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Peer reviewed

Letter to the editor

Sir: We read Dr Ronald Stamper's critique of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Informatics Study Number 12, *Local Government and Information Technology*,¹ and felt we should respond. Dr Stamper raises concerns about the book itself, which is the purpose of a book review, but it appears his main message is to call into question the quality and value of the research conducted by the Panel on Information Technology and Urban Management of the OECD. In doing so he has made some unfortunate assumptions and errors. He also implies that the expenses the Panel incurred in carrying out its research are excessive, and that he and his colleagues could have done a better job for much less. These criticisms are misplaced.

We have an intimate knowledge of the panel's research efforts, and of the data collected in their research, because we have been using the data, in conjunction with our own from US cities and counties, to conduct an international comparative study of computing use and impacts in local government. We have found the data from the Panel's research to be of good quality, and their work of considerable importance in development of new theory about computing use and impacts in organizations.

Some of Mr Stamper's criticism of the book itself is reasonable. It is true that the research design for the project is not described in great detail. It is true that a number of conclusions in the book are the opinions of the authors, and are not backed up by presentation of data from the project. And it is true that data from the study are not used as much as one would expect in the book. As Dr Stamper notes, this report, Number 12 in the OECD Informatics Studies, is unlike earlier reports in the series. The others have generally been the work of consultants or collections of papers and essays by individuals. Number 12 reports on a unique empirical research effort carried out by the Panel as a group. The problems of the book are due primarily to the committee's structure and to difficulties of

conducting and reporting on empirical research; not the result of poor research.

We agree with Dr Stamper that such committees are not the optimum vehicles for conducting empirical social science research. Universities and other research institutions are usually better for this purpose. However, given the difficulties of conducting multinational, empirical research, the panel did a good job. Certainly there are problems in the design and execution of the research, and these have become painfully obvious to us in our efforts to do computer analyses on the data. But we have had the same kinds of problems in analysing our own data, which were collected using a very rigorous survey research design.² It is our judgement that the data from the Panel's research are of good quality, and rest upon adequate research design and execution.

The lack of data in the book was due, in our opinion, to a gross underestimation by the Panel of what it would take to actually analyse the extensive data they collected. The Panel not only operated under budget constraints, but under time constraints as well. Designing, coordinating, and carrying out the data collection effort consumed more time and money than the panel had anticipated – not an uncommon occurrence in multinational empirical research projects. When the data were assembled, there was not sufficient time to complete the tasks of coding and cleaning the data, creating files and indexes for analysis, and actually conducting analysis. Instead, only basic marginals on variables like city characteristics and computing use were culled from the interview questionnaires and included in the book. The panel recognized that the data were being underutilized, and it was for this reason that they encouraged and assisted us in undertaking our international comparative study.

Our research has shown the data collected in the Panel's research to be of great utility in broadening our understanding of computing in local government and in organizations generally. By using the Panel's data to check and to prompt further analyses of our own extensive URBIS (Urban

Information Systems) data base, we have been able to develop a new theory of computing evolution in organizations that might have significant impact on the management of computing. We also have found the Panel data very useful in confirming and clarifying ideas developed using only URBIS data. The unique mix of an international sample of cities and an open-ended, structured interview methodology used in the Panel's study has provided us with considerable power in our analyses. Also, we might add, detailed computer analysis of the Panel data has shown the conclusions presented in the book to be generally correct.

As to the cost of the research, Dr Stamper freely admits that his figures are estimates. Yet, even assuming they are accurate, we do not feel the costs he projects for the panel's research are excessive. Research of this kind is extremely expensive. We strongly question whether any university researchers could do an equivalent job with 'a fraction of the money' unless they were making their university bear much of the cost for their own time. It is our experience that *in vivo* research in international settings is always more expensive than the kind of research that provided the foundation for the other 11 Informatics Studies volumes.

We understand, of course, that Dr Stamper had no knowledge of our follow-on work when he wrote his review. We assume his comments were directed at the book as a final statement of the panel's considerable research effort. We wish to assure Dr Stamper and the readers of *Telecommunications Policy* that the Panel's research is indeed competent, and will, if we are diligent, produce useful new knowledge and policy guidance. Our own work using the Panel's data will be published in the near future.

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¹ R.K. Stamper, 'Nothing for something', *Telecommunications Policy*, Vol 3, No 3, September 1979, pp 258-259.

² K.L. Kraemer, J.N. Danziger, W.H. Dutton, A.M. Mood and R. Kling, 'A future cities survey research design for policy analysis', *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, Vol 10, No 5, 1976, pp 199-211.