



E-government discourses: An inductive analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a new perspective on e-government by documenting the categories of e-government discourses, and evaluating them within a public value framework. Understanding e-government discourses is significant, since these discourses represent contested visions of e-government, and one can derive a feel for public sentiment about e-government from the discourses used in the media. The findings are accumulated through an inductive analysis of 85 newspaper articles, published during the year of 2010, in three top-selling, ideologically different, nationally circulating Turkish newspapers. In these 85 articles, 98 discourses presented by 90 policy actors are found. Five positive and four negative discourse categories and their relationships emerged from the analysis of the data. The results show that, government reform efforts shaped by the New Public Management movement and Turkey's harmonization efforts with the global political system in general, and with the European Union in particular, are influential in the presentation of e-government projects to the Turkish public through newspapers.

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1. Introduction

The provision of government information and services, and opening of additional channels for political participation, transparency and accountability via information and communication technologies (ICTs) is defined as electronic or digital government. Means and Schneider (2000, p. 121) define e-government as the relationships between governments, their customers (businesses, other governments and citizens) and their suppliers (again, businesses, other governments and citizens) by the use of electronic means.

E-government is not only comprised of and cannot be fully understood only by studying government web sites, the innovative ways of providing government information and services, the necessary technical infrastructure, or the personnel who operate these technical and organizational systems. Students of e-government should also recognize and take into account the perceptions of e-government by the major stakeholders of this process, who are the citizens, businesses, government agencies, civil society organizations and political and administrative decision-makers. The processes through which the demand for e-government products (i.e., information and services), and the justification for the use of resources for e-government projects, also need the attention of e-government scholars. Issues of demand of and justification for e-government are closely related to the public value that e-government produces. Therefore, discussions of e-government discourses are conducted in this article within the public value framework.

This article offers a fresh perspective on e-government from a non-Western point of view by documenting the discourses of e-government used in Turkish newspapers. Understanding e-government

discourses is crucial since these discourses represent contested visions of the e-government, and competing and complementing evaluations of public value emanating from e-government applications. Discourses presented in the media can be instrumental in creating demand and providing justification for e-government projects. As West (2005, p. 13) aptly observes:

Media coverage is important to the dissemination of new technology because it affects both how people think about technology and their receptivity to change. Reporting that is positive about technology encourages people to be favorable to new creations.

Given the importance of analyzing multiple discourses for a better understanding of the e-government construct, the objective of this paper is to empirically document the numerous and sometimes competing discourses used in the media by examining the newspaper coverage of e-government in Turkey. The data analysis method is the content analysis of news and commentaries of all e-government projects in three major Turkish newspapers during 2010. Five positive and four negative e-government discourses are documented in this study. The final section of the article includes critical evaluation of the findings and suggestions for future research.

2. Brief literature review

2.1. Discourse

The academic exploration of the discourse concept can be traced back to the discussions of Mannheim (1936) regarding the reproduction of knowledge and authority in a society. Gee (1999) defines discourse as what is typically sayable about a topic within the constraints of a given

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time, place, or social, cultural, or institutional setting. In other words, discourses constitute the shapes and limits of exploration and communication of ideas.

Critical discourse analysis is an action of resistance against the dominant distortions and prejudices that discourses create and recreate. The analysis necessitates clarifying the underlying power relationships and decision-making activities, and also unearthing the ideological origins of discourses. Van Dijk (1998) defines 'critical discourse analysis' as looking at the premises, justifications and presuppositions of an argument/discourse, keeping in mind the historical, contextual and theoretical factors, and without being trapped into reductionism.

Discourses of e-government, or discourses about any important development in a society for that matter, may be linked to the agenda-setting role of mass communication. Since McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1972) argued for the influence of the news media agenda on the public agenda (mass media sets the agenda for what audience members considers important), many studies followed suit.¹

Another concept that is related to agenda setting is media framing. It is defined as the selection and the emphasis of certain perspectives to the exclusion of others, to make sense of observed phenomena; an understanding not always necessarily meshed with reality (Ghanem, 1997, p. 10). This article uses a similar approach with the discourse analysis and media-framing research areas, as it explores how the emphasis of certain attributes of e-government and the de-emphasis of some others, frame the e-government discussion differently for its consumers, that is, citizens, academicians and governments. It should be noted, however, that the focus of this article is not the transmitter of the e-government discourses, that is, the role played by the media per se. The focus is on the transmission, the message brought by the use of e-government discourses to the consumers of these discourses.

2.2. The relationship between e-government and discourse

Few researchers, who examined the non-technical, communication-oriented aspects of technology use in the government, studied the relationship between e-government and discourse. Among these limited number of studies, some emphasized the role of technology as an enabler for argumentation, deliberation and negotiation, that is, participatory decision-making, recreating the Greek-city-state-like deliberations on computer screens. For example, Gordon and Richter (2002) explained and gave examples to the use of discourse support systems, which are groupware designed to increase democratic participation and decision-making in public administration. An excellent example to this process is the integration of discourse support systems with geographical information systems in order to facilitate a computer-mediated discussion of city plans on the Internet by citizens (Gordon & Richter, 2002, p. 7), which are in reality, online 'citizen decision-support systems'.

Heeks (2005, p. 59–66), by using Argyris' notions of "espoused theories" and "theories in use", argues that public discourse—which is different from private motivations and actions—on e-government may reflect a 'discourse of rationality', which is disconnected from the realities of the organization in question. He uses the metaphor of a "rotten coconut". The vendor firm, for example, sees the surface of the organization (the coconut), which seems fine and healthy; but it knows very little about the political processes and weaknesses (rottenness), such as corrupt practices, within the organization.

West (2005, p. 38–39) emphasizes the role of the media in shaping the political context of e-government. He argues that media coverage,

as an important factor affecting the adoption of new technology, is used for highlighting priorities and getting the financial resources for technological investments. He contends that in order to invest a lot of money from the public purse, it is necessary to convince the general public that, investments in technology has priority over other areas such as education and health-care.

West argued that when e-government is perceived as a technical, non-ideological issue, it will be seen in non-political terms. Thus, it will be supported by people and funded by politicians, who are coming from all the different parts of the ideological spectrum. However, if e-government is viewed in political terms, it will no longer be seen as a technical means that serves government reform. This non-technocratic perception will decrease public support and funding for e-government (West, 2005, p. 43).

West (2005, p. 170) also provided two basic categories of e-government discourse, as conservative and liberal discourses of e-government. He observed:

Supporters will have to justify IT expenditures based either on a conservative message, such as cost savings and improved efficiency) or a liberal message (closing the digital divide or providing more universal access). Conservative messages justify e-government as a cost-saver, liberal messages justify it as spending for promoting equality.

Zinnbauer (2004, p. 7–8), after arguing that very limited attention has been given to e-government rhetoric, claimed the existence of two major narratives (discourses) of e-government: e-administration and e-democracy. He urgently calls for more research on these discourses in order to reassess the goals and means of e-government development (p. 11). However, a serious limitation of Zinnbauer's discussion and the resulting categories of e-administration and e-democracy narratives are that they are deduced from the literature and thus lack empirical validation.

Wastell (2002), on the other hand, provides some empirical evidence as he observes the defensive use of various discourses of e-government in a local authority in the U.K., for conferring identity, reducing task-related anxiety, and resisting organizational change. Wastell emphasizes the dialectical process by which the "new discourses [are] reinterpreted on encountering on established ones" (p. 182). He underlines various characteristics of the e-government discourse, such as the discourse being oriented towards service, rather than towards either democratic or policy-making perspectives, and e-government being a continuation of earlier reform efforts with the help of new technology, under a new name (p. 187).

Wastell also indicates the presence of "discourse of dependency" and "discourse of consumerism" between the providers and users of government services (p. 190–191). Although Wastell provides some empirical evidence to discourse use in e-government practices, he also complains from the lack of empirical evidence (p. 184). The shortcoming of Wastell's study is that, it does not present the subcategories of e-government discourse(s) in a systematic way.

The most detailed analysis of the relationship between e-government and discourse is presented by Yammine (2002), who studied the public discourse on these new technological means in Switzerland. Yammine evaluated the news content by examining the dimensions of time, judgment/evaluation, challenges and concrete e-government applications being used. She observed that e-government discourse is more technical, pragmatic, and cautious in its expectations, since e-government could not create the hype that dot.com era has generated. Yammine's analysis of news content was quite detailed:

... content analysis focuses on four categories which are applied to all the articles: per article we distinguish a maximum of six positions for each of which we determine the following categories: 1) temporal perspective: present-, past- or future-oriented; 2) judgment/evaluation: positive, negative, neutral, ambivalent;

¹ For example, Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) on the impact of candidate images and political interest on personal agendas in a presidential election, Ghanem (1996) on the coverage of crime in news media, and Fine (1992) about affirmative action coverage.

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