Mapping out and constructing the needs – a pilot study of on-line public services and citizens involvement

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ABSTRACT

This report gives a presentation of work in progress, a pilot study concerning the setting up of public services in the local context of the county of Blekinge, South-eastern Sweden. The main aim with this discussion is to support a more reflective and participatory attitude towards design and development of public systems among municipalities and other service producers/providers in the future. The way in which I will do this study is to examine a selection of methods, or types of needs analysis or needs assessments, used by different actors and producers of public services in order to get a picture of various needs among the users. One part of my study is to look at service providers and their use of explicit techniques, such as questionnaires, larger surveys and work carried out with the help of focus groups. A basic question to put forward is what role do these explicit surveys play for the various participating actors – including citizens – and, in the long run, for the design-choices?

The mapping work described here is being carried out within the context of a larger on-going research and development project concerning the continuous design and development of IT in use in public service. [1]

Keywords

Analysis of methods, on-line public services, citizenship, needs analysis, needs assessments

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, a new form of co-ordination of public services has been spreading among Swedish municipalities in the form of so called one-stop shops or citizen's offices. Here citizens are offered different kinds of public services at one and the same reception desk. [2]

This could be seen as a result of an ongoing effort to make public services more efficient, a development that has

occurred simultaneously with rationalisations of the Swedish public sector and the reduction of the Swedish welfare system. But it could also be seen as a way to test new organisational and administrative forms or an attempt to achieve improved accessibility, quality and range of public service and stimulate the development of local democracy. [2]

In Blekinge some of the municipalities have been involved in experiments such as the ones described above, which have been more or less successful. Yet there is still room for development concerning initiatives like this. Natural follow-up evaluation-questions on these experiences ought to be; What is the significance of centralisation versus decentralisation of points of services? Is co-ordination really a gain or a loss? Susan Leigh Star discusses the relationship between standardisation of technologies and local experience in her essay: Power, technology and the phenomenology of conventions: on being allergic to onions [3]. She points out the fact that we are all members of more than one community of practice and in the moment of action we bring together knowledge from all kinds of experiences and create metaphors or bridges between these worlds. It is not possible to create a special needs assessment that would try to find technical solutions for all special cases, according to Leigh Star, nor to say that all conventions and standards are useless. The question is instead where to begin the analyses of standards and technologies and she emphasises the effort to start the analyses on the 'zero point', in my interpretation that is from a perspective of what is considered as the periphery. In creating a public online service the self-evident strategy is to define needs and ways of satisfying those needs. But there are also a lot of vague expectations on public services provided by the municipal authorities in the county, which indicate that an instrumental approach on these matters is not enough. Implicitly business-oriented approaches such as "once we manage to create the 'right' kind of product or community it's also possible to attract the citizens - whether they have the needs or not" is another perspective that is occurring in the debate on the issue. This could lead to the reaction; "these needs are not mine, these services are not close to me". Another approach that has been advocated lately is the possibility of increased citizen involvement and development of

democracy in society thanks to the digitalisation of services and expanded interactivity. Since the focus is shifting from "doing things just because the new technology gives us the opportunity to do it" to a more allowing perspective saying that the development of on-line services must focus the use of certain services, and how to gain added value for the users. Therefore I find it highly relevant to focus and explore the increasing planning and conducting of needs analyses or needs assessments 1 in this area, by concentrating on the relationship between the process of identifying the needs and forming of content and shape. If services are to be defined in terms of needs the underlying values also have to be considered, and it is also important to make clear where the needs emanate from, an individual, groups of citizens or the society itself. The logic tend to be circular in these matters what is needed is what is asked for and what is asked for is what is needed.

Witkin & Altschuld [4] emphasise a way to clarify the idea of needs by thinking in terms of three levels of needs, each of them representing a target group for the needs assessment. The primary one is the service receiver, in these case citizens. The secondary level is the service providers and policymakers, such as the municipalities, governmental authorities and other producers of service. A tertiary level is the resources or solutions such as supplies and technologies. They point out that the primary group for the analysis is level one, but the salaried employees could also have unmet needs related to their functions towards the users and the organisation could also have needs as an organisation.

I would also say that there is a clear distinction between the precise needs that are easily recognised and answered and the "unknown" needs, in the sense of not yet formulated, recognised and understood needs. In order to facilitate a personal development of knowing which leads to a formulation of needs connected to a clear definition of what it means to be a citizen, a different approach is required. This brings on the question: how to provide on-line public services that allow and support people in growing as citizens, not only in being a citizen with certain needs?

The study

I would like to emphasise that this study is a limited pilot study aiming to initiate a discussion on the questions that arise in this presentation, rather than answering them once and for all. During the autumn I have conducted in-depth interviews with key providers of public services in the county of Blekinge as well as with representatives of various groups of citizens and with individuals[2] I will also focus briefly on commercial actors and governmental representatives in the area in order to give space for complexity. My objective is to bring about a discussion on the experience and construction of needs and whether it is possible to discern which:

- techniques/methods
- definitions/interpretations
- target groups/perspectives
- qualities/effects

that are likely to stimulate and lead to more sustainable and participatory results. The analysis will be compared to and discussed in relation to other examples of local projects aiming to achieve increased citizen involvement and support the setting up of communities on the web emerging from a grassroots perspective. Here citizens were provided time and space to explore and articulate their needs and options [5]. The study is a part of an assignment for the European Union concerning experiences, access to and requests for public services on-line. The European study will be completed and reported in October this year[3].

The mapping out and constructing of needs described here should also be seen as an important part of the framework of a larger on-going research and development project, financed by the Swedish Council for Work Life Research, concerning the continuous design and development of IT in use in public service. [1]

What has been done so far?

Some basic questions being addressed are:

- What kinds of techniques/methods are currently being used in order to identify and distinguish various needs?

- Why do the service producers/providers choose these kinds of selection methods? How do they define significant conceptions as "needs", "citizenship", "service", "technical products", "user-orientation", "interaction and dialogue"?

- What is regarded as primary and/or most frequently encountered needs in public services? What are the basic elements when developing the services?

- How to define target groups? Whose/which needs are legitimate or predominant? Are the categories seen as univocal or is there room for diversity and if so, how is this great variety dealt with? Allowance of different perspectives such as products that are adapted to a specific situation or an individual's need?

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[1] There is a distinction between needs analyses (basically, identifying and listing needs) and needs assessments (a more comprehensive process including evaluating the needs and making priorities) due to the refereed authors, which I also found in my study. See Witkin & Autschuld.

[2] An example of such a project, which was carried out both on a local and transnational level, is the DIALOGUE-project. A sub-project Women writing on the Net has been presented and described during the WWC2000Conferens in Vancouver earlier this year. See Ekelin & Elovaara.

[3] This assignment has come via IT Blekinge, funded through the RISI+ project (Regional Information Society Initiatives) within the EU social fund.

- By whom? How do the service producers/providers define and describe themselves and their relationship to the users?
- Thoughts/expectations on future services?
- Is it possible to balance demands of quality and content as opposed to low-cost needs: e. g use of technical solutions and the extended need of a content that is dealt with thoroughly

A local inquiry

One example of the empirical material I am using is the result of an inquiry that is taking place in Ronneby. A group of local politicians and municipal officers from the Municipality of Ronneby are currently working with a survey concerning how to develop future public service. This survey covers public service in general, not only focusing the on-line functions. During the first half of 2000 I've had the opportunity to take part in this group as a participant observer, and participate in workshops or discussion meetings with groups of generalists such as receptionists and librarians as well as formal meetings. The question of increased citizen involvement is central as well as how to improve the quality of the service. Mark Nichter [6] talks about low cost techniques for "reading the community" such as focus groups that are replacing surveys. Nichter points out that none of these approaches seems to foster active community participation.

A number of important questions are surfacing: Are there any alternatives? How do we take stock of intermediate competencies when bringing together people who need to communicate? This leads on to the basic questions: what is the signification of accessibility, democratic solutions, participation and co-operation in the area concerning the production of on-line public services? And is logic based purely on needs and their satisfactions necessarily appropriate from a long-term perspective?

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