

e-Governmentality: On Electronic Administration in Local Government

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Abstract: As a consequence of the advance of information technology into the realm of public administration, we are now faced with a potential increase in efficiency of a scope and power not previously seen. The intentional use of information technology to modernise the public sector goes internationally by the name of e-Government. While e-Government's greatest impact thus far has been to promote customer satisfaction, its guiding spirit is more ambitious, with the fundamental reorganisation of the entire public sector in its sights. The overall purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how public administration at a local authority level adapts to impending e-Government by considering the discourses that are manifested and how they are used to understand and legitimise electronic administration. The present study uses critical discourse analysis to shed light on those discursive orders that are revealed in the course of deliberations on electronic administration at the local government level. On the one hand, it is possible to see electronic administration as a refinement - and a reform - of a bureaucracy's techniques. On the other hand, it is equally possible to view it in the light of free market ideology.

Keywords: e-Government, state management, public sector, critical discourse analysis, public administration, governmentality

1. Introduction and background

Internationally, the current wave of public sector modernisation associated with the advent of information technology goes by the name of e-Government, a term that blurs the borders between public administration, new technology, and changing administrative methods. It has no one definition, but roughly speaking is applied to the processes intended to develop administrative services using a variety of electronic means, and to increase internal efficiency and the public's political influence (Yildiz 2007, Bekker & Homberg 2007, Lenk & Traunmuller 2000). Even if perhaps the most widespread meaning of e-Government is linked to customer satisfaction, its guiding vision is more far-reaching, and ultimately derives from the idea of a fundamental reorganisation of the public sector. It is anticipated that the relationship between formal politics, public administration, and civil society will be changed in its essentials by e-Government.

The history of e-Government is punctuated by a series of political initiatives that have not only sought to increase IT use in public administration, but also to prompt outright institutional change (hence the e-Europe envisioned by the EU policy framework i2010¹). In the Swedish debate (Ilshammar 2006) it is possible to distinguish three separate strands within e-Government: e-services, e-administration, and e-democracy.² Although all three are mentioned in the relevant Swedish Official Government Report, SOU (2005:19), as a rule electronic administration attracts the greatest attention, while democratic processes attract far less.

The purpose of the present article is to use critical discourse analysis to identify the discourses that are used in legitimising electronic administration in local government. I am interested in how public administration at a local authority level adapts to impending e-administration. The process is as yet in its infancy. Given that public administration and local government are often noted for their strong institutionalisation and professionalisation, it is hardly surprising that it is difficult to change the established order. In recent years, several researchers (Löfgren 2007, Moon & Norris 2005, Yildiz 2007, Bekker & Homberg 2007, Fountain 2001, Gasco 2003) have noted that just as information technology can be used to reform public administration, it can equally well contribute to the reproduction of existing institutional structures. Generally the latter has held true, as is the case in Sweden. In the majority of cases, existing structures have been digitalised in the absence of any real structural reform (Grönlund 2006). It is not easy to predict how local government will be changed by the introduction of electronic administration. Each local authority has an independent responsibility to develop their operations along these lines. The result is that e-Government can

¹ i2010 is the European Union's strategic policy document for 'Europe's information society', in which e-government is included.

² The division reflects an analytical difference between the three: e-services are intended to develop the public administration's services and exercise of authority via electronic channels; e-administration is intended to increase internal efficiency; while e-democracy is intended to increase citizens' political influence and participation (SOU:2005:19).

be ascribed different meanings depending on the discourses used to legitimise change at different local levels.

2. Previous research

Although a shift towards electronic administration has been underway for several years, most researchers (for example, Torres et al 2005, Grönlund 2006, Kraemer & King 2003, Johansson 2003) argue that it has not yet contributed to any fundamental change in the relationship between formal politics, public administration, and civil society.

Research into e-Government is dominated by applied studies that are concerned with the implementation of new technological systems.³ In many cases, they come under the heading of informatics (Grönlund & Ranerup 2001, Barry 2001, Chadwick & May 2003, Löfgren 2007). Social scientists have been attracted to the field to a much lesser degree. True, there is a great deal of research on information society as a whole (see, for example, Castell 1996, Robins & Webster 1999), yet studies that address e-Government as such are far more rare. The need for more critical research has also drawn comment. Since e-Government or electronic administration touches on so many central relationships between state and citizen, it is necessary for developments to be viewed in a critical perspective (Ranerup 2006, Löfgren 2007). Amongst the results of existing critical research into the Swedish situation, it has been shown that development projects are often conducted as technological projects, despite in reality being a matter of organisational change. Attention has also been drawn to the fact that democratic processes have been subordinated to the demands of efficiency and service (Ilshammar 2005, Åström 2005, Bjurström 2005). Others (Grönlund 2006, Ranerup 2006) have called for a more considered service approach within the public sector. It has been noted that state management is increasingly being replaced by goals such as good service and efficiency. An important element in meeting the public's needs is a sense of what they are; otherwise there is a risk that a significant gap will appear between the services the public administration provides and the services the public requires.

Research has also demonstrated the need for a more strategic approach to IT use in the public sector. Since different administrative levels enjoy different degrees of autonomy, the link between central planning and local practice is by no means self-evident (Johansson 2003). This being the case, I find it particularly interesting to analyse from a critical perspective how electronic administration is received at a local level. A critical discourse analysis is fruitful in studying the discourses that are manifested at a local government level, and is particularly well suited to revealing the relationship between language and social practice (Fairclough 1995, Meyer 2001, van Dijk 2001). In the present article, I will consider the discourses that thus dominate not only the thinking of social actors in local government but also their social practices.

3. Critical discourse analysis

The main representative of critical discourse analysis is the English socio-linguist, Norman Fairclough (1995). In his text-based discourse analysis, he combines three different scholarly approaches - ethnomethodology, linguistics, and macro-sociological analysis – in an actor-oriented perspective with a strong institutional bent. In the present context, this permits analysis of how an administration's underlying interpretative patterns relate to a dominant discursive order, and how they are used to understand and legitimise electronic administration.

Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse draws principally on social constructivism. He argues that it is with the help of language that people create the social world in which they live. Social constructivists concern themselves with how constructions come into existence, and occasionally how they can be altered. Texts and spoken statements are viewed as social actions. Accordingly, I have regarded policy documents and interview statements as social actions. Besides offering a focus on social change from both micro and macro perspectives, the advantage of Fairclough's discourse analysis is that it necessitates a close textual analysis. In a systematic study of the connections between social processes and spoken texts, the discourses can be identified. The texts on electronic administration thus bear witness to the discourses that operate within local government administration. Consequently, it is the discourses themselves, rather than the documents and individual statements, which are the principal subject of analysis here. For this reason the material is treated as a whole: the various texts are assembled and treated as a single document in which different discourses can be expected to be found. The statements of individual interviewees are therefore of lesser significance,

³ See journals such as *The Journal of E-government*, *Government Information Quarterly*, *New Media & Society*, *Government Computer News*, and the like.

and can instead be treated as exponents of a discourse (Fairclough 1995, Meyer 2001, Winther Jørgensen & Phillips).

The texts that form the basis of this study consist of local authority documents supplemented with interviews.⁴ The local authority documents consist of two action plans (adopted by its executive board), two feasibility studies, a vision statement, and a newsletter circulated to local authority employees. The documents outline work in the near future entailed by the introduction of electronic administration. The action plans specify goals and implementation strategies, while the employee newsletter describes the ways in which electronic administration will simplify their work. Together, the material (both documents and interviews) amounts to some seventy pages of text. In accordance with the precepts of critical discourse analysis, I have not studied the objectives and strategies per se, but rather the discourses expressed in the process of recounting the objectives and strategies.

The interviewees were chosen from amongst the senior officers in a single local authority. The three interviewees were the Chief Executive Officer, the Senior Personnel Officer, and the Senior IT Officer. By virtue of their positions, they have an interpretative and mediating role that corresponds well to what Fairclough believes to be the discursive practice's primary role. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the three officers. In the interviews – which lasted approximately ninety minutes, and were recorded for later transcription - they were invited to share their views on electronic administration. In the course of the subsequent analysis, I identified the various discourses that were expressed in the resultant texts by looking for the common patterns that revealed the discursive order or orders that had informed the statements.

As already noted, Fairclough combines ethnomethodology with linguistics and a macro-sociological analysis to show how discursive processes find expression in different texts. In action, Fairclough's multi-layered analytical model amounts to a three-stage process. In the first stage, I used ethnomethodology to identify the underlying discursive practices to which the texts bear witness. In the second stage, I analysed with the help of linguistics the texts' various subject positions. In the third and final stage, I conducted a macro-sociological analysis of how the discourses and subject positions so identified relate to dominant socio-cultural practices.

The article falls into three sections. The first consists of an ethnomethodological analysis of discursive practices. In that section I focus on the ways the people who produce the texts use administration-related discourses and genres when they discuss electronic administration. In the second section, I conduct the more detailed textual analysis indicated by linguistics, using two grammatical tools, transitivity and modality, in particular. These terms make it feasible to consider whether there is any agent behind the suggestion to introduce e-Government into public administration. In the third section, I undertake a macro-sociological analysis of the social practices thus identified. Following Fairclough, I draw on Foucault (1992) and his analysis of the modern welfare state in order to discuss the manner in which the texts on electronic administration are bound to a more dominant social practice, what Foucault (1992) calls a governing 'marketisation' of civil society. Each section presents all the stages of the critical discourse analysis, starting with a presentation of the relevant theoretical approach. The three stages are recombined in the concluding analysis of socio-cultural practice.

Since this study is based on a single case study with a local authority in Sweden there is of course limitations regarding the generalisation of the results. But, by understanding something about this particular case more in depth it will contribute to the understanding of the more general phenomena. And further on, these limitations can also be seen as fruitful avenues for future research under the same theme.

4. Legitimising electronic administration – a discursive practice

Referring to Garfinkel, Fairclough (1995) argues that the ethnomethodological approach of studying the act of speaking as a social practice lends itself readily to an analysis of discursive practices. The proponents of ethnomethodology are primarily interested in the meaning-engendering discourses that people use in their daily social practice. To apply this theory, we must assume that social actors make use of established forms of understanding (for which read discourses) in their descriptions of the electronic administration's content and thrust. The individual statements are thus held to refer to an already established pattern that the social actors assume is both reasonable and intelligible, while at the same time they are part of the same pattern. This is closely related to Berger & Luckmann's theories of the social qualities of language. Berger & Luckmann (1979) argue that language possesses two qualities that are significant for everyday life: the one

⁴ In the interests of anonymity, I will not name the local authority or provide document references.

is speech found in actual situations; the other is language's storage of objectified thoughts and actions in such a way that different terms are embedded in different meaningful contexts. These contexts Berger & Luckmann term 'semantic fields'. The sum of the linguistic objectifications associated with a local authority administration can, for example, form a semantic field that creates a meaningful cognitive order. I would argue that a semantic field creates a framework for text production. Within a semantic field, several discourses can operate simultaneously. The production of the texts studied here is informed by the local authority administration's semantic field, which allows of a specific idiom and a specific self-understanding. In viewing the texts as a 'document about' the local authority's underlying thought patterns, I thus tried to identify the different discourses that had produced the texts, and the way in which they were expressed in descriptions of electronic administration.

Local government usually speaks of three fundamental elements in its operation's self-understanding: democracy and politics; bureaucracy; and civil society and the citizen (Modell & Grönlund 2006). It was therefore reasonable to expect that the statements analysed here would in one way or another refer to these elements, and so it proved to be the case. The texts contain repeated references to public benefit. In one, the impetus behind electronic administration is described in the following manner:

For me, it's public benefit in the first instance; after all, it's that that's central. (Senior Personnel Officer)

At another point:

It's about being able to offer simple, effective means of contact, self-service, and e-services to the public. (Senior IT Officer)

The description of electronic administration is predicated on an orientation towards civil society, as is the case on several occasions in the texts.

The texts are imbued with a sense that the local authority needs to be made more efficient. In this context, however, the term bureaucracy is notable by its absence in describing the organisational merits of electronic administration. Instead, the statements refer to an improvement in operations:

I think of it as operational development. (Chief Executive Officer)

In the future, computers will handle much of the work checking certificates, invoicing, and so on automatically. This will leave time spare for other matters. (Employee newsletter)

Related to the use of phrases such as "operational development", there is also talk of redirecting resources to the local authority's core activities:

It's a matter, as I see it, then it's a matter of being able to redirect resources, and by that I mean money and so on, to what is our core business. (Senior Personnel Officer)

5. A service discourse

The method of close reading that Garfinkel (1967) advocates in his *Studies in ethnomethodology* means that the text or statement is viewed as a 'document about' something, in the present case a document about a public administration's underlying cognitive order. When the originators of the texts describe electronic administration, they have already made a choice from several possible descriptions. For example, it is interesting to note that the texts are only to a small extent about democracy and influence. In one place there is mention of "increased transparency" as a possible consequence of electronic administration:

The advantages are increased insight, as it becomes possible to follow your case electronically the whole way. At the same time, it makes our day-to-day business simpler, thanks to there being fewer administrative tasks. (Employee newsletter)

At another point, an increase in information exchange is mentioned:

...that we improve quality and the information that goes out, and what we can offer, but also the quality of what comes in from the public, because we can direct it with forms that are well thought out, so that you can't fill them in wrong. (Chief Executive Officer)

Bearing in mind that the discourses manifested in these texts are spread at a later stage to the public, it means that several possible questions - and their answers - concerning electronic administration have already been formulated. It thus becomes particularly interesting to study this choice of information, and the

cognitive order that finds expression in the texts. Thus we see that according to the cognitive order that the speakers take for granted in their descriptions, the introduction of electronic administration to local authority operations is more a matter of improved service and efficiency than of democracy. The texts reveal two central perspectives through which electronic administration is ascribed purpose and meaning. The first is the public perspective. This one might expect to comprise statements about influence and democratisation, but instead is almost exclusively bound up with a service-oriented discursive practice. The sense of providing a service to the public is strong, as this passage demonstrates:

The point is to give an increased level of service and better accessibility for the public. We want to be a leading local authority when it comes to accessibility and service. We can get there by making it easier to conduct business electronically round the clock. (Vision statement)

Enabling easy public contact with local government is a matter of fulfilling the legal requirement for accessibility, and is often mentioned in descriptions of what electronic administration is expected to contribute; better services, better dialogue, and greater public accessibility are referred to on countless occasions.

Not infrequently, a turn of phrase comes into view in the texts that shows evidence of an idiom linked to other semantic fields, so-called inter-discursivity. 'Customer' is one such term. It is most often associated with commerce rather than local government. In the texts I have studied, however, it appears often in connection with descriptions of electronic administration:

It makes for a clearer customer orientation. (Senior IT Officer)

Implementing this change means we can simplify and improve services to our customers. (Action plan)

Even if the statements differ at first glance, I believe expressions such as "better services", "customer focus", and "accessibility" witness to elements drawn from a service discourse. Despite the fact that accessibility can also be viewed as an integral part of a democratic discourse, since it here is always associated with service rhetoric, I hold it to be an expression of a service discourse.

6. Operational development – an instrumental discourse

When electronic administration is construed in the light of "operational development", however, it is invariably a matter of an instrumental perspective on operational development, for example rationalisation and increasing efficiency. Yet at the same time the texts can also accommodate terms such as quality and resource allocation. Consider, for example, these two statements:

...it's about creating quality and cost-effectiveness in support of processes. (Senior IT Officer)

...it means after all increasing efficiency, rationalising, and improving quality. (Chief Executive Officer)

That quality and cost effectiveness do not necessarily go hand in hand is never considered an issue. Quality and cost effectiveness are simply synonyms in this cognitive order. They recur not only in the interviews, but also side by side in all the action plans and vision statements considered here. Rationalisation is another frequently used term. In the texts, it is often set in relation to personnel management:

True, the point might be that you can use staff more rationally and in priority areas. (Senior Personnel Officer)

It appears that the automation of some processes does not necessarily mean a reduction in staff numbers. Rather, staff can be redirected to areas of greater priority. "Priority areas" is generally used as a synonym for "core business".

Routine administrative duties will be fewer, or at any rate quicker to complete. It leaves more time for those other things you thought of doing, but never quite managed to find time for. (Employee newsletter)

Well, the introduction of electronic administration ought to mean a simplified administration and more core business. You've got to go back and think about the mission when you're allocating resources, especially things like such-and-such a section will always have too few resources. (Senior Personnel Officer)

The fact that electronic administration is looked on as cost-effective reveals an underlying belief that the local authority's administration is too expensive:

Of course, we have to reduce costs for administrative routines; you can't justify having such an expensive administrative apparatus. (Chief Executive Officer)

The dominant discourse practices that are invoked in the understanding of electronic administration thus revolve around citizen service and instrumental operational development. But alongside this instrumental discursive order, it is possible to distinguish (at least in the interviews) resistance to an ever increasingly technologised operation:

It is important that you, I think it's important that you, that it isn't IT but it's the operations that determine things, what we want to achieve. (Chief Executive Officer)

This resistance is often expressed in a determination that the development should proceed from operational needs rather than from what is technically possible:

Well, we have to decide how we are going to use the resources to change operations; get rid of the focus on IT. (Senior Personnel Officer)

Similarly, direct personal encounters are defended:

First off, I think the most important contact is human contact, after all. (Chief Executive Officer)

The interviewees emphasise that speech allows for more shades of meaning than does written communication. Spoken communication thus reduces the risk of misunderstandings:

After all, the words are written down; it's there in black and white. If you speak to someone, there are nuances, you can change it, back down, alter things. (Senior Personnel Officer)

The resistance to technologically driven operational development is sometimes also linked to uncertainty whether electronic administration really will bring any significant change. The texts often reflect the view that operational development is proceeding too slowly. Local autonomy and a lack of central control are often cited as the reasons why electronic administration has not had a greater impact:

Yes, well, there are two hundred and ninety local authorities in Sweden, and there've been two hundred and ninety different ways forward. (Chief Executive Officer)

That local government autonomy we're so proud of in Sweden? This is the downside. The state has no mandate. (Senior IT Officer)

Oh, it's idiotic that each council has to come up with its own way of dealing with planning permits. Surely you ought to be able to have a national solution? (Senior Personnel Officer)

On occasion, central control is called for:

That's quite a lot of time spent; let's say two hundred and ninety local authorities, county administrative boards, county councils, all doing their own thing and off in different directions. I think it could've been possible to steer it. (Senior IT Officer)

If you look at the UK, Blair ran this much more centrally, that's why he managed to get it through after all, and that kind of central management we just don't have in Sweden. (Chief Executive Officer)

What might be worth noting for this case is the Swedish, so called, dualist model (Löfgren 2007) which gives the local agencies a high level of autonomy vis-à-vis the government applies. Apart from some overarching guidelines within the Swedish e-Government policy local municipalities are independently managed (ibid).

The demand for central management and resistance to a technologically controlled operation can indeed be seen as two contradictory discourses. On the one hand there is the idea that "we have to decide", and on the other "I think it could've been possible to steer it". Statements to the effect that "we will govern" stem from the idea that IT should not dictate development. The statements that call for central management, however, reflect a desire for greater centralised political control. Therefore I think it reasonable to view the statements as different expressions of one and the same thing: political decisions should determine technological development, not vice versa. There is an obvious tension between both these types of statement, yet they need not contradict one another. Regardless of whether it is a matter of technology-controlled or politically-

controlled operational development, the texts often express a wish that someone might shoulder responsibility for it. The question is, who?

7. Text analysis – no one really knows, and no one really does it

In his text analyses, Fairclough (1995) uses a range of different tools drawn from language theory (Winther Jørgensen, Phillips 2000). I have used only two, transivity and modality.

Transivity reveals how events are linked - or are not linked - to a subject. If, for example, I were to say, "I want to reduce costs", it appears that I am taking responsibility for the cost reduction. If instead I say, "One should reduce costs", or, "It's a matter of reducing costs", the agent is omitted, and I avoid the problem of who is responsible for reducing costs. In the texts on electronic administration, this kind of usage occurs. Assertions are strung together without any mention of an explicit agent. Expressions such as "you can", or "it's a matter of" are recurrent. Agency has significance for the ideological consequences that different forms of representation can have (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). If, for example, the passive form is used, thus excluding an agent, it becomes harder to find someone who can be blamed, or called to account. In my material, the agent in the majority of cases is excluded, and thus there is no one to be held responsible. Electronic administration is still external to the local authority; it has yet to be internalised in the local authority's self-understanding. Judging by the statements, the pressure for change is external rather than internal. Generally, the emphasis is on the consequences of the development, either in terms of public service or of instrumental operational development.

When a statement's modality is analysed, it is the speaker's degree of assertion that is under consideration. This may be read from the self-assurance of the statement. To take one example, there is a world of difference between the assertions "It is important" and "I think it probably is important". The choice of modality is of great consequence for knowledge and significance systems, for the statement appears either as a hard fact or merely as a matter of opinion (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). In the texts on electronic administration, the statements are often provided with prefixes such as "I believe", "As I see it", and "I think". This indicates that the degree of confidence in their assertions is not particularly strong; there is, in other words, no assurance or certainty about the statements. Nor is any established knowledge system invoked. This may in turn indicate that the development of electronic administration is associated with ambivalence and ambiguity.

8. e-Governmentality – a socio-cultural practice

By socio-cultural practice, I mean the institutional and organisational circumstances in which a discursive practice is situated. Fairclough (1993, 1995) suggests that Foucault's studies of the modern state and its neo-liberal governing techniques are a useful starting point for such an analysis. The resultant research tradition now goes by the name 'governmentality'. According to Foucault (1992), the modern era is marked by an all-encompassing social practice. All the phenomena that are characteristic for this era are designed either to strengthen or to counteract this practice. However, it should be noted that Foucault does not analyse liberalism as a theory or as an ideology, but rather as a method; a method characterised by an increased rationalisation of governing practices. These practices obtain their legitimacy from terms such as individual freedom and cost effectiveness. Foucault describes the development of modern governing techniques as a transition from a view of the modern state as a civil society to a view of it as a social market (Burchell 1992, Barry et al 1996).

It is possible to locate the texts' 'public service' and 'instrumental organisational development' in the framework of a dominant neo-liberal discourse. Since the 1980s, a major trend has emerged in the Western world that is usually termed New Public Management (NPM). Indeed, some have gone so far as to call it a new paradigm. This reform movement is broadly in tune with the 'marketisation' of civil society mentioned before. Generally speaking, NPM entails a general reform of the public sector, bringing increased efficiency and a pronounced market orientation (Almqvist 2006). Even if theoretically speaking NPM draws its inspiration from the schools of rational choice and public choice, at an empirical level it comes down to reducing the gap between the public sector and commerce. Although this idea is controversial, it has had considerable impact in recent decades on the development of political and public administration. If nothing else, it brought with it a new language drawn from the private sector (Almqvist 2006). One term that recurs in the statements analysed here is 'customer', while such terms as 'cost effective' and 'automation' are frequently used. The statements that emphasise 'core business' conform well with NPM reforms aimed at limiting the state and local government to their 'core business' (Premfors 1999). Critics argue that NPM's focus on efficiency means that democracy comes second, a tendency that is also evident in my material.

According to Czarniawska and Bernard (1996), there are a number of dominant rationalisation myths that organisations are quick to adopt. In this way, different concepts are taken up and disseminated, and enjoy status as 'modern' solutions. The NPM trend has already gained a certain status as a rational solution model. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that civil servants use this kind of rhetoric when they discuss the introduction of electronic administration. Nor is it strange that the public sector wishes to imitate the private sector. Like the private sector, the public sector has made enormous investments in information technology to improve its efficiency and provide a better service to its customers. By adopting these solutions and incorporating them into their operations, the organisations increase their status and legitimacy. Sometimes the introduction of new technology is held to be more important, or at any rate at least as important, as the actual results:

After all, one of the strongest motives for this particular change is that if we don't, we're old-fashioned. It's up to all of us to think out new solutions. You'd have to agree that it'd be great to for [our] local authority to be one of the country's leaders in this field. (Employee newsletter)

...one of the strong driving forces for this change is the very fact that if we aren't in on it, we're old-fashioned. (Senior Personnel Officer)

The literature on governmentality has inspired analyses of the welfare state that show that different social reforms are routinely linked to new styles of government. These techniques are characterised by a neo-liberal spirit that expects people to be active, engaged, and eager to participate. This is a form of government that in effect allows citizens to administer themselves. The discourses evident in the texts on electronic administration also invoke the freedom of the individual. The individual is so placed that self-service and accessibility are viewed as opportunities for citizens to conduct their own business, to meet their own needs, and at a time to suit them. Meanwhile, cost-efficiency incentives are intimately associated with other rationalisation and automation discourses. According to Foucault (1992), the modern state achieves its greatest efficiency when it can regulate as much as possible by the minimum of intervention. In such a perspective, it is possible to view electronic administration as just one element in a social practice that tries to extract as much as possible from the public by letting them get on with more administrative business themselves.

9. Conclusions

The overall purpose of this paper was to contribute to the understanding of how public administration at a local authority level adapts to impending e-Government by considering the discourses that are manifested and how they are used to understand and legitimise electronic administration. In the context of critical discourse analysis the discursive orders underlying the implementation of electronic administration at the local government level has been identified.

The result indicates that with the help of different discursive practices, electronic administration is being introduced into local government as a new and refined administrative technique. Electronic administration is described with the help of discursive practices such as 'cost effectiveness', 'customer orientation', and 'rationalisation'. These are in fact terms that are intimately associated with the broad 'marketisation' of civil society.

Based on the texts studied here, electronic administration appears to be strengthening or refining neo-liberal governing practices rather than challenging them. Certainly it is possible to view reservations about local government autonomy as yet another step in this direction. I however choose to see it as a resistance discourse – resistance to what is felt to be IT-controlled operational change. The understanding of electronic administration demonstrated in the texts analysed here is at heart a matter of public service and instrumental operational development. Equally, these discursive practices can be viewed in the light of a more general marketisation of civil society. NPM is one element in this marketisation, and the introduction of electronic administration is consistent with its ambitions. The only noticeable resistance, discursive or otherwise, is found in the concern that technology will control political development, and not vice versa. The texts on electronic administration often lack agency, and with it someone who can be held to account.

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