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Conference "The Technology of Information, Communication and Administration – An Entwined History" – Call for Papers

Organiser: Swiss Federal Archives
Date, place: 26-27 March 2015, Bern
Deadline: 25 August 2014

The history of administration and the development of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) are closely linked. The conference at the Federal Archives is a platform for discussing these links from a variety of perspectives. It is aimed at researchers from the humanities and social sciences as well as technological research and the information and administration sciences. The objective is to gain new knowledge by sharing the latest research on the topic and to identify further issues for future examination.

ICT and administration: an entwined history

A series of historical studies have demonstrated from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of contexts that the histories of administration and ICT are closely linked. In his 2003 study of the use of modern information technologies in the British civil service between 1900 and 1980, for example, Jon Agar has shown that automation projects and the associated technological innovations were prepared by means of "discursive mechanisation": the administration had first to be described as a "machine" in order for workflows and information flows to be modelled as standardisable processes.

The core activity of the modern administration has been the controlled processing of information within predefined bureaucratic "programmes". Vannevar Bush developed a paradigm of this activity in the form of the memex (a portmanteau of **mem**ory **ex**tender), a hypothetical device based on a writing desk consisting of a storage system and associative trails.

Information generation and administration have been subject not just to the (power-mediated) formal and informal rules of the administrative organisation, but also to the resources and limitations of the (culturally mediated) technologies for recording, cataloguing, storing and (re-)using information in practice. In this sense, recent developments in ICT can be embedded in a long-term perspective that examines the mutual interdependencies of information and communication technologies on the one hand, and administrative principles and practices on the other.

Issues

This configuration of ICT and administration gives rise to a series of issues that are of interest both from a technological and administrative history perspective, and from a more general social and cultural science viewpoint. How have discursively mediated administrative science principles and ideas of technological progress influenced the development and introduction of new ICT? What role have transnational (expert) networks and international standards played? How has the introduction of certain forms of ICT impacted the organisation, processes and staff of the administration? How has it changed the everyday practices of bureaucratic decision-making and execution? What impact have shifts in the relative prices of information generation, administration and use had on the interaction between the citizen, parliament, government and administration, for example in respect of control, transparency and participation?

Given the current dominance of digital information technology in administration, it is possible to identify a further series of issues that are of particular importance from a long-term view. The spread of the computer has introduced a new distinction within the administration: one that separates a "digital" from an "analog" world. Yet bureaucratic processes cross the boundary between analog and digital constantly. This creates a hybrid field of action with multi-layered transitions that require a constant re-evaluation of the interface between human and machine.

Papers

The conference adopts a broad conception of ICT. It is devoted to both public and private administrations. It deliberately offers extensive scope for the presentation of different approaches. In chronological terms, the focus is on the whole of the 20th century. Speeches should not be longer than 20 minutes, in order to allow sufficient time for discussion. They should consider the central theses of research and suggest ways of addressing interdisciplinary and comparative issues.

Proposals:

Size   max. 2,500 characters plus brief CV and selection of recent publications (approx. 500 characters)
Language   English
Deadline: 25 August 2014

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