

## **Mandatory e-government has arrived**

The silent protest from staff calls for the committed scholar – resistance must never be futile!

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*Published in:*

The 25th Australasian Conference on Information Systems

*Publication date:*

2014

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Berger, J. B. (2014). Mandatory e-government has arrived: The silent protest from staff calls for the committed scholar – resistance must never be futile! In *The 25th Australasian Conference on Information Systems ACIS. The 25th Australasian Conference on Information Systems, ACIS 2014*  
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## Mandatory e-government has arrived: The silent protest from staff calls for the committed scholar – resistance must never be futile!

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### Abstract

*The great potential in e-government - the provision of public services to citizens through the internet - is widely recognized by governments and expectations of the benefits are high. E-government research has been preoccupied with its evolution, public websites and citizen adoption, from a 'natural growth and voluntary use' perspective. Little attention has been drawn to mandatory e-government. This paper reports from an exploratory study on a Danish mandatory e-government initiative – enforced e-communication between local government and citizens. Civil servants' perception was investigated through two Focus groups. Civil servants reported that some citizens find it really hard to manage computer and e-communication. Moreover, the civil servants feel that they are not allowed to offer the necessary assistance, which makes them frustrated. They find that especially weak citizens may lose welfare benefits due to e-communication. This has a negative effect on motivation and work life quality and may affect the public sector ethos. Increased efficiency by mandatory e-government may be the next hype. How will it affect citizens, civil servants and the 'public good'? How can it ensure that citizens' rights are not violated? This paper calls for critical research on e-government impact and for e-government scholars to play an active part ensuring ethical e-government.*

### Keywords

E-government, critical research, mandatory, local government, employees

### INTRODUCTION – RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

E-government, the provision of public services towards citizens through the internet, has been pursued with great effort by governments throughout the last decades, mainly to mitigate an increase in public sector spending. E-government has over time suffered from IT development and implementation failure and poor usability (Kumar et al., 2007). Later challenges for governments have been to provide the necessary change management efforts to achieve benefits from IT-investments (Ndou, 2004). Further, studies show a lack of demand (Gauld et al., 2010). Creating demand may take time, as noted by Bannister and Connolly (2012): 'Changing a culture can take a generation. Changing people's behavior may be impossible, even in the long run.'. This patience may not be allowed for by governments that are blinded by New Public Management (NPM) efficiency goals. The Danish government launched a national e-government strategy based on legal enforcement and captive use (The Danish Government et al., 2011). The hard facts cannot be ignored; numbers of transactions and digital messages have doubled from 2011 to 2013 (see figure 1) and are estimated to double again in 2014. General Director of the Digitization Agency claims Denmark is world leading and that a huge global interest has been generated. In the 1970's, when new technologies were introduced to make industry more efficient, employees protested against lay-offs and the imposed changes in their work life, supported by trade unions (Kensing and Greenbaum, 2013). Mandatory e-government may introduce similar changes to clerical staff and/or citizens. Up till now, there has been no e-government 'spring'.

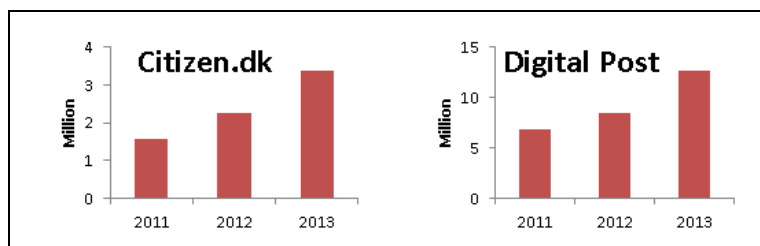


Figure 1 Number of On-line transactions on national portal (left), number of electronic messages from public sector to citizens (right)

An empirical study proved that mandated use 'is one of the best things one can do to increase the likelihood of the [e-government] initiative's success' (Chircu and Lee, 2005). The dominating view by e-government scholars seems to be that e-government - almost by nature - has to be voluntary for citizens. AlAwadhi and Morris (2008) simply state that 'e-government services are highly voluntary'. Axelsson and Melin (2012) state that: 'Governments cannot actively stimulate or even force usage in the same way as a private organization can order employees to use a certain IT system.'. From this belief, it follows that citizen adoption is key to e-government; hence a major stream in e-government research is devoted to establish in-depth understanding of what makes citizens use e-services. Prevailing studies are based on psychosocial models (e.g. the technology acceptance model, TAM and variations), describing how factors such as perceived usefulness and ease of use will affect citizens' adoption. The models rely on the citizens' *decision* to use a given technology, which may not apply in a mandatory context. The feeling of how one would eventually react as a theoretical option may be very different when use is imposed. Luna-Reyes et al. (2012) state that 'we still know little about the impacts and results associated with e-Government'. Scholars argue that NPM values dominate e-government strategies, considering e-government e.g. 'as a linear process of change which leads to more efficient and less costly organization management' (Cordella and Bonina, 2012).

*The Borg forces other species into their collective group ego, which induces loss of individual identity. The ultimate goal for the Borg is to achieve an unemotional, mechanical perfection. This is achieved through forced assimilation, a process, which takes individuals and technology, enhancing and controlling them. Negotiations or reasoning are unheard of, resistance is futile (The Borg - Wikipedia)*

No research is value free. I admit to the stance that society must be governed by a public sector ethos. Forced assimilation is not acceptable, negotiations and reasoning should be the rule and resistance should be stimulated as a means of giving people a say. The weak parties that are affected by e-government initiatives, being citizens, who are dependent on public sector services and staff, who's work lives are affected, has the right to be involved in design and enactment. E-government research plays a crucial role ensuring facilitation of an informed process and offering the necessary methods and techniques to serve the 'public good'. This paper presents an exploratory study of civil servants' perception of a mandatory e-government initiative from a critical perspective.

## MODELS TO SUPPORT THE ANALYSIS

Karlsson et al. (2012) have synthesized eight different goals from UN and U.S. documents concerning principles for e-government development. The first goal, 'E-services should be usable', is about reducing the barriers that citizens face in their contact with public sector; the objective is to make it easier for the citizen. Goals two and three are concerned with government efficiency; government should be able to reduce costs in the operation of the e-services, which both include work processes, management and systems, but also the development process. The fourth goal is concerned with efficacy, which the authors describe as 'relevant for the users', which is both citizens and civil servants. The fifth goal is about rapid response to citizens' needs. The sixth goal is concerned with citizens' trust in e-government services. Governments should develop e-services that are trusted by citizens'. Goals seven and eight are concerned with democratic values, i.e. transparency, accountability and participation in political decision making, which apply both to operation and development.

The values embedded in the actions performed by public sector has been described as 'public sector ethos' (Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996) and even though this has been criticized for reflecting public sector in a too narrow and positive way, it serves as a suitable background for understanding and analyzing the implications of e-government on the public sector. The public sector ethos comprises five generic features: Accountability, meaning that civil servants are expected to accept the legitimacy of political decisions and actions of government and fulfill their work accordingly, whether they agree or not; they expect a similar commitment from civil servants in other parts of the public sector. Second, bureaucratic behavior means, they should perform honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity. Thirdly, civil servants are not restricted to managing their work tasks; they work for the 'public good' and share the belief that the organization as a whole serves this public interest. Fourth, civil servants are not in it for the money, they feel rewarded and are motivated because they do something good for the community. Finally, civil servant must exert various loyalties, some of which will be characterized by inevitable conflicts. This includes loyalty to the national and local government and to the public sector as such, to the local community, to the profession and to individuals such as the manager and the citizen.

## CASE SETTING

The Danish e-government strategy is twofold; 70+ services will be mandated electronic (captive use) and 80% of public sector communication will be digital by 2015. This exploratory study focuses on digital communication. Digital Post is a type of 'reliable delivery system' which is characterized by 'specialized centralized tools for

delivery, which mean electronic equivalent to the postal services with all appurtenances' (Mates et al., 2013). The Digital Post system was provided by the Danish Ministry of Finance in 2010 with the aim of reducing public sector postal costs. A digital message reduces direct postal costs by \$1 and the equivalent due to saved time. The Danish government expected a \$200m cut in postal costs annually, but at the end of 2011, only 1 in 5 citizens had registered. The Danish parliament passed the Public Digital Post law in 2012 (with a big majority and no against-votes) that made it mandatory for citizens and businesses to receive electronic messages from public sector and designated the same legal status to digital messages as physical letters. It follows from the law that a letter is regarded as received by the citizen, with all its legal implications, when it is sent digitally from a public institution. From 2013, funding of public institutions was cut according to the estimated cost reduction.

The citizen accesses Digital Post through the national portal 'Citizen.dk', applying the national eID 'EasyID' by entering the social security number, a personal password and a dynamic passcode that depends on a six-digit code, prompted by EasyID. The passcode is found on a personal (physical) 'passcode-list'. Citizens are accountable for having access to Digital Post, i.e. a valid EasyID-account (should be applied for and activated), a valid passcode list, access to a computer with internet access, EasyID installed with latest Java up-date, a browser and a printer to be able to print and sign forms from public sector. Citizens have free access to computers at the municipality and libraries but must pay for print. The state accounts for Citizen.dk, EasyID and Digital Post to the firewall of the public institution. The public institution accounts for the integration to Digital Post, e.g. sending messages through an output manager application, integrated in the word processor, where staff enter the social security number as the 'address' of the citizen. E-mail and text alerts to citizens can be configured in Digital Post.

The study was performed in the Citizen Service Center of a Danish local government with 42.000 citizens in the outskirts of Denmark. Every Danish local government has a Citizen Service Center. Citizen Service Centers are the municipality's direct contact with the citizen. Besides offering first level service in opening hours and by telephone, they perform more basic case handling of applications, e.g. driver's license, passport, health insurance card, marriage administration, housing loan, identity card, and different pension aids. They handle debt to the municipality and welfare fraud investigations, payment and control of the unemployed and sick citizens and registration of citizens' movement in the national population register. The Citizen Service Center covers contact with a variety of citizens, both in age and life situations; and both citizens with and without special needs. The Citizen Service Center involved in this study comprises two sections (with four teams each), two managers and 40+ employees, only staff from one section was engaged in serving citizens directly; the other section had primarily telephone and written contact.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Prior studies by the researcher in another but similar setting had revealed that use of e-communication was hampered by resistance from clerical staff. Data indicated that part of the resistance was grounded in the concern for the citizen. This could be interpreted as a 'legal' excuse to resist change. In the present study, therefore, one of the goals was to gain further insight of the clerical resistance. Focus groups are often applied to obtain further knowledge about a phenomenon and they provide insight into complex matters (as e-government) because the participants 'both query each other and explain themselves to each other' (Morgan, 1996). More importantly, focus groups has the ability to give voice to weak groups (Ibid.) as clerical staff, being lowest in hierarchy. Furthermore, by using focus groups, it is possible to assess the extent of consensus and diversity. Focus groups have been applied in critical IS research (Stahl et al., 2011) and have been found valuable in e-government studies (Axelsson and Melin, 2007).

Sampling was prepared by performing a survey on background data, e.g. age, experience, work tasks and an assessment of the 'e-government use' and 'attitude' profile. The former study indicated elderly staff was more critical. The scope was to explore e-communication from a critical viewpoint, hence representation was important. Thus, only participants older than the median (50 years) were eligible. To foster discussion and avoid issues that participants were unable to relate to, it was necessary to balance between difference and resemblance in background. This was achieved by having participants from the same section but with different tasks. Requirement of sufficient experience (domain and task knowledge) was fulfilled by the age requirement. The three employees in the department that did not perform written communication with citizens were not included. Due to not wanting to introduce gender-dependent issues from IS or the social work domain, the two men were excluded. Differences in e-government use and attitude in each group should ensure discussion about digitization and e-communication. Focus groups should have 6-8 participants. Given the above mentioned constraints and the need to 'reserve' candidates for vacancies, it was possible to perform two focus groups. All participants had the same formal status. See participants' profiles in Table 1.

The two focus groups were performed 30 April and 2 May 2013 in the municipality meeting centre. This constituted a comfortable environment, whilst not the actual work place, which could distract attention. The focus group was planned from 8:15 to 9:45 and followed a strict plan. The researcher acted as moderator. An

observer was not appointed due to lack of resources even if this is sometimes recommended. Introduction, warming up and introducing the domain to the moderator was kept to a minimum because participants were comfortable with each other and the researcher and the researcher was familiar with the domain. The moderator presented the national e-government strategy including e-communication, the legal structures and the anticipated benefits. A short film show from another municipality with very positive attitudes to e-communication was shown to inspire the discussion. The focus group spent 30 minutes on discussing the general topic on the Danish e-government strategy and 30 minutes on the specific topic of e-communication. This was followed by a more practical part, where participants jointly solved a task about barriers. Different types of activities to maintain engagement and draw on multiple competences. The two discussions were guided by questions presented by the moderator and composed according to ethnographical guidelines (Johnston et al., 1995) in order to reduce moderator bias (e.g. questions were expressed in participants own language) and improve correspondence between responses and actual behavior (e.g. hypothetical responses and speculation was avoided by referring to participants experiences instead of attitudes and referring to meanings of different resource categories). The moderator tried to involve less engaged participants with directly targeted questions.

The sessions were recorded and transcribed (9.024 and 8.214 words). Statements were not only taken for face-value. Critical IS research acknowledges that employees are not always conscious about their conditions due to socialization (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005), which informed the coding process. Further, the author takes the philosophical stance that the real world is out there but every person has a personal perception of it. Coding was performed as open and axial coding using ATLAS.ti. Transcriptions, sub-categories and categories together with the core-category were presented to participants to confirm content validity. The findings were presented to managers. They commented that they did not find staff as worrying as described, but also, that staff may express different views when not exposed to managers. The two focus groups were performed according to the same content, guidelines, venue and time to provide reliability. To attain data saturation, it is recommended to perform 4-6 focus groups (Morgan, 1996). Data from this study only relies on two focus groups, but followed the indications from qualitative studies in another municipality. In both groups, participants expressed the view that the focus group had been like being with the colleagues in the canteen, indicating that participants were behaving naturally. The researcher was aware of the risk of bias influencing participants by his critical stance. As the focus group moderator, the researcher attempted to be objective and did only interrupt the discussion after the time limit or when participants went off-stray, e.g. when they had a wild debate on young peoples' use of social media. There are various limitations to the study. E-communication constitutes merely a mediating channel and not a 'service', hence the attributes may be more depended on the service than the channel or a combination and the findings may not be comparable with what is normally perceived as e-government. The findings may be limited to this specific combination of technology design, economic and legal means, and implementation strategy. Qualitative studies are not generalizable per se; this study may, however, be generally useful by its outputs.

The following Findings section connects statements with references to participants to ensure that the researcher is not blinded by own beliefs but lets the data inform the analysis.

Table 1 Participants in focus groups

FG	ID	DP Attitude <sup>1)</sup>	DP readiness <sup>2)</sup>	Gender	Age	Education	Experience (years)	Team
1	P1	0	2	W	60-64	Social worker	3-4	1
	P2	0	2	W	60-64	Clerk	>10	2
	P3	0	5	W	55-59	Clerk	>10	4
	P4	0	6	W	55-59	Clerk	5-10	2
	P5	1	4	W	40-44	Clerk	3-4	3
	P6	1	4	W	55-59	Clerk	>10	1
	P7	1	4	W	50-54	Clerk	>10	2
2	P8	0	2	W	55-59	Clerk	>10	5
	P9	0	4	W	55-59	Clerk	>10	7
	P10	0	5	W	35-39	Social worker	3-4	4
	P11	1	4	W	55-59	Clerk	5-10	5
	P12	1	4	W	45-49	Clerk	>10	6
	P13	1	2	W	45-49	Clerk	>10	5
	P14	1	4	W	60-64	Clerk	>10	7

<sup>1)</sup> Self-reported attitude towards Digital Post (-1 = negative, 0 = neutral, 1 = positive)

<sup>2)</sup> Self-reported use of EasyID/Digital Post as citizen, maturity = 0-6 from specific use questions

## FINDINGS

According to the participants, e-communication is associated with different aspects related to the actors (citizen, staff, local and national government), technological/non-technological aspects and value (positive/negative), see overview in table 2. No positive statements were elicited regarding local and national government. During the focus groups, participants expressed some strong emotions: Deep worry for the citizens' well-being and insecurity of task handling was predominant. Insecurity of staff regarding layoffs was mentioned by one participant and alienation/apathy by one participant, none of these were questioned by the others.

Staff is very aware of the positive effects of e-communication and e-government as such for some citizens, e.g. that it is much easier, can be done more quickly, and that e-communications constitute a more reliable delivery channel, 'It is fantastic, that the citizen has these opportunities' (P5). This goes for both citizens and staff that recognize the advantages and find it 'much easier with e-communication' (P4). One participant (P7) expresses how satisfying it is, when a citizen discovers how easy on-line self-service is and the gratitude entailing. The participants share stories about their own digital readiness as citizens along with perceived positive tangible impact on the citizen service. As staff they express how e-communication is applied in a variety of work processes after own choice; there is no sign of general technology or e-government resistance. The negative effects will be further examined in following sub-sections.

It is seen by staff that e-communication has been enforced onto citizens (P2) and that it has been decided from 'a higher place' (P5, P6, P7). Further, staff reveals an overall perception of local and national government not living up to what might be expected of them, especially under the mandatory and captive use realm, see table 2 for attributes of the accountable parties (local and national government) on the enactment and technology issues of e-communication.

### About citizens: Technology and availability barriers, public service is suppressed for weak citizens

Staff report technology as way too complex, e.g. recurring Java-updates, printer-handling, EasyID (to acquire and to operate), handling of e-communication attachments etc. It makes some citizens feel insecure, e.g. 'while there are many English words on the screen and this is not [easy] for those, who have never learned languages' (P13). Configuration of alerts (e-mail and text) is possible, but again, too complicated for some citizens to handle. Further, staff experiences issues with citizens that do not have computer access; some citizens' do not want a computer and some cannot afford it. One participant spoke about an elderly citizen crying in the telephone asking if the municipality can help provide a computer (P4). Staff described how a mouse device and

Table 2 Notable attributes of e-communication according to staff

	Citizen		Staff	
	Citizen service	Technology	Work life	Technology
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easier</li> <li>Quicker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More reliable deliverance</li> <li>Independency of                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- time and place</li> <li>- public sector</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easier</li> <li>Quicker</li> <li>More reliable deliverance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>System chooses delivery channel automatically</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Troublesome</li> <li>Loss of rights</li> <li>Hits weak citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too complex</li> <li>Accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased workload</li> <li>The urge to offer service and help is suppressed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too complex</li> <li>Too many systems</li> </ul>

	Local government		National government	
	Enactment	Technology	Enactment	Technology
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insufficient preparation                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Procedures</li> <li>- Strategy</li> <li>- Citizen and staff information</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insufficient interoperability                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Systems integration</li> <li>- Automation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insufficient preparation                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joint government issues</li> <li>- Legal barriers</li> <li>- Citizen information</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bad design</li> <li>Insufficient implementation                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National shared systems</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

touch screen is difficult to use by the elderly people who seek assistance at Citizen Service. Citizens with no computer must access computers at Citizens Service Centers. But what about hospitalized citizens and institutionalized psychiatric or elderly citizens? Young people that use mobile devices and are not familiar with e-mails are also perceived as a group that may not access their Digital Post. Participants express that it is not right. 'It surely cannot be that people are forced to buy a computer (P2), the State or the municipality does not provide them with a computer [indignantly] (P13).'

E-communication has been more troublesome for some citizens. The public sector sends digital letters to citizens with attached forms that citizens must print, sign and return to be eligible for a given welfare service (a loan, livelihood, an assistive tool etc.). Citizens need to have a working printer or must use the public library where you need to pay. Participants judge it as unfair that the public sector sends digitally to citizens but citizens cannot answer back digitally (P9). Citizens that do not have access to a computer at home or alerts, need to access a computer elsewhere. This may be inconvenient for sick or institutionalized citizens. The main worry, however, is that citizens are not aware of these e-communication from public institutions and that this may have severe consequences; an unnoticed form with a deadline may result in lost welfare benefits. 'What worries me is that people are not aware [of Digital Post] (confirmation from the others). One elderly lady was not aware that she had been registered [...] she didn't manage to return the housing aid application in time so she lost one month's pay and the deposit loan option (P9). Other examples may be citizens that do not get the information they are entitled to following a legal decision (F14), for instance about the complaint process. Staff describes citizens, especially elderly men, that visit the Citizen Service to be assisted with handling the computer - but when they realize that they must operate the computer themselves and that staff must only facilitate, they leave in anger and despair. Participants worry that a group of citizens will never apply for the welfare services they are entitled to, purely because it must be done digitally (e.g. P14). From both focus groups it was very clear that staff experience many incidents, where people do not notice their Digital Post. Due to digital privacy issues, participants perceive that they are not allowed to help citizens as in 'the old days'. At the same time, the digital format is more difficult to share with others that could help, 'the neighbor cannot empty your mailbox' (P5). Citizens express that there is no service left, 'in two years, we do not have 'Citizen Service', only 'Citizen INFO' [laughter]' (P11). Citizens' ability to cope with e-communication depends on life situation:

*It depends, where you are in your life and the situations, you're put into. Are you enrolling your child in daycare or are you sick and in a crisis? For me, I'm sick right, seriously ill and I damn well cannot manage to do this or this or this or, I have lost my job, I need to apply for unemployment, it's terrible for me, I have lost my job - it depends on how much emotional surplus you have to grasp what you have to do (P7)*

Even though they agree that local and national government have not fulfilled their obligations to inform citizens (P3, P5, P6, P7, P8) it is also stated that citizens do not read the information and that citizens will be affected before they learn: 'this will only be clear to them [citizens], when they are affected, when they lose money (confirmation from others) (P5).

### **About staff: Technical issues, increased workload and reduced work satisfaction**

Participants agree that there are too many systems and too much to remember. First, staff needs to know the e-government systems from the citizen approach to be able to assist the citizens. Second, staff operates 15-20 systems to perform their daily work and these systems should be integrated with the Digital Post system. A typical situation is one system provides an attachment, the Digital Post system provides the letter and the digital channel and the two parts need to be archived in the case handling system. Participants have different experiences with different systems, some work for some and some do not. Staff must manually ensure consistency, which inevitably leads to payment errors (P7), which must be corrected. Systems that are not integrated must be compensated for by check lists or memory; interruptions by telephone or visits are described by participants as very stressful. Staff perceive that it's their own responsibility to learn new systems, and the vast majority of the participants express that they do not have time to learn and experiment with new systems (e.g. Digital Post) (P5, P4, P8, P9, P11). 'It's hard to follow all the new things; I just try to hang on' (P10). Participants express great uncertainty and confusion about the Digital Post system concept and how it is managed vis-à-vis other systems. One participant comments that 'if we cannot understand it, how can we explain it to the citizens?' (P5). Participants discussed many troublesome work processes due to interoperability issues; one participant comments that 'one must do more than before to make it work, it is more time consuming, this certainly wasn't the objective (others: no!)' (P13), she describes how citizens are beginning to use Digital Post to write to the municipality, but often it is extra work because they write and ask if we got the electronic message'. Digital/analogue shifts during work processes comprises another major extra workload mainly due to other public institutions demanding signature, original documents etc.

Before the digital era, staff and citizens shared information in a more flexible way, staff could even fill out forms (P2). In the digital era, privacy issues are more salient and practices have changed, 'I have to say to citizens that

you HAVE to do this [digitally], but I cannot manage, won't you help me? No, I cannot' (P4). Participants especially worry about weak citizens. Participants talk strongly about a 'service' or 'caring' gene, but also agree that they assist citizens too much. Participants describe how they omit e-communication or the rules to ensure that citizens do not lose welfare benefits (P5, P11). Many of the participants feel frustrated.

*What hits me the most is my 'caring gene', I think of all those poor citizens that cannot manage [the digital domain] (P4), but then you care for them by helping them into the new world (P3), yes, I can explain, but I cannot buy them a computer or bring them to the municipality, I can understand their frustration (P4), but it is our duty to tell them that THIS is the way it is (P5).*

One participant describes how this new regime impacts her attitude.

*I can be struck by apathy; all the rejections [on welfare benefits applications] that I send. Before, I had some feelings into it – it's a pity, he's not too smart – but now, there are these rules - bang! - Rejection! To protect oneself, you have to say 'that's just the way, it is'' (P5)*

### **About local and national government: Insufficiently designed, prepared and implemented**

It is very clear that participants find a lack of 'balance' in the relation between public sector and the citizen. Participants find that e-communication should have been better prepared so all public institutions should use e-communication (e.g. police and priests), legal barriers should have been cleared (e.g. digital signatures) and citizens should be able to respond on digital forms instead of having to print, sign and return analogue forms. The system was badly designed (e.g. the dependency on third party software as browsers and Java introduced severe barriers to citizens) and information of citizens on the potential severe consequences of e-communication. Some participants find that it has been carried out too quickly. Participants do not express the same concern for the lack of interoperability, procedures, strategies and adjusted work processes that affect their own work life quality.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

E-government is not only one thing; it can be good or bad. The former section considered what civil servants perceive as negative attributes. E-government and e-communication can be troublesome and may imply that citizens do not get the welfare services that they are entitled to. Besides, the weaker citizens are heavily affected by the digital enforcement due to the combination of high dependency on public services and low accessibility. Staff perceives an increased workload combined with a reduced ability to provide service and help citizens, which together constitute a reduced work life quality. Generally, staff sees the technology part as far too complex, both for citizens and for staff. This section will elaborate on the critical implications for practice and research.

### **Weaker citizens get hit by e-communication**

It was apparent that participants worried about the e-government impact on the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, i.e. on what may be called the weaker citizens in the sense that they have fewer resources to cope with – or fight against – public sector bureaucracy and demands. Staff even expresses it as not fair and showed clear indignation. To be able to fulfill the requirements that follow from collecting welfare benefits, the citizen is obliged to engage in a recurring application-and-confirmation processes, based on forms and written communication. The mandatory e-communication has made this even more rigid because failure to reply to e-communication has legal (and economic) consequences. Further, citizens, also need to spend money on a computer, printer and internet; and to master skills to operate and maintain hardware and software, including recurring updates. It is not at all trivial for the segment of weaker citizens that may never have had a computer or experience fatigue due to a life crisis. Municipal staff finds that many elderly citizens cannot operate a mouse, let alone panic when 'Java needs to be updated'. Whilst personalized e-services have been shown to enhance user satisfaction (Tan et al., 2013), the Danish e-communication initiative is a one-size-fits-all design, which in this case clearly is shown not to comply with the goal from Holgersson et al. (2010) that e-services should be usable. Moreover, it obviously doesn't comply with citizen responsiveness or democratic development goal. One may also question whether efficacy is fulfilled if a major group of citizens does not demand e-communication. More importantly, this study indicates that requirements are needed to protect civil rights. E-services should not impede citizens in executing their citizens' rights.

Citizens that do not want a computer or cannot afford one need to travel across the municipality to do their required business with the public sector in Citizen Service Centers or libraries where they struggle with less help from staff because of privacy reasons. Staff describes how the dependency on public livelihood combined with the perceived barriers to the communication channel that ensures this livelihood makes some citizens angry, unsecure and nervous, they predict that some citizens will not apply for the benefits, which they are entitled to



and some citizens will directly lose benefits. In Denmark, the citizens that receive benefits from sickness, pension, unemployment etc. constitute one third of population.

E-government, it has been argued, reinforces existent power structures (e.g. Cordella and Bonina, 2012), so this is not new. Basically, it is a question of, what kind of society, we want. Ironically, the enactment of this e-government initiative may, however, with its negative implications on weaker citizens, especially the elderly (who attract huge political focus), provoke certain political parties – the most right wing party with one fourth of the voters, had announced that they want e-communication to be voluntary for the elderly. No political party had ever voted against one of the four Danish e-government strategies since 2001, but this may change the Danish e-government momentum, slowing down the positive implications of e-government initiatives.

### **E-communication may alter public sector ethos**

Staff reveals in a matter-of-factly way the various barriers, they experience in their daily work with e-communication, but they do not complain, even though there was a comment about fear of lay-offs. This is natural, since cost reductions are the stated goal. One participant was laid-off five months after the focus group due to cuts as a result of reduced state funding from e-communication. The barriers relating to insufficient design, preparation and implementation are well known from IS and e-government. The combination, however, of increased workload and reduced work life quality may be important. This study does not give grounds to elaborate on the overall efficiency, however, staff express clearly with various examples that the goals of efficiency have not been met. The Ministry of Finance is well aware of the internal and external barriers and has chosen a watch and wait implementation strategy. Staff is very conscious about this; they find that it has become mandatory too early. For instance, they criticize that the fact that citizens cannot answer digitally and that citizens need to buy computer and printer. It is clear, that they do not support Digital Post as it is enacted, though, it is a silent protest. They comply and do what is expected of them, but there is a clear feeling of imbalance. It is not fair that public sector saves postal costs, while citizens get more trouble and eventually lose welfare benefits.

Moreover, they feel frustrated that they are not allowed to provide the usual service when they find that citizens cannot manage. This has a direct impact on their work life quality, because what ‘drives them to work every morning’, is to ensure that especially weak citizens receive the necessary assistance to be able to respond to public sector demands. Public sector ethos is under pressure from e-communication since it touches upon civil servants’ motivation for doing ‘something good’, which might create apathy that impacts the civil servant in the direction of merely managing the job instead of pursuing an extended public good. E-communication as it is enacted has revealed a fragmented public sector where one part decides to use e-communication and other parts decide not (e.g. police, courts, church). This might affect civil servants’ beliefs in the wider context of public sector. Lastly, the loyalty both to local but especially to central government is clearly at stake. Pratchett and Wingfield (1996) proved how NPM values in the 1990’s altered the public sector ethos. E-government may follow the same trail.

### **New e-government research approaches may be called for**

E-government research has been preoccupied by the great potential and possible evolvement of e-government to ensure, at the same time, efficiency and citizen empowerment (Coursey and Norris, 2008). The scholarly focus has been on how to assist government in removing barriers, e.g. by investigating, what motivates citizens to adopt e-government from a technology deterministic viewpoint (Heeks and Bailur, 2007). Further, studies of car registration, tax filing or public website information provide little insight in the potential negative impacts of e-government. Andersen and Henriksen (2006) promote a model, where citizens and not governments control personal data, but not from an empirical background. Cordella and Bonina (2012) state that e-government may introduce political and administrative consequences that should not be overlooked. Empirically based studies, however, of negative impacts from e-government have not yet been seen, which may be connected to the likewise limited application of mandatory e-government. As this study shows, mandatory e-government may impact the lives of citizens and civil servants and even affect the public sector ethos. The call from Heeks and Bailur (2007) to engage in qualitative, empirical and critical studies still holds. There is a need to further establish qualitative research methods to engage weaker citizens, along with civil servants. Promising studies have been made in engaging citizens in e-government research, e.g. using focus groups (Axelsson and Melin, 2007) and finding suitable participatory approaches (Holgerson et al., 2010).

Scholars have been critical of how governments fail to realize the potential of e-government and have offered a variety of evaluation frameworks (e.g. Luna-Reyes et al., 2012) or stakeholder perspectives (e.g. Flak and Rose, 2005). The underlying assumptions for offering such models, is that there is a lack of knowledge, and governments will apply this knowledge if it was present. The models, however, are of limited value if governments are committed to pursue only efficiency goals and neglect the citizen or staff perspective. During

this study, no participant voiced against e-government or against mandatory e-government; no participant cited citizens that demanded free e-government (the state should supply hardware, software and internet), let alone their civil right to be served *without* e-government. Or at least, demanded that e-government, both from a civil servants' and citizens' perspective was easily operable. Critical e-government research has a role to play in offering alternative and respectful e-government. By providing viable alternatives in design or implementation, e.g. that it is possible to implement over a longer period, citizens and civil servants may articulate their voice. Further, research should offer and promote empowering techniques and methods such as to promote critical e-government inputs. In the 1970's, researchers and trade unions formed alliances to stand up against ruthless businesses. Researchers were then driven by the beliefs that technology gains and work life quality could and should be pursued simultaneously.

## CONCLUSION

The Danish e-government strategy produces significant e-government growth statistics. Yet, there is little knowledge about how the current mandatory e-government regime impacts citizens and civil servants in the short and long terms. This paper reports from a qualitative, exploratory and critical study of the enactment of a Danish e-government initiative, mandatory e-communication from public sector to citizens. As it is enacted by the Danish government, is shown to have both positive and negative effects on staff and citizens. As expected, e-communication, in some situations and for some citizens, is both quicker and easier for citizens and staff. However, as may not be expected – or reflected on by e-government researchers – civil servants find that e-communication may have negative impact on some citizens. It may be very troublesome for especially weaker citizens and entails that some citizens do not apply for the benefits, they are entitled to and some citizens lose their benefits. Staff report citizens to be angry, insecure and emotional, especially when staff is not allowed to help manage the computer and the e-services. Furthermore, staff describes how their workload has increased because of many unforeseen barriers, bad design and insufficient preparation and implementation. Staff shows great worry for the weaker citizens and frustration because they cannot provide the good citizen service that they are used to; apathy and declining motivation may impact the virtues of public sector ethos. This paper calls for more empirical based critical e-government research with a focus on mandatory e-government and impact on the weaker actors of e-government (clerical staff and weaker citizens).

So, what is the path forward? Should governments that make e-government mandatory be criticized? If mandatory e-government proves to ensure a reduction in public sector costs, more governments will follow, regardless of scholarly criticism. Researchers should not be blinded by the coercive forces, but rather focus on the way it is enacted – not only by central government – but by the multitude of various decisions and choices throughout the various public institutions and private sector actors that design, implement and use e-government initiatives. Disclosure of how e-government is enacted and the consequences for people may constitute the background on which the taken-for-granted belief that more public IT is better will be questioned.

When it is acknowledged that e-government may violate citizens' rights and have a negative impact on life quality for both citizens and civil servants, it will be necessary to monitor these and provide alternative e-government enactment models for public discussion of what kind of society, we want. In this endeavor, citizens and staff constitute valuable informants. E-government researchers have the skills to provide alternatives to those in power, elicit the necessary empirical evidence, and suggest techniques and methods that enable participatory activities and empowerment – we might be the only allies that citizens and staff have got. It may be possible to perform even mandatory e-government with the twofold goal of increasing public sector efficiency and improving conditions for citizens and staff – at least ensuring that they do not decline.

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