Government – citizen communication through the web: Editorial

Karin Axelsson[a] and Göran Goldkuhl[a]

[a] Department of Management and Engineering, Linköping University, Sweden
e-mail: karin.axelsson@liu.se; goran.goldkuhl@liu.se

1   Theme background

The web is nowadays a dominant media for communication between public agencies and citizens. Governmental information is published on websites to be read and used by different citizens. Such websites may also contain e-services to be used by citizens for their communication to government, e.g. application for permits and allowances. There are many examples of websites with one-way communication from government to citizens (Ancarani, 2005). There is, however, a growing number of websites that contain two-way communication between government and citizens (ibid; Goldkuhl, 2007). People can initiate and follow cases (requests, applications, etc.) through the web. There exist different degrees of sophistication in the web interaction between government and citizen. This has been described in different taxonomies and stage models; see e.g. Layne & Lee (2001), Siau & Long (2005), Andersen & Henriksen (2006), Goldkuhl & Persson (2006) and Kim & Grant (2010). Many of these frameworks describe an evolutionary process of e-government from simple one-way communication to complex and integrated services. Later frameworks and development efforts also include wider citizen participation and uses of web 2.0 principles (Chun et al, 2010). Recent development also includes enhanced personalisation of services to users (Millard, 2011).

Many governmental websites contain an immense volume of information and it might be very hard for citizens to find what is desired. Governmental information can be structured in many ways and there is a great challenge to find principles that make navigation in large websites easy (Tan & Benbasat, 2009). There exist websites for single agencies, but there also exist websites that integrate information and services over agency borders (Janssen & van Venstra, 2005; Siau & Long, 2005). Such portals/websites are challenging to build and they can be either facilitating for citizens to use or confusing to use (Wimmer, 2002; Gouscos et al, 2007).

Quality of governmental e-services has been conceptualised and investigated taking different perspectives. Inspiration has been obtained from general service quality frameworks (Zeithaml et al, 2002; Barnes & Vidgen, 2003; Halaris et al, 2007; Alhyari et al, 2012). There are other arguments for establishing quality criteria especially adapted for the e-government context (Tan & Benbasat, 2009; Tate & Everman, 2010). The focus in these quality assessments is on the citizen as a user. When taking

a two-way communication perspective it is also necessary to consider effects on the governmental agencies and their staff. To receive information from the citizens through the web often entails changes in business processes (Scholl, 2003; Chourabi et al, 2009; Corradini et al, 2010) and information systems interoperability (Janssen & Cresswell, 2005; Klischewski & Scholl, 2006).

E-government policies and all kinds of laws and other statutes regulate website communication with citizens (Alpar & Olbrich, 2005; Allouache & Khadraoui, 2011; Goldkuhl, 2011). Besides classical issues of user – system interaction, the regulative nature of governmental communication adds more complexity to the design of governmental websites.

A communication perspective on governmental websites implies a clarification of
- the communicators (governmental agencies and citizens) and their intentions and actions
- the website as media, content and communicative actions

Investigations of governmental websites may get lost in structural and technical issues. This Special Issue emphasises the web as relational media with communicative purposes and with governmental and citizen users. Information and communication are fore-grounded (Goldkuhl & Persson, 2006; Axelsson et al, 2007; Goldkuhl 2007).

2 Papers in this special issue

The papers in this special issue are dealing with different aspects of web-based communication in e-government settings.

The first paper is *Two faces of autonomy: learning from non-users of an e-service* authored by Guri Verne. This paper discusses various reasons why citizens do not use online e-government self-services. A case at the Norwegian Tax Agency Call Centre illustrates how citizens and agency advisors communicate about problems and issues when doing automated taxes. The persons calling for help are understood as non-users of the e-services. The author has conducted a qualitative study where she has co-listening to the telephone calls and analysed empirical data by using feminist theory of relational autonomy in order to understand how autonomy is supported by the tax advisors. A conclusion from the study is that many advisors differentiate their response depending on how they understand the life situation and needs of the caller, and suggest one of two kinds of autonomy; do-it-yourself autonomy and duke autonomy.

The second paper is *To use or not to use: Road bumps for citizens' adoption of e-services* authored by Maria Ek Styvén, Åsa Wallström, Anne Engström and Esmail Salehi-Sangari. This paper addresses the challenge of increasing the use of public e-services and argues that we need better understanding of factors driving citizens' use of such services. This is done by assessing the influence of trust, perceived sacrifice, and optimism bias on citizens' intentions to use public e-services as well as the moderating influence of previous use on the relationships between trust, perceived sacrifice, optimism bias, and intention to use public e-services. The study focuses e-service adoption by proposing and testing a model on a random sample of 422 Swedish citizens. The model confirms the influence of trust and optimism bias; however,

trust seems to play a considerably more important role for non-users than for users. The study also indicates that perceived sacrifice in terms of time and effort can be a strong predictor of behavioral intentions. A conclusion of the study is that it would be difficult to retain users who have experienced an e-service as complicated and inefficient, even if these citizens are skilled Internet users. In turn, this may hamper the adoption of other e-services.

The third paper is *A decade of e-government indexes: The emerging mode of participative communication* authored by Ronit Purian. This paper describes how human relationships reflected in mediating interfaces of information systems (IS) can be captured through evaluation criteria of IS. The author studies the evolution of e-government evaluation indexes in order to identify important contexts and values over the period of years 2000 to 2010. Different values are analyzed in order to find what they symbolize and which underlying mechanisms there are. The actors who produce and construct such indexes are important to understand, in order to understand e-government's role in different settings. This paper shows the evolution of e-government evaluation criteria over a decade; it points at changing trends that are not yet explicitly addressed by the extant body of literature; and it proposes a theoretical framework for e-government as a tool in the social discourse.

The fourth paper is *The muddy waters of public e-services – the use and misuse of the concept and how to get out of the maze* authored by Arild Jansen and Svein Ølnes. In this paper the notion that availability and quality of public e-services are important indicators of e-government maturity is focused. The authors problematize which types of electronic interaction between citizens and government agencies that could be seen as e-services. They are critical towards the fact that the e-service concept is used in an uncritical and inflationary way that blurs important differences between unequal categories having distinct quality requirements. This makes the development of ontologies in this area difficult which has a negative impact on the possibility to reach interoperability between systems. A framework for categorizing electronic communication using some basic functions (service elements) is proposed in this paper. The framework facilitates description of various types of interactions between citizens and public agencies.

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