

Consulting the citizens

Relationship-based interaction in development of e-government

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ABSTRACT

This work-in-progress report explores the multi-layered discourse on interaction within the field of e-government, heavily influenced by marketing-, and democracy-related values. The discourse hold out the prospect of an on-going transformation towards what could be labeled “relationship-based interaction”, aiming at involving citizens actively in development of public information and services on regular basis. Municipalities and official authorities are taking various initiatives to reconfigure their relations with the citizens on local and regional as well as on a national level in Sweden, of which some local examples are presented in this paper. This article also reflects upon possible ways to promote public involvement in development of government, by the use of participatory design influenced methods and tools.

Keywords

24x7 service, relationship-based interaction, service design, e-government, public administration, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Local governments and municipalities have a wide range of societal expectations and demands to face, concerning a total renewal and transformation of public administration in accordance with the notion of 24x7 Agency[17], which is generally seen as “The Way” to future government in the Western world.

A key issue, according to the on-going debate on development towards the “24x7 Agency” [17] in Europe¹ is how to move beyond a prevailing tradition of hierarchical communication between authorities and citizens, into a dialogue-model based on horizontal structures and networking [1] [13]. The main objective of this paper is to initiate a discussion of what could be characterized as new processes of relationship forming, including various actors, in order to establish and stimulate *relationship-based interaction* between authorities and citizens. Practical examples of this are the declarations and dialogues [19] around service design² and that are taking place on local and regional levels, in various parts of Sweden.

Models of e-government

Research and evaluation, mostly within Political Science, from Great Britain and the United States³ concerning e-government, show that handing out information hitherto has been the main goal for national and regional authorities in England and USA [1][13]. Using new technologies for citizen feedback and stimulating participation has not been of the same importance. In the rare cases when feedback is gathered from the citizens, this is done by collecting opinions upon predestined issues rather than giving the citizens the opportunity of having a say on design issues [1][13]. The transformation from an “authority culture” into a “service culture” has proceeded gradually during the last decades in Sweden [8][16]. The scope of focus has shifted –

¹ The Swedish version of this concept is developed further in [17].

² Basically, including citizens’ needs in development of online public services.

³ The development of e-government in both Great Britain and USA and Australia are considered as role-models for the Swedish Government according to SAFAD, (Swedish Agency for Administrative Development.)

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at least in the ongoing discourse – from enlightening and guiding the citizen, towards taking the starting point from the citizens' point of view and lately also "consulting" the citizens and actively involving them in development of public services.

EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The discussions in this paper are mainly drawn from experiences and materials gathered during work on two separate inquiries, conducted within the framework of the DitA project, Design of IT in Use,⁴ As a third source, I have used experiences and reflections from my previous work with the Dialogue project, a Trans-European project, aimed at developing the use of ICT as a means for furthering democracy and methodological development.⁵ I am also currently involved in research concerning municipality initiatives on setting up and working with user evaluations.

The RISI+ evaluation and the PIM project

The first inquiry (henceforth called RISI+ -evaluation) was a study initiated by the EU, DG Employment and Social Affairs, carried out as a commission and follow-up on the Regional Information Society Initiatives, mapping stakeholders' and citizens' experiences, access to and requests for public services on-line. The material was mostly gathered through interviews and observations of technologies-in-use. The second inquiry, The PIM-project, is an evaluation of the implementation of a self-service system, initiated by official authorities in Sweden, The *Swedish Public Internet Monitor Project*, (henceforth called the PIM project), and conducted in co-operation with two other Swedish universities – The Royal Institute of Technology and Mid Sweden University. Public Internet monitors and their use were studied mainly through observations and interviews with locally responsible "monitor-hosts" and end-users.

Text analysis

My theoretical and methodological basis is also inspired by critical discourse analysis, originally developed by Norman Fairclough [23], concretely exemplified as readings and analysis of both national and local official texts and formulated visions concerning developmental work within the area of e-government.

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

In accordance with Suchman et al. [20], which summarizes the last twenty years of research in the field of participatory

design (PD), there are three interrelated lines of inquiry, which are to be seen as the main constituents of what could be defined as an approach striving to achieve "ethnographically-based design of digital technologies"[20]. According to the authors the core research within the PD-field consists of: *critical analyses* of technical discourses and practices, *ethnographies of work and technologies-in-use* and *design interventions*. [21]. The main focus in this report is the first mentioned line, critical analysis; the other lines will be emphasized in future work. The history of PD-research are also described by Kensing & Blomberg [14], Gärtner & Wagner [12] and the Scandinavian Research projects on system-development inspired by PD, are also discussed by Bjerknes & Bratteteig [2]. In another article Lucy Suchman [22] addresses the complexity of design at work, [22][11] the blurring of borders between professionals and more or less "invisible" actors, of which I pose citizens are an example.

Relationship-based interaction

Tracking the main route in the discourse on interaction in e-government, leads us to what can be defined as a management- and marketing related discourse. Philip Kotler, an American "guru" and initiator of the concept of *relationship-based marketing*, poses that: "*Our thinking [...] is moving from a marketing mix focus to a relationship focus.*" [15].

Several of the respondents in the RISI+ evaluation relate development of e-government with the issue of marketing the municipality or local region. Citizen involvement in service design is considered essential for qualitative reasons, and seen as an important instrument in the future for marketing a municipality. A respondent relates *relationship-based marketing* with development of public services in the following way: "*The main idea with the notion of 24 hours authority is to make interactive interchange around services possible but...we haven't got this thinking yet, as they have in marketing, that there are possible channels, but we have to manage them.*"

In Swedish marketing literature, the approach of *relationship-based marketing* are outlined and substantiated with terms such as *long-term co-operation* and *equal partnership* [10]. All parts are accountable for what goes on and what does not happen in the relationship. These values are defined as core relation- and service values and seen as intrinsically 'good'. Increased value for the customer has to be the main goal, which is achieved by creating *activity links*, *resource ties* and by developing *actors bond* [10].

GOVERNMENTAL "WISHES UPON A STAR" DIALOGUE

At the request of the Swedish Government, the Swedish Agency for Administrative Development (SAFAD), in 2000, presented a proposal for a definition of criteria for the notion 24x7 Agency and how it should be applied in the ongoing development of e-government in Sweden. The

⁴ The DitA project. Design of IT in Use; supportive technologies for public services. More information at <http://www.iar.bth.se/forskning/arbv/dita/index.htm> and in [4].

⁵ See <http://www.ronneby.se/dialogue/default.htm> and [7].

em phasis is put on “increased accessibility”⁶ and “availability” for the citizens, as well as improvement of the “quality of services”. The citizens are placed in the centre and the development of “network-based electronic interactivity” between different actors is considered to be the main-goal. A follow-up on how the development of a 24x7 service is proceeding was recently conducted and presented last year by SAFAD [18]. The government commission concerning 24x7 Agency stresses the importance of developing methods for analyzing information- and service needs based on a customer perspective [17]. According to this commission the authorities have to apply a range of methods for supporting and stimulating the development of a relationship-based communication, i.e. through management dialogues, service charters, continuous follow-ups and customer surveys, focus groups and so on. All in the name of renewing the dialogue around services. As it says in the report: *“The 24 hours agency must be keenly alive. It has to be alert and constantly listening to the citizens - it must consult the citizens. Consulting means seeking advice from, taking counsel, deliberating, but also listening to and thinking upon. The consultation then becomes a way to create participation.”* [17]

Case number one: municipalities

A strategy on development of public services was recently discussed and accepted by the local city council in one of the municipalities within my empirical study. Several proposals of how to force the development of public services are presented in a policy document. The citizens are “included in project work, invited to join courses and to provide feedback”. A scenario is presented: *“On the Intranet, you can find an education-package for politicians on how to enhance democracy. A focus group consisting of local inhabitants and politicians is testing how the ideas are to be implemented in “real life”, this is just one of many ambitious ideas on how to create a better communication among different actors....”*⁷

The same Swedish municipality was planning to reshape their website. A young designer was commissioned to make a new fresh design. The re-designed site was sent out to the municipal employees in order to get feedback on the renewal of the site. The response was overwhelming, and certainly not as positive as expected. This looks like

“Disney World Park or a candy-store”⁸ is just one example of the reactions. The chief of information then adopted a totally different approach and set up a group of referees, consisting of users representing different ages and groups, within society. During the meeting the citizens were merely asked for opinions about the functionality of the new website. The municipally employed chairman said the following, at the first meeting with the selected user group: *“I think there is a need for continuous consultation with users in order to develop the website and all the services.”*

The citizen’s feedback then was taken in account in the next remaking of the website. Another municipal officer, in the same city, commented the plans on recurrent user evaluations in the following way: *“...we are thinking of combining these activities with training, giving people an opportunity to develop their computer skills.”*

Case number two: a governmental pilot

The European Commission and the Swedish government emphasises the policy “IT for all”.⁹ One concrete example of an initiative to increase access for disadvantaged groups in society is the *Swedish Public Internet Monitor Project* (the PIM project)¹⁰. This project was started as a co-operative initiative between different authorities, aiming to co-ordinate their public services and make them accessible to the general public in alternative places, for instance in libraries and other local meeting places. The self-service system (basically a built-in terminal and a shared Internet portal, called ‘The Citizen’s Square’) is intended to guarantee a basic democratic right: easy access to comprehensive public information and services. Five Swedish authorities, the Employment Office, the Social Insurance Office, the National Board of Student Aid, the Premium Pension Authority and the National Tax Board was co-operating by the time of the evaluation. The Swedish Migration Board and the Swedish Consumer Agency recently joined the project.

During an internal meeting in which representatives from all the steering groups of the authorities took part, the issue of

⁶ All quotes are presented in italics, available in Swedish at <http://www.statskontoret.se> (Translations by author.)

⁷ “E-center or Learning-resource-center. A virtual and physical arena for development of applied ICT; citizens’ services and learning”. Presented during a city council – meeting in 2002.

⁸ The originally quote was referring to a well-known, Swedish amusement park.

⁹ This was emphasized in the words of the Prime Minister of Sweden, Göran Persson, at the opening of the parliamentary session in September 1999-09-14

<http://www.riksdagen.se/debatt/9900/prot/2/htframe.htm>

¹⁰ See <http://www.medborgartorget.nu>

Feedback from citizens was addressed in terms of "how to create better interactivity". In the discussion several ideas were given as examples, such as: managing errands on-line, careful, planning and conducting of needs assessments, actively incorporating users' or citizens' feedback in service design. However, when the organisational schemes for further development and maintenance of the project was sketched on the white-board, the word citizens was not mentioned or included at all.

The hosts¹¹, and other members of local working-groups, give concrete examples in the interviews of how to manage an increased interactivity through sharing work-practice experience and by taking active part in a continual process of "local tailoring" of the services: "...we have discussed establishing some sort of continual sharing...the simplest way could be to man the various authorities' help-desks and thereby get in-service training. /.../

In the evaluation parts concerning accountability¹² issues and influence, the responsible authorities had visions of establishing a chain of interlinking anchoring-processes, in order to sustain liability of interaction and management. But it did not always work as planned, which is exemplified by this comment from a member of local working-group: "*We could have developed the dialogue around support- and activities for users further, but the question is who is responsible for doing so? If the authorities put more emphasis on it, we will gladly take part. They can't mean we have to start a lot of training of people, without getting any support or resources to accomplish this.*"

The citizens who were using the self-service system also talked of feedback in terms of "their duty of reporting things to the staff", who in turn are expected (by the citizens') to pass on the information to the developers and ultimate owners and managers of the monitor.

CONCLUSIVE DISCUSSION

The analysis of the discourse on interaction within e-government, in texts and practices, shows that different actors, including stakeholders from the governmental arena as well as local municipal officers and citizens, responds to the changing approaches on interaction in various ways. The relationship-based interaction is motivated by quality reasons, as an instrument for marketing. The concept is described in terms of interchange around services, management of relations, mutual accountability. The discourse depicts the interaction as a constant activity of

consultation and listening, deliberation and "thinking upon" the citizens. In local practice the linking of citizen's services and continual learning, as well as incorporation of citizen's feedback in service design, is emphasised. The actual users of the services (local employees and citizens) express their need of defined responsibilities, support and resources and state that they have a "duty" to report breakdowns and insufficient functionality. There seems to be a need for developed methods and techniques for "consulting" the users. This gradual transformation – which actually is taking place – is shaping and influencing the ongoing dialogue in the direction towards what is often referred to in the discourse, without further problematization, as relationship-based interaction. Long-term co-operation is discussed and explored, in terms of developing regular methods on how to get a hold of and put words on "the public will". The service declarations could be seen as a way for the authorities to give account on their service and establish a contract with the users, and thereby open an invitation to discussions on development of services with citizens. At the same time as this willingness and readiness to take into account users' or citizens' feedback and to start up a continuing dialogue are expressed, we see several examples of feedback failure in local practice which highlights the risk on creating what instead could be described as a "detached engagement".

A basic question must be; what is in it for the citizens? And there is definitely an opening here for exploring and expanding the notion of relationship-based interaction further, by acknowledging the connection between developing skills and providing feedback for different purposes. The will to create activity links, such as continuing evaluation of websites and identification of needs through focus group interviews is still rare in the examples, and the resource ties are possible to distinguish for instance in the shape of offering basics in computing to citizens. The actors' bond could be exemplified by the demands on citizens to give their feedback on request. The interaction is still performed as single activities, (the user-evaluation of a proposal on a renewed website), but there are potentials on developing a continuing consultation with citizens. Relations need to be structured, though, and mutual exchange and transformation of knowledge and information need to be enhanced. The vision of seeing the citizen as a strategic partner in this development is significant for this kind of interaction, but what does it really mean, when it comes to basic involvement and participation of citizens in design-related issues? The aim to develop public services is closely interwoven with the aim to achieve organisational change as well as societal development and to strengthen democratic values.

The various attempts to establish a relationship-based interaction seems to be conducted in an unconscious way, which of course is good for a start, but the methods could

¹¹ Basically the responsible person, within a local institution, that provides the Swedish Public Internet Monitor.

¹² The concept of accountability is further developed in Eriksén [10].

be strengthened by taking into account the competencies of participatory design methods on incorporating a multi-perspectives in service design as well as technology production and use, and thereby stimulating other strivings.

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