E–Government, E–Democracy and the Politicians

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INTRODUCTION

The development of Electronic or Digital Government (E-Government) has varied throughout the world. Although we give it the same name, we know from different studies that, for example, the concept of information society can be interpreted in different ways in different cultural settings (Sancho, 2002; Williams & Slack, 1999). This article provides a general outline of the development of E-Government in the West and is primarily based on European and Scandinavian experiences.

It is only possible to give an introduction to E-Government if we can define what we are talking about. E-Government is still a rather new concept, thus its definition is not yet completely accepted, but for the time being, most people agree that E-Government includes the following features:

- E-Government is based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
- E-Government is taking place in public administration
- E-Government concerns electronic ways to perform all kinds of internal administrative tasks
- E-Government also concerns the communication between the public administration and the citizens and other actors in the surrounding society (Jæger, 2003)

BACKGROUND

Based on the first part of this definition the history of E-Government starts in the beginning of the 1960's when the magnetic tape replaced the punched card. During the 1960's and 1970's big central databases were built and were run on big mainframe computers. The databases mostly contained administrative data from fields where the law and regulations were clear and there was a large amount of data to process. In this period, large registers concerning, for example, public institutions were formed; and software systems for the government of the economy including salaries, taxes and pensions were developed. These activities were often run centrally and the results were delivered to the relevant authority.

When we turn to the second characteristic, we have to include the development of the public administration as well. During the 1980's and 1990's most Western countries have experienced a profound modernization of their public administration. At first, this modernisation was marked by reforms that have since been collectively labelled New Public Management. According to Rhodes (1997), New Public Management can be said to involve two different types of initiatives, the first of which relates to the management itself. These initiatives include a focus on management by objectives, clear standards, and an evaluation of the quality of service, while at the same time granting greater attentiveness towards the users of the public service in question. The other type of initiative deals with the introduction of economic incentive structures. This involves the dissection of the public administration in demarcated services, contracting out some services, and other services that are sought and arranged in competitive-like situations by establishing quasi-markets in which the consumers of the services are provided with an opportunity to choose between different services.

These alterations have had a more or less unintended consequence – the emergence of new policy networks around the provision of public services (Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998; Heffen, Kickert, & Thomassen, 2000). These policy networks draw new agents into the management of the tasks in question, including agents from the business community as well as from civil society. Now we see private companies carrying out publicly-commissioned services. We also see civic groups in the local community, NGO's, sports clubs or interest organisations take over more social and caring-type tasks, which were earlier defined as public. (Again, we have to be aware of different traditions in different countries, but especially in the Scandinavian countries many of these tasks have been defined as public, whereas in other Western countries the family and local community have played a much bigger part in taking care of these things.) These agents are now engaged in relations with the public administration in collective, binding policy networks. This general development is often described in terms of the transformation of public sector regulation from government to governance.

These reforms differ from country to country (Rhodes, 1999), but the general picture is that these reforms have

had great impacts on the way the public administrative tasks are preformed. Here the development of E-Government plays a significant role. Many of these reforms would have been very difficult to realize without ICTs. An example of this is the decentralization of administrative tasks from town halls to public institutions in Denmark. This reform was based on the use of PCs and the development of an internal electronic network between the town hall and all the public institutions. Today we describe it as the start of the development of the intranet in the authority in question (Jæger, 2003).

This development has continued and today we have a wide range of different software systems for all kinds of administrative tasks. These include electronic archives, systems for handling electronic documents, systems for consideration of different cases and so forth. Garson (2000) provides an overview of this field as well as a review of the literature.

Rather early on, it became clear that the development of E-Government was not just the design of an information system and its implementation in an organization. Thus, over the years, a lot of effort has been put into developing methods for the process of design and implementation (Bødker, Kensing & Simonsen, 2000). Based on different analyses of failures, it was acknowledged that it is very important to draw on the experience of the potential users in the design process. Otherwise, it is easy to produce systems that do not fit their needs. The experience also showed that the implementation of the system is very important if the organization is going to harvest the benefits of the system. A lot of parameters have to be taken into consideration in this process. The staff has to be informed and drawn into the process. It also is likely that some training is needed. In addition, the way to organize the consideration of cases has to be carefully examined, and it is perhaps necessary to draw in other competences than those that already exist in the organization. The inclusion of all these factors is important if one wishes to ensure that the design and implementation of a new information system is to be a success for the public administration.

During the last couple of decades, public authorities on different levels have developed their own information systems for performing their tasks. This has lead to a situation where many public agencies are unable to communicate electronically because they use different technological standards. Thus, there is a need today for developing common standards for electronic communication between public agencies at different levels. In recent years, this has become a barrier to the development of E-Government and therefore a large amount of resources is now spent on solving this problem.

E-DEMOCRACY

Nevertheless, public authorities do not only communicate internally or with other public agencies, they also communicate with citizens, private companies and other users of public services, which is the last of the features of E-Government listed above. With the introduction of the World Wide Web in the 1990's, the public authorities were given a tool for this external communication. During the late 1990's, and since, most public agencies have developed their own website where they place a lot of information, and electronic forms citizens have to fill out to apply for a public service and so forth.

Also in this area of the E-Government, we find different kinds of development. In a study of the development of Digital Cities in Europe (Bastelaer, Henin, & Lobet-Maris, 2000), (Williams, Stewart, & Slack, Forthcoming) it became clear that in some cities (e.g. Copenhagen (Jæger, 2002)) the website was developed as a part of the E-Government and interpreted as a tool for communication between the public authorities and the citizens, while in other cities (e.g. Amsterdam (Van Lieshout, 1999)) the website was developed as a tool for communication between citizens and did not involve the public authorities very much.

In terms of definitions, this is the most debated aspect of E-Government. Some people interpret a public website only as being a tool for administrative tasks for use between the public agency and the citizens, while others see the website as a place for debate and a tool for democracy as well. The first group defines the objectives of E-Government as a way to rationalize public administration and increase its efficiency, thus democratic debate should, in their understanding, not be a part of a public authority's website but should be developed as something else – as E-Democracy. The last group defines the objectives of E-Government as a tool for all the tasks a public authority has and, consequently, also a tool for the democratic process. In this understanding, the democratic use of ICTs should be developed side by side with the administrative use.

Whether E-Democracy is developed as an integrated part of E-Government or as a special service, it is the least developed use of ICTs. To further this development, it is necessary to define what kind of democracy the technology should support. Without going into a theoretical discussion on the concept of democracy, it is possible to state that we have at least two different kinds of democracy: representative democracy and participatory democracy. Representative democracy is what the Western world mostly defines as democracy, and functions through a parliament where all the citizens in a country have the possibility to elect some people to represent them. Participatory democracy is

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