

Intermediaries in E-Inclusion: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The development of socially-aware eGovernment policies requires the implementation of multiple delivery channels to give the different user categories the choice of which service access alternatives (physical and electronic) to use each time. The paper claims that new intermediaries play a potentially significant role in inclusive eGovernment strategies, in both the developed and the developing countries. A selective review of the disparate literature highlights the need for a better understanding of the role of these actors and their impacts on the qualities of the citizens' and public-sector relationships. Our exploratory research suggests the usefulness of placing the intermediaries in an institutional framework and proposes an agenda for future research.

1. Introduction

Ten years ago, most commentators, ICT providers, and governments were ready to bet that the extensive use of eGovernment would be enough to spur a leap in quality in the internal functioning of the public agencies, while also raising the effectiveness of the services for citizens and businesses. But things have turned out otherwise. Recently, the supranational bodies (among them the European Union, OECD, and the United Nations) have attempted to insert eGovernment strategies into a wider context, one that takes into account the dynamics that drive contemporary societies. eGovernment (or more generally ICT) policies are increasingly interwoven with diversity-related issues, such as social inclusion and population ageing, or quality of life. To achieve one of the more ambitious goals of the eEurope 2005 program - which aims to make the administrations “more user-centered and inclusive, providing 24/7 personalized service to everyone, no matter their circumstances or special needs” - the national governments and public administrations are invited to intervene in an integrated way, that is, by combining policies and actions. For example, in reconciling goals such as competitiveness and social gains, the growing

provision of public-interest (e-)services needs to go hand-in-hand with coordinated actions at the infrastructural, technological, training, and cultural levels. Otherwise, the gaps – in terms of ICT access, ability to use them, and also the reason for adopting them [1] – between the various population segments will only become wider.

To address the highly complex and heterogeneous demand side of public needs, the supply side must implement appropriate strategies and practices that factor in all the diversity-related issues mentioned above. The first generation of eGovernment, launched in the mid-1990s, necessarily focused on ICT infrastructure to build technical capabilities and train the human resources to organize and automate traditional government practices. This second eGovernment stage adopts a wider perspective as, for example, it involves a transformation of the presentation and delivery of services [2]. Future eGovernment will be increasingly built on public-private partnerships and will introduce new intermediaries to the public service delivery chain and democratic processes [3].

Some countries are already looking at multichannel (blended) management strategies to give fresh momentum to their overall eGovernment plans. The UK has coined the phrase “electronic mixed economy” whereby public services are delivered through intermediaries from the private and voluntary sectors as a way to “reduce the cost and risk to government, whilst making the services considerably more accessible to citizens” [4:184], according to the British government that launched it in 2003. Similarly, the Italian government launched the *Reti Amiche* (Friendly Networks) project at end-2008, coupling the State with private partners (e.g. lottery retailers, post offices, professional associations) to bring some e-services - passport applications, renewals and visas; payment of contributions for home helpers/carers; issue of resident permits; booking/payment of healthcare tickets; delivery of medical reports - within reach of the citizens. The project has a target of 100,000 fully functioning access points nationwide by end-2010.

A variety of intermediary actors is thus entering the eGovernment stage. Table 1 provides some examples

of intermediaries that serve the two main recipient groups, i.e. businesses and households.

Table 1. Examples of eGovernment intermediaries

Service Recipients	Intermediaries
Businesses	One-stop shops; Accountants; Professional tax preparers; Consultants; Industry associations
Households	Multipurpose community tele-centers; Public Internet access points (e.g. Post offices; Libraries; Schools); Lottery retailers; Pharmacies; Friends; Family members

Generally, the business (especially SME) users of the public e-services turn mainly to professional structures/actors, while the private individuals (at least in the developed economies) have a greater choice. Data streamed from a project funded by the European Commission Information Society Technology Program (called eUSER <http://euser-eu.org>) show that almost 10% of citizens use eGovernment on behalf of family or friends [5].

This paper aims to provide a potentially fuller understanding of intermediaries, who we believe crucial to promote and implement inclusive eGovernment plans. What is the relationship between inclusion policies (i.e. policies that give “everyone equality of access to opportunities” [6:8]) and the new intermediaries? In order to explore the potential role of these players in the development of socially-aware eGovernment policies, the paper makes a selective review of the current literature and proposes an agenda for future research.

While not directly focusing on social inclusion, this study recognizes that – as a phenomenon characterized by “complexity and multiplicity” [7] – e-society inclusion should be understood as a political and social rather than a primarily technical or development issue. Inclusion and its related themes are of global concern, nevertheless, the considerations proposed here refer mainly to the developed countries. Interestingly, compared with these latter societies, the developing/transitional countries were the first to acknowledge the limitations of the Internet as the exclusive medium for eGovernment services [8]. One instance is India, which broadly anticipated the strategic potential of the intermediaries’ role in creating socially-aware eGovernment policies [9, 10], especially in rural communities.

We adopt a contemporary and extended definition of eGovernment [11] meaning “the use of information and communication technologies, and particularly the

Internet, as a tool to achieve better government” (p. 11). The complexity of our chosen theme has prompted us not to treat eGovernment in isolation, but to approach it from the perspective [12] that sees the organizations as open systems – strongly influenced by their environments – but where rational or efficiency-based forces are not the only drivers at work. “Socially constructed belief systems and normative rules exercise enormous control over organizations – both how they are structured and how they carry out their work” (p. 117). Public institutions in particular “are highly differentiated, multifaceted, often loosely coupled congeries of organizations” [11: 207].

Therefore, our research questions are:

- *To what extent has the scientific debate adequately understood and reflected on the concepts of eGovernment intermediation?*
- *Can the multitude of actors who perform a mediating role between the citizens and the public sector help tackle the inclusion challenge?*

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section (2) offers a review of the literature and describes how we selected the contributions presented in this study. Section 3 captures and summarizes the key factors at play in the current intermediation scenario. Section 4 explains the usefulness of adopting an institutional perspective as an alternative approach to place the intermediaries in the social inclusion frame of reference. The final section illustrates the main contributions and limitations of the study, in addition to drawing some conclusions.

2. Literature review and analysis method

Intermediaries, eGovernment, and inclusion are three very broad notions that present a number of conceptual and practical overlaps and interconnections. Precisely the need to explore these interconnections spurred us to embark on the research illustrated in this paper. In conducting our study, we first sought to place our research strategy in the taxonomy framework proposed by Cooper [13]. Table 2 shows that we favored a prudent approach, in that we wanted to understand primarily how the theme of eGovernment intermediaries is reflected in research. Therefore, we decided on a neutral representation. As our target audience is made up of general and specialized scholars, we arranged the selected (and by no means exhaustive) literature around the main concepts proposed by the authors.

Table 2. Scope of the proposed review (adapted from Cooper [13])

Characteristic	Categories
(1) Focus	Research outcomes, methods, theories
(2) Goal	Central issues
(3) Perspective	Neutral representation
(4) Coverage	Representative
(5) Organization	Conceptual
(6) Audience	General and specialized scholars

Digital inclusion “incorporates efforts at addressing social exclusion, through an emphasis on ICT” [14]. We then performed a preliminary analysis to understand whether and in what terms the intermediation theme is covered by the IT/IS literature. In April and May 2009, we consulted the following electronic sources: (i) top eight IS journals according to the AIS senior scholar list (namely MIS Quarterly, Information Systems Research; Information Systems Journal, European Journal of Information Systems, Journal of Management Information Systems, Journal of Strategic Information Systems, Journal of Information Technology, Journal of the Association of Information Systems), and (ii) six core eGovernment journals (Government Information Quarterly, International Journal of Electronic Government Research, Information Polity, Transforming Government: People, Process, Policy, eGovernment: An International Journal, Electronic Journal of e-Government). We selected the relevant articles through a full-text search guided by the following keywords (used in two or more combinations):

- inclusion
- *government
- intermed*
- public sector
- delivery channels
- one-stop shop.

The review of the IS journals was of little help as it appears that the international IS community does not consider the specific focus of digital government on intermediaries as crucial. The most numerous and useful scientific contributions were culled from the eGovernment journals that adopt a broader and multidisciplinary perspective (markedly, those that draw on policy studies). Successively, we used the snowball method to identify further studies. From the resulting batch of articles, we excluded manually any duplicates and papers irrelevant to this research. We discussed and corrected discrepancies. An attentive reading of the articles led us to ultimately select 38 papers.

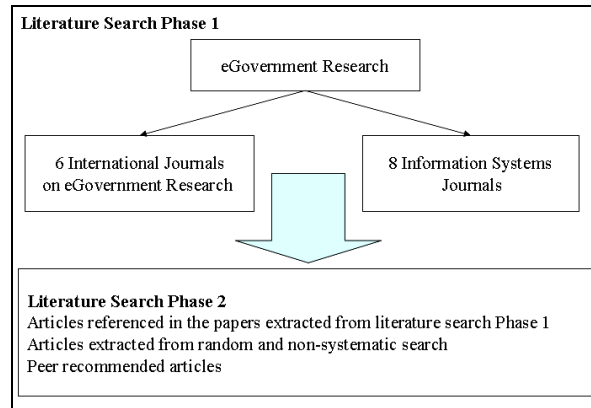


Fig. 1. Summary of the literature research method

3. Results

To capture the main characterizing factors of the current debate on eGovernment intermediation, we summarized the results of that work and organized our findings into three key categories.

3.1. Conceptualizing the Intermediaries

There is no agreed definition of ‘intermediary’. The literature examined reveals different ways of understanding the intermediaries and their activities.

Some studies underscore the role of *access point to public services*:

- “Private or public organizations that act as brokers” [between different actors] [15:63];
- “Community organizations and other civil society intermediaries [that] can act as facilitators and bridges to help citizens interact with eGovernment or eHealth applications” [16:34].

Other studies associate the intermediaries with the ability to *process, generate and (re)combine data and information*, also in relation to the needs of specific user categories:

- “A new interface for the relationships between the citizens/business and public sector” [17:88];
- “Intelligent intermediaries add human skills and knowledge ... critical for projects that want to reach disadvantaged groups in society” [18:19].

Given the significant variety of actors categorized as intermediaries, it is not surprising that the studies propose different tags. Table 3 provides some examples of such labels with reference to the *physical* and *virtual* intermediaries. This latter category comprises software programs, agents, portals and other

ICT artifacts that act as an automatic agent or broker anywhere in the public service delivery chain.

The list of labels shown in Table 3 refers solely to the public- sector studies. We have omitted all those contributions (numerous indeed) that deal with intermediaries who serve the electronic markets, e-commerce and e-banking. We also point out that the tags used by the authors in the different studies do not always have the same meaning.

Table 3. Intermediary labels

Type of intermediary	Labels proposed in the studies	References
<i>Physical</i>	Civil society intermediaries	Zinnbauer [16]
	eGovernment intermediaries	Millard [5]
	e-intermediaries	eUser Project [19]
	Human/Intelligent intermediaries	Rajalekshmi [18]
	Professional intermediaries	Millard [5]
	Social intermediaries	Millard [5]
<i>Virtual</i>	e-agents or e-brokers	Centeno et al [20]
	Electronic intermediaries	Josefsson& Ranerup [21], Ranerup [22]
	Public services brokers	Bannister& Walsh [23]

3.2. Impacts on the qualities of the citizen-PA relationship

The conceptualizations proposed in the examined studies translate into different ways of understanding the influence of the intermediaries on the qualities of the citizen-PA relationship. Below, we cite a few examples:

- “(...) intermediaries (...) increase eGovernment service take-up” [24:5].
- “(...) [intermediary organizations] reduce the intervention of government in micro operational issues” [25:84].
- “[partnering with intermediaries] provides a more appropriate route for delivering improved customer service and value for money” [26:381].
- “(...) the intermediary is acting as an agent of the end-customer” [27:18].
- “(...) social moderators of internet adoption, access and use” [14:244].

- “[citizens are] seeking government program and service assistance, not simply access to information” [28:2].
- “Using e-government services on behalf of others is an important factor in the overall use of such services” [29:53].

The studies culminate in two prevailing perspectives. Adopting the classification proposed by Bannister and Walsh [23], we can define these as *organization-centric* and *citizen-centric*, respectively. The former sees the intermediaries (especially the virtual type) as part of a delivery strategy guided by rational arguments like the cost-efficiency of the channels or the reduction of transaction times and errors [30], [4]. The latter sees the intermediaries as a way to help a broad range of potentially disadvantaged citizens to access the information/resources they need through more tailored services. In that sense, the intermediaries have the potential to bridge inequalities, above all in terms of the adoption, access and use of the ICT resources. The type of individuals receiving assistance from social intermediaries, compared to those not receiving assistance, tends to be those who are otherwise beyond the digital divide and excluded from eGovernment, as well as from other information society benefits [19]. The presence of intermediaries who add human skills and knowledge to the ICT presence is critical for projects that want to reach disadvantaged citizens [18].

Midway between these two perspectives (i.e. organization-centric and citizen-centric) are the studies (e.g. Ebbers et al [30], Millard [29]) that recognize the existence of a gap between how governments want their citizens to use channels and the citizens’ actual preferences. The website of the UK government’s e-Envoy project summarizes all the main implications ensuing from the presence of intermediaries as follows: (...) There are benefits for all: for citizens (it’s easier to deal with government; there are time and effort savings); for intermediaries (it can deliver added value; it can help strengthen relationships with clients); and for Government (it improves the delivery of services and allows better resource management)” [31].

3.3.Theoretical frameworks

The documents reviewed indicate that the context and rationale underpinning both the governments’ commitment to the diversification of delivery channels and the involvement of external partners from the private and voluntary sectors are commonly attributed to the need to breathe new life into eGovernment programs [42]. Although the studies adopt different theoretical perspectives, we underscore that the reader

is not always able to deduce the theoretical framework of reference. Table 4 refers exclusively to the studies that clearly state the framework.

Table 4. Main theoretical frameworks proposed in the studies

Theoretical framework	References
Actor Network theory	Avgerou et al [32], Ranerup [22]
Critical studies	Taylor&Lips [33]
Cultural perspective	Lowe [24], Carter&Weerakkody [34]
e-business/e-commerce theory	Chan&Pan [35]
Institutional theory	Akesson [36], Ranerup [22], Toots [37]
Policy studies	Jaeger [38], Gibson et al [28]
Public value	Grimsley&Mehan [39], Moore&Hartley [40]
Structuration theory	Avgerou et al [32], Rajalekshmi [18]
Social construction of technology	Rajalekshmi [18], Zheng&Walsham [7]
Technology adoption models	Carter&Weerakkody [34]
Transaction cost theory	Jackson [6], Warner&Hefetz [41]

There is a vast amount of empirical research on the implications of ICT in general. To date, an instrumental perspective, in terms of economic value, has prevailed in the research on intermediaries whereby these are understood as one of the possible delivery channels in the scope of a multichannel strategy, or even a way to ensure a capillary access (relatively inexpensive for the PA) to the public services, using existing ICT infrastructures or networks. Recurrent themes are: economic value; intermediation vs. disintermediation; and the intertwining relationship between offline and online channels [35].

In short, while there is a substantial body of knowledge in the area of eGovernment implementation, adoption and diffusion, other streams of research rarely undertake an in-depth discussion of intermediation issues. The visibility of the Intermediaries-eGovernment-Inclusion triangle is set to heighten in the public policies, but it is difficult to find studies that specifically address this three-pronged relationship.

4. Discussion

The literature review gives the impression that while the intermediation theme is broached, the scientific debate does not assign it a high-profile role.

Probably, that can be explained in part by the fact that our review was not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the debate so far does not appear particularly well cultivated, at least based on the basket of top academic journals consulted in the first phase of our research. For example, only a few studies recognize the future need to develop alternative forms of interaction with governments “despite the increase of private internet access” [43] in both the developing and the developed countries. Today, citizens continue to prefer the traditional channels (offline) [30, 29], but at the same time the non-users of Internet are reasonably confident they will find an intermediary [44: 260]. That means that these actors will populate the social scenario set to form the backdrop for eGovernment initiatives in the years ahead.

In the following sections we attempt to summarize the main shortcomings in the literature, in the belief that “a review should identify critical knowledge gaps” [45: xix], and stimulate more debate on intermediation-related issues. Given that only a few cases analyze and discuss the relationship between eGovernment intermediaries and inclusion, we use a theoretical framework that acknowledges the dual role of the intermediaries, who are both eGovernment actors and users. Specifically, we suggest the usefulness of adopting an institutional perspective to place the intermediaries in the e-inclusion frame of reference. The article proposes this interpretive key as it is coherent with the concept of organization adopted in the paper (see Introduction). Some of the implications ensuing from our research are set out at the end of this section.

4.1. Shortcomings in the literature

Intermediaries are an integral part of the eGovernment strategies, but judging from the review conducted for this study, their importance continues to be underestimated.

a. Front-office emphasis

In most of the studies, the intermediaries are analyzed in relation to the channel diversification strategies, only in rare cases do these highlight the fact that the internal structure of the intermediaries and their role can evolve in time, as it did in the case of the US public libraries, which have started to become “one-stop shops” [28]. This shift in citizens’ needs is directly related to the budget-cutting policies of the public agencies. Given current eGovernment developments, it is unlikely that we will see a reversal of this trend in the foreseeable future [28: 8]. The key focus is on the more visible aspects (e.g. the user interface or service accessibility), neglecting equally

important aspects like improving cost-efficiency or service quality (e.g., integration of back-end processes or appropriate human resource strategies).

b. Underdeveloped organizational dimension

Generally, the organizational dimension appears underdeveloped in the selected studies. Each case keeps separate the technology changes from the public administrations: “e-government is only loosely coupled to organizational action” [36: 88]. That separation defines and delimits the extent of the problems and therefore seems to simplify the analysis. However, in reality, that delimitation reduces the organizational scientific community’s perception of the relevance and interest in eGovernment-related issues. This is attested to by the fact that the top journals have published only a small number of articles on the intermediation theme, even though we adopted a fairly loose set of inclusion criteria. The result shows that the theme is studied, but by other disciplinary spheres (among which, sociology, policy studies, electronic markets). The academic eGovernment community is running the risk of letting other scientific communities (or nonacademic survey organizations) dominate this theme, which nevertheless tends to be connoted by a reflection on digital government that, although present, is of limited depth.

c. The aproblematic view

That the multichannel strategies create inclusion seems obvious, thanks to the fact that the citizens are given the opportunity to “switch and make choices between technology, human and other channels suited to preference, location, service and task” [5: 1]. Generally, like in other policy areas, the outcome (positive) of these strategies is almost a given, while the pernicious effects - which can actually heighten those inequalities they were expected to remove – are overlooked. Often the digital exclusion cited in many studies has no “special or political meaning” [46:268]. If that widespread perspective were to prevail also in the future, we risk falling into the technological determinism that characterized the first round of eGovernment studies.

In brief, in relation to the pillars identified by the Institute for Prospective Technological Study (IPTS) report: *eGovernment vision for 2010* (i.e., the first being the pursuit of cost-effectiveness and efficiency and the second the creation of public value [3, 47]), the intermediaries are associated above all with the first type of goals. The IPTS document underscores that these two pillars should not be treated as independent and equal goals, but rather as ‘means’ and ‘ends’ with the interrelationship that this implies. Further, and still more important, is the fact that public value is recognized as a greater burden (“public value is the

superior ends of the operational means”, [47: 17]. The ultimate purpose of ICT in supporting government and governance thus becomes not public sector modernization itself, but the modernization that maximizes public value.

4.2. Intermediaries as institutional agents

Institutional theory is a theoretical approach able to encompass all three points of the Intermediaries-eGovernment-Inclusion triangle. In particular, we claim it might be fruitful to slot the intermediaries into the “institutional agent” category (a concept worked on by Scott [48, 49]).

The use of the institutional perspective in the analysis of eGovernment and its related themes is no novelty. We need only think of the influential studies by Fountain [50, 51] on the US, or the research (e.g. Akesson [36]) that has sought to explain the differences between academic theory and empirical findings on eGovernment diffusion and use by adopting the notion of ‘inertia’.

That choice – which we illustrate solely in exemplary form – enables us to shed light on some aspects that have been little investigated up to now, including the public value of the intermediaries. Limited space means we can talk about only some of the key concepts of Scott’s framework, referring the reader to the original studies listed in the bibliography found at the end of the paper; specifically, institutional agents:

1. are “definers, interpreters, and appliers of institutional elements”, [48: 223], i.e. “regulatory, normative or cultural elements, or various combinations of them” [49: 882];
2. have an “impact social behavior” [48: 222];
3. are never neutral conveyers, but must adapt and translate their messages to fit specific recipients and varying local circumstances. They are “crafters of institutions” [48: 223];

The advantage of applying Scott’s perspective to the eGovernment intermediaries is that it enables us to place the diverse categories of intermediaries (physical and virtual) into one sole conceptual framework, in turn underpinned by a solid theoretical paradigm (by which we mean institutional theory) well known to the scholars. That setting has both a descriptive and a prescriptive value for eGovernment-related issues.

In *descriptive* terms, the intermediaries can be regarded as *relational agents* (i.e. “systems made up of connections among actors, including both individual and collective actors” [49: 886] and *symbolic agents* (i.e. “systems that can be used to convey information

about rules (...), values and norms (...), or mental schema or models" [49: 882].

In the first role, the intermediaries (such as one-stop shops and professional associations) reshape organizational boundaries (since the information, resources and knowledge flows transcend formal borders between different organizations) and "stimulate managers to reconsider who and what are inside vs. outside" [49: 887].

The second role played by the intermediaries, especially those who interact directly with individuals, appears to be particularly crucial in carrying tacit knowledge, i.e. uncodified knowledge embedded in the skills and routines of performers. For instance, the user sees the pharmacist as a kind of access point to an abstract system, i.e. the national health service. Nevertheless, codified knowledge can be also embedded in hardware and software artifacts (as in the case of the virtual intermediaries). In turn, the artifacts, like other carriers, can be viewed as associated with, and affected by, regulatory, normative or cultural elements.

In *prescriptive* terms, Scott's proposal enables us to say that, as institutional carriers, the intermediaries are a key reference point for the policymakers, the public managers, and the researchers, who should learn to recognize and value them. Disclosing the institutional values of the intermediaries means, on the one side, recognizing the multitude of interests mobilized in the eGovernment programs and, on the other, that the diverse stakeholder groups have a different weighting in the distribution of the public resources and the right to access these latter.

We still need to consider the usefulness of Scott's proposal in terms of public value, an aspect less developed in the studies examined. Given that public value is a slippery and articulated concept [47: 17], in this paper we merely outline a general hypothesis (still to be fully verified) on social inclusion.

The previous pages have underscored the unrealistic scenario in which public services are provided mainly through electronic means. Equally, the implementation of a multichannel (blended) delivery strategy can be a source of concern for market advocates who view such redundancy as potentially expensive and inefficient [41]. The answer to that trade-off can be sought by acknowledging that the public sector is charged with managing a broader set of objectives than private firms. Like the private firms, the public sector is interested in efficiency but is also expected to provide services that ensure equity and accountability. Inclusion is a priority value (an 'end' [47]) that must anyway be pursued and managed (with or without ICT support), even at the cost of demoting the efficiency goals.

In what way do the intermediaries slot into the processes that generate social value? The intermediaries perform informational and transactional services on behalf of the citizen, building value by institutionalizing new practices and personalizing the offerings. The most important role (in terms of social value) played by these actors is to reproduce and strengthen trust in institutions and public authorities [32]. A number of research (e.g. [32, 34, 52, 53]) show how the trust between the people and the intermediary organizations is positively associated with the use and take-up of the public services. As noted by Grimsley and Mehan [39:138], the production and propagation of trust is a *sine qua non* in respect of public value". The research hypothesis that here remains to be answered is therefore the following: does it make sense to "assess" the social value fuelled by the intermediaries using *the actual use of the public services that these help to promote* as 'predictor'?

4.3. Implications for future study

The findings of our work build upon existing research to illustrate the active role of intermediaries as "institutional carriers". The research agenda can be enriched with a number of interesting possibilities, we especially highlight:

- the possible contribution of the intermediaries to the (re)construction of relations of trust between government and citizens;
- the opportunity to analyze how the integration of old and new channels reflects on the network governance systems;
- the search for the most appropriate ways of combining diverse types of intermediaries to ensure the maximum return in terms of social value;
- the analysis of the policy implications (especially the ethical issues) that might derive from the growing use of public employees (e.g., librarians [38]) in roles other than their own, that is, as social case workers.

These issues need to be addressed adequately by the scholars, also from diverse disciplinary spheres. The time now seems right to acquire a more focused knowledge of these complex and multifaceted phenomena and to diffuse it across all levels. Investing in empirical research to analyze intermediaries is a key step in helping to empower the existing intermediation theories.

Accreting our knowledge could help the public managers to cast light (from a bottom-up perspective) on the reality that the American political scientist Michael Lipsky defined in 1980 as "street level bureaucracy" [54], meaning all those processes and

practices that underpin the chain of command but that are nonetheless decisive because in direct contact with the “real” recipients of the public policies.

Based on the above, we can say that the Intermediaries-eGovernment-Inclusion theme is hard to approach from the “top-down planning” perspective, as if we are dealing with a problem that needs to be solved once and for all. Conversely, also in the event the academic community manages to circulate more information on the theme, it is far more reasonable to adopt a bottom-up approach of discovery and experimentation, of learning by doing. Ultimately, as Jackson observed [6: 26], only a few cases of public sector reform in the recent past – we need but think of total quality management, contracting out, and performance monitoring – “had been adequately tested empirically or validated analytically prior to their introduction”.

5. Summary

This exploratory study has sought to close a gap in the literature by providing a first and partial overview of the eGovernment intermediaries. It therefore seeks to spur the accumulation of knowledge on this theme. The paper has been developed to respond to the following research questions:

- *To what extent has the scientific debate adequately understood and reflected on the concepts of eGovernment intermediation?*
- *Can the multitude of actors who perform a mediating role between the citizens and the public sector help tackle the inclusion challenge?*

In answer to the first question, our research revealed that many studies have approached the intermediation theme but never in an extensive way; importantly, neither have these tried to conceptualize the intermediaries themselves. Despite the abundance of available literature on ICT solutions that can or could make a concrete contribution to address e-society inclusion issues, the eGovernment intermediaries are rarely protagonists of the studies. We face a relatively unexplored field that requires an investigative effort, above all from the academic eGovernment community.

The response to the second research question is potentially favorable, but until the policymakers and the public managers can act, these need to duly consider and recognize the importance of the intermediaries and promote more information and knowledge on the many implications of these institutional agents.

The paper claims that adopting an institutional approach will help further our understanding of how

eGovernment intermediaries can help close the inclusion gap. Public value is the bridge-concept that connects Intermediaries, eGovernment and Inclusion.

Like all studies (especially those of the exploratory type), our reflections also present limitations. First, the literature review conducted is far from exhaustive and, therefore, future studies on the eGovernment intermediaries theme will need to be based on the analysis of the proceedings of high-standing international conferences (e.g. HICSS, Dexa-eGOV, ICIS, ECIS), as well as a greater number of scientific journals.

Second, the use of the institutional perspective in the analysis of eGovernment and its related themes is no novelty. Naturally, that does not rule out that other frameworks may find application in the study of eGovernment intermediaries.

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