Eaves: Connecting with Citizens Through Digital Government

As you know, over the last thirty years or so I have developed a fairly elaborate theory about public sector leadership and management that unfolds from the very simple idea of the strategic triangle. A key part of this theory is that individuals related to government in many different roles. The most important are the roles of citizen, taxpayer, client (recipient of goods and services), and client (person who is obliged by government to act to achieve a public purpose – e.g. an industrial polluter). One can add others such as those individuals who participate in the processes of achieving government purposes through co-production (e.g. parents who help their children learn, or victims who help police find offenders), or through participation in government decision making (e.g. jury duty, attending public meetings, voting, and so on). None of these roles are the role of “customer” (an individual one sees on the other side of a service encounter, who pays for the good or service being provided, and who is recognized by society as the appropriate arbiter of value in that individual transaction.) But for a few small exceptions, I don’t believe government has many “customers.” Its relationship with individuals are very different kind.

Obviously, each individual is often simultaneously in one or more of these roles. But what distinguishes individuals in these roles is the particular tape that is playing in their head as they are encountering or overseeing or participating in government activities. The client beneficiary is thinking about whether they are getting the benefits to which they are entitled. The client-obligatee is wondering how he can minimize the burden and whether he is being treated fairly. The taxpayer wants costs to be low. I usually treat the “citizen” as the ideal Rawlsian citizen who is deciding whether the government is acting effectively and fairly against a standard that is set by putting himself behind the “veil of ignorance” where the individual who is thinking like a citizen does not know what particular role he or she will occupy in the future. This last is obviously an ideal type. It is hard for any of us to shed the particular interests that are associated with both our position in society, and the particular context in which we are evaluating a government effort. But part of the ideal of democratic deliberation is to move individuals a bit closer to this idealized position in the hope of assembling a “we” from a bunch if “I’s”.

The reason I am telling you all this is that, on occasion, when I have tried to think about the best way to come at the subject of digital government, I have thought that one useful diagnostic framework would be to see the digital systems as connecting individuals to government *in these various roles.* The information systems that could support transactions with clients would be different than those that would support transactions with voters which would be different than those that would help co-producers of government outcomes perform their roles, and so on. This is the fundamental idea that is the valuable idea behind a customer oriented government in the sense that it uses the power of digital communications to create highly individualized encounters, but leaves behind the conceptually awkward but all too familiar idea of a customer in favor of a much more nuanced picture of the different ways that individuals interact with democratic governments.