High-Tension Wiring:
Lessons from Local Government Internet Use in Sweden

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Sweden has undertaken local government empowerment during the 1990s. There were high hopes that this could be supported by new information and communication technologies. With this in mind, the city of Gothenburg embarked on the DALI (Delivery and Access to Local Information and Services) project in the mid-1990s. DALI was intended to provide citizens with information about government services, and with an opportunity to understand and participate in policy debates.

Three pilot districts in Gothenburg, each with around 15,000 inhabitants, were selected for the project. Four leading politicians on each district council were given a PC. In addition to home/work access for citizens, a small number of public kiosks were provided. The DALI Web sites were created with:

- An *administrative information* section about availability of, and access to, council-provided services (though no facility for online application).
- A *current issues* section covering council policy proposals and news about council services.
- A *debate forum* for moderated debates on policy issues, such as road planning in the district, in which both citizens and politicians could participate. Politicians' email addresses were also provided.
- An *archives* section of past discussions and documents with a free-text search facility.

Evaluation reveals that the project has had only a modest impact and can only be termed a 'partial success'. District home pages register around 40 hits per day, and the total number of debate contributions per year has been just a few dozen, mostly from citizens and hardly at all from politicians.

This result called for more detailed analysis through interviews with key stakeholders, which revealed a series of 'tension dimensions' around local government use of the Internet.

Tensions Over Access

Cost vs. Value: Internet access needs to be higher before debate and usage will reach any kind of self-reinforcing critical mass. Yet raising access levels either means waiting for technology diffusion or pushing it by investing scarce resources. Kiosks particularly were very costly to operate since a number were vandalised or accidentally damaged.

Politician vs. Citizen Access: where money is available for access-raising investments, there are difficult decisions to make between increasing the ability of politicians and the ability of citizens to participate in the project. Adopting a 'bit of both' strategy potentially leaves neither with critical mass.

Tensions Over Content

Local vs. Central Web Design Control: central (city- or national-level) control over Web design can provide benefits of consistency, scale economies, and a clear locus for learning. Local control offers the ability to customise to particular district requirements. There were continuous internal political wranglings about control.

Government vs. Other Information Content: some officials feel government-funded sites should contain only government-authorised, government-related information. Others want to make their home pages a one-stop site for everything going on within a given district, including information about local shops and business. The former view prevailed, but the latter would have brought a higher hit rate.

Privacy vs. Accessibility of Personal Details: in Sweden, two legal principles collide in putting government information on the net. On the one hand, citizens have a right of access to government documents; on the other, holding of personal details (including names of public servants) on computer, requires a special permit for each instance. Districts tend to escape the collision by the rather ungainly solution of removing names from online government documents, or by just not putting documents online.

Tensions Over Debate

Censorship vs. Openness: full participation and freedom of expression are generally encouraged. Yet the 'psychological distancing' that occurs with use of computer-mediated communication leads to expression of extreme views that can cause offence and can easily sidetrack or halt debates. Balancing these two is not easy.

Necessity vs. Hesitancy of Politician Involvement: for debate fora to be effective, politicians must be seen to be contributing and taking note of contributions. This often ran counter to politicians' concerns about committing themselves in public, about having to give instant responses, and about being pushed along by the potentially unrepresentative few who bother to take part in Internet-mediated debates.

Direct vs. Representative Democracy: it is not always clear where such debates are headed. Are they tweaks to our current system of representative democracy that merely provide an electronic equivalent of the politician's mailbag and the occasional political meeting? Or are they driving forward a new model of democracy that will ultimately 'disintermediate' the politicians out of existence?

Addressing Tensions

Three elements help address the tensions:

- *Time*: some (but not all) problems of access will diminish over time as ICTs diffuse.
- *Tactics*: management guidelines agreed between the key stakeholders need to be developed to cover issues of content and control.
- *Strategy*: over and above these guidelines there must be a strategy which is more than just the 'suck it and see' approach that has driven many pilot projects. This must identify the Internet merely as a tool to meet broader democratisation goals, ensuring that the 'technology tail' does not wag the 'democracy dog'.

Nevertheless, there is no simple resolution to the tensions described. Some of them will remain fundamental to Internet-enabled links between citizens and government, reminding us that the Internet is no 'magic bullet' to solve the problems of governance and democracy.

More details about this case, and many others of IT use in government, can be found in "Reinventing Government in the Information Age" by Richard Heeks (Routledge, ISBN: 0-415-19037-1). See:
http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/other/books/rgia.htm

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