



Electronic services in the public sector: A conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

Electronic services provided by governmental organizations, here referred to as public e-services, are frequently discussed in the e-government literature. There is, however, little consensus on the meaning of the concepts used to describe and discuss these e-services, and hence, the literature is full of synonymous terms and concepts. This paper is conceptual and presents efforts to understand e-services in the public sector domain by unpacking the public e-service concept into three dimensions; as being (1) a service, (2) electronic, and (3) public (as contrasted to being private). Based on a hermeneutic analysis, these dimensions are discussed in a number of combinations, illustrating that a multi-dimensional take on public e-services must be adopted in order to capture the complexity of governmentally supplied e-services and contribute to theory development, as well as practical utility.

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1. Introduction

Electronic government (e-government) and the use of electronic services in public sector organizations, here called *public e-services*, are currently significant themes in research on information systems (IS) and public administration (PA) (e.g., Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Dawes, 2009; Scholl, 2010). This is hardly surprising considering the increase of development and use of e-services in the public sector (Ancarani, 2005). What might come as a surprise, however, is the large number of concepts used to describe e-services delivered by governmental agencies. Journal articles, conference papers and reports on e-government and public e-services testify of a research field full of related concepts that appear to be used synonymously: *e-government service* (e.g., Jansen, de Vries, & van Schaik, 2010), *e-service* (e.g., Boyer, Hallowell, & Roth, 2002; Kaisara & Pather, 2011), *public e-service* (e.g., Karlsson, Holgersson, Söderström, & Hedström, 2012), *digital service* (Re, 2010), *e-Public-Service* (Lenk, 2002) and *Website channel* (Ebbers, Pieterse, & Noordman, 2008); to name a few. It is, however, difficult to know with certainty that these concepts are representing the same phenomenon, since provocatively many scholars omit explicit definitions of the concepts they use. For example, if we take a look at the *e-service* concept, there are definitions of both e-service (e.g., Boyer et al., 2002) and public e-service (e.g., Buckley, 2003) produced by e-government researchers, but in surprisingly many publications on e-services in the e-government context, the meaning of *e-service* seems to be taken for granted – many scholars do not define or discuss what the concept e-service refers to at all.

E-government research has been criticized for “ghetto-ization” (Pollitt, 2011), “conceptual vagueness” (Yildiz, 2007) and “theoretical neglect” (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006; Heeks & Bailur, 2007), referring to the inability to build on previous results and theory development from e-government research as well as adjoining fields of research. The variety of concepts and definitions used to study and describe e-services in the e-government context not only makes it difficult for researchers and practitioners to discuss use and development of e-services in the public sector; it also makes e-government research on e-services an easy prey for the critics as it illustrates difficulties for researchers to build knowledge in a cumulative manner.

In this paper, we explore and discuss the meaning of the concept *public e-service*, a concept that, we argue, encompasses most of the concepts used to denote electronic interfaces between governments and citizens. The challenges with the concept public e-service are, however, manifold. The term e-service contains two parts: the *e-* and the *service*. These two parts can be seen to represent two different things. The ‘e’ represents that something is done ‘electronically’ and can thus be linked to an electronic artifact. The ‘service’ represents something intangible – a process in which value is created for someone. Hence, the e-service concept can be explored from both an (1) electronic artifact (technology) perspective, and a (2) service perspective. When considering the organizational context in which the e-service is used, yet another perspective is added. This perspective highlights the ownership or availability of the artifact or service; a perspective in which attention is directed towards exploring potential implications based on whether the e-service is (3) public or private.

The community of researchers concerned with e-government and public e-services is truly multidisciplinary and the interests of the individual e-government researcher guides which of these perspectives on the public e-service will be adopted. The multidisciplinary nature of the field strengthens the e-government research in many ways (Scholl,

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2007), but can make conceptual discussions difficult. This possibility to perceive and interpret the phenomenon that the concept e-service refers to in several different ways might be an influencing factor to why the concept (public) e-service is used synonymously with several other concepts. In order to increase the analytical generalizability, conceptual maturity and practical benefit of e-government research, researchers concerned with e-services need to define what they are referring to when discussing public e-services. Furthermore, *multidisciplinary* is not the same as *interdisciplinary*. Increased communication between researchers of different disciplines is needed if the e-government field is to avoid the alleged ghetto-ization and, in turn, stimulate knowledge accumulation.

The aims of this paper are to discuss the public e-service concept from an interdisciplinary perspective and propose a broad conceptual framework for comprehending public e-services. The paper is hence conceptual and presents efforts to understand e-services in the public sector domain in order to prepare grounds for disambiguation of terminological and conceptual variations as well as conflicts observed in the e-government context. The paper is built on the assumption that in order to explain social phenomena we need concepts to think about them (Pollitt, 2011). We argue that conceptual refinement is an important step towards combating the theoretical underdevelopment claimed to plague e-government research (Heeks & Bailur, 2007). Conceptual frameworks provide the “metatheoretic language”, which is necessary for talking about and developing theories, i.e. help to identify the necessary elements as well as relationships between these elements (Ostrom, 2005, p. 28). The concept of public e-services has suffered from what Sartori (1970) refers to as “conceptual stretching”, i.e. vague conceptualization: it can be everything or nothing. Simultaneously, it is important to recognize the complexity of the concept and understand that omitting one perspective could exclude significant insights. A conceptual framework for public e-services thus has to balance a holistic perspective without resorting to vagueness. Here, we believe there are significant winnings in conceptual clarification to be made by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, as well as an interpretative and hermeneutic approach, thus unpacking the public e-service concept into its parts and refine their meaning. This means building on previous research and theorization made within e-government research and adjoining fields of research.

After this introduction, the paper is organized in the following manner. First, our research perspective and approach is briefly described. Second, the meaning of the terms *service* and *e-service* is discussed. Third, some of the main characteristics of public organizations vis-à-vis private organizations are investigated, in order to clarify the *public* prefix. Based on these discussions the concept *public e-service* is addressed. The paper is concluded with a discussion on the main issues and questions that emerge when adopting a holistic perspective of public e-services.

2. Research perspective and approach

The work presented in this article is qualitative and interpretative research (Walsham, 1995), and constitutes the merger of two research perspectives; 1) information systems, and 2) public administration research. In order to present ourselves as conversational partners and clarify our motivation and logic of this work, this section is devoted to the presentation of our view on technology and research approach.

2.1. Our view on technology

The implementation of public e-services can be perceived as an instance of organizational change through the implementation of information technology (IT); a topic researched by scholars in both IS (e.g., Orlikowski, 1992, 2007) and PA (e.g., Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Fountain, 2001a). In their often cited paper on different perspectives on the causal relationship between information technology and organizational change, Markus and Robey (1988) distinguish between three conceptions of causal agency; 1) the

technological imperative, 2) the organizational imperative, and 3) the emergent perspective. The technological imperative views technology as a force that determines and constrains the behavior of individuals and organizations; in this perspective, information technology is seen as a cause of organizational change. The organizational imperative, in turn, assumes that behaviors are chosen according to a set of consistent preferences and that the impact of information technology on organizational change is a result of the motives and actions of the designers of information technology. This perspective assumes more or less unlimited control over both technological options and their consequences. In this article, we adhere to the third conception; the *emergent perspective* on the relationship between information technology and organizational change, namely that “the uses and consequences of information technology emerge unpredictably from complex social interactions” (Markus & Robey, 1988, p. 588). This perspective acknowledges that behaviors and consequences, of both humans and the environment, are difficult to predict a priori. It also acknowledges the interplay between conflicting objectives and preferences, and the existence of non-rational behavior. Researchers adhering to the emergent perspective on causal agency allow for greater complexity and, as a consequence, are less prone to state normative implications (Markus & Robey, 1988) or prescriptions regarding the relationship between technology and organizations. Nevertheless, according to this logic, it becomes the more vital to understand the interplay between the technology and its context, i.e. detangle some of the complexity and dynamics of the relationship. By discussing the public e-service concept in relation to it being an *electronic artifact*, and a *process*, and in relation to its *organizational context*, we argue that some of this dynamics is captured.

2.2. The literature review and analysis approach – a hermeneutic process

The discussion and framework presented in this article is based on a literature review conducted as a hermeneutic process (Boell & Cezec-Kecmanovic, 2011). The review method (as described in Fig. 1), starts with the search for publications on some identified concept and different terms used to describe it. After reading publications on this topic, the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon of interest increases; based on this understanding, the search for further publications can be refined. This is an iterative process in which the review and analysis processes are inherently intertwined, aimed at identifying interesting themes, contrasts, and ‘gaps’ in the body of literature. Based on this approach, we have continuously explored literature, policy documents, and e-government practices, with the intention to better understand the context and particularities of e-services in the public sector.

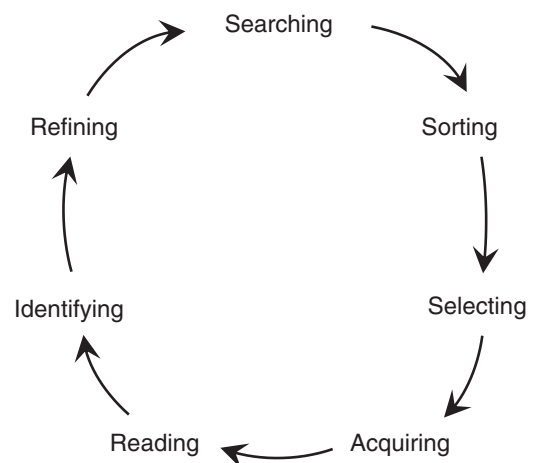


Fig. 1. The hermeneutic circle for undertaking literature reviews (adapted from Boell & Cezec-Kecmanovic, 2011, p.9).

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