Chapter XVII

The Myth of E-Government

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ABSTRACT

The idea of e-government is spread at a rapid rate. In almost the entire world governments are attempting to adapt to the suggested changes which implies that e-government has become a global phenomenon. We suggest that the idea of e-government is best understood as a mythologised megatrend. It has become a symbol for the modernised government of today. A symbol which, in some sense, has to be demythologized in order to be able to be realised. It is argued that it is possible to gain further insights into, and tools to cope with, the gap between myth and reality by differentiate between general and specific interpretations of the idea. By analysing these interpretations the myth can be partially unravelled, which is illustrated by a large scale study based on 2,624 employees in public administration. The result indicates a loose coupling between the general and the specific level.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade computerised technology and advanced information systems in public administration has increased. Today these implementations in public sector are often part of the overarching idea of e-government. Included in the e-government concept there is also an expectation of an organizational redesign and a rethinking of public administration work in general. Lenk & Traunmuller (2000) points out that if the guiding vision ‘e-government’ should be realised, the public administration has to go through an institutional change. This is, as many researchers (Fountain 2001, Lin & Conford 2000, and Lenk & Traunmuller 2000) have noticed, not something that happens automatically. The public sector has a long institutional memory with ingrained habits which are embedded in routines, norms and bureaucratic politics. These institutional settings are carried by both individuals, cultures and structures within the organization and will
of course influence the transformation process, and to be able to achieve institutional change the electronic government has to bring about adjustments of the whole set of institutional entities (Yang 2003).

As all-embracing ideas such as that of e-government begin to be adopted in different parts of the world, they have to be translated in order to suit the local context (Bekker & Homberg 2007, Czarniawska & Joerges 1996). In this chapter we focus on the complex relationship between the general and specific translations or interpretations regarding the myth of e-government. We assume that myths are interpreted differently according to the general and specific point of reference and that the knowledge regarding how these interpretations differ provides valuable insights into the demythologization of a realisable e-government.

In order to gain knowledge with regards to the concerns of general and specific interpretations of e-government we put forward the Relation with technology-model (Lindblad-Gidlund 2005) as an analysis strategy. It highlights the importance of creating a more in-depth understanding of the reference point from which myths such as e-government are translated. The objective here is to show how general and specific points of references could enhance the understanding of the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of e-government implementation. We consider the general level to be more closely related to the all-embracing idea of e-government and the specific level to be more closely related to the employees’ understanding of the implementation of the e-government with reference to their daily work life praxis.

The chapter will take its starting point in a general description about the idea of e-government to then move forward by analysing e-government through a discussion about mythologization. While doing so, the quality of individualisation is especially focused upon. To further illustrate the process of individualisation the Relation with technology-model is used as an analysis strategy to go deeper into the relation between the idea of transformation and the praxis of the same.

The linkage between the arguments is explored with the help of a large scale study. And the results give at hand that it is important to investigate the coupling between the general level (the idea of transformation) and the specific level (the praxis) to gain further insight about how the myth is actually embedded.

**BACKGROUND**

Since e-government has, in many respects, become a global symbol for a new and modern government we found it rewarding to view the idea of e-government as a megatrend. In order to do this, our starting point was the Scandinavian version of neo institutionalism as presented by Røvik (2002) and Czarniawska & Joerges (1996). From this perspective megatrends are seen as travelling ideas which have to be translated into local contexts.

*Ideas that have been selected and entered the chain of translations acquire almost physical, objective attributes; in other words, they become quasi-objects, and then objects.* (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 32)

For an idea to achieve the status of a “megatrend” it has to be unison with the dominant discourse of the time. Homogenisation is deemed to be taking place when an organisational concept becomes a symbol for modern society. In becoming a symbol, the idea gains a penetrating power and is legitimated as the “best” or “only” way to reform and modernise an organisation. A common feature for all-embracing megatrends (Røvik 2002, Anttiroikko 2002, Czarniawska & Joerges 1996) is their global sphere of action and that they are associated with basic modern values such as rationality, efficiency, science and
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