

User Orientation in the Provision of Online Public Services

Karsten Gareis

empirica Gesellschaft für Kommunikations—und Technologieforschung mbH, Germany

INTRODUCTION

In the context of e-government strategies, governments typically claim that they utilize Internet technology to improve service provision and to better meet citizens' needs. However, the development of front-office e-government applications often seems to be guided primarily by supply-side factors. Many observers criticise that in practice, technological possibilities rather than user needs determine the design and provision of most public online services.

This situation contrasts sharply with the common political intention that the “user—the individual—has to be placed at the centre of future developments for an inclusive knowledge-based society for all” (CEC, 2004). At the root of this contradiction lies technological determinism: the widespread tendency to assume that certain social outcomes are in some way inherent in a technology. A determinist view implies that it is sufficient to “unleash” a certain technology in order to make its potentials for improving human life come true. It can, however, easily be shown that technological determinism is a myth and that technology, while enabling certain beneficial developments, is in no way a sufficient condition for these (Webster, 2002). Rather, society has to devise policies which effectively strive to use technology to the largest possible benefit of all.

There is, thus, no reason to be complacent about the high degree of satisfaction which users show with e-government services (CEC, 2003). A lot of research has shown that users tend to be satisfied with online public services: Lassnig, Markus, and Strasser (2004b) found through representative surveys that over 90% of citizen and over 80% of business users indicate that they would use the online channel for e-government service provision again. At the same time, however, a large percentage of potential users of e-government state that they still prefer to access government services through traditional channels (mostly face to face). Thus, a positive attitude towards online government services seems to exist only among current users, while most nonusers tend to dismiss their usefulness.

Such polarisation between users and “e-government refusers” points towards the need for better understanding of facilitators and barriers to uptake. The issue is of special

relevance because the main services of public interest (which, of course, need to be defined) must be accessible to *every* citizen. Additionally, for many services there exists a public interest to have as many users as possible (e.g., education, civil participation). It becomes clear, therefore, that user orientation must go beyond mere accessibility and also fully address questions of motivation.

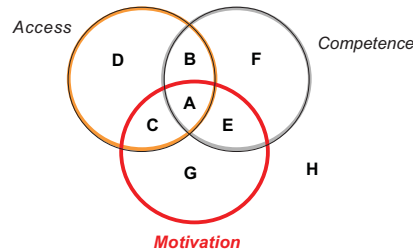
Recent evidence, from the UK especially (Curthoys & Crabtree, 2003), suggests that online availability of a core set of public services alone is unlikely to lead to strong increases in take-up of e-government. The UK government has set a target of getting all public services online by 2005, but this contrasts with low usage rates: About 70% of services were online, but many of these services were hardly being used at all. Curthoys and Crabtree (2003) suggest that encouraging more citizens to use online services should be made the “unequivocal top priority” by the government in its e-government strategy, even if this means downgrading quantitative targets.

What, then, must be done to better cope with the diversity of user needs and preferences in the development of online public services? This article outlines the main challenges related to user orientation of end-user e-government services. Disparities between citizens in the areas of access, competence and motivation appear to be of special relevance in this regard. Against this background, the article suggests a conceptualisation of user orientation of online public services which takes account of all main stages of the service delivery process. This framework may help providers of e-government services in the ex-ante assessment of online services to be developed. The final section includes some conclusions and a brief look into upcoming trends and challenges in the area.

MAPPING USERS

Public services are defined here as front-office government services. The focus is on delivering such services using online computer connections, either entirely or at least to a significant degree. The relevant issues relate to the improvements that can be achieved in comparison to ‘traditional’ delivery channels. These improvements can be twofold—first, they can relate to the efficiency of

Figure 1. Access, competence, and motivation as key factors determining uptake of e-government services (eUser, 2005)



Type	Description
A	Users of online public services
B	Lack of motivation but access and competence given, most likely from user experience at work or from basic education. Large share of "self-excluded".
C	Access and motivation given, but lack of competence. Traditional target for training measures, high probability of success of such measures.
D	Only access given, but neither competence nor motivation. Severe barriers exist before online public services will be used. Likely to apply for many older persons who live in households together with their children who provide the access.
E	Only access is missing. The bottleneck here is infrastructural equipment, which may need to be provided by the state as in the case of free public Internet access points. Also applies to many disabled who need special devices and services to access mainstream computer applications.
F	Only competence given, most likely from basic education. Motivation is likely to be the bottleneck.
G	Only motivation exists. Applies for parts of the poor population who show a strong commitment to society, but lack the means to gain competence and access to the Net.
H	None of the three conditions exist. Likely to apply to significant parts of low qualified, low-income population in the EU, including poorly integrated ethnic communities.

service provision. Thus, e-government can provide a new impetus to address the ongoing challenge of how to raise the quality of public services; second, improvements can aim to widen the reach and reachability of these services by actively incorporating the needs of all potential users as integrative part of the whole delivery process.

Users of online public services are a highly differentiated group. This is often ignored as governments are planning the "roll-out" of public online services according to simplistic assumptions about diffusion dynamics. In reality the notion of an "average user" (as it has been applied by the United Nations (2003) for a study on e-readiness of public administrations) can be misleading because the main services of public interest must be accessible to everybody rather than only the majority (or minority?) of users whose capabilities and preferences are well represented by the statistical "average". For this reason, an analysis of barriers to uptake needs to shed more light on types of users and their specific requirements.

For the purpose of this article, the analysis carried out by Viherä and Nurmela (2001) is of special value. They have introduced the concept of communication capabilities.

This comprises not only access to information and communication technologies and competence in using them, but also the *motivation* for actively doing so. Figure 1 shows how different combinations of (lack of) access, competence and motivation lead to target groups which need to be carefully distinguished when exploring barriers to uptake and devising strategies for inclusion.

In order to apply the notion of communication capabilities to usage of online public services, we need to understand what access, competence and motivation mean in the context of e-government applications.

- **Differences in Access:** Using public online services requires access to the Internet for private usage. When looking at Internet access at home, and additionally usage of public Internet access points or in educational institutions, libraries, Internet cafés, and so forth, available data quite clearly indicate that access is far from ubiquitous even in Europe. This applies, in particular, when considering that many advanced online services require a broadband access to function efficiently.

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