

**Understanding Complex Service Systems through Different Lenses
Academic Conference, Cambridge Service Alliance, University of Cambridge
22-23 September 2011, Cambridge, UK**

The Role of Electronic Services in Transformational Government: A Unified Services Theory Perspective and Implications for Trust

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Abstract

More than ten years ago, the publication of a government paper (DTI, 1998) officially acknowledged the development of electronic services as a crucial factor for the UK economy. Building upon this publication, the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) UK published a report pointing out that a successful strategy for implementing electronic services should be based upon the development of access and trust (PIU, 1999). In addition, the government paper 'Modernising Government' (Cabinet Office, 1999) was presented to the UK Parliament. This paper was a milestone in the history of digital government evolution in the UK, as it put forward a new package of reforms that brought information technology to the forefront of policies and programmes for public service reform. About a year later, the PIU UK published another report setting out a comprehensive strategy for realising the full potential of electronic service underpinned by customer-focused services (PIU, 2000). The strategy entailed radical improvements of the services delivered to the citizen, as consumer, and the transformation of government operations.

A decade on, new digital technologies such as digital TV, mobile applications and broadband internet have become all pervasive. By allowing differentiation of services delivered to meet a diverse range of users, these technologies have significantly stretched the scope of digital government, which now faces new organisational challenges imposed by the augmented complexity and increased variety of its digital service environment. This scenario has led the government to develop a new agenda for IT-enabled change, which has culminated in the establishment of government transformation strategies labeled 'transformational government' (Cabinet Office, 2005). Transformational government, also referred to as 't-government', can be seen as a new stage of e-government evolution into a broader perspective involving technical, social and organisational aspects (Coursey and Norris, 2008; Andersen and Henriksen, 2006). Among the transformational objectives set by the UK Cabinet Office (2005) for the t-government agenda, two positive specific challenges to service operations in a technology-mediated context: 1. Service design oriented to customers; and 2. Standardisation, simplification and sharing of services.

Recent research involving consultation of main government stakeholders (Irani and Elliman, 2007) has also pointed out these two objectives among key issues in the process of developing and providing electronic services. More specifically, 'citizen centric processes' and 'technology and service process standardisation' were among the themes identified as imperative concerns for the t-government agenda. Moreover, the participants considered 'lack of participation, engagement and take-up of electronic services' as a serious concern. This issue is intrinsically related to trust. For instance, previous research suggests that trust in government generally leads to increased use of electronic government services (Carter and Bélanger, 2005). Another research

(Parent et al., 2005) suggests an inverse causality, i.e. the use of the internet to interact with the government causes a positive impact on trust.

A major difficulty in deriving practical managerial insights from the transformational government perspective is that in the existing literature 'transformation' is usually expressed in terms of desirable qualities rather than concrete transformation of structures and processes (Bannister and Connolly, 2011). Although it is possible to address transformational government issues from diverse areas such as Customer Relationship Management, Business Process Management, Management of Information Systems, and so forth, the adoption of an integrative theoretical basis that could accommodate different perspectives around 'service', the core subject of interest, would certainly facilitate generation of useful managerial insights and approaches in the area.

The main purpose of this conceptual paper is to fill this gap by presenting a Unified Services Theory (UST) perspective of issues concerning the development of electronic services in the transformational government area. The paper will focus upon customer orientation and process standardisation issues. The UST is a recent theoretical development that defines a service production process as one that relies on customer inputs (Sampson and Froehle, 2006). It places the customer as a key supplier of service processes. Its foundational core states that the customer provides significant inputs into the production process and the presence of customer inputs is a necessary condition to define a production process as a service process. Managerially relevant insights can be derived from this fundamental principle. For instance, a viable way to reduce customer variety in service processes is to reduce variety of customer inputs through process standardisation.

By discussing the role of electronic services in transformational government from a UST angle, the paper provides a refreshed theoretical and managerial perspective to the area. Another contribution of the paper is to demonstrate further the usefulness of UST as an analytical mechanism for the generation of practical managerial insights. To do this, we start by discussing the role that information and communication technologies can play to support governments to achieve their fundamental roles. We then narrow the discussion down to the role of electronic services in transformational government. This discussion is done in the light of the UST, from which we draw concepts and perspectives that will lead to refreshed understanding and useful managerial insights. Finally, an additional contribution of the paper is the discussion of the implications of electronic service process standardisation for trust. An important premise in this discussion is that process trust emerges from continual satisfactory experiences (Bannister and Connolly, 2011). A potential obstacle to trust generation is that process automating technologies can damage customer experience by failing to accommodate customer variety through over-standardisation of customers' inputs (Sampson and Froehle, 2006). To overcome this problem, we point out important aspects concerning value-sensitive design in technology-mediated interface.

Contribution to the case scenario:

The paper provides valuable insights for analysis of the case scenario. According to the information provided in the case, Sutton is one of the safest boroughs in London, with one of the lowest levels of crime. Yet, despite the fact that crime has fallen over the past eight years, improving safety and reducing crime remains the top priorities upon which the local residents want the Council to concentrate. This aspect suggests that there might be a lack of trust in the Council's ability to carry on tackling crime even though the statistics show that the local authority has been performing well in this area over the last years. Therefore, building trust can be seen as an initiative with potential contribution to reducing fear of crime in the region. Awareness of this aspect expands the level of importance and purpose of deploying electronic services in the government context. As discussed in the paper, electronic government services can potentially

contribute to developing trust, which, in the case's context, could lead to an increased level of confidence citizens have in their government, as suggested by Barnes and Gill (2000). In practical terms, government services mediated by electronic means have the potential to increase trust as long as they facilitate citizen participation and involvement. The logic behind this is that citizens are likely to develop more confidence in the government if they feel they are more actively involved in government processes. Developments in technology can facilitate access to government information and documents, promoting greater understanding about government and its services. On the other hand, they can provide useful means through which citizens can have more say in government issues. Citizens who understand how government works and who feel they are a valued part of democratic processes are likely to be more trusting of their government (Barnes and Gill, 2000). Value-sensitive design issues discussed in the paper might be of valuable help to improve electronic services take up, public participation, and, potentially, trust in the Borough of Sutton.

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