

Story

Informational Governance

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It is not that long since changes in society took place according to logical, more or less fixed patterns. Governments, companies, academics, social organisations and citizens all fulfilled clear and recognisable roles. *Governance*, in the sense of steering social processes along the right lines, was largely a job for the government, which kept a tight hold on social developments (*and* the information flows and processes they entailed) from its position of power. The relationships and balance of power between the various stakeholders were clearly defined.

Today's society has very little in common with the well-organised society of yesteryear. Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to predict where changes will take place and who will be the driving force behind them. Information from established organisations has lost its clout, while remarks from a single individual via social media can cause shockwaves that send society reeling. The same social media can play a major role in a switch from government-management to self-management. Take, for instance, the [Goei Eete](#) 'crowd feeding' project. This community initiative was started without government funding or subsidy by citizens in Tilburg, who collectively purchase and distribute fresh, local produce.

The causes

The fact that governance has become a complex combined activity involving stakeholders and information processes can be put down to a number of simultaneous social developments. For example, the government has taken a step back in various areas, passing responsibility to companies and citizens. But the role of information itself has changed radically. Internet and social media allow everyone access to information and the right to an opinion. This has fundamentally changed the balance of power between the various stakeholders in society. Information,

information flows and information networks now form the driving force behind social transformations, but nobody is actually in control.

Our focus

So precisely what role does information play in governance processes? How are the stakeholders in these processes influenced by information? How do stakeholders use information to try to manipulate the behaviour of other stakeholders? And how does this alter the balance of power? A large group of scientists at Wageningen UR have pooled their resources in the Informational Governance strategic programme. The prime focus of this programme is governance by information: how can information be used to make a positive contribution to social transformation processes, resulting in improved sustainability in food chains and sustained natural capital? A second focal point is to discover more about the way in which modern information technology is fundamentally changing governance processes in practices of self-governance, within markets or in the traditional state citizen structure. In this respect, we will concentrate on a domain in which Wageningen UR leads the national and international field; sustainable food chains and natural resources. Our aim is to become the world's top knowledge and research organisation in the field of Informational Governance.

What are we working on?

Chain-wide projects to stimulate sustainability

First of all, Wageningen UR is involved in a large number of global chain-wide projects, in which information systems have been set up to encourage the parties concerned to make sustainable decisions. A project aimed at raising awareness of sustainability among supermarket consumers is a good example. Acting as 'agents of change', their purchasing habits could be used to persuade producers to expand their ranges of sustainable products. In this project we want to study how new information flows, such as Twitter, cloud-based applications, QR codes and value-informed pricing, can influence consumer behaviour. Moreover, the effects of the numerous private certification systems, such as those for sustainable wood, and the importance of reliable and transparent information in these systems will be explored.

Contested information processes

Secondly, we will study the social effects of contested information flows. Take the energy sector, where new IT solutions should be simplifying the transition to more sustainable energy consumption. An example is the smart energy meter, which gives consumers detailed information about their energy consumption and makes it easier to exchange information with energy producers and grid managers. Large numbers of consumers refuse to accept the meters due to concerns about data entering the wrong hands. In a PhD project, we will try to find out how we can implement innovations to boost sustainability in the energy sector, without compromising the privacy of data in the eyes of consumers.

Information systems and adaptive management of ecosystems

In the third category of projects on which we focus, various stakeholders take responsibilities to ensure that landscapes at land and sea are used and adapted in a sustainable way, either at local or regional level. Case studies are being carried out in various Dutch regions, including one to determine whether it would be easier to achieve the aims of strategic water management if the quality of the water in certain areas were to be monitored by a local partnership of citizens, companies and water boards, rather than providing the information top-down. We expect this to generate a sense of personal responsibility and mutual trust. But partnerships like this are also emerging at supranational level. The development of a governance system to ensure sustainable exploitation and use of arctic natural resources is a prime example. One of the ways that information plays a crucial role here is by demonstrating the most responsible way to extract oil and/or gas in a particular area, for instance. We hope that our research will shed more light on this role: how can information contribute to new partnerships aimed at the mutually agreed use of natural resources?

Social media

The fourth subject we will explore is the role of social media in Informational Governance. Governments, companies and social organisations are working together in countless areas to make the agrifood sector more sustainable. Our research examines how social

media could respond to the wishes of the target group. The EU project CONNECT4ACTION, which has been running since 2011, is a good example. This project uses consumer preferences as a basis for developing healthy, sustainable food products. Social media tools play an important role. CONNECT4ACTION is particularly aiming at improving innovation processes for new products, while limiting the cost of failure in product development. We will also study the origins and development of uncontrollable hypes and controversies in social media, and how stakeholders can deal with them.

Our people

At Wageningen UR, Informational Governance is an interdisciplinary field in which natural scientists and social scientists from various organisational components have joined forces to work together. Some of the work is taking place via public-private programmes, in which we intend to link up with needs of governments, companies and special interest groups. These could include sustainable innovation in food chains, and forms of network-alliance in area development.

Another more fundamental part of the projects focuses on assembling knowledge about the role that information plays in governance processes. This knowledge can also be used for educational purposes: Informational Governance is set to become an increasingly important theme on the curricula of our university degree programmes over the next few years. So part of the programme is concentrating specifically on educating and training the next generation of experts, often in the form of PhD projects.

The future

The combination of research, education and knowledge valorisation makes Wageningen UR an international leader in the 'sustainable food chains' domain. But we also want to be the leading knowledge institution for research and education in Informational Governance *within* this domain. Over the next few years, we will work hard to pool all the knowledge that we are currently accumulating from separate projects. We need to do so in order to offer students a suitable range of programmes into the future. But also in order to contribute more knowledge to the partnerships we undertake via public-private research programmes. Our ambition is that in

another ten years, we will have an accurate idea of the impact that information is having on society: when is it effective and when is it counterproductive? To understand how information affects changes: in agrifood chains, in area development, in nature management. Our ambitions know no boundaries.