

Accountability and Responsibility in e-Government

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1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe, in general terms, an area for further research: accountability and responsibility in electronic government. The paper is intended to serve solely as a vantage-point for discussion among workshop participants, aiming at defining more distinct research questions.

2 Accountability and Responsibility in Government

Accountability is central to the relationship between government and the citizens at large as well as to the relationship between government and individual citizens. Much has been written on accountability, and I will not even attempt to summarise the extensive literature on the subject. Some general points will be offered as a background to the following discussion.

As understood here, responsibility is a prerequisite for accountability, i.e. a person can be held accountable for an action (or lack of action) if he is responsible for the action (or has a responsibility to act). This use of the terms is somewhat oversimplified, but sufficiently accurate for the purpose of this paper.

Accountability is a central democratic concept. Elected representatives are accountable to their constituents, and are being held accountable with the remedy of not being re-elected (see e.g. Przeworski et al, 1999, and Held, 1996). In a parliamentary system, the government and ministers are accountable to the parliament. Agency heads and other officials are in their turn accountable to the government. Indirectly officials are being held accountable to the citizens by way of their representatives. Apart from being accountable “upwards”, agencies and officials have responsibilities towards individual citizens as well. These responsibilities include e.g. to handle cases according to law. I will focus on accountability in the administration.

One aspect of responsibility and accountability that makes the issue more complex, is that the citizen too has responsibilities. This is one of the aspects that differs between the customer relationship and the citizen relationship (see e.g. Gabriel & Lang, 1995).

A typical description of the prerequisites for accountability in the administration states that accountability requires (Ahlbäck, 2001):

- That it is possible to discern who is responsible,
- That there is knowledge on the performance of the public administration
- That there are mechanisms for holding those responsible accountable.

The last point concerns remedies and similar matters, and is of little interest in this context. The second point is of some interest in the context of e-government, since the availability of information on government

performance is obviously increased with the use of information technology. The first point is the most interesting, and will more or less be the vantage point of the discussion in the remainder of this paper.

The statement, like the approach to responsibility and accountability in general, stems from a certain perspective on the way government works and organises itself. This view, in turn, seems to stem from an understanding or perception of the contacts between government and citizen as clearly individualised and distinguishable. This understanding or perception can be described in terms of several “sub-perceptions”, such as:

- Government is clearly separable from the rest of society (e.g. from citizens)
- Various parts of government (ministries, departments, agencies, municipalities) are clearly separable
- Communications between citizens and government (e.g. applications or decisions) are separable, individual, and documented
- The business of government is conducted by officials, who are separable from each other and from the surrounding government organisation (e.g. its information system)
- The forms and conditions for the interaction between citizen and government are constant.

As I will outline in the following sections, I claim that these understandings are challenged in the networked electronic government.

3 Accountability and Responsibility in e-Government

The issue of accountability and responsibility in e-government has drawn only limited attention. Surprisingly little attention, given the importance of the question. As a vantage point for my discussion, I have chosen two policy statements, one from the OECD and one from the Swedish government.

One of many actors on the e-government stage is the OECD. In its report *The e-Government Imperative*, the organisation gives a number of recommendations to governments. Under the heading “Responsibility”, one of the so-called guiding principles is (OECD 2003):

“Accountability: E-government can open up government and policy processes and enhance accountability. Accountability arrangements should ensure that it is clear who is responsible for shared projects and initiatives. Similarly, the use of private sector partnerships must not reduce accountability.”

A somewhat similar statement concerning the long term development of the administration can be found in the Swedish Appropriations Bill for FY 2003 (Swedish Government 2003):

“The long-term goal is that citizens and business, from a service perspective, perceive the public administration as one single 24/7-agency without disturbing boundaries between agencies. This entails e.g. that one case, as far as possible, demands only one contact with the administration, which calls for agency collaboration. It is, however, important that agency

responsibilities do not become so blurred as to impair transparency and accountability.”

At face value, the statement seems obvious or even trivial. But analysed more closely, they seem to reveal a somewhat dubious perspective on accountability and responsibility. Both the statements warn for the possibility that the use of information technology in the administration may reduce transparency and blur responsibility, thus making accountability impossible. They seem to presuppose that accountability and responsibility are constant concepts. Concepts that can be applied to any organisation or technology.

From that point of view, the relationship between policy and technology is a one way relationship. First we make policy choices, e.g. regarding accountability, then these choices are implemented in the technology through a policy directed design process.

My claim is that this is a flawed approach. The theory and ideology of accountability is a product of a certain kind of administration with certain ways to structure itself and to organise the way it works. These structures and processes of the administration are to a large extent the products of certain forms of communication and documentation, namely physical meetings and paper based communication. These are the structures of the industrial age government, the bureaucracy, as described by Weber.

In the existing literature on the subject surprisingly few authors have applied classical bureaucracy theory to e-government. One of the few examples is Jane E. Fountain (Fountain 2001 & 2002, with a particularly good overview of Weber in the former work). Fountain’s conclusion is that bureaucracy-theory remains the chief instrument for analysis of the administration. On the subject of accountability her conclusion, albeit unclear, seems to be that systems are to be designed in such a fashion that traditional concepts of accountability can be sustained. A somewhat similar view can be found in Niklasson (2003).

I intend to question the view that it is at all possible to sustain traditional concepts of accountability in the networked government. As I will outline in the following section, there is at least room for doubt regarding the applicability of traditional, bureaucratic concepts of accountability to e-government.

4 Challenges to Responsibility and Accountability in e-Government

In this section, I outline some challenges to traditional concepts of responsibility and accountability, posed by the evolution of e-government. The intention is to make a broad and superficial picture of areas for further research, not to list all relevant issues and not to analyse the issues in detail.

4.1 Decisions and Decision-Making

One of the prerequisites for responsibility mentioned above, is that it must be possible to determine who is responsible. This claim rests on the

assumption that the official is a distinguishable person making independent decisions. This concept of an official is challenged in an electronic administration, thus making the application of traditional concepts of accountability difficult.

Naturally even an electronic government administration must be manned with humans. A topic that has attracted some attention is automated decision-making. If decisions are made automatically, the responsibility for the correctness of individual decisions is somewhat blurred and may at times seem artificial. The official serving as an “operator” may perhaps not have taken any part in the programming, and may thus not have any realistic possibility to control that the automatically made decisions are correct.

Less obvious and perhaps more interesting is that situation where the official still makes a decision, but to some extent uses information technology in the process. It may be to make calculations, to retrieve information or to communicate. In such a case it may be difficult to determine what decision the official has actually made. The system becomes part of the cognitive system of the official, and the boundaries between the human mind and the machine get blurred.

These situations have drawn the attention of researchers in various disciplines, e.g. legal informatics and computer ethics. In this context it may, at this stage, suffice to note that the foundations for a concept of individual responsibility and accountability for officials will be challenged and possibly altered with the advent of new technologies.

4.2 Decisions and Documents

The previous section was about the role of the decision maker. Another problematic area is the decision itself. The decision, or rather the document informing of the content of the decision, is the classical interface between government and citizen. The decision marks the end of a case, which started with an application. In the traditional administration the relationship between citizen and government is in fact a long series of cases, each handled by an agency, and with a clear start and ending.

This is expressed in the goal that the administration is to appear to the citizen as one single administration. This aim is implemented in various ways, ranging from government portals to citizens’ accounts and data vaults. These latter interfaces indicate a more long lasting relationship between government and the individual citizen. Individual cases will lose their significance, and the relationship between citizen and government will be a constantly evolving one, centred not around individual decisions, but around the needs of the citizen. Constant negotiation will replace documents.

If documents and the decisions they record lose their central role in the relationship between citizens and government, their central role for the concept of accountability will be challenged. The diminished role for documents is in fact also a challenge to the alleged possibilities to enhance transparency through the use of information technologies.

4.3 The Limits of Responsibility

Decisions and decision making are at the centre of responsibility. One way to analyse accountability and responsibility is to study instead the limits of responsibility.

One possible way to deal with the problems of the role of the official as decision-maker is to replace individual accountability with organisational accountability. To some extent this is done today, for example when a head of an agency is held accountable for the actions of her subordinates.

However, this too seems to be a problematic approach. It is an explicit goal for many governments to appear as a single administration instead of as a collection of agencies. This goal is clearly at odds with the demand to sustain traditional concepts of accountability.

The two goals can be combined if the administration draws a clear line between production of services and delivery of services. The former would then be handled by a traditional bureaucracy with clear lines of accountability, whereas the latter would be handled through a single point of contact. This does not seem to be a sustainable long term solution. It would also be a major pedagogical challenge to deliver services seamlessly, but to make clear to citizen how the services have been produced by various agencies.

A more likely development is that the boundaries between agencies and between levels of government will become blurred. It will thus be impossible to rely on boundaries as a foundation for accountability and responsibility in theory and in practice.

The issue of boundaries will be even further complicated by the fact that the boundaries between the citizen and government will blur. First by the interactions between the information system of government and the user environment of the citizen, secondly by the possible emergence of new middle men and broker services, handled by third parties.

5 Conclusions

I have outlined some challenges to traditional concepts of responsibility and accountability in government. It seems to me fairly uncontroversial to claim that the changes under way in governments world wide pose a major challenge to the concepts of responsibility and accountability. It also seems uncontroversial to claim that these challenges have not been met in present time policy making in the area of e-government. Neither have they been thoroughly analysed in present day literature on the subject.

The need for further research in the area is in my opinion evident. Some possible areas for such research have been outlined above. The possible outcome of such research could be on the one hand design implications for public sector systems, and on the other hand policy implications regarding e-government development, and even public management in general.

6 References

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