WHY AND HOW TO GOVERN INFORMATION?

by Marc ANSOULT

Information governance is a broad and multifaceted concept which is sometimes given very different meanings. It is therefore useful to define it, especially since people involved in the domain of information management are well aware of the need for controlled vocabularies.

THE END OF THE WELFARE STATE AT THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD 'GOVERNANCE'

In 2012, researchers at the University of Sherbrooke in Canada attempted to define the word "governance". The article[1] they produced, containing 37 pages, confirms that the subject is broad and very topical.

According to them, it was following the crisis of the welfare state in the 1990s that the English word "governance" was updated by Anglo-Saxon economists and political

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[1] La gouvernance : tenter une définition, Isabelle Lacroix et Pier-Olivier St-Arnaud, Université de Sherbrooke, Cahiers de recherche en politique appliquée, Vol. IV, Numéro 3, Automne 2012

analysts, and by some international institutions (UN, World Bank and IMF, in particular). The question at the time was how States would continue to be able to pay for pensions and health care. In this context, governance was defined as "the art or manner of governing States", with two particular concerns:

- clearly distinguishing the government as an institution;
- promoting a new way of managing public affairs based on the participation of the civil society at all levels.

Governance is therefore 'the art of governing' and governing is about 'how are we going to do something together?". In this case, 'something' refers to the management of the State and 'together' includes the government and the civil society. Involving civil society in decision-making limits resistance to change when it comes to implementing new decisions.

We can therefore say that governance is referred to when encountering difficulties. Thinking of governance leads to reforming governing bodies with a trend to transfer some competencies from the State to new institutions, often private. Discussions about governance exist at all levels of power, for the planet at the United Nations or at the level of States, organizations or even projects.

The same is true with information that is governed and interwoven at all scales.

DIGITIZATION AT THE ORIGIN OF INFORMATION GOVERNANCE

While the welfare state crisis brought the concept of "State governance" at the forefront, the progressive digitization of our societies - gradually leading to the disappearance of paper-related practices - has for its part given rise to the concept of "Information governance". First, computers replaced typewriters and drawing boards. Afterwards, a software was added to optimize inventory management, then another to facilitate bookkeeping and finally modeling and optimization software were introduced. Then computers were linked into local networks just to share a printer or a hard drive, and those local networks eventually became interconnected.

Each of these successive modifications did not, on their own, have a powerful transformational effect. However, put together, and without the need for a great digital transformation architect, they slowly shaped a whole different world over the last 30 years. Today, we live in a digitized world where almost every object, every service and every person have a "digital twin", a digital avatar.

This transformation has a great impact on our society, our organizations and on ourselves. Many of us do not shop in local stores anymore; goods from around the world are now coming to us. At the same time, company information and our personal files left our drawers and are now available in the Cloud.

AS A RESULT…

Thanks to digitization, many tasks that used to cost time and money seem much simpler and less expensive today. And yet, the existential question about how to live together in society, at work and within our family in this new digital world, which sometimes seems to disregard our data and our identities, remains open. Other sensitive questions are "How are we going to archive this digital world?" and "How will we be able to keep a trace of our History?".

These questions come with others, each equally complex, such as: "Where is our data stored?", "To whom does it belong?", "Who has access to my data?", "Is it properly protected against theft and ransom?", "Is it actually being used without us knowing?"...

Finding answers to these questions is not easy, especially since:

- the environment in which these questions are asked is still volatile and uncertain;
- the financial means are not always proportionate given the challenges at stake and the predominance of the GAFAM;
- some people give up considering the technological and legal complexity; sometimes it is even entire institutions which are giving up;
- objectives at management level are too often short-termists and linked to assets found on the company's balance sheet - thus not the information assets.

Today, only the implementation of a real information governance will allow us to answer these questions.

In this context, the question "How are we going to do something together? " becomes "How are we going to manage information with all the stakeholders?"; the stakeholders being all those having some form of power or interest linked to information.

THE INFORMATIONAL CONSTITUTION

The definition of State governance provided by the Sherbrooke University presupposes the existence of a Constitution which, within the framework of a democracy, organizes the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers.

If we use this same definition to characterize information governance, it is clear that what we miss today is an Information Constitution.

In terms of information governance, it would make sense, as the States did, to set up a Constituent Assembly bringing together a large panel of people responsible for defining a new information management institutional framework that would take into account the new reality of information technologies. This Constituent Assembly would develop an Informational Constitution which would provide:

- the definition of new bodies, for example one to steer, one to manage and one to control information;
- internal operating rules of these bodies (how its members are appointed and the terms of office)
- the missions and resources allocated to these bodies.

Once this first framework and these bodies are in place, information can then be governed in the way described above. This

can be achieved at the level of nations but also of organizations.

GOVERN ...

Information governance is the set of collective rules and processes, formalized or not, by which each concerned party participates in the decision-making and implementation of information management. These rules and processes, like the ensuing decisions, are the result of a constant negotiation between the various parties involved. This negotiation, in addition to guiding decisions and actions, facilitates the sharing of responsibilities between all parties involved, each detaining a certain form of power.

The parties concerned are the bodies identified by the Information Constitution but also unions representing users, experts and citizens who are sometimes better able to assess real needs and propose adequate solutions and can as a result counterbalance the weight of institutional bodies.

The decisions thus taken could go in various directions, depending on the context of each organization, and include, for example:

- to adopt a form of subsidiarity; which information is managed at what level?;
- to make each nation, organization, department or service responsible for the management of its own information;
- to set up new systems using artificial intelligence while following specific ethical rules.

While the task of the Constituent Assembly can be seen as a project with a deliverable, the business of governance bodies aims for

the long term and is managed through continuous improvement.
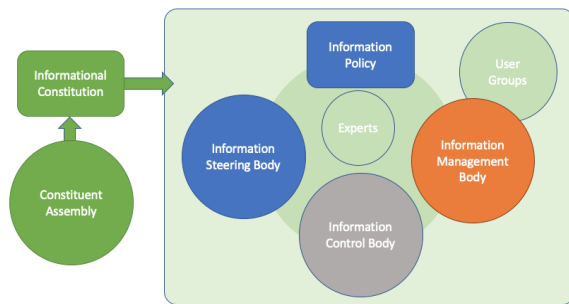
All decisions taken then constitute the Information Policy.

...THEN MANAGE

Once the information policy has been defined, the management of information will have to comply with it and with the main principles decided upon.

While the instruments of information governance are the negotiation table and the representations of the world of information, those of information management are data architecture and softwares.

THE ART OF GOVERNING

The art of governing is mostly about managing all the stakeholders; it is indeed essentially a question of negotiation and cooperation. The resulting partnerships involve the participation of many different parties, which spreads the responsibility for regulation over this large group. And, given the challenges - cybersecurity, long-term preservation, knowledge management, business intelligence, artificial intelligence, ethical aspects, the protection of personal data and Open Data - it is preferable that the responsibility do not rest on a single person or entity.

Everything is ultimately relying on collective intelligence with a good balance of power,

between those who manage our information, the experts, user representatives, and legal and controlling bodies.

We focused here on the governance of States, organizations and information but it is also useful to think of our own governance. In his book *Du JE au NOUS – L'intériorité citoyenne[2] ("From I to US - Citizen interiority")*, Thomas d'Ansembourg says: «Today, with the challenges faced by humanity, we know that the world is in great need of men and women who know each other well, who know the processes of interior reconciliation and the traps of the ego, who know how to develop self-confidence, confidence in others and confidence in life and put their talent at the service of the community.»

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS