How to Meta-govern Policy Networks in E-government?

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HOW TO META-GOVERN POLICY NETWORKS IN E-GOVERNMENT?

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, there has been, in most industrialised states, an explicit policy aim of integrating governmental information and service delivery through the means of information- and communication technologies (ICTs), sometimes under labels such as 'the 24/7 agency' or 'Joined-up governance' . This aim, which goes beyond the establishment of 'single' governmental websites, includes both horizontal, as well as vertical integration, of otherwise separate public agencies and authorities, who are supposed to collaborate towards 'joint' and 'needs-based' electronic solutions to the benefit of the citizens. While many writers have described this implementation of a policy aim in purely technical interoperability terms, we will here frame this development as a **meta-governance policy process of self-regulating networks.** *This paper is a theoretical think-piece in which we will present a systematised framework of the mechanisms for meta-governing the policy process of electronic government. Our arguments will be supported by empirical illustrations mainly adopted from Scandinavian research.*

1. Introduction

This article discusses the current processes of integrating different governmental on-line information and service delivery initiatives which go toward providing single entry points for citizens and businesses. Based on notions of 24/7 Agency, Gateways, Single-windows, One-stop-shops and Joined-up government, the underlying vision is to make electronic government information and services more accessible and interactive, be functionally needs-based (for example, based on 'life-situations' such as e.g. birth, marriage etc), and provide information and service that cut through existing vertical and horizontal administrative borders. However, the challenges inherent in obtaining fully integrated, and seamless, single entry points force governments to reconsider old organisational, and institutional, borders, and push public (and sometimes private) autonomous actors to *coordinate*, *collaborate* and *cluster* their on-line services (Kernaghan, 2007:104*f*).

In this essentially theoretical piece, we will present this challenge of integrating and coordinating different actors as a *meta-governance policy process* in which one 'meta-governor', usually the responsible Cabinet/ministry, by discursive and organisational means, is trying to manage a (policy) network of otherwise autonomous and self-regulating actors, and mobilise, and 'guide' them towards a certain policy goal (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007; Triantifillou, 2007). As in other policy fields in modern societies, current electronic government policies are based around a keystone idea of a dislocation of the traditional hierarchical ('silo') concept of governing with a strong and unitary state at the centre of the polity. It is therefore our contention, in addition to the more traditional information systems approach to electronic government, that the policy processes of fully integrated electronic single entry points are taking place in a political setting more characterised by *governance* than *government*, where

direct commands and legal provisions have been replaced by institutionalised negotiations between otherwise autonomous actors. So far there has been a strong bias in the literature on e-government towards the technical design of this development, whereas the public administration and policy research of the processes has, with some exceptions, been almost completely absent from the field (Dunleavy, *et al.*, 2005:469). Equally, the traditional information systems literature still has some blind spots in terms of this development. First, it is too focussed on the information and process integration in terms of interoperability and interconnectivity, meaning the more technical system development aspects of e.g. semantic standards (cf. Traumüller and Wimmer, 2004; Klischweski, 2004; Guijarro, 2007), whereas the *political management, and organisation, of integration* has been notably overlooked. Second, there is a still a tendency to envisage implementation processes of governmental information systems as rather vertical processes, albeit acknowledging that they can be both top-down or bottom-up, in which the individual public agency is at the centre of the study (cf. Heeks, 2006). Consequently, the managerial and organisational aspects of horizontal integration processes *between several interdependent actors* are somehow missed out. Although our approach does not dismiss previous research, we find it essential to expand the domain of inquiry in order to give modern political management processes a more prominent position. The meta-governance approach is not by default a universal framework to describe all the intricacies involved in shaping electronic single entry points, but it provides a novel approach to understand the policy complexities involved in the current processes of integrating different governmental information systems.

The vision of integrated on-line information and services goes beyond the normal internal use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public administration, and also

beyond various public organisations' exclusive websites (where the electronic services usually are no more than complementary to standard administrative routines). A basic challenge in this process is that the use of strong policy instruments, such as hierarchical commands and legal provisions, is either 'inappropriate', or simply not possible. This is due to either constitutional vertical restrictions (such as in, e.g. federal political systems, or where sub-national authorities are autonomous *vis-à-vis* central governments), or horizontal constraints (such as in e.g. systems with ministerial government, or strong autonomous agencies, or *quangos*, within bureaucracy). Although these constraints are well-known problems of coordinating policy (Thomas, 1997; Peters, 2006), they simply become more manifest in the case of electronic government. As expressed by Robert Denhardt in a comment to the future of public administration:

> In our view, these emerging trends [new knowledge and technological innovations] will turn public management both inside out and upside down. Public management will be turned inside out as the largely internal focus of management in the past is replaced by an external focus, specially a focus on citizens and citizenship. Public management will be turned upside-down as the traditional top-down orientation of the field is replaced – not necessarily by a bottom-up approach, but by a system of shared leadership (Denhart, 1999:285)

The journey to the ultimate goal of electronic integrated single entry points, is accompanied with structural, political, legal, managerial and cultural challenges (Kernaghan, 2007:112). Consequently, the formation of networks, with the integration of concerned 'stakeholders', has become an increasingly widespread instrument in electronic government strategies across

industrialised democracies, although the organisational design may appear different (cf. Pratchet, 1999; Bellamy, 2002; Acaud and Lakel, 2003; Jensen and Kähler, 2006; Löfgren, 2007). By integrating all concerned actors, the idea is to make the policy process more inclusive, transparent, avoid duplication, pool resources, and not least, to engender a more 'successful' implementation of the policy vision.

The objective of this article is thus to apply theories of meta-governance to the specific field of electronic government in general, and more specifically, to the formation of governmental electronic single entry points. The theoretical approach in this article, section two, will outline the concept of meta-governance. The following four sections will present four different forms of mechanisms for governing self-regulated networks along the dimensions 'hands-on/hands-off' and 'limited/strong intervention' and also a systematic list of meta-governance mechanisms in the field of integrated electronic information and service delivery of governments. The theoretical discussion will be supported by, primarily Scandinavian, empirical illustrations. Finally, the concluding section will discuss how meta-governance in the field affects the production of outputs and outcomes of the network governance, and will also stress that a successful meta-governance process demands a blend of the different forms.

2. Meta-governance as a theoretical approach

Seen from the perspective of the large body of governance theory that has evolved since the 1990s, the current development content can be perceived as a part of a general transition within public governance from sovereign forms of bureaucratic rule to meta-governance of self-regulating actors (Kooiman, 2000; Jessop, 2003; Scharpf, 1997; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). Hence, governance theorists argue that the increasing functional and organisational complexity,

dynamism, and fragmentation of public governance processes have spurred on the search for new forms of governance that combine decentred self-regulation and centralised strategic leadership. In other words, increased fragmentation calls for increased coordination.

The many reform programmes that have been implemented over the last 25 years can be seen as an effort to transform political systems aiming to perform sovereign rule, into meta-governing systems in which public authorities seek to regulate self-regulating actors. The New Public Management (NPM) reform programme, may be perceived as a specific meta-governance strategy that aims to meta-govern self-regulating actors through the establishment of market-based competition between public and private actors[i].

However, in recent years this competition based meta-governance strategy has been modified, and supplemented, by a network oriented strategy aiming to enhance coordination and cooperation between fragmented actors through the meta-governance of self-regulating intra- and inter-organisational governance networks. In an increasingly more complex, functionally divided, and organisationally fragmented world of public governance, such networks have proven to be crucial for the promotion of a much needed negative and positive, vertical and horizontal coordination. Governance theorists argue that self-regulating governance networks are valuable because they are able to ensure a highly flexible form of coordination, reduce resistance through the enhancement of ownership, promote resource pooling among stakeholders, and make these resources i.e. knowledge, engagement, and man power an asset in the promotion of public values (Kooiman, 2002; Jessop, 2003; Kickert and Koppenjan, 2004; Peters and Pierre, 2000). A governance network is, in this context, defined as a cluster of interdependent actors, who coordinate their actions on the basis of negotiated agreements that

are reached with reference to a self-constituted regulatory, normative, cognitive and imaginary framework, and by doing so contribute to the production of public values (Torfing, 2005).

The energies and capacities of governance networks, which also is the case for self-regulating markets, are closely related to their relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* public authorities. As such, the ability to harvest the potential benefits of governance networks depends on the degree to which public authorities are able to influence the actions of self-regulating networks without undermining their autonomy. This is exactly what meta-governance is about: the regulation of self regulation.

2.1. Different forms of meta-governance

A review of the theoretical literature on governance networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007), and an analysis of studies describing the empirical developments in contemporary liberal democracies (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992; Markussen and Torfing, 2007; Bogason and Zølner, 2007; Van Heffen, Kickert and Thomassen, 2000; Bogason, *et al*., 2004), points to the presence of four main categories of meta-governance that are available for public authorities in their efforts to meta-govern self-regulating networks and other self-regulating actors: policy and resource framing, institutional design, network facilitation and network participation. As envisaged in table 1, these four forms of meta-governance techniques vary according to the level and form of intervention exercised by the meta-governor and according to whether meta-governance is performed hands-off at a distance, or hands-on through close interaction between the meta-governor and the self-regulating actors.

Forms of meta-governance:	Limited intervention	Strong intervention
Hands-off	Policy and resource framing	Institutional design
Hands-on	Network facilitation	Network participation

Table 1

Below we will present these four forms of meta-governance one by one in order to identify the different ways in which meta-governance of self-regulating networks are, or can be, carried out in policy studies.

3. Meta-governance through policy and resource framing

First, meta-governance can be carried out through the demarcation of the political and financial conditions under which networks are granted autonomy to govern themselves. Political framing is exercised through the formulation of some overall political goals and governance objectives that the networks must meet. This form of meta-governance is identical with what the NPM-terminology denotes 'management by objectives'. Resource framing takes place through the allocation of a specific amount of fiscal or administrative resources that the self-regulating networks are authorized to use in their self-regulated effort to reach the overall objectives set out in the political framing. As such policy and resource framing are closely interrelated. As long as the networks encapsulate these general political goals, and do so without exceeding the resources delegated by the meta-governor, the network maintains a high level of autonomy. If not, however, the level of autonomy is likely to be reduced. As such, meta-governance through policy and resource framing is performed in what Scharpf (1994: 40) denotes a 'shadow of hierarchy' that put pressure on the networks to fulfil their part of the job, and thus earn their

autonomy. Policy and resource framing is exercised *hands-off* in the sense that it does not necessarily call for direct interaction between the meta-governor and the self-regulating networks. The framing establishes a distribution of labour between what is governed by the meta-governor and what is governed by the networks, and a part of the bargain behind this distribution of labour is a *low level of intervention* on the part of the meta-governor vis-à-vis the self-regulating network.

In terms of the electronic government field, this soft mechanism of meta-governance is about communicating some boundaries for the otherwise self-governing networks, and allocating resources to the activities of the same. As a point of departure, the policy domain of electronic government is not 'given', but constructed. In our framework we identify the policy framing by the meta-governor in a) the received significance among the actors for the policy, b) the network actors' responsibility, and c) the evolutionary understanding of the implementation process.

First, in most countries the e-government domain has been framed, by the central actors in government (i.e. the metagovernor), as one of the core pillars of the future public administration, even though it sometimes is included as an element in the national future information society strategies as well (cf. Muir and Oppenheim, 2002). Consequently, its imperative status is reflected, and repeated, in most official documents regarding the future of public administration. Also, the issue is officially framed as an organisational issue, rather than merely a technical issue, or a public procurement matter.

Secondly, the different actors on various levels of the public sector are assigned *responsibility* for the fulfilment of the vision of integrated electronic services. One can just briefly take two Scandinavian (Denmark and Sweden) examples from governmental strategies.

In general terms, Project eGovernment will create a common framework and support cross-cutting co-operation, but the realisation of specific gains will require the involvement and commitment of individual public authorities across the boundaries of sectors and levels of authority throughout the public sector (The Danish Government, 2004)

[The Government's] assessment is that the 24/7 Agency must, through its choice and implementation of service channels and electronic services, become part of the larger context that is central e-government. This calls for voluntary collaboration between agencies or Government-led development and strategy throughout the central public administration (SAFAD, 2000:41, p. 11).

Consequently, the issue is framed as a division of labour between the meta-governor and the actors, but where the responsibility, by and large, is placed with the implementers, i.e. the governmental agencies, and thus, the members of the networks. Implicitly, this encourages collaboration between a number of actors in one form or another.

Thirdly, we can also conclude, as mentioned above, that the policy programmes for e-government development, in which fully integrated service solutions is the main aim, is now an uncontroversial policy objective across the advanced societies. What unites many of these programmes is the focus on evolutionary development paths, usually in the shape of 'ladders' in which the service development, and the integration between public agents' different services, will go through a series of stages (Goldkuhl and Persson, 2006; Layne and Lee, 2001). Examples of this can be found in e.g. the Swedish '24/7 Agency model' (SAFAD, 2000), and in

the Australian national audit office plan for electronic service delivery (ANAO, 1999). As a result, the final policy aim is already set out in advance, whereas deviating policy paths become less likely to materialise.

4. Meta-governance through institutional design

Meta-governance can also be exercised through the strategic design of the institutional conditions under which networks govern themselves. By strategically designing institutional structures, meta-governors are able to enhance the propensity of self-regulating networks to act as desired by the meta-governor. The diverse understandings of how institutions structure action in the large complex of contemporary institutional theory, produce different tool kits for meta-governing networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2000: 25ff). *Traditional institutionalism*, which focuses on the structuring effects of the formal institutional set up, points to how governance networks can be influenced through some formal guidelines regulating the composition of a governance network, e.g. what stakeholder groups are to participate? What formal competencies do it have? What formal procedures should be followed? *Rational choice institutionalism* (Scharpf, 1997: 45; Kooiman, 1993: 251) point to how the actions of self-regulating networks can be influenced through a strategic design of incentive structures directed towards individual network actors as well as towards the governance network. Strong networks are promoted through the construction of plus-sum games while competition between networks and other actors enhanced through the construction of zero-sum games. Finally, *sociological neo-institutionalism* (March and Olsen, 1995; Hajer, 1995) show how self-regulating actors can be meta-governed through the construction and institutionalization of specific discursive storylines that shape the perceptions of purpose, interests and collective points of identification

of governance networks and other self-regulating actors. The strategic launching of such storylines can promote a sense of shared destiny and meaning in governance networks that spur action in line with the wishes of the story telling authorities.

The different forms of meta-governance inspired by the different institutionalisms are not alternatives but should be seen as supplementary. As such, meta-governance through institutional design can take many forms just as the different form can be combined in multiple ways that either reinforce or weaken each other. Like policy and resource framing, meta-governance through institutional design is exercised *hands-off* and at a distance, since designing institutions can take place without involving the involved networks. However, in contrast to policy and resource framing, meta-governance through institutional design is *highly interventionist*. The meta-governor's aim is not only to demarcate an autonomous space within which governance networks are allowed to regulate themselves, but also to influence the content of the self-regulation through the composition of governance networks, through the strategic construction of incentive steering, and through the internalization of a specific collective points of identification and meaning.

If we turn the attention to the electronic government field, we can discuss four aspects of meta-governance and institutional design: a) production of discourses, b) financial incentives, c) audit and control, and d) selection of participants. In most of the e-government plans there are signs of a top-down process in which the overarching vision of an 'information society' has been a sign to follow by the networks (cf. Hall, 2005; Hall and Löfgren, 2006). By inspiring a group of otherwise autonomous actors to witness a mental picture in which the classical dilemmas of accessibility, service orientation, and cost effectiveness (as well as new problems of an ageing population) can be solved through integration of information systems, the meta-

governor(s) can produce a 'story-line'. This language of the new age is not immediately interventionist, although it as a discourse systematically arranges representations of reality with the purpose of shaping the very same (Foucault, 1991). By keeping up a high level of production of visions you eventually get a consensual view on what direction we are moving towards and why. It is also an attempt to shape a common identity around an objective definition of the future among those who for a foreseeable future will carry out the policy. In the electronic government field this can in particular be witnessed in the rich publication of policy documents from governments wherein certain uncontroversial buzz-words such as, for example, 'modernisation', 'change', 'needs-based service', 'network society', and 'citizen-orientation' are repeated, and replicated, through whole publication series of the official print. In addition, the plethora of public management conferences, and gatherings of the community of civil servants and politicians, fills the function of diffusing the vision. As demonstrated in Hall and Löfgren (2004), there are several examples of how the discourse on electronic government, as expressed in different policy documents, and diffused through conferences, is replicated by various actors during interview studies. Likewise, a quote from a Danish study on meta-governance of electronic government by Jensen and Kähler (2007) somehow describes the power of the discourse:

> "What we do here", says a Local Government Executive "is a product of thinking in terms of the information society. And it seems to work even if I cannot prove it scientifically. I am convinced that there is something fundamentally right in here…that it works." (quoted from Jensen and Kähler, 2007:185).

While the overall visions might be intangible, it is worth remembering that the basic struggles embedded in the discourse of electronic government are well known and far from esoteric.

In addition, there are examples of a more solid, and strong intervention, through financial support to research and development activities in which governments seek to encourage various actors to participate in, for example, technical system development. This is particular true in Sweden where certain funding schemes, organised by the Swedish agency of innovation systems' funding in the activity area of electronic government, offer some financial incentives for both private and public actors to form research and development networks in the field of electronic government.

Finally, a rather strong interventionist tool at a distance is of course the wide-spread use of auditing techniques, benchmarking and best practices in the field of e-government. By regularly requiring reports on the progress of the on-line integration, the meta-governor is capable of securing that the actors in the networks are moving in the right direction. Equally, benchmarking techniques have become a strong interventionist instrument of steering the otherwise autonomous networks. Even though there is evidence that these benchmarking studies not always are consistent, or even relevant in terms of the policy aims (Jansen, *et al.* 2004), they do play an imperative role for governing the actors (Hall and Löfgren, 2006). As Rose points out 'rendering something auditable shapes the processes that are to be audited' (Rose, 1996:351). Indeed, this has been a significant element in the strategy of reaching the objectives of fully integrated on-line service and service delivery in many countries. By means of audit and best practice reports, benchmarking exercises, and even straight-forward 'competitions', the actors need to adjust their work to what is demanded in the audit exercises. Examples of this can be found in much of the Swedish e-government policy in which one of the

main aims of the policy is to identify readily measurable indicators for the progress of the on-line integration, to regularly require reports from the networks, and even inspire the actors of the networks through competitions (Hall and Löfgren, 2006).

5. Network facilitation

But meta-governance cannot only be performed hands-off. As suggested by a number of governance network theorists (Kickert, *et al.*, 1997; Rhodes, 1997), hands-on facilitation of governance networks plays an important part in promoting successful network cooperation. Due to the general instability of governance networks, which derives from the fact that they are based on negotiated cooperation between autonomous actors, they are in constant danger of failing in their efforts to regulate themselves. If governance networks are to function successfully, that is to coordinate action among operationally autonomous, albeit interdependent actors, it is essential that they are able to surmount internal distrust and destructive conflicts between the network actors. The ability of governance networks to develop mutual trust and to turn destructive conflicts into constructive negotiated agreements can be increased considerably through skilful hands-on facilitation of network cooperation. What is called for, is a facilitating meta-governor who takes part in the day-to-day activities of the governance network with the defined purpose of promoting positive and constructive interaction between the network actors, and supporting the ability of the network to define and solve the overall governance tasks and public values it has set out to fulfil. This network facilitation can take many forms: initiating contacts between potential network actors, giving administrative support to existing networks and hence reducing transaction costs of network participation, mediating conflicts that occur in the negotiation processes, functioning as an

ambassador for network actors with few resources, and processing two-way information and communication between a network and its meta-governor that might enhance mutual understanding and recognition.

Even though this form of meta-governance is exercised hands-on, and takes place within the realm of self-regulating networks, it is characterized by a *low level of intervention* in the content of the network governance, since the meta-governor does not have a specific independent objective that is pursued. Hence, the major objective of the facilitating meta-governor is to enhance the ability of the network to define common goals and to coordinate their actions in the pursuit of these goals as successfully as possible.

As described above in section two, network meta-governance also entails the facilitation of networks in which the meta-governor initiate contacts between the actors who are supposed to participate in the network, give administrative support, mediates in conflicts, and act as an ambassador for the network. Even though this is a more interventionist strategy, it is still a rather subtle and 'soft' way of governing the networks whereas the promotion of networking *per se* is the objective. In terms of on-line integration we will here discuss the following mechanisms: a) initiating, sponsoring and composing networks, b) supporting knowledge sharing, and c) trust building. To begin with initiating networks, this is probably the most common mechanisms of meta-governance in the field of electronic government. There is a general tendency to find that the networks of integrating on-line information and service delivery originate from centrally located actors. A study of the EU countries shows that all the national information society (IS) strategies have been accompanied by the formation of interministerial committees, boards of stakeholders, task forces, advisory boards, public-private forums etc, initiated from above (Chatrie and Wraight, 2000: 12; see also, Accenture, 2006).

Partly this is the result of the underlying rationale in the information society strategies (as e.g. expressed in some of the EU IS strategies, such as the Bangemann report) where governments should limit their own roles. But this low-key strategy is also, as mentioned above, to do with the problems of coordinating autonomous actors. Consequently, we can witness how the first steps of formatting a network is usually taken by the meta-governor who invites the concerned stakeholder to the network, and cater for possible meetings, after which the meta-governor pulls out, or tries to remain on the sideline of the network. This was at least the case of the Swedish 'E-forum' (Hall and Löfgren, 2006), and the Danish 'Digital Task-force' (Jensen and Kähler, 2007). With this follows also the prerogative of selecting the 'right' members of the networks. Here it is important that the meta-governor is capable of identifying the right blend of actors dependent on which public values the single entry point should entail. A new electronic service website, which relates to, for example, the industry's needs (e.g. taxes, VAT, etc), should include members of the business community, or trade associations. Later on in the process the network can be opened up for new participants, but at that stage there is probably already a high degree of path-dependency which sets the limits for new issues, or diverging strategies.

In addition to initiating the networks, the meta-governor can also supply the network with knowledge. While many of the networks for integrating on-line information and services lack financial means to achieve the objectives, or are for various reasons unable to obtain additional resources from their own organisations, the meta-governor can act as a supplier of information. By supplying indicators, statistics, and other forms of information resources, the meta-governor can distribute the information s/he wants to disseminate thereby presenting both the problems and the solutions to the policy problem of the network. This has for example been the case in Sweden where the government, through its agency for administrative development, has been

the main producer of statistics, user surveys, and other forms of reports which they then have distributed to the electronic government networks (Hall and Löfgren, 2006).

Finally, the meta-governor is important for the trust building of the networks. By granting a certain authority to the works of the networks, thereby giving certain seriousness to the same, the meta-governor implicitly enhances the understanding and trust between the actors, and also supports an interactive process between the actors.

6. Network participation

Finally, meta-governance can be exercised through participation in governance networks (Dunsire, 1993: 34; Mayntz, 1991: 18). Network participation represents yet another *hands-on* form of meta-governance that grants the meta-governor a direct platform for interacting with the network actors, and for participating in the debates and negotiations within governance networks. This direct participation and interaction in governance networks gives the meta-governor an important insight into the effects that the hands-off forms of meta-governance have on the self regulation processes within a governance network, which might help to fine tune these governance initiatives. In addition, direct participation in governance networks provides meta-governors with a platform for story telling and for explaining the reasons for the policy and resource framing that defines the autonomy of the network. As such, network participation enhances the vertical coordination, trust and shared understanding between meta-governors and network actors.

Network participation is a *far more interventionist* form of meta-governance than network facilitation because the meta-governor, like the rest of the network participators, take active part in network negotiations in order to gain influence on the shared goals and strategies of the

network. Since public authorities tend to have more resources than most of the other network participants, they are in most instances, able to dominate the negotiation process and get their way. The potential capacity of public authorities to obtain influence through the participation in governance networks places them in a difficult position. If they make full use of this capacity in order to gain influence, they undermine the horizontal interaction, negotiation, and cooperation logic that constitute governance networks. An asymmetrical distribution of power between the network actors is a condition of being for most governance networks, but if such asymmetries result in hierarchical patterns of interaction the networks fall apart. As such, public authorities and other strong meta-governors who participate in governance networks, must constantly balance their efforts to gain influence against the need to maintain and promote the horizontal patterns of interaction that is the founding characteristic and glue that keeps governance networks together. The difficult act of participating in network governance, without undermining the self-regulating capacities of the governance network, points to a general consideration for meta-governors: how to avoid an overregulation of governance networks that will undermine the constituting autonomy of the governance network, and how to avoid under-regulation that leaves to governance network to regulate itself without any overall direction *vis-à-vis* the surrounding society.

In terms of the integration process of electronic information and service delivery we wish to point to the role of the meta-governor participating as an active member of a working electronic government network. While the theoretical metagovernance literature usually presumes networks with a considerable high participation of private, or voluntary, sector actors, the non-public sector is usually not very well represented in the networks of electronic government, at least not in a Nordic context. And even if they are, they usually play a limited role as supplier,

external partner or consultant, where the interaction is regulated through a contract. However, network participation makes sense if we envisage metagovernance as policy coordination between central – local actors where both sides are interdependent. This was actually the case in the Danish 'Project eGovernment' where the leading central actor in the policy field, the Ministry of Finance, took part on equal terms with Local Government Denmark and Danish Regions. Here, the Ministry of Finance acted as a metagovernor who actively took part in all parts of the process, and tried to influence the process. However, the dilemmas between over- and under regulation, mentioned above, became over the years visible as discussions on more strategic issues, including with major economic and organisational repercussions, caused recoil away from the more consensual network mode of governance (Jensen and Kähler, 2007).

7. Concluding remarks

So, how can theories of metagovernance contribute to the on-going discussion on the implementation of single entry points across industrialised democracies? The current process of integrating various authorities and agencies' electronic information provision and service delivery is a revolutionary attempt in the history of public administration which, provided it succeeds, will recast the previous organisation of discrete, and often autonomous, public agencies. That network governance is the obvious choice for managing this process is not only a theoretical point, but can indeed be empirically observed. As this think-piece has demonstrated, the integration of various agencies and authorities' electronic information and service delivery is not a pure technical issue where once the interoperability process has come to an end, the rest will follow. Still, to meta-govern networks also demands some further consideration. First, as we have tried to demonstrate above, self-regulating networks can be

meta-governed in a number of ways. An effective and successful meta-governance must seek to combine all four forms of meta-governance, but the choice of the most suitable combination between them depends on the precise character of the governance network in question. As governance networks materialise differently, it makes little sense to search for a general model for the meta-governance of governance networks. Rhodes and Marsh (1992) place networks on a running scale from policy communities to issue networks. Whilst some of the networks involved in the process of creating single entry-points can be classified as policy communities based on previous long-term, and bottom-up based, collaboration between agencies with 'natural' interfaces (such as e.g. tax and welfare benefits), others are the result of top-down processes in which reluctant actors are more or less 'forced' into collaboration. In this context, the former seem to be more averse towards too interventionist forms of metagovernance (as that inevitably means loss of autonomy), whereas the former somehow presuppose stronger interventionist forms of metagovernance.

To start with an overall perspective to the outputs and outcomes of meta-governing the policy processes of electronic single entry points, the meta-governance approach entails both pros, and cons, in terms of successful implementation processes. Self-regulating networks, which are composed of those people who are supposed to implement the vision of integrated electronic single entry points, have naturally a better understanding of the problems that might occur, and can more easily coordinate activities, enhance collaboration and build the foundation for clusters. The integration of several autonomous actors without using hierarchical commands is, by default, a strategy which is more likely to circumvent antagonism and additional fragmentation. And by just 'pushing' the actors in the right direction there is a greater chance of, at least, not returning complete policy failures.

Secondly, there is risk of failure if the meta-governor demonstrates ambiguity, or opaqueness, in terms of the final policy objective of electronic government integration. This was for example revealed in an audit report of the Swedish government's policy on 'the 24/7 Agency' in which the integration process of the central government's vision of a fully integrated 'network administration' very quickly came to a halt, or rather, never really started (SNAO, 2003). The vision behind the Cabinet's aspiration of integrating electronic services never became clear to the actors, and by employing a hands-off design, only entailing policy framing to a group of actors, which by definition was nothing more than an issue network, the integration process became a failure. Even though this is an example *par excellence* of classical implementation problems (Pressman and Wildawsky, 1973), ambiguity of policy objectives is devastating for meta-governance.

Thirdly, the network actors must be able to see some incentives, and acceptance of the meta-governor. If the network just becomes a realm for idle talk without any prospects that the members will gain anything from it, the chances of success are limited. The examples presented by Jensen and Kähler (2007) demonstrate that the actors in the Danish 'Project eGovernment' started to retract and withdraw once they could no longer see any beneficial effects, but that the whole set up of meta-governing just was part of a general governmental cut-back on public expenditures.

In summary, the meta-governor strategy for implementing the policy of electronic single entry points is a viable, and more flexible strategy, of fulfilling the vision thereby avoiding some of the vertical and horizontal barriers. However, it is not a universal remedy, and it is essential to find a blend of different forms of meta-governing.

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[i] Worth remembering in terms of electronic government specifically though, is that although the aims for a more unified and digital public administration usually are portrayed in the light of NPM reforms and business process reengineering (either from a sympathetic perspective (Eggers, 2005; Andersen, 1999), or from a critical stance (cf. Bellamy and Taylor, 1998)), one can also perceive the current reforms as a response to the fragmentation caused by MPM, and a subsequent attempt to reintegrate the civil service (Dunleavy, *et al.*, 2005).