distance". The pre-dominant theme in e-government literature is one of positive reverence. E-government is associated with any effort to reform government to make it more flexible and effective in providing public services (Ancarani, 2005; Vathanophas et al, 2006). Since reform and efficiency can be brought about only by e-government projects, it is to be made the foundation of the above-mentioned 'new relationship'. A review of e-government literature shows that some of the adjectives used in its relation are:
- modern (BEA, 2005; Gasco, 2005)
- re-invention (Vathanophas et al, 2006)
- revolutionary (Cabinet Office, 2005; Cabinet Office, 2006)
- transformation (Clift, 2004; Gunter, 2006; McDonald, 2006; OECD, 2002)

3.10 Expect repayment
We expect benefits in life, especially health, prosperity and happiness. From the government's point of view, "Technology allows governments to service citizens in a more timely, effective, and cost-efficient way." (Evans et al, 2005:354) One of the reasons e-government should be implemented, its proponents declare, is its potential to root out corruption (Cho & Choi, 2004; OECD, 2002). So merely implementing e-government improves government accountability and transparency (Ancarani, 2005). Other advocates claim e-government is a cheaper way of delivering citizen services and the savings thus obtained can be re-routed to the public (Da`Briel, 2007; Heeks, 2006). Another repayment expected is efficiency in public administration and easier access to government information and services (Evans et al, 2005). Deakins et al (2002) say that e-government should be pursued because it "allows anyone, anywhere to go online anytime to obtain information, complete transactions and to communicate with their elected representatives" (pg 375). E-government is expected to alleviate poverty, and fuel social and economic development (Ghapanchi, 2007; Kitaw, 2006; Vathanophas at al, 2006). Lofty goals such as the strengthening of democracy and building trust in governments are also associated with the implementation of e-government (Clift, 2004, OECD; 2002). Finally, e-government is also expected to improve the quality of citizens' lives (Gasco, 2006; Heeson et al, 2007).

3.11 Harm of Idolatry

We see that the general attitude to e-government exhibits all Goudzwaard's characteristics of idolatry, not just peripherally and partially, but fully and copiously. Thus, we submit, Goudzwaard's notion of idolatry is a useful lens with which to view e-government, and hence discuss, research and develop it. But what follows from this? Goudzwaard makes clear that idolatry is not simply one attitude among many, but is harmful in a major way. We noted a number of types of harm which occur in society from idolatry. Norms are distorted in ways which we would not otherwise wish. In the case of e-government, we see this operating in its treatment in terms of e-business, and of citizens as consumers. The espousal of detrimental means to promote e-government may be seen in the call for coercion to ensure those with Internet access use it to access government services. The forcing of humans and environment to continually adjust to e-government may be seen in the reduction in service personnel consequent on installing e-government services on the assumption that everyone will use Internet access. The creation of false enemies may be seen in Angell and Ezer's (2005:173) observation that "'Development' is a way of convincing other countries that they are living in darkness, and that this is a solvable problem: 'do as we say, and we may let you share in our prosperity.'" Dependency comes about because government employees are encouraged to think only in e-government terms and to overlook other means of doing government. There are perhaps two types of dependency caused by the idol of e-government: of government and citizens on I.T., and of developing countries on the rich world. And e-government will tend to deliver the opposite of what it promises, as seen for example in the disenfranchisement of less-advantaged sections of the population mentioned by Angell (2005). Jaeger (2005:703) gives another example:

"Depending on the ways in which information is presented, e-government sites could encourage democratic dialogue and participation. Alternately, the same information presented in a different manner could serve to promote the policies of the government, limiting dialogue about important issues and participation."

Thus if Goudzwaard is correct then we can expect commensurate harm to emerge from the phenomenon of e-government.

4. Concluding Remarks

If Goudzwaard has correctly identified idolatry as a phenomenon of modern society, and our analysis, based on the writings of the e-government community of thought, is valid, then the notion of idolatry might be a useful lens through which to view, examine, understand and discuss e-government. In relation to e-government it provides: a way to understand its power, a normative critique, a way to account for the problems that we are beginning to experience, an explanation why most critique so far has failed to effect the radical changes of direction necessary, and a basis for suggesting new directions of ameliorative action. The paper has set forward a kind of 'hypothesis' that the notion of idolatry as characterized by Goudzwaard (1984) can help us understand the attitudes that are taken towards e-government, which can lead either to success or failure of a social or political kind. While the small number of instances cited here - one of success and several of failure - cannot be treated as conclusive evidence in favour of the hypothesis, it does at least suggest that the notion of idolatry might be useful. It suggests that further exploration of the notion of idolatry as a lens through which to view e-government would be worthwhile. This means that the intellectual paradigm under which e-government may be researched as idolatry needs exhibit a number of characteristics. It must acknowledge the deep societal and structural (as well as personal) normativity implied in Goudzwaard's account. It must be properly attuned to the faith aspect of human reality, rather than reducing it to, for example, psychology, sociology, economics or politics. Dooyeweerd's suite of aspects offers one solution to this problem. The diversity of the aspects and their ability to tease out hidden issues in peoples' statements make them an appropriate solution.

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