It Takes More Than Two To TANGO
Co-Constructing Situated Accountability Through a Local E-Government Arena

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the issue of shaping local e-government policies and practices, by including several actors, such as researchers, official authorities, politicians and software companies as well as ordinary citizens in a joint, sustainable development of a region.

One way to provide space and place for this ongoing co-construction and negotiation work of situated e-government is the establishment of a regional center of competence on e-government, within a program, partly funded by the European Commission, called Innovative Actions. TANGO (*Thematic Arenas Nourish Growth Opportunities)* is a way to build thematic competence centres and stimulate local research- and development projects (R&D), carried out in co-operation with partners from local business life. The *Come on in-* project, described in this paper, is an example of such an R&D project. The practices reveal several critical and crucial negotiation situations that are of importance to be put forward and be discussed in relation to what situated accountability could mean for the development of what could be called a new politics production. Situated accountability is therefore of great significance for this discussion.

KEYWORDS

E-democracy, local e-government, responsibility, informatics, politics, situated accountability, triple helix, citizen-centered services

1. INTRODUCTION

It seems appropriate to begin this paper by exploring different interpretations of e-government as a concept, in order to show how it is envisioned and exercised in a European context. An official definition of e-government can be found on the website of the World Bank Organization:

'E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) which have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.' [24]

According to the new eEurope 2005 Action Plan [16], adopted by the European Commission in May 2002, the goal for Europe is to provide its citizens with '*modern online public services*' by the year 2005. Proposed actions in order to reach this goal are the development or extension of broadband connections, the launching of an interoperability framework, the continuing development of interactive public services and the establishment of public Internet access points. Other important areas are e-services within culture and tourism and public procurement. These are the 'far-reaching commitments' that the Member States in the European Union have agreed upon.

1.1 The Swedish model
In Sweden, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (SAPM) is responsible for this ongoing transformation of public administration and services. Among other things, the agency evaluates e-government related activities on a national as well as local and regional level. Electronic government is regarded a important for the overall modernization of public administration. Development within Sweden is characterized as rapid but we are still far from realising the visions of the '24/7 agencies,' as e-government is labeled in Sweden, according to a recent follow-up of the subject. The guiding principles for the development are stated in a visionary document, "On our way to the 24/7 Agency", available on the website of SAPM. [21] In short the development requires: technical development, professional leadership, ability to change, increased self-service for citizens in order to gain inter-organizational efficiency, changes in work practice, and more co-operation between different authorities and organizations. The ambitions and goals for e-government in Sweden, which is managed by the Swedish Agency for Public Management [21] are to stay in the front line of development, to achieve increased networking, a 'seamless' organization and one-stop procedure of handling an errand, and to facilitate citizens' participation in processes of decision-making within public administra-

tion. The slogan is 'one errand – one authority', which is supposed to be realized by 2005.

1.2 Simplicity and complexity

According to Lenk & Traunmüller, two European researchers within the field of e-government, the central challenges within the development of e-government must be, to broaden and nuance the current predominant definition:

'Electronic government is commonly understood to focus upon relatively simple transactions between identifiable customers (citizens, enterprises) on the one hand and a multitude of government organisations in charge of particular activities on the other. Attention is chiefly directed towards Electronic Service Delivery. If the promise of e-government as the key component in modernising government is to be kept, the concept must be broadened so as to include the full enabling potential of IT, as well as the complex reality of government and public governance. ' [18]

In line with the quote presented above, the concept of e-government is, in this paper, understood and discussed as a combination of three parts; electronic services, administrative procedures and electronically processed democracy. E-government must, according to its multi-layered complexity, be seen as a continual co-construction and negotiation process, involving several actors. This approach makes it possible for researchers to look at some specific aspects of the practices and distinguish how e-government is enacted in local contexts, for example which actors are active on different levels – including citizens. Some additional guiding questions for this investigation could be: What constitutes the ongoing negotiation work? Are there elements within the process that could be highlighted in order to broaden the dominating and somewhat narrow understanding of e-government? What does situated accountability look like in practice? Does the process involve citizens and in what way? What are the rights and duties of accountability, efficiency, quality and increased networking?

The following sections of the paper will give a presentation of the local context and provide more details about the ongoing development project on e-government, followed by a discussion of accountability seen from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Then there will be a brief presentation of a case study from the region and thereafter a concluding discussion, which will not attempt to provide fixed solutions, but rather list further research questions and possible ways of continuing the work.

2. DESCRIBING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Ronneby, a small town in south-east Sweden, has several years of experience of dynamic co-operation between research, the local community and software companies, to which attention was drawn in a recent article by Robert L Glass, editor of The Software Practitioner. [8]

The profile of Blekinge Institute of Technology is applied ICT, which is emphasized as a successful strategy for new knowledge production, as well as the surrounding business life in the local context, an example of "triple helix" [18] in action, so to say.

The ongoing co-operation between several actors is of strategic importance for the development of the local community, according to the municipality. Many projects, and other initiatives, have been processed over several years, by the local authority in co-operation with Blekinge Institute of Technology. [15]

3. ARENAS FOR TANGO

A center of competence on e-government, within the framework of the TANGO Arena (*Thematic Arenas Nourish Growth Opportunities*),[1] was recently established, actively involving the above mentioned and defined actors. The project is partly funded through the European Commission program for Innovative Actions. [16]

In total The TANGO Program, which is physically located in two counties of the southern parts of Sweden, Skåne and Blekinge, consists of five thematically arenas, whereof e-government is one example. The other arenas focus on mechanical engineering industry, integrated digital and physical flows, provisions industry and Wireless Communication.

This paper concentrates on the development of the e-government arena, the aim of which is to promote the ongoing transformation of the local authorities and their provision of electronic services to citizens in the region, not solely by focusing on technical product development, but also by applying a horizontal perspective, including multidisciplinary and multi-organizational approaches, increased provision of e-services, encouragement of new organizational patterns and behavior within official authorities. It is of great importance, according to the e-government project plan, to make place and space for co-operation between different actors and to apply a holistic view to the project, in order to reach the stated goals. The development of e-government as well as competence centers requires far-reaching co-operative and co-working efforts from all the partners involved.

Desired and crucial actors, in the outlined co-operation, are politicians, and actors from local businesses and research with a multidisciplinary approach. A number of initiatives have been taken, in order to stimulate transformation of the region. Several researchers, from different disciplinary fields, such as informatics, Technoscience Studies, Human Work Science and Spatial Planning are taking an active part in running and conducting process evaluation of the ongoing projects.

The research methods is inspired by the Scandinavian approaches to system development, in USA known as Participatory Design [1], which are based on the use of ethnographic methods, and mean investigations of

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[1] See http://www.k.lst.se/tango2/engindex.htm [Accessed 040310]

activities in everyday settings of work and of technologies-in-use. The aim is to take a holistic view, i.e. focus on the relations between activities and not exclusively look at one single individual or single activity. Our findings come out of the thematic analysis of interview material and observations on site.

The e-government arena is also initiating several local and individual projects, run by the local municipalities in co-operation with researchers from different research areas. Each project is focusing on development of an application, which highlights a specific aspect of e-government, on-line services, citizen participation and support of back-office co-operation between different specialists and organizations within the public sector. [2] New research programs and courses are under development, in close connection, and even in direct co-operation, with proponents from the official authorities, software companies and local politicians.

The earlier mentioned, *Come on in-* project, is one example, discussed later in this paper. Other projects are under consideration or in start-up phases, i.e. pilot projects focusing on development of interactive and mobile services within parental care. Other planned activities and arrangements are creating test beds for technical and organizational work and more.

4. PERSPECTIVES ON ACCOUNTABILITY

During a couple of reflecting research seminar, which have taken place during the past spring in Ronneby, mainly involving researchers and practitioners with a specific interest in local politics, has put some aspects of the ongoing development work in focus, of which accountability is one example. Following sections outline some important aspects of accountability:

4.1 Visibility
Responsible government is seen as a core issue in the ongoing e-government debate, where accountability is a central theme. A number of criteria on how to achieve good governance are exemplified in the current debate, when the changing character of public sector and government are discussed, in terms of *openness and transparency.* Dialogues concerning service design, recurrent evaluations and customer surveys, i.e. service declarations as well-as on-line consultations, as applied in Swedish contexts, could be seen as an aspiration towards increased *accountability*, by opening up new communication channels.[5]

Accountability is often associated with the aim of increasing the individual citizen's insight into government routines and principles, producing transparency and providing a presentation of government work processes. Accountability is then used in the sense of 'making visible', i.e. presenting and describing the process which leads to a decision. The ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel has minted a classic definition of accountability,
describing it as 'visible-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes' [6]

Ethnomethodological studies analyze everyday activities as members' methods for making those same activities visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e. "accountable"' [6, p. vii]. Accountable refers here to people's organizations of commonplace everyday activities, and help us understand how people manage and structure these everyday activities and daily interaction. Or, as described by John Hughes, professor of sociology at Lancaster University, during a lecture on the Work Practice and Technology Course at Blekinge Institute of Technology, in November 2001: 'Accountability is members methods for making activities observational-reportable, not to be understood as a stable theoretical concept, it is better seen as a set of methodological proposals for ethnomethodology. ' Focusing on these every-day practices of situated accountability gives a multitude of perspectives and interpretations on e-government development, compared to what the, somewhat one-sighted rhetorical policy documents suggests.

4. 2 Situatedness
This ongoing change of structures within and between the established official institutions, such as research, local government authorities and the public could also result in a new kind of politics production, emphasized as an example of "situated accountability". This compound conceptual figure builds on Donna Haraway's re-definition of objectivity, and makes it possible to deepen the discussion about various actors and their specific responsibility in development processes.

This is clearly related to Donna Haraway's insistence on a firm anchoring of responsibility rather than the visible-reportable. Accountability is from her standpoint, all about emphasizing the importance of taking a personal stand and accepting responsibility for the reality producing process in which we are all deeply involved: 'In this way we might be answerable for what we learn how to see'. [11]

I suggest that it may be fruitful to discuss what I would call '*situated accountability*' based on Donna Haraway's description of situated knowledge:
'Situated knowledge means not to be in one place or take a standpoint of situatedness, it is "a way to get at the multiple modes of embedding that are about both place and space in the manner in which geographers draw that distinction. Another way of putting it is when I discuss feminist accountability within the context of scientific objectivity as requiring a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy' [12, p 71]. Situated accountability, then, to which several actors contribute, aims at making visible the multiple modes of embedding within accountability production and a mutual learning-process, focusing on how e-government *becomes* e-government.

4.3 Purposefulness
The different understandings of accountability presented above raise certain questions, such as: 'accountability for what purpose?' In what ways can citizens, researchers, officials and business people take a common responsibility for how e-government-related projects

should be interpreted and carried out in relation to the day-to-day existence, of which everyone is a part, in this ongoing co-operation within the e-government arena?

Accountable democracy, politics as well as knowledge are no longer produced within given frameworks or under given preconditions. Aant Elzinga, a Swedish professor in theory of science, has described the changing policy agenda in Science and Technology as an aspiration towards a new, social contract for science, emerging in the 90s. The boundaries between science and politics were no longer significant, and the reconfiguration of science has been described in a number of terms, such as: 'mandated science (Salter), post academic science (Ziman), Mode-2 Science (Gibbons et.al) triple helix (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff), academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie) post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz), socially robust science or science in the agora (Nowotny et.al) ' [4]

Michael Gibbons, Director of the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex, and his fellow authors discuss changes in traditional knowledge development in *The New Production of Knowledge* (1994). Knowledge does not always develop where it is most expected; rather, it takes place in other contexts and ways which Gibbons calls 'mode 2', which he defines as follows: 'A new mode of knowledge production affects not only what knowledge is produced but also how it is produced; the context in which it is pursued, the way it is organized, the reward system it utilizes and the mechanisms that control the quality of what is produced'. [7]. This change in knowledge development is important for democratic and political development. It is thus appropriate to talk about a new form of 'politics production' as well as 'science production'. The aspects referred to above (how, in which context, in what way, and how to assure quality) are also important to present when discussing accountability as an example of politics production. Another important question to pose is: How does the above-described change manifest itself in different local practices?

5. THE CASE STUDY – 'COME ON IN'

The empirical material, presented in this paper, is mainly t gathered during the start-up and initiation of the *Come on in*-project as well as previous and ongoing research in the Municipality of Ronneby. [5] A recently completed e-democracy project in the municipality called Election2002, fed into a new project named, "*Kom-in-Du*", which is the Swedish acronym for Communication, Insight, Dialogue and Development, henceforth called the *Come on in*-project. [19] The new, running project is described as a way to put emphasis on changing the relations between official authorities and the citizens through experimental use of technology and dialogue around certain focus areas, such as urban planning and Citizen's Public Services Online.

The project team for "*Come on in*" involves municipal officers from the information office and urban planning

unit, researchers and software developers from a small Software Company called Your Voice, who are designing the new website on urban planning for the municipality and providing the support system for on-line consultations with citizens (in this particular context mainly used for the Citizen On-line Public Service), called Open24 Helpdesk. Using this software gives the responsible officers a possibility to gather questions through the web, store local knowledge through a database containing questions and answers (FAQ-database) and provide them with automatically generated statistical reports as well as follow-up reports.

5.1 The Software Company Open24 System
The software Company Your Voice offers Open24, which is a tool for modular web communication. Basic functions are publishing, management of customer relations (Customer Relationship Management, CRM) and interactivity on the Internet or Intranet.
The Open24 has deliberately been developed in order to serve the 24/7 Agency and the communication between citizens, politicians and administration units. The software has been developed over several years in co-operation with The Municipality of Stockholm [23] For the local *Come on in*-project this means, to a large extent, customization of already existing software.
Open24 is a portal supporting management of dialogues between citizens, official administrators and local and regional politicians. The portal is consisting of a set of modules, which is possible to link together. The modules are integrated with each other in order to create seamless flow in the portal. The modules is combined, customized or redesigned to fulfil the customers' needs.

Open24 could function like this:

1. The Municipality publish a present errand in the **Module for Errands**
2. The next step is to process the errand in a **Discussion forum**
3. The debating participants has the possibility to ask questions to the politicians in the **Question Panel**
4. An opinion poll is conducted in the **Module for Voting**
5. Citizens has the possibility to give proposals on errands to the municipality in the module for Citizens **Proposals**
6. The result of the decision-process is then published in the **Module for Errands**
7. The citizen is informed about the decision through **e-mail and the website**. [23]

5.2 Invitation to a dialogue?
In order to start up the work of a new website for spatial planning, two mock-up sessions, which basically could be described as paper-prototyping also involving users [3], were conducted together with practitioners from the information office, and officers from the local spatial planning office as well as researchers and designers from

Your Voice. The physical meetings and a follow-up discussion on the mock-up sessions were conducted using a videoconference system. The aim was to focus upon communication/interactivity, but this was not easy to achieve.

During a meeting with some of the municipal officers who were involved in the sessions, they were reflecting upon the experience and the purpose with the task. Here is one voice drawn out of the discussion:
'We must ask us questions: how do we want to make the issues [urban planning visions] visible? Is it really that much about communication or is it all about information? How do we know that we have succeeded with the communication? This is not about how many answers we give, it is about how many explanations we can offer and in what way the answer is given. We must invite citizens to develop more questions and new ways of knowing. '

5.3 Citizens as collaborators?
One concrete example may come out of this discussion later on: a possibility for the citizens to do their own SWOT-analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) about the municipality on the spatial planning website.

Another municipal officer was reflecting over the fact that the *Come on in*-project is envisioned as an e-democracy project in the project description, with emphasis on the deliberative aspects [10], not concentrating efforts on developing direct democracy such as electronic voting [10].

'What is it that makes this to an e-democracy project? Well, after the initiative with the Election2002 web, one of the politicians thought that there should be a continuation. In that aspect, everything is to be considered as e-democracy, development of services and administration has a relation to democracy. We just didn't want to set up a graffiti board this website on urban planning is an initiative to improve the basic data for decision-making and get more citizens involved and interested. And that is good enough. But active citizens need active politicians. /.../ we can't have the crucial role in this process; it must be the politicians' duty. /.../ E-democracy is nothing today, we are just contributing to a development process, and contribute to restore trust in the organisation, to bridge gaps, but it could also create the opposite, which is a bit scary. '

5.4 Intermediaries - roles and responsibilities
Another part of the *Come on in*-project was to develop and enhance citizen-centred services within the municipality. This ambition had implications for the inter-organizational structure, and new ways to secure situated accountability had to be explored. A committee of "informationsombud" or "information intermediaries" was formed, consisting of people with responsibility for information- and service development in the different departments of the municipality.
A group of employees were appointed to take the role as "information intermediaries" acting as resource persons, bound to have an overview, collecting and mediating

ideas and competence on the information and web development area, being active and pushing development of organizational activities and web services further. They function as contact persons for other municipal employees regarding issues of local information, communication, public relations, service to citizens and media. They are also supposed to actively contribute to information development on the public Internet and the internal Intranet, and in most of the cases also as web editors.

One of the reasons for the changes of the organizational structure comes out of a discussion about the decentralization of responsibility of the central municipality information department. So the process is not only a new way to organize the work, but also a means to establish and make visible the accountability of each department, in order to enable the organisation to take responsibility for increased *transparency*, *efficiency, development and luminosity*[2] and the need to adjust to strategies on information and communication defined through policy-making.

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Since the *Come On In-* project started in March this year there are few results and deeper analysis to present so far. Therefore the emphasis in these concluding remarks will be on highlighting some aspects and problems, which are of particular interest for further analysis and research work:

There have been several discussions with the project participants whether this is an e-democracy project or not. There are **multiple and conflicting goals and processes,** which are bound to have an impact on the final web design, which is important to highlight and to follow up.

So far, there has been too much focus on **presentation and information instead of dialogue and interaction**, on the planning meetings regarding the website design, and not enough discussions on content and structure of the website.

Is the ongoing negotiation work **including everyone** that was meant to be included, or are there elements of **exclusion** in practice? Who is taking the initiatives? What is the role of the politicians?

What does **situated accountability** mean for the politicians, the municipal officers, the citizens, and the designers from the small software company and the researchers?

What are the **rights and duties** of the negotiation processes according accountability?

And finally, for those of you who may wonder about the title of this paper, IT Takes More Than Two To Tango, here is a simple explanation: even if a tango performance

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[2] The words marked in italics are taken from the PM of a workshop for the municipal officers.

surely involves two main actors, or dancers, a whole set of people is supporting them in their performance: the musicians, the public, the dressmaker, the floor-builder and many more. All these actors are not visible when the spotlight is on. But they are all invaluable actors when it comes to developing a situated, accountable and engaging performance...

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