



Being an Efficient or Dialogue-Oriented Rural Municipality on the Net: Framing Civil Servants' Confidence in E-Services

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Abstract: The impact of the Internet on citizens' confidence in public services has been described in general terms. The purpose of this study is to analyse how civil servants in the context of a rural municipality bestow confidence on e-services. Based on four qualitative group interviews, we analyse the interpretative *frames* that guide how they understand a confident use of public services on the Internet. Our results illustrate the importance of considering the organisational context when studying how civil servants frame e-government solutions. E-services were framed as a machine that creates both opportunities to rationalise a local government, and a risk that a complex technological system could restrict direct contact with citizens and destabilise their procedures of work. In addition, the civil servants never framed the Internet as a tool for democratic interaction, which is explained by the fact that they worked in a local bureaucracy where many claimed to have direct contacts with the citizens.

Keywords: E-services, confidence, machine frame, dialogue frame, civil servants

Introduction

E-government solutions, or e-services on the Internet, have been described as a technology with a general impact on citizens' confidence in the public sector (Ranerup, 2001; Statskontoret, 2005, p. 30). By using information and communication technology (ICT), geographical distances can be managed more efficiently, greater numbers of pensioners can be offered better access to public services, and direct communication between citizens and public authorities can be facilitated (Asgarkhani, 2005; Commission of the European Communities, 2002). At the same time, there are concerns that e-services may lead to integrity problems, a reduction in face-to-face interaction, and difficulties in administrating increasing numbers of requests in a fair and regular manner (Parent, Vandebeek, & Gemino, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

All of these expectations are based on general assumptions concerning the impact that the Internet may have on the relation between public services and the citizens. By mapping how civil servants in a rural municipality understand e-services, we aim to offer a context bound and explorative analysis of what these services can mean to those who adapt this development to local conditions of a public administration. We analyse the interpretative patterns, or *frames*, that are applied by civil servants in bestowing confidence on this ICT-development. These frames are understood as constantly negotiated guidelines for how the civil servants think they can use e-services at work. It is their confidence in their own organisation and capacity to meet this development that we focus on. By *confidence*, we mean how civil servants see their ability to cope with the professional risks posed by new

technology; the kind of capacity and anxiety they express in assessing on-line public services (Kramer, 1999; Luhmann, 1968/2005, pp. 59ff.). Two questions that guide us through the analysis are:

- *How do the civil servants describe what e-services mean to their work?*
- *How do they describe the impact of e-services on their interaction with the citizens?*

By focusing on frames of confidence, the analysis is restricted to specific parts of a broader organisational culture (Goffman, 1974/1986, pp. 7ff.; see also Benford & Snow, 2000), conditioning the way civil servants perceive e-government (Fisher, 1997; Rolandsson, 2003). That is, we shall draw conclusions about group-specific perspectives that direct the way in which civil servants in a sparsely populated rural region perceive public e-services (cf. Gallivan & Srite, 2005). Such a study differs from a lot of research investigating citizens' Internet access and perceived convenience with these services. In such studies, general references to a legitimacy crisis are often made, while analysing Internet access among different social groups and their satisfaction with and inclination to use public on-line services (cf. Cohen, 2006; Jain & Mandviwalla, 2007). These studies are marked by what Korteland and Bekkers (2007) call "logic of consequence", focusing on the technological fit and its general impact on citizens. For instance, they consider how the mismatch between authorities' general interest in efficiency and the citizens' strong preference for person-to-person communication can constrain a confident use of e-services (Streib & Navarro, 2006). We might mention Ebbers, Pieterse, & Noordman (2008) who address this problem and emphasise that public authorities should take both Internet based and face-to-face modes of communication into account. Research about the digital divide between 'information rich' social groups (e.g. urban citizens with higher education), and 'information poor' social groups (e.g. the disabled, ethnic groups, the elderly, immigrants) also address obstacles to achieving an efficient e-government able to reach as many citizens as possible (Cohen, 2006). To eliminate the obstacles to the inclusion of various groups of information poor citizens, the focus is therefore upon democracy and specific measures (Evans, 2004, p. 86ff; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Gilbert, 2006). Other studies on the relation between e-services and citizens' trust similarly indicate that because the Internet is easy to access, it can improve the acceptance of e-services and thereby also improve trust in governmental bodies (Parent, et al., 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The same focus on technological fit and consequence reoccurs in studies looking at different governmental bodies and the diffusion of e-government innovations among public authorities (Ebbers & Van Dijk, 2007). Ho and Ni (2004) have, for instance, analysed the decisions made at American County Treasures Offices in connection with the evaluation and adoption of various e-government features, finding that concerns for staff resistance in particular are of importance in the adoption of specific features.

E-government, public authorities and civil servants – a theoretical framework

Parts of this article recall studies that analyse how organisations choose, adopt or accept new technology by evaluating it in terms of prior preferences. However, these studies often make use of theoretical bodies like the *technological acceptance model* (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007; Lippert, 2007) or Rogers' (1995) *theory of diffusion of innovation*, characterised by the above-mentioned *logic of consequence* (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007; Lippert, 2007). This article focuses less on the citizens and the technological fit of e-government innovations, and seeks rather to put the civil servants' perspective into an organisational context. Unlike studies on, for example, factors influencing the adoption of specific on-line public services (cf. Mahler & Regan, 2002), we have a constructivist approach and concentrate upon how civil servants negotiate their own confidence. No specific technology is evaluated. Instead, we analyse how frames of a confident e-government are shaped within a broader organisational context or culture (Rolandsson, 2003). We look at how civil servants in a rural context accept or make sense of e-government by including different interests and views on the social fittingness of e-services (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007, p. 141).

More specifically, the civil servants have to take into account that their municipality is a *public authority*, i.e. a politically governed bureaucracy with a duty to maintain confidence in the public sector (Grönlund & Ranerup, 2001). They have to consider that they are working in a hierarchic administration, which encourages them to frame formal routines and well-defined functions as being important to how they should do their jobs with confidence. It becomes crucial to conceptualise how they can offer an efficient and just form of administration to all citizens in accordance with recognised routines (Mintzberg, 1993). Moreover, public authority also has to show that it is taking measures that are legitimate (Weber, 1922/1978). Civil servants become involved in an interactive process, in which they negotiate their responsibility. A democratic dialogue has to be established, in which stated routines may be questioned and citizens should experience that they have some influence over the administration of their tasks (Rothstein, 1998).

The confidence that civil servants have in their own ability to make an appropriate use of Internet-based public services is based on how they believe that they can manage these two aspects. That is, we will analyse the claims they make regarding how e-services shape both administrative efficiency and dialogue with the citizens (Parent

et al., 2005; Streib & Navarro, 2006). For instance, they may use frames describing a technology with the capacity to speed up and standardise public administration in a reliable manner (Robins & Webster, 1999, p. 5). E-services are then ascribed features emphasising the formal hierarchy of the above-mentioned bureaucracy. We can imagine an impersonal *machine* (Mintzberg, 1993) rationalising communication and making it possible to include large numbers of citizens in the administration (Giddens, 1990). In this type of frame, technology will define the outcome. Cost cutting and an improved technological capacity to include vast numbers of citizens in the public administration will also be in focus (Castells, 1996, p. 6; Ebbers et al., 2008).

This type of a *machine frame* has been associated with an anxiety caused by a decrease in personal trust and lack of face-to-face communication between citizens and officials (Giddens, 1990, p. 34; Weber, 1922/1978). A legitimacy crisis is outlined, where civil servants are seen as technocrats who use the Internet to uphold abstract and complex systems of administration, disembedded from their local context (Giddens, 1990, p. 53). Instead of listening to the citizens, civil servants appear to be officials stressing that e-services should be used to improve efficiency in the administration and in the inclusion of citizens and key actors. The Internet will be framed as a tool within an organisational practice that aims to include as many citizens and organisations as possible. The impersonal character of such a practice may cause resistance among both staff and citizens (Ho & Ni, 2004). Nonetheless, we have to keep in mind that descriptions of a rational administration are essential to the confidence that citizens will have in a public administration; everyone wants a just and efficient administration.

In the second *frame of dialogue* we can expect the above-mentioned demands on interaction with the citizens. Internet-based services are perceived as negotiable artefacts that are used to include various actors in a democratic dialogue (Parent, et al., 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Where previously there was a stress on formal routines and efficiency, there now are descriptions (e.g. digital meeting places or media tools) which indicate that citizens can contact civil servants personally, or partake in discussions and decision-making (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 170; Ranerup, 2001). We will then observe a frame in which the interaction can be described as a connecting practice, for example sustaining a local community where partakers are said to have a mutual and direct relationship to each other (Evans, 2004; Putnam, 2001). If efficiently administrated routines are seen as important to the civil servants' confidence in the above-mentioned machine frame, the citizens' ability to interact directly with the public authority is important for the confidence they will express in this latter dialogue frame (Rothstein, 1998; Weber, 1922/1978).

It has been stressed that features of the machine frame in earlier research frequently overshadow important aspects of democracy and dialogue (Grönlund, 2001). We should, however, see these aspects as two typical frames that will rarely be used in a one-sided manner; rather, they are points of departure that help us to analyse empirical material filled with different combinations of these frames.

The context of the studied case

This is an empirically grounded and explorative study; we interviewed civil servants working in the municipality of Svenljunga in south-western Sweden, in order to examine rural frames of e-government. The region they serve covers an area of 1000 km², comprising of 13 parishes and a scattered population of approximately 10,600 inhabitants. It is an administrative unit that serves a small population and a large area of countryside. The region is associated with a growing number of older people who frequently lack computer-mediated facilities. Earlier studies have also pointed to an extensive local engagement among citizens in the region, in networks and in organisations representing different villages (so-called 'Byalag'), demanding direct contact with local politicians and authorities (Lindfors, 1997). In the following excerpt from the municipality's Web page, we see how several of these contextual ingredients have been associated with the impact of Internet-based services by the authority itself:

A local authority the size of ours, has limited resources for grand solutions that may quickly be implemented. Within the municipality there is awareness about the fact that IT will to a greater extent support the internal work, the services to the citizens and to companies in the future. Among us there are anxieties for diminishing personal contacts and elderly people that may not be able to take advantage from public services because of their lack in capacity to manage computers. We have deliberately decided to move slowly and look at others, in order to do the right things and profit from existing experiences. We have been putting energy into developing correct services by working with the citizens' wishes and needs. Internet access is a precondition for the citizens' ability to reach the e-services we deliver through our homepage. The municipality invested in the national broadband drive, primarily in improving the accessibility and secondarily in the capacity; because we prioritized that the citizens and companies would have the Internet within easy reach. This work was done in 2004. By then the municipality had succeeded in covering almost 100% of our region with the help of ADSL-technology, despite the large area and the widely scattered population. (Municipality of Svenljunga, n.d.-a) (Author's translation).

The above excerpt makes reference to limited resources, an aging population and an urge not to rush into the implementation of e-government. This urge can be seen as a concern for the impact e-services will have on how the civil servants in a local authority work and communicate with the citizens. But the excerpt also reflects a common political discourse, in which the Internet represents progress, such as by referring to broadband investments. In Sweden, this discourse is evident in a widespread claim – among politicians, unions and researchers – of being a modern ICT-nation (Johansson, 1997; Rolandsson, 2003). Similar claims can be found in initiatives from the European Union (EU), where focus is upon an efficient and functional e-government, easily accessed by the citizens (Commission of the European Communities, 2002; Statskontoret, 2005, p. 30). The reference to the EU is motivated by the fact that the municipality has been in charge of an EU-project dealing with these issues. In this project, e-services are seen as potential solutions enabling the municipality to improve access to their services for the wide range of citizens who live scattered throughout their region (Municipality of Svenljunga, n.d.-b).

Empirical material and analysis

The study is based on qualitative group interviews that were carried out during the spring of 2006, with 21 civil servants who worked in the administration in the previously mentioned municipality (in total 90 persons were working in this administration) and claimed to be accustomed to computers and Internet at work. They were divided into 4 groups, with an average of 5 participants in each group. A few of them worked with tasks concerning staff, but most of them had functions that demanded regular contact with the citizens, such as in connection with schools, home care, business. Furthermore, most of them (13 persons) were between the ages of 40 and 65 and worked as managers at different levels, meaning that they were in a position to influence the actual usage of e-services. The groups also included younger assistants and secretaries, and both women and men who took part and could be found in different positions within the administration of the municipality (Seidman, 1998).

The interviews were designed to make the respondents talk to each other rather than answering questions from the interviewers (Kvale, 1997). Each group was introduced to the general themes they would discuss (these themes were: ‘existing/possible e-services’, ‘advantages/disadvantages to the organisation of the municipality’, ‘advantages/disadvantages for the citizens’; i.e. themes corresponding to the initial questions) with only exceptional intervention from the interviewers (Seidman, 1998). With this explorative approach, our aim was to achieve a body of empirical material in which we could find and describe discursive formations about issues of confidence in e-services that concerned the civil servants (Foucault, 1969/1995; Ragin, 2000). Each discussion lasted one hour and was tape recorded. In one case the discussion was visually recorded on video, which has enabled us to better reflect upon the conditions of the interview situation.

After the interviews had been transcribed, we started to analyse their content. An obvious problem was to make sufficient English interpretations based on their Swedish statements, being careful not to neglect too much of the meaning they ascribed to e-services, as well as not losing our focus. This was achieved by alternating between theory and empirical data. Initially, we formulated theoretically anchored themes that could be found in all groups (Ragin, 2000). Detailed codes indicating how they framed e-services and the organisational changes caused were then generated. These codes were based on content and how the relations between themselves and the citizens were described (e.g. ‘exclusion of social group’, ‘inclusion of social group’, ‘trustworthy information’, ‘organisational problems’) (Kelle, 1995, p. 53). After sorting the different statements with the help of codes, we started to shape the results by confronting our interpretations within the theoretical framework again. In addition, a preliminary report was written and distributed among the civil servants, allowing them to respond to our analysis and allowing us to adjust our interpretations. In this way, theoretically coherent and grounded conclusions regarding how the civil servants framed e-services could be formulated (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 271).

Results – an e-service machine

If we commence with a brief summary of our results, we can say that the civil servants framed e-services as a machine in a local public bureaucracy. They described a potential and rational machine, conditioned by the risk of causing an increasingly impersonal and complex bureaucracy. Rather than framing e-services as a tool, used within a dialogue-oriented and connecting practice, their confidence was dependent on whether they could prevent public services from becoming too complicated. This machine should be used for rationalising work, and to make it easier for civil servants to work in what was described as a smart and well-defined way. By using the Internet, they saw an opportunity to develop user-friendly services, and keep track of how they used their time and resources in an efficient way. However, they had some concerns about their capacity to implement this

potentially complex machinery, while including as many citizens as possible in their administration. A major theme was how social inclusion in the Internet could be improved by using simple e-services that did not reduce personal communication between the civil servants and citizen groups.

E-government – a smart way of working

Several respondents were confident that public services on the Internet were something that they could use for facilitating a more efficient way of working. This was a technology that was expected to speed up the administration of requests, such as by enabling different self-services. Also, the citizens could access forms and submit them through the Web instead of having to telephone someone at the municipality. These features would facilitate the work of the civil servants and possibly even counteract a trend of increasing number of functions that they currently had to fulfil. In relation to the bureaucratic stress on the well-defined functions, they hoped that the use of e-services would allow them to focus on one task at a time. In one group they also claimed that it provided an opportunity to reduce all of the duplicated work that was done:

Well, I think about this new technology as something that makes it possible to serve yourself, by reporting errors, for example. I mean, if all such things could be done electronically, if it would pop up at some storeroom that 'here we got this error, report on this', I think this would be great. It would reduce all the double work that I see and lead to a much more efficient use of the technology. In other cases, I believe that there is this risk that we have become too dependent on the technology we construct. But, generally, I would say that this is incredibly exciting.

E-services were framed as means that made an exciting and rational specification of labour possible; they were associated with different gains in efficiency, but also with risks that had to be taken into account. In accordance with the above, these services were described as a potential machine which could be used for generating automatic reports of errors, for example. Some of the respondents also imagined that an improved technological efficiency would facilitate closer and more frequent contact with citizens. As illustrated below, the idea was that a more systematic use of Internet tools in their municipality would mean that they would have more time for direct contact with citizens. By using e-services they could hand over simple tasks to both the computers and the citizens, while they dealt directly with the citizens' concerns.

- But I believe that if this will work, we will be much more efficient and we can get more done somehow, without increasing the level of stress.
- To work smarter.
- Yeah, we would care more about our time and we... Yes, I believe so.
- We have the opportunity to go out more in the operative part of our organisation... to be out there in another way, if we can manage much of the information over the net, we can do the visits we need to do out there....
- Mm.
- To engage in those real and important meetings.

A smarter and more efficient way of working would mean that e-services could release them from administrative tasks, thereby creating more time to communicate face-to-face with the citizens. But the respondents also spoke about improved opportunities to control the work and the resources used in services that were offered. That is, the idea of a smart use of e-services consisted of both demands on developing the content of work and establishing better control over the work that they already did. Some of the civil servants stressed that they not only needed new Internet applications, they had to become better at using the technology they already had:

- Really, it is a shame that we do not use what we got. It is fantastic, what we got there.
- Mm, just this thing that you could have different terminals in use while the persons responsible for the home help are out somewhere helping a patient, for example. And then they just enter the coordinates into the system and you immediately know that this person has been with this patient. You will get a health plan and you'll get a better control over those (patients) who only need to be controlled once a day and so on. So, there is plenty of new technology that we could use, if we only would have a coordinator that could put all the parts together.

Both the wish to control work and to develop offered services can be understood as an emphasis on rationalisation of work. Internet based services were described as a resource that could offer a complex bureaucracy some efficiency. E-services would become a potential machine that simplified and automated parts of the civil servants' administration. As mentioned, this machine could then also facilitate personal contacts, though by reducing the fragmentation and intensity of work, and not merely by being a tool in itself for communication.

Complex e-government and problems at work

As mentioned above, the civil servants were confident that they could use e-services in a smarter and more efficient way. But, this machine frame contained problems. Many of the respondents were, for example, concerned about what might happen if politicians and managers used the Internet for both cutting costs and speeding up the work. They referred to an already existing increase of complexity in their work; i.e. several of them feared that they would constantly have to shoulder new tasks when colleagues were ill, or posts disappeared because of retirement, for example. Below we can see how one civil servant worried that the Internet would lead to demands on both intensification and flexibility at work:

I can actually see a threat, in my darkest moments at least (laughter). And it is political, a threat that politicians believe that many of our tasks have disappeared, administrative tasks, in connection with this way of working. This may mean that they believe that it is possible to get rid of administrative posts. Sadly, there are certain politicians that may not be as well educated themselves and they may have this idea that ‘but, you got those details in the computer, if you just push the button, you will get them’. I hear such comments pretty often, and the fact that it is an enormous work to bring a document together, that is something they do not understand.

Their way of framing the negative impact of e-services gave an impression of an ICT-machine that enabled an increase of bureaucratic complexity in times of decreasing budgets. They did not express any clear resistance. However, several of them also expected that they themselves in the future would have to constantly change their routines of work in a way that made them concerned. In addition, we can see below how some of the respondents had concerns for a growing and more complex workload caused by citizens’ increased use of on-line services:

A lot of the work at the municipality is about ‘come and help me with this problem I got, let the civil servants at the municipality give me that service and help me by suggesting what I can do in order to stick to law and order’, so they are informed about what they should do. I suppose it frequently is those questions you look at when it comes to issues about environment and building constructions. Especially when it comes to environmental issues the laws are so complex... so they (citizens) expect that we who work at the municipality are experts that know how to communicate our expertise so that our citizens will act and manage their errands correctly, following what the law says. I believe that this type of service will be demanded even more in the future and we just have to try to keep up with it.

Hence, more Internet contacts with the citizens are not seen as merely positive; it could also challenge their conditions for executing the administration in accordance with formal descriptions of work. The civil servants were anxious for the quality of their work, and for not being able to keep up with the growing demands on service and information about child care, public transports, construction, libraries, etc. According to some of them, the use of e-services could mean that they simply did not get enough time to meet the citizens in person. If they were not careful, e-services could even be used actively to avoid direct contacts, such as by redirecting an increasing number of requests from citizens to various Web pages. In one group they discussed the following issue:

- But, how about the personal relationships then?
- Yes, we should not forget that they exist as well.
- They have to be there.
- Yeah, they have to be there for the consumer’s sake.
- Because, it will be a cold world to live in if they disappear.
- But, I do not think we should see this as a cold and harsh world that we enter, but as a complement to what we already got today.
- Mmm, but you cannot say to the citizen ‘You must fill this out on the Internet’ but rather, ‘You have the opportunity to do that’. You have to communicate in a proper way so that people do not think ‘they don’t want to have any contacts with us’.
- No, but we may turn up being in a grey-zone every now and then.

In brief, the civil servants framed the effect that e-services could have on their work by repeatedly describing the Internet as a technical asset that makes it possible to handle a new type of economical and public complexity in a functional and a more efficient way. E-services were framed as a machine that enabled them to uphold their bureaucracy, while costs were cut and self-services were developed. At the same time, they worried that the use of this bureaucratic machinery could lead to a technological complexity that would be difficult to grasp, potentially causing both less personal contact with the citizens and an increased number of citizen errands for administration.

E-services and the inclusion of connected citizens

The framing of e-services as a machine that could render a complex administration some efficiency reoccurred when the civil servants focused on their relations with the citizens. The potential complexity that e-services could impose on their work did, for example, depend on whether they could convince those citizens who already had Internet connections to use self-services that the municipality offered. Personal contacts were appreciated, but it was equally important that those citizens who knew how to use the Internet understood that it was not necessary to telephone or visit the officials each time they needed information about building permission, city planning, day care, etc. In order to succeed with this, the municipality had to develop simple and efficient e-services, which most people with Internet connections felt they could be comfortable with. Internet based services were framed as an issue of *comfort*; they had to ensure that the citizens would experience the use of them as reliable, smooth and simple. One civil servant declared:

It has to be simpler and smoother, so you (the citizen) realise that this was damn good and use it again. As you say, this is a small municipality in a region where everyone knows everyone, so if something happens, you are used to knowing where to phone, and it is done quickly and smoothly. This is always an obstacle which prevents me from going out on the net and sending a notification. I will not know for sure if it will reach the right person and if it will take a longer time. Such actions have to be efficient and I have to get a confirmation that somebody is doing what I have asked for.

Potential technological complexity was seen as an obstacle to their possibilities for offering these kinds of comfortable e-services. The municipality was said to run the risk of ending up with an abstract ICT-system that would block user-friendly e-services for the citizens and increase the workload among the civil servants. Some of them spoke about an ICT-complexity that could cause frustration similar to that which people experience while phoning automatic switchboards, offering standardised choices that do not fit specific purposes or needs.

Complex security issues and problems with achieving procedures for digital authorisation, guaranteeing integrity to connected citizens, were also pointed out as something that conditioned their ability to offer a comfortable use of e-services. In addition, they had to develop good procedures that could help already connected citizens to overview the administration of their requirements. The civil servants described the citizens as uncertain and in need of support; one respondent declared that many citizens, no matter what button they push, will wonder ‘Was that correct? Did I fill in everything? Did I send that e-mail? Will it get through?’, and would therefore need routine confirming the functions they had used. In order to avoid these comfort problems making it difficult to include the citizens who already had the Internet, they finally talked about offering personal support to as many citizens as possible:

But, we as officials have to set a good example. No matter where you work, as a civil servant we have to set a good example while we are staying in contact with the citizens, and in some way guide the citizens in to these services... You cannot just tell them that they have to check it out on the homepage. Rather, you have to stay on the phone and say ‘This time I am going to guide you, but next time you will be able to easily do it yourself if you follow my instructions’. There is no other way.... well there might be, but I think that this is incredibly important if we are going to reach out with this.

Many civil servants thought that the best way of convincing these connected but sometimes uncertain citizens to use e-services was to offer personal contact. This was especially important because they worked in a countryside municipality, where citizens have always appreciated being able to recognise the persons whom they contact. They even spoke about how they could become acquainted with some citizens who were accustomed to telephoning them. In brief, personal relations were described as crucial to the confidence citizens had in their administration, and therefore it would condition their ability to include them in the use of e-services. One respondent illustrated the significance attributed to personal contacts by pointing out that they did not work for a central state authority, but to a local authority closer to its inhabitants:

The administration of our municipality is much closer to the inhabitants than the tax office or other national authorities, for example. They are so far away, and the phone queue is so long in such central organisations, and I believe that the inhabitants will find the advantage of picking up and filling out forms on their Web pages as more appealing.

Demands of simple and comfortable communication were essential to how the respondents framed what the citizens expected from their e-services. If they failed to achieve such services, there was a risk they could end up with a communication system that was too complex and excluded citizens. The quotation above also illustrates how they framed a comfortable use of digital self-service as dependent on confirmation routines and personal support. The possibility of limiting the risk of ending up with a too complex technological system where citizens

felt uncertain and excluded was not dependent only on whether they had simple services on the Internet. If they were to succeed, they as civil servants also had to consider whether they worked in a local authority from which the citizens would expect personal guidance.

E-services and the inclusion of uninterested and disconnected citizens

It has to be stressed that the civil servants were reasonably confident that they had the capacity to reach most citizens with Internet access, by offering personal support together with simple and comfortable e-services. In addition, they stressed that the problem with inclusion would become less significant when today's youth, who had grown up with computers and the Internet, became older. It appeared as though the problem would slowly vanish by itself. One civil servant described the development in the following way:

Then we have to realise that this thing, with the new technology, is a matter of generation as well. Within the care administration of elderly and especially those who have physical disabilities, or any other difficulties, these people may not be inclined to make use of it in the same way as these young and healthy youngsters that attend the school of today and come out with higher education and are more skilled with computers. And, well, I think it is going to be like that in the future, that everything is dependent upon this tool. But you should never forget those who have never even seen a computer or never touched it. Well, they have seen it, because they are up to date with the media, and TV, and such, but they have never actually been in front of a keyboard. We should never forget that.

Even if the civil servants expected a great deal from the younger generation, the quotation also reveals that they were less confident about the municipality's capacity to reach the citizens that are currently living without knowledge of or access to the Internet. The civil servants spoke about people who have deliberately chosen not to have the Internet, mostly older people or pensioners who felt foreign to computers and lived alone far away from any village. These people were framed as conservative; they had had their peak of life and still did not engage in catching up with the developments in society any more. One respondent described this group as follows:

It is not enough to offer access and opportunity by distributing terminals in the neighbourhood to those who do not have it at home. After all, there will always be those who refuse to try them out. You saw with the older generation, and how they dealt with things like credit cards when those came out. There were plenty of old people, such as my grandparents, who refused to use such cards, because they still wanted to use cash.

Additional resources had to be used in order to reach these citizens. They spoke of investing in and distributing computer kiosks in the region, at local shops, in libraries or at the municipality. Some of the civil servants stressed the need to offer e-services that did not demand extensive computer knowledge or education in how to use the Internet, and a few of them also underlined the need for improving access to education and personal support.

In a sense, the framing of uninterested citizens was similar to the earlier framing of those citizens who were already accustomed to the Internet, and who were expected to demand comfortable and functional services. Once again, the municipality was facing the challenge to offer a simple and user-friendly machine, and to convince the citizens that they could be comfortable using it. However, in addition to that, the challenge now included the problem of reaching these citizens while distributing knowledge and technology. One of the civil servants offered his view:

But in that case, this is also about communicating that we have our 24-hour a day e-service. We have to get our citizens to both read about it and use it, and it brings us back to the fact that we have to get the technology out to the places where people find it more difficult. They may not have any communication technology, they may not be able to travel up to the village, 'We live down in Hoksvik, we live wherever, so how do I manage? I do not have any knowledge about either the Internet or computers, because I am totally uninterested, so what do I do?'

In order to include this latter group in the use of e-services, the civil servants spoke of enrolling various organisations in their work with different e-government solutions. It became important to engage companies, schools, the job-agency and organisations representing different villages ('Byalag'). The framing of e-services as dependent on a network of different organisations also recurred when the civil servants were discussing citizens who, despite any possible interest, were not connected to the Internet because of lack of resources and education. In some cases, the civil servants referred to people with handicaps, but mainly they focused upon refugees and

immigrants. Computer access, and also the Swedish language, was described as an important obstacle that prevented this group from participating in the municipality's Web services and the Internet. One respondent said:

Yeah, and we should not forget the immigrants that may not have a long Swedish primary school education and the Swedish language behind them. This is a problem, the language question and the need to think about using a simple language.

Briefly, all citizens, even if they were already connected, uninterested, or not connected to the Internet, became associated with demands for simple or comfortable e-services and personal support. But when the civil servants discussed difficulties including pensioners who were uninterested or immigrants who were not connected, the importance of distributing technology and enrolling organisations advocating the interests of different villages, schools, job-agencies and local companies, became obvious. In the last case, with unconnected citizens who lacked resources and knowledge, the civil servants also emphasised the importance of offering education.

Analysis – framing an e-government machine

When we analyse the discussions among the civil servants (see Table 1), we may say that their confidence in e-services depended on a machine frame in which it became necessary to balance different bureaucratic opportunities and problems (cf. Mintzberg, 1993). In accordance with research claiming that authorities have a frequent interest in efficiency matters when they discuss e-services (Streib & Navarro, 2006), they were confident that Internet could make it easier for them to work in a more efficient way. They would each be able to focus on one task at a time. A clearer definition of tasks could, in addition to the principles of a bureaucratic organisation, reduce the number of functions and the duplicated work that they did (Weber, 1922/1978). In addition, they hoped that the control of resources used in the organisation would increase. The framing of e-services as a machine also became clear when the civil servants spoke about automated administrative tasks that would help them improve their services and leave more time for face-to-face contacts with citizens.

Problems at work that were found in this machine frame depended on whether these e-services were used for implementing constant changes in their tasks and routines, and whether too much Internet administration of requests from the citizens would cause problems in keeping the administration and its work procedures stable (Mintzberg, 1993). No clear staff resistance against adopting new e-government features were expressed (cf. Ho & Ni, 2004). But, they had their concerns and spoke about the Internet as a reason why intensity at work could increase, and why they might experience difficulties in keeping up with formal obligations and offering the citizens a reliable and safe level of Internet communication. All these features can be expected to be discussed in a bureaucratic organisation, where civil servants are encouraged to frame formal descriptions of efficient routines and well-defined functions as important to how they should do their jobs with confidence (Rothstein, 1998; Weber, 1922/1978).

Table 1
A machine frame of e-services

<i>E-services were described as a:</i>	<i>A confident use of e-services in the administration demands:</i>	<i>A confident relationship to citizens by the help of e-services demands:</i>
– Technology that can be used to rationalise the administration.	– Well-defined tasks, despite changing organisation of work.	– Comfortable self-services on the Internet, making it possible to include citizens uncertain about how to use e-services.
– Technology that can become too complex, but also enable a smart way of working.	– Control of resources at work, and personal contacts with citizens.	– Distribution of technology and knowledge among the citizens (e.g. through the help of other organisations).
– Technology that can make a complex bureaucracy efficient, if it is based on simple applications.	– Reduced technological complexity that makes it possible for civil servants to work in a smarter and more efficient way.	– Reduction of complex and impersonal e-services.

The civil servants also discussed an inclusion problem that differed depending upon whether they addressed connected, uninterested or disconnected citizens. The problem roughly meant that the municipality had to avoid too much routine based communication taking place on the Internet and they would have to offer comfortable applications and personal support, in order to convince the citizens regarding the advantages of e-services. More time and resources had to be invested in developing user-friendly self-services for those who already had the technology. By doing so, they were confident that an increasing number of citizens connected to the Internet would start using e-services – especially as younger citizens grew older. However, they were less confident about the inclusion of citizens – mainly pensioners and immigrants – who had no interest, knowledge or access

to the Internet. To include these latter groups of citizens demanded a major engagement in improving access to technology and education, by mobilising other private or public organisations and their resources. Terminals were about to be placed out at local shops or libraries, and some of the organisations would have to be engaged in educational projects (Evans, 2004).

Hence, we can conclude that e-services were seen as rationalisation tools, and not as tools for engaging in a dialogue with the citizens (Grönlund & Ranerup, 2001). In accordance with earlier research which stresses that issues of interaction and democracy easily become overlooked when e-services are discussed (Streib & Navarro, 2006), the civil servants did not see the Internet as a means for creating a mutual interaction with the citizens (Grönlund, 2001; Parent et al., 2005). Neither did they express any resistance; rather, they saw e-services as a possible and rational way of improving confidence in their administration. However, they were concerned that the importance of what we earlier have described as a connecting practice – where as a local authority they interacted directly with the citizens – would be neglected if more communication took place on the Internet (cf. Ho & Ni, 2004; Putnam, 2001). In addition, increasing Internet interaction with the citizens was framed with administrative problems involving keeping up with all the errands and formal obligations they had to fulfil. That is, both their confidence and anxiety were based on ideas of how they could use this machine to efficiently include and administrate growing numbers of citizens on the Internet.

E-services in the countryside – understanding the machine frame

It might not be a surprise that civil servants in a public bureaucracy frame e-services as an administrative machine (Mintzberg, 1993). The fact that they could be described as bureaucrats could explain why e-services became technical assets that made a correct and efficient administration possible. But, it does not explain the lack of a dialogue frame; why did they not describe the Internet as a tool that could stimulate a democratic and connecting dialogue? After all, just because the civil servants stressed the importance of an efficient administration of a constantly larger number of citizens, they did not automatically have to overlook the importance of Internet applications, allowing mutual interaction with the citizens in their region. As mentioned previously, earlier research also emphasises the importance of taking both different Internet based and face-to-face modes of communication into account when authorities consider adopting e-government features (Ebberts, et al., 2008).

Trying to answer that question, we may note that e-services were seen as an administrative machine that could provide them with more time for qualitative face-to-face communication with citizens. That is, dialogue oriented practices were not neglected, but they did not expect them to take place over the Internet. One reason why that was the case could be found in the contextual setting of the municipality; during the interviews, the civil servants repeatedly mentioned that in many ways they already had good relations with the population in the region. It was, for example, stressed that they did not work for the national tax office, which was assumed to have problems with achieving the type of interaction with the citizens that they as a local authority had. The civil servants described how they became acquainted with citizens who were used to telephoning them to ask for information about various concerns. In addition, they wanted to avoid a too technocratic Internet-based administration of citizens' requests and demands for information. That is, e-services were to be seen not simply as an efficient machine, but also had to be treated cautiously so that they could avoid becoming technocrats upholding an administrative machine that threatened the direct dialogue and the confidence that already existed (Giddens, 1990).

These descriptions can be interpreted as crucial parts of a frame in which both confidence and anxiety were based on ideas on how they as civil servants could use this machine to efficiently include and administrate the growing numbers of citizens on the Internet. We could argue that, in accordance with earlier research, they could gain even more confidence by elaborating further with on-line services less focused on administration and more on citizen interaction (Streib & Navarro, 2006; Ebberts, et al., 2008). At the same time, the civil servants claimed to have a connecting dialogue with the inhabitants in the region, even without Internet. They described their work as located within a local authority that based its legitimacy and confidence on personal and direct dialogue with a small population of citizens (Weber, 1922/1978), which explains why they did not frame the Internet as a tool for improving the dialogue with the inhabitants of the region. The civil servants did not see any reasons why already existing citizen contacts could be improved by using the Internet.

Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to analyse frames of a confident e-government. It is a qualitative and explorative study, in which we have investigated what interpretative guidelines civil servants in a Swedish rural municipality used to assess their ability to cope with risks and opportunities that online public services may

impose on their work (Benford & Snow, 2000; Fisher, 1997). We have concluded that they did not express any explicit resistance (Ho & Ni, 2004). The descriptions presented above rather constitute a machine frame where issues of administrative efficiency are complex but important to a confident use of online public services. It could be stressed that they did not mention the type of legitimacy crisis that sometimes is put forward as a reason why public authorities in the Western world should strengthen their dialogue with the citizens by using the Internet (Parent, et al., 2005; Ranerup, 2001). Instead, their experiences of personal and direct relations with a small population of citizens are understood as crucial to an organisational culture in which e-government is framed as a machine rather than as a tool for citizen dialogue (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007, p. 141).

Obviously, our explorative focus does not allow us to draw general conclusions about how most civil servants perceive and implement different e-government features. Such conclusions demand other methods and data. In addition, analysing the actual implementation would demand that we take into account other aspects than mere interpretative patterns. After all, the above-mentioned automation of certain administrative tasks does not necessarily create more time for face-to-face interaction with the citizens. Such measures could, just as well lead to a shrinking staff and less time for personal or direct interaction, even in a small rural municipality. However, we can conclude that the civil servants are confident in seeing e-services as a machine with implications for how they run their bureaucracy. We have found a frame in which e-services are not described as a tool used for communication with the citizens, but as a technology that could rationalise their work and the inclusion of citizens in the public administration. The fact that many of our respondents were managers at different levels suggests that crucial parts of this frame may also reappear as guidelines when future e-government initiatives are to be promoted.

By referring to the fact that we have described the content of this frame as logical within a public bureaucracy that serves a small population in the countryside, we also assume that these interpretative guidelines may reappear at other authorities acting within rural contexts. We need more research on different municipalities before we can draw any general conclusions, but our case shows how the contextual setting of a small rural authority is reflected in the framing of e-services. It shows how general references to a crisis of legitimacy, or to specific technological features, are not enough when we analyse how different e-government solutions will be perceived (Parent, et al., 2005). We have to take notice of whether it is a local, national or an international authority that is analysed, and what type of relations with the citizens the civil servants claim to have. By taking a wider organisational context into account than what other studies on diffusion of specific innovations or technological consequences do (Ebbers & Van Dijk, 2007; Ho & Ni, 2004), such an analysis may also improve our understanding of how specific e-government solutions will be adopted and accepted (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007).

In saying so, however, we are once again assuming that there are municipalities elsewhere, where civil servants experience a similar contact with the citizens and do not see any need of using the Internet for improving a democratic dialogue. Those civil servants might even adopt a machine frame, in which issues of efficiency at work and administrative inclusion of citizens dominate their way of describing a confident use of e-services.

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