Three eGovernments Living Happily Ever After: Discursive Tensions and Conflicting Epistemic Cultures in the Development of Public E-Services

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ABSTRACT

There exists a vast amount of different texts (policy documents, guidelines, action plans etc.) with the aim of stipulating the road forward for digitalisation of public sector, and an often used rationale for digitalisation is that the use of digitalised services will stimulate efficiency, reduce costs and at the same time enhance service quality. This is also often coupled with the idea that guarantee of success can be found participatory practices. This paper aims to disclose some of the underpinnings to the above logic by a closer analysis of ‘the who, the why and how’ of involving participators in digitalization of public sector. This paper uses a combination of discourse analysis and a Bourdieuan inspired use of the concept of epistemic cultures as an analytical framework to disentangle the notion of a participatory eGovernment development. The empirical case is a text analysis of a national action plan for digitalisation and the results of the analysis unfold two interesting notions: 1) three conflicting notions of for whom, why and how this is done, and 2) the consequences of conflicting epistemic cultures for practitioners to solve in the everyday practice when customer-oriented market logics are naively linked with democratically oriented inclusive participatory decision processes; two not so easily combined ideologies.

Keywords: Digitalisation, Discourse Analysis, Epistemic Cultures, Practitioner Perspective, Public E-Services

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners in the position of making the idea of eGovernment into reality are facing numerous challenges at many different levels and it is important to continue putting effort into acknowledging their struggles, and analysing and structuring the findings in order to enhance the possibilities to disentangle some of the tensions. One way of trying to capture the process of making eGovernment policies into practice is to adopt traditional organisational theories such as for example the one by Karl Weick (Weick, 1995), stating that the main objective for practitioners

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on different levels is to translate and enact visions, policies and catchy wordings into something doable (e.g. Giritli-Nygren & Lindblad-Gidlund, 2009; Gidlund, 2012a, Gidlund, 2012b). This kind of analysis shows that at the practitioners level, it is no longer possible to continue talking without linking ‘what is talked about’ to ‘what is made’; what is talked about is unavoidably to be translated into different available resources, methods and tools in order to perform and make what is talked about into reality. It is therefore particularly interesting to analyse discourses and logics as something that are to be made into very concrete social practices. Doing so puts the limelight on how ‘what is talked about’ is related to existing competencies, experience and performances. This could in addition be addressed from the other way around by performing a closer analysis of the texts (such as policies, action plans and dialogues) in order to disclose inconsistencies and conflicts that are hidden or veiled underneath a seemingly coherent narrative (Gidlund, 2012a, Gidlund, 2012b). Studies in this area of research (Gidlund, 2012a, Sefyrin et al, 2013, Gidlund & Sefyrin, 2014) seem to confirm this thought since the practitioners showed uncertainty on who to listen to and how, while the ‘why’ seemed to be very well anchored in their customer focused thinking. For example, the strong symbolic construct of ‘citizen driven development’ were taken for granted and stayed unquestioned, leaving the practitioners with problems to solve that were out of their reach; they did not hold the formal positions to deal with them and they sometimes fumbled in the dark trying to understand their limits of action. The symbolic significance of user presence in citizen driven development of public e-services performed on a policy level combined with the practical elusiveness in practice seemed to fail the practitioners (Gidlund, 2012a).

This paper aims at analysing a specific embodiment (a national action plan) as an object in becoming and doing by analysing how it is translated and understood in terms of reference to competencies, experiences, methods and tools. As such the development of public e-services is viewed through the lens of different fields of knowledge and epistemic cultures (Knorr Certina, 1999) and especially the constellation of, to some extent diverse but interconnected, fields of knowledge within the overarching idea of eGovernment. In such an approach the analysis will embrace both the diversities and discontinuities and the similarities and imbrications (Mørk et al. 2008) which will provide an opening to get a deeper understanding of what the practitioners are facing in their everyday work practices. In order to do so, a critical discourse analysis (resting on Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) is performed to plot the course of the struggles to fix meanings and map out the processes by which “some fixations of meaning become so conventionalised that we think of them as natural” (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002:26). This is done by posing three overarching questions: (i) ‘the who’ (i.e. whom the idea of eGovernment is concerned) in combination with (ii) ‘the why’ (driving forces, logics and expressed goals), and finally (iii) ‘the how’ (with what kind of knowledge and practices the why is expected to be realized) and see how these are related to each other in terms of overlaps and conflicts. By such an approach lessons can be learned in general for policy makers, leaders and practitioners in public sector regarding realisations of policy documents but also some suggestions could be made regarding necessary support for practitioners in their everyday practice of performing e-service development.

The empirical material used is a national action plan called A Strategy for the Public Authorities’ work with eGovernment SOU 2009:86 that is spread to decision makers and practitioners in public authorities, government agencies, municipalities and counties. The analysis will be presented as an operationalisation of the subjects and practices of knowledge articulated in the text, the result will be discussed in relation to existing discourses and epistemic cultures and their interrelations.
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