PUTTING "PUBLIC" BACK INTO PUBLIC E-SERVICES: A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

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This paper presents attempts to contribute to the conceptual refinement of e-government and public e-services by discussing the concept of "public" in relation to public e-services. It does so by building on perspectives from political science and public administration. Bridging the gap to insights made in previous research is here regarded as vital in order to contribute to conceptual, theoretical and practical development of public e-services. In turn, the paper serves as part of on-going research that contributes to the formulation of a wider conceptual framework concerning the essence of public e-services. By putting the "public" of public e-services in the foreground, public e-services are here viewed as a matter of access to governments and governmental output. Consequently, depending on issues such as usability and availability, public e-services can be conceptualized as either the swing door or gatekeeper to public services.

Keywords: e-government, public e-services, public organizations, public services.

1. Introduction

During the last decade, research on electronic government (*e-government*) and the provision of electronic services in public organizations (here, referred to as *public e-services*) has increased significantly in a number of disciplines, ranging from information systems (IS) to public administration, to media and communication studies. Yet, or perhaps because of the interdisciplinary research of the field, e-government remains theoretically underdeveloped [1]. Observers speak of the "ghetto-ization" [2] and the "theoretical neglect" [3] of e-government research, referring to the inability to build on previous results and theory development from adjoining fields of research. Related to this problem is the conceptual confusion surrounding both the concepts of e-government and public e-services, with different interpretations circling according to research context and discipline. This does not only have theoretical consequences, for instance for knowledge accumulation and analytical generalizability, but can also have practical consequences: the way we rhetorically give meaning to something influences how we handle it in practice [4]. Bridging the gap to insights made by previous research is thus important in order to add to theoretical, conceptual and practical development.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the conceptual refinement of e-government by discussing the concept of "public" in relation to e-services, mainly from a political science and public administration perspective. Although public e-services have increasingly gained attention by scholars from public administration [5] [6] [7], it remains a largely neglected

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topic within mainstream political science [8] [9]. This neglect is somewhat surprising considering how political science is traditionally occupied with governmental processes and reforms. Nevertheless, we argue that political science perspectives can, through "old" insights, contribute with "new" perspectives on public e-services. This is especially applicable to the public context in which e-services operate. Consequently, the paper will focus on the "public" prefix in public e-services. Despite the emphasis on political science and public administration perspectives, IS perspectives will also be added. Public e-services have gained considerable attention in the IS field and by IS researchers concerned with e-government research [10]. Public e-services, in general, can be understood as electronic services through which citizens (or businesses) interact with the government, typically via a governmental website [11] [12]. This kind of service is typically described as being interactive, customer driven, and integrated with related technologies and processes within the supplying organization. Given its two components, *e-* and *service*, it is important to see that an e-service is both an IT artifact and a service process. In the e-government literature, issues such as e-service development and user adoption are frequent themes. Many researchers classify e-services based on the relationships between the supplying organization and the receiving party into types such as Government-to-Government, Government-To-Business, Business-to-Consumer, etc [13]. Nevertheless, few of these researchers account for the specific context and logic of public organizations, in contrast to private organizations, in an elaborate and grounded fashion. In this paper, the "public" in public e-service will be opened up in order to inform research and practice concerning e-services in public organizations.

The paper is built on the assumption that in order to build theories, conceptual refinement is key. To put it more exactly: "(e)ven before we use theories to *explain* things we use concepts and taxonomies to *think* about them" [2]. Thus, the paper is conceptual and presents parts of on-going research that contribute to formulation of a wider conceptual framework concerning the essence of public e-services. This framework also focuses on the service and electronic aspects of a public e-service. The paper therefore aims to supply a building block in a future conceptual framework for thinking about and looking at public e-services.

We begin by investigating what the term "public" entails, mainly according to political science and public administration perspectives on public organizations and public services, since this is the context in which public e-services operate. We in turn contrast public organizations with private organizations, in order to illustrate some of our main points. It should be stressed that our discussion will mainly concern developed democracies. Our findings will then be used in the final discussion on how public e-services, from the perspectives presented in this paper, can be perceived and conceptualized.

2. What does *public* in public e-services involve?

We acknowledge that there are several meanings of "public", which are not only related to formalized and regulated political institutions but also to more informal forums of public debate, in particular in discussions concerning the *public sphere*. In these instances, public entails the physical spaces or information which are part of a shared "commons", as well as the collective of citizens or generally shared interests or principles ("public opinion"), e.g. as embodied in civil society [14]. However, we will in this paper focus on public as in the legal-political system in contrast to public associated with, for instance, civil society or other forums [15],[16]. *Public organizations* are defined in this paper as the formal public entities which decide about and organize public administration of different kinds, e.g. state authorities, ministries, municipalities or regional authorities. *Public services* are defined as the

services provided by public organizations to citizens, either directly or by financing private providers. These include actual service production such as teaching and health care, as well as information and counseling [17] [18].

Within political science and public administration, the distinctiveness of public organizations is often taken for granted. However, the spread of New Public Management (NPM) and the incorporation of ideals from the private sector into public organizations have resulted in the differences between public and private organizations being increasingly downplayed [17]. Although we do not deny that there are similarities between public and private organizations, we adhere to the basic assumption that there are also fundamental differences which cannot be downplayed. Simply put: the differences matter more than the similarities [19]. It is also important to acknowledge that public organizations are not uniform. They often differ in terms of function and structure, for instance, depending on whether they are positioned on local, regional or state levels of public administration. Yet, on a general level, there are certain rudimentary characteristics which we argue are important to highlight as shared by all public organizations. In this respect, there is a need in e-government research to more deeply explore what "public" in conjunction to e-services entails, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the concept. But before this relationship can be explored, the main characteristics of public organizations and services need to be clarified. We perform this clarification according to three basic categorizations: (1) institutional framework, (2) actors and (3) context.

2.1. Institutional Framework – Serving the Citizen

The most basic difference between public and private organizations is that public organizations, at least indirectly, work for *all* citizens [20]. For instance, the Swedish constitution stipulates that "All public power in Sweden emanates from the people" [21]. Public organizations are thus accountable to a *publicly elected leadership*, through which the people constitute the basis of authority. In order to ensure compliance with decisions made by the elected politicians, public organizations are steered by a set of formal, explicit, comprehensive and stable set of rules, which traditionally has been organized according to a bureaucratic logic. Although it can be claimed that the inclusion of non-public actors and new forms of "softer" policy instruments has loosened this bureaucratic structure, it cannot be denied that public organizations operate within a comprehensive legal institutional framework [17] [18]. This framework varies according to public organization or sector in terms of degree of detail or formalization. For instance, the Swedish Constitution, which encompasses the duties of all public organizations, sets a more general framework for civic freedoms and rights. In contrast, income-tax law involves a heavily formalized and detailed set of rules which allow less discretion.

As a consequence of the obligations enshrined in the legal framework, public organizations are seen to be guided by a different logic – *the public ethos* [22] [23]. The public ethos entails that the overarching aim of public organizations is to serve the public in ways that ensures the public interest, based on an active understanding that they are financed by public resources and ultimately accountable to the people [24]. Public organizations should thus embody a shared sense of responsibility for serving social justice and the common good, whereby both *economic* and *democratic values* are taken into account. Economic values are mainly founded on balancing the use of resources according to economic targets and revenues, whereas democratic values are based on the public rights and rule of law enshrined in constitutional writings. Here, principles of legal impartiality, equal rights and equal treatment are central. Both types of values presuppose each other and have to be constantly balanced in order to fulfill the public ethos. In short, in order to be legitimate, public organizations have to be both

democratic *and* efficient. In this respect, a distinction is sometimes made between public *administration* and public *management* [22]. Whereas public administration places the democratic values in the foreground, public management mainly highlights economic values. Although public management is a vital part of public organizations of today, the democratic values of public administration is the very foundation that makes them *public*.

The institutional framework regulating public organizations is largely derived from the protection of political and individual rights (as well as obligations), as enshrined in *citizenship*. Although it is nowadays common to speak of the receiver of public services in terms of a *customer*, thus borrowing terminology from the private sector, the wider meaning of citizenship cannot be ignored [25]. Citizens cannot be excluded just because it is not deemed profitable enough to serve them. In most cases, public organizations have a legal duty to ensure service delivery. Services cannot be held back from citizens because there are too many cases to deal with or because of shortage of personnel or money. Services have to be universal and cannot revert to different forms of particularism [5] [26].

Working for *all* people also means that the clientele of public services varies: it is sometimes difficult (and sometimes unethical) to identify a well-defined target group or average user [5], [27]. This is especially the case for welfare states with universal coverage, which includes the Nordic countries [28]. Here, entitlement to public services is based on citizenship rather than income (as in the Anglo-Saxon model), which means that the users of public services can indeed be very heterogeneous. As a consequence, the information about and provision of public services have to be made available to an often rather *heterogeneous group of people*.

Thus, in order to ensure legal impartiality for all citizens, *equal treatment* and the *availability* of public services is of immediate concern to public organizations. An important starting point for understanding what "public" in public e-services entails is thus to recognize that public organizations operate within a number of institutional constraints, both formal and informal, where serving the citizen functions as the overarching goal.

2.2. Actors – Multi-functionality and Complexity

A second overarching difference between public and private organizations concerns the *multi-functionality* of public organizations. A number of different actors, with different roles, interests and aims, are involved in the creation of public policy and services. Public organizations are not solely governed by rule of law, market mechanisms, civil servants, politicians nor other organized interests, but constitute a combination of these forms of governance. This means that public organizations have to take into account several sometimes contradictory aims and interests. These aims and interests have partly been touched upon above in the discussion concerning the public ethos. In addition, public organizations have to consider issues such as political control, representation and participation from different stakeholders, transparency, public control of decision making processes, predictability, equal treatment, neutrality, quality of services, professional independence, political loyalty and cost-efficiency. Principles related to rule of law have to be balanced against rule by the majority and cost-efficient management [17]. Consequently, aims in public organizations are often regarded as contradictory and ambiguous.

The *complexity* of public organizations has also increased with the growing involvement of private actors in the provision of public services. In this sense, the boundary between what is private and public is becoming less distinct. Public services are now taking place in the borderland between public and private and are being provided by different hybrid forms of

organizations. For instance, public services can be public with regards to the ownership and private when it comes to the production and financing [17].

The involvement of non-public actors does not only complicate the interests and aims behind public services further, but also blurs who is behind "public". This brings issues of responsibility and accountability into the foreground. In order for citizens to perceive a public e-service as trustworthy and secure, it is important that they understand who is "behind" the service, as well as who is responsible if something goes wrong [29]. In sum, public e-services need to be seen in the light that public organizations constitute a mixed system, with partly inconsistent principles for governing, as well as inherent challenges in balancing these different aims and interests.

2.3. Context – Lack of Exit

A third basic characteristic concerns the type of context, external of the institutional framework, in which public organizations and services operate. Public organizations usually function in a *monopolized* or some sort of *compulsory situation*, where the relationship with citizens is asymmetrical [30]. Several public services, in particular welfare services, are monopolized by public organizations. Welfare services are public services which are meant to guarantee the social protection of individuals in case of illness, unemployment and disabilities as well as during childhood or old age, e.g. schools, health care and social security benefits. Even welfare services for which private options exist are often too costly for several groups of citizens. Hence, only the public options are viable [31]. Furthermore, although several public services are carried out in cooperation with private companies, and thus offer freedom of choice between public, private or other service providers, these providers are usually chosen by public organizations through public procurement or some other centrally steered selection of actors. Therefore, public services do not take place in a free market, but rather a *quasi-market* where the power of the consumer is limited [32]. Receivers of public services cannot "shop around" for certain public services but are often dependent on one specific authority for the services or the selection of service providers. The nature of several welfare services, e.g. social security benefits, also reinforces the asymmetrical relationship between citizens and public organizations. Citizens are in these situations dependent on public organizations for their livelihood; it is not a "choice".

In addition, governments, and hence public organizations, have a number of compulsory claims on individuals that do not involve choice, e.g. arrest, taxation and conscription. In contrast to welfare services which serve as a part of the rights of citizenship, these serve as a part of the obligations of citizenship. Consequently, in contrast to services provided by private organizations on a free market, there is either a restricted *exit*-option for users of public services or a total lack of exit [33].

In turn, understanding the concept of "public" means understanding that the basis for *legitimacy* differs for public organizations. On the ideal private market, all contracts are voluntary and all actors have equal status, at least in theory. Decisions made by private organizations are legitimized by the fact that no one is forced to buy or sell. All decisions are made by individuals, based on free choice and own responsibility. In contrast, public decisions have to be justified on different grounds. In a democracy, the basis of legitimacy for public organizations ultimately stems from the democratic decision making processes. However, since public services are the main channel through which citizens experience the execution of political decisions, the execution and quality of public services are also decisive for how citizens judge the political system [20] [30] [34].

2.4. Main Characteristics of Public Organizations and Services – a Summary

We have in the above sections argued that there are certain fundamental differences between private and public organizations, stemming from that the authority of public organizations ultimately emanates from the people and that public organizations mainly operate in monopolized, quasi-market or compulsory situations. The complexity and multi-functionality of public organizations also produce certain differences. It is difficult to define one set of goals or interests; instead there are several which often are inconsistent and have to be balanced. This places certain demands on public organizations in terms of their relationship with the citizen: they have a different role and responsibility than private organizations. Thus, public sector "customers" and private sector customers cannot be perceived as the same. The relationship between citizens and public organizations are mediated by several institutional and contextual factors which are different from those of private organizations. These factors are summarized in table 1 below:

Public	Main Characteristics of Public Organizations and Services
Institutional framework - **Serving the Citizen**	▪ Need to ensure individual and political rights of citizenship. ▪ Need to balance democratic and economic values, i.e. principles of equality, responsiveness, availability and social inclusion, as well as cost-efficiency. ▪ Need to ensure services for all citizens (accommodate heterogeneity)
Actors - **Multi-functionality and Complexity**	▪ Need to balance diverse, contradictory and ambiguous interests and aims (accommodate complex web of public and non-public actors)
Context - **Lack of Exit**	▪ Need to balance asymmetrical relationship with citizen and ensure legitimacy through democratic decision making, rule of law and efficient output.

Table 1. Main Characteristics of Public Organizations and Services.

3. Conceptualizing *Public* E-Services – Access to Governments

As stated in the introduction, e-services can be understood as electronic services through which citizens (or businesses) interact with governments, typically via a governmental website [11] [12]. This kind of service is typically interactive and integrated with related technologies and processes within the supplying organization. Given its two components, *e-* and *service*, it is important to consider an e-service both as an IT artifact and a service process. With this in mind, what do above described characteristics of "public" add to the conceptualization of public e-services? With our discussion of the term "public" as a backdrop, we argue in the following section that it is not enough to conceptualize public e-services as the delivery of electronic services by governments. Rather, by placing the "public" prefix in the foreground, we would like to broaden and also reverse the perspective and claim that public e-services need to be conceptualized as a matter of *access to governments and public organizations* per se. Public e-services are a central part of the actual carrying out and realization of public policy and governmental output. In return, public e-service becomes a matter of gaining access, not only to the IT artifact or the service process, but to governments and governmental output in general. This implies a wider perspective on public e-services. We argue that this point of view carries with it a number of broader implications for the

conceptualization as well as practical realization of public e-services. Thus, we end with some normative reflections on why public e-services increasingly ought to be conceptualized as part of the access to governments. The discussion is conducted by addressing three sub-questions grounded in our categorization of the concept public: (1) what is being served? (institutional framework), (2) who is being served? (actors) and (3) how is it being served? (context) In particular the last question will touch upon normative aspects, i.e. how public e-services ought to be served.

3.1. What is being served?

In several cases, public e-services do not involve the actual output, or end product, of public policy, such as the teaching in schools or the medical treatment of a patient. Rather, it is the *mediation* of that service, the process through which this service is being communicated and accessed. Public e-services are in this sense a matter of *information* about and *communication* of public services. The growing centrality of public e-services in the mediation and provision of public services means that, in certain instances, they start occupying a similar position to *street-level bureaucrats*, i.e. public service workers who interact directly with citizens. Street-level bureaucrats have been described as occupying a critical position in society since their actions constitute the services delivered by governments. Thus, they are the channel through which citizens directly experience citizenship and the government they have implicitly constructed [31]. The behavior and actions (e.g. routines and coping mechanisms) these bureaucrats develop are thus decisive for how citizens experience and judge governments or, in some instances, determine if citizens gain access to services at all. If we apply a similar logic to public e-services, the *e-* (the technology) of public e-services is decisive for how citizens can access and judge the e-service, the public service, and in turn, governments. In other words, just like for street-level bureaucrats, the quality of public e-services has a central role in the creation and maintenance of trust for and legitimacy of public organizations.

By recognizing that a public e-service is part of the meditation of public services, our conceptualization of the term becomes more distinct. We argue that a public e-service can be viewed as either a *swing door* or *gatekeeper* to public services. What we mean is that a public e-service has the potential to function as a smooth entrance to a public service, increasing the perceived quality and ease of access of this service (a swing door). Conversely, a public e-service can work as a something which, intentionally or unintentionally, guarantees or restricts access to a public service (a gatekeeper). The *intended* gatekeeper refers to a public e-service that determines who receives access to a specific public service according to eligibility criteria, e.g. in the case of social welfare or unemployment benefits, where not everyone is guaranteed full access. The *unintended* gatekeeper refers to when a public e-service unintentionally functions as a gatekeeper due to bad design or insufficient information, and thus decreases the quality of the public service offered or simply obstructs an individual's right to this service.

3.2. Who is being served?

Secondly, a public e-service is something more than a service process that creates clear benefits for both provider and receiver. In public services, it is not always clear who the beneficiary of the service is since the gains for citizens can be more long-term, or imply collective benefits for society as a whole, rather than for the individual citizen. This unclarity is especially applicable for the obligations of citizenship, such as prescription and tax declaration, where the citizen could be seen as serving governments rather than vice versa.

Similarly, the asymmetrical power structures between citizens and governments, e.g. when citizens are dependent on governments for their livelihood, also highlights the peculiar situation of public services. In comparison to several private services, there is often an inherent duality in objectives of public services (and hence, public e-services) which blurs who the beneficiary is. Public e-services add an extra dimension to this. In e-government policies, the implementation of public e-services should create benefits for both citizens and governments, and the benefits for the citizens are especially emphasized. However, an emphasis on the latter, i.e. increased efficiency and effectiveness within governments, has tended to prevail in practice. Nevertheless, the obligatory nature and asymmetrical power structure of some public services highlights even further the importance of viewing public e-services from the citizens' perspective, more specifically as a matter of access to governments. An obstruction of access (e-services as the unintended gatekeeper) could have serious consequences in the shape of penalties or loss of livelihood for the individual.

3.3. How is it being served?

Finally, if we conceptualize public e-services as an increasingly important part of access to governments and to governmental output, there are several aspects that need to be considered in the practical realization of public e-services, that is, *how* they are being served. The most important aspect concerns the fact that public organizations do not gain legitimacy because, as for private organizations, citizens choose to use their services. Instead, public organizations gain legitimacy when citizens experience that the services are fair, trustworthy and qualitative. Trustworthy services include knowing who is behind the service; the technical development of e-services is usually handed over to private distributors and consultants, as well as based on private ideals such as e-banking. This blurs who is to be accountable for the service, as well as complicates the specific responsibilities which the "public" in public e-services entails. Whereas banks, for cost-efficient reasons, have cut down on non-electronic contact channels such as paper forms and face-to-face meetings, public organizations have to make sure that no citizen entitled to public services is excluded due to a streamlining of contact channels. This concerns both services that citizens are entitled to receive and services that are an obligation.

Public organizations have to be aware of different life situations and that the needs of citizens are not always clear cut. This presupposes user-friendly and flexible technological solutions rather than standardized solutions according to a standardized user, and places issues of *availability* and *accessibility* in the foreground. Therefore, in order to ensure the principle of equal treatment, public e-services have to promote possibilities of *fair* and *equal access* and thus function more as a swing door. This is particularly important when considering that the groups in most need of public services might also be the ones less prone to use public e-services, i.e. disadvantaged groups with no computer or Internet access, low computer maturity and/or literacy. Public e-services, although not the end-product of the service delivered, can in practice still reduce the quality of the public service or simply obstruct an individual's right (or obligation) to this service, as a result of bad design or insufficient information. By viewing public e-services as part of the access to governments and governmental output, we hope to bring a discussion on these issues to the foreground.

4. Further Research

This paper has focused on one dimension of public e-services, namely *public*. It provides one of several ways of looking at the concept of public e-services, namely from a political science

and public administration perspective. According to this logic, the application of the "public" prefix to the term e-service illustrates an underlying notion that public organizations inhabit certain characteristics that must be taken into account when developing and studying e-services. However, we believe that there are further conceptual and analytical gains to be made by further unpacking each dimension, *public*, *e-* and *services,* by relating them to previous research and not least by relating each dimension to the others. If conceptual refinement is to be achieved, we argue for an increased awareness that public e-service is a multi-faceted and multi-relational concept, where each dimension, alone or in combination, adds important insights. This paper thus attempts to provide a building block for a future conceptual framework for understanding public e-services.

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