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# The Myths of E-Government: Looking Beyond the Assumptions of a New and Better Government

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**In general, rhetoric and myth play important roles in policy-making. Myths may inspire collective action but may also mystify and blur views on reality. In this article we identify, analyze, and reflect on the myths underlying the e-government programs of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands. We found that in all national policies myths of technological inevitability, a new and better government, rational information planning, and empowerment of the intelligent citizen can be discerned. Although the mobilizing powers of these myths are acknowledged, we conclude that existing empirical studies have generated little support for the inescapable telos of these myths, which makes canvas cleaning effects of e-government initiatives less likely.**

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**Keywords** e-government, institutional innovation, myths in policy processes, public policy

E-government—or electronic government—is one of the buzzwords in the discussions on modernizing public administration (Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Fountain, 2001; United Nations & American Society for Public Administration, 2003; Chadwick & May, 2003). Modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially Internet and web technologies, are seen as enhancing the access, transparency, efficiency, and quality of public administration. According to Fountain (2001, 2001; see also

Heeks, 2001), ICTs could help pave the way to new and better government, since they may be used to restructure existing institutional arrangements and to ensure that these innovations flourish. This new and better government is seen to be (1) more responsive to the needs of citizens and enterprises, (2) more democratic, and (3) more efficient (Bekkers & Homburg, 2005). Notwithstanding the intuitive appeal of these claims, studies have shown that the actual implementation of e-government initiatives has been disappointing (Moon, 2002; Chadwick & May, 2003; Edmiston, 2003; Layne & Lee, 2001; Teichert & Dow, 2002; Gartner, 2000; OECD, 2003).

One could reflect on this cleavage between the rhetoric and the reality of the shop floor in a number of ways. In this article, we do not reflect on the cleavage in a strictly material or instrumental sense (i.e., in terms of managerial issues, or critical economic, technical, or political success factors); instead we reflect on the cleavage in a cultural, narrative sense, by reading against the assumptions embodied in policy documents (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1994; Jensen & Lauritsen, 2005). We do so by analyzing e-government policies and technologies as myths (Mosco, 2004; March & Olsen, 1989; Edelman, 1967, 1977). Following Mosco (2004), we define myths as hymns to progress, and as utopian visions or promises unfulfilled or unfulfillable. It is important to state at the outset that myths mean more than falsehoods; rather, myths are used in this article as (1) powerful stories that inspire people to strive for realization of issues that matter, whatever the cost (Buck-Morss, 2002), and (2) discourses in which specific aspects are highlighted and revealed at the expense of other aspects that are (deliberately or unintentionally) concealed (Parsons, 1996). We assume that in order to reflect on the cleavage between the rhetoric and the reality of e-government projects, one should analyze the stories, or paths to transcendence, that inspire redesign of institutional arrangements (Mosco, 2004). In short, the research objective of this article is to describe and critically examine the myths that underlie national e-government initiatives.

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We do so by analyzing the first waves (1994–2006) of e-government reforms, in which politicians and administrations embraced the transformative potential of ICT-enabled projects. This was the period when Al Gore brought the notion of an information superhighway into the popular imagination. In the analysis, policy documents of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Australia and Canada are scrutinized (for a list of documents examined, see Appendix). While small selections tend to be dubious, we used a number of criteria to select these countries. First, there is the dispersion of continents. We selected European and North American countries as well as Australia. Second, we looked at a number of countries that deployed a number of e-government initiatives during the period studied. Australia and Canada were among the pioneers, while the Netherlands and the United Kingdom can be characterized as relative laggards. Denmark is interesting because—like the other Scandinavian countries—it has a long-standing practice of using ICT in public administration.

While this research approach seems to indicate a comparative design, this is not entirely true. Our research goal is not to compare the e-government policies of the countries involved, and to link these policies to, for example, their institutional structures and policies. Moreover, we do not present an assessment of organizational, managerial and technical factors, which could explain the success and failure of the e-government initiatives in the selected countries. Rather, our study aims to develop a preliminary inventory of national e-government policies, their contents, instrumentation, and basic beliefs. This makes it possible to demonstrate that there is a common set of beliefs that inspire e-government initiatives in these countries, and which lift politicians, bureaucrats and policy makers out of the banality of everyday administrative practice and into the possibilities of institutional innovation.

In order to confront the rhetoric with the reality of e-government, we analyze a range of assumptions in the policy documents examined. First, we identify assumptions with respect to the goals and ambitions behind e-government initiatives. What claims are put forth to justify the actions and investments to be made? Second, we examine assumptions with regard to the assessment of the use and effects of ICTs. Such an assessment is of interest because ICTs are often seen as the most important means to modernization and institutional renewal. Third, we look at assumptions with respect to the barriers and problems that should be overcome. Very often these barriers reflect the major problems of government organizations, such as coordination and integration across agencies. We also examine the actions that policy documents stipulate should be undertaken for implementation of e-government initiatives. Given the barriers identified, how do governments act to put e-government into practice? The final set of as-

sumptions examined concern the role of citizens. Most e-government initiatives are directed toward improving service delivery for citizens. How do citizens assess the possibilities of Internet technology in relationship to government? Are citizens portrayed as consumers or are they more than that?

The article is structured as follows. In the first two sections we define the concept of e-government and then look at the role of myth, language, and rhetoric in the policy process. In the subsequent four sections we describe a number of myths. Each section has two components. First, we describe the basic assumptions behind e-government initiatives in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, and Australia. Second, we interrogate these assumptions and spotlight the chasm between the rhetoric and reality of e-government. In the last section, we will draw some conclusions.

## THE CONCEPT OF E-GOVERNMENT

E-government is a policy and managerial concept for which we have relatively little research, especially theoretical research. There is, however, a vast amount of empirical research available that focuses on the effects of ICT on the functioning of public administration in general (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Snellen & van der Donk, 1998; Andersen & Danziger, 2001).

In many publications e-government is portrayed as a vehicle for fostering customer-orientation in public agencies (Layne & Lee, 2001; OECD, 2003; Roy, 2002; United Nations & American Society for Public Administration, 2003; Wimmer, Traunmüller, & Lenk, 2001). The emphasis is primarily on designing and implementing front office electronic communication channels, which enable agencies to communicate electronically and unequivocally with citizens and businesses. In many cases, the focus is on delivery of services.

We extend this view of e-government in a number of ways. First, in order to redesign the front office, it is often necessary to also redesign the back office of agencies—the myriad registration functions in or between agencies that need to be performed in order to actually deliver services. Second, many agencies do not merely interact with citizens as service deliverers; they may also interact with concerned citizens, or with potentially malevolent individuals. We therefore define e-government as public organizations' use of modern ICTs, especially Internet and Web technology, to support or redefine the existing and/or future (information, communication and transaction) relations with stakeholders in their internal and external environment (Bekkers, 2001; Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; United Nations & American Society for Public Administration, 2003). Relevant stakeholders include citizens, companies, societal organizations, other government

organizations and civil servants (Chadwick & May, 2003; Gartner, 2000). Relevant goals in this context include increasing the access of government, facilitating the quality of service delivery, stimulating internal efficiency, supporting public and political accountability, and increasing the political participation of citizens.

E-government is often described in relation to the kind of services to be provided (Gartner, 2000). In general, it is possible to discern information services (focused on the disclosure of government information), contact services (possibilities to ask questions about the applicability of certain rules and programs), transaction services (electronic intakes and handling of requests), participation services (electronic forums and virtual civic communities), and data transfer services (the exchange of information between government agencies and between government and private organizations) (Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Chadwick & May, 2003). In this article the analysis encompasses all kinds of services mentioned above.

## THE ROLE OF MYTHS IN POLICY PROCESSES

In many policy documents and consultants' advice and reports there is a clamor for ICT-enabled reform of government. It is asserted that no government can resist the impact of modern ICTs. In doing so, policymakers, politicians, bureaucrats, and consultants tell stories about the nature of policy problems and how these problems should be tackled (Fisher & Forrester, 1993; Stone, 1989; Mosco, 2004). In the language of those who study myths, these storytellers could be characterized as bricoleurs (Lévi-Strauss, 1987): people who compose heroic narratives to inflict changes in ways of thinking and doing. However enlightening these stories may be, innovations are not necessarily implemented immediately (if at all); nor does the implementation necessarily follow the story lines exemplified in policy documents. But then, the hopes for immediate implementation and fear of lagging behind make for powerful technomania.

We regard the concept of myth as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, myths are seductive tales containing promises unfulfilled or even unfulfillable. They are used by bureaucrats or politicians, for example, to legitimize intervention or application of specific technologies (Edelman, 1967, 1977). In Edelman's work, the emphasis is on the symbolic content of policy and politics and how policymakers are involved in exploiting tales, symbols, and language. On the other hand, there is a more positive connotation of myths, which can for instance be found in the work of March and Olsen (1989), Lévi-Strauss (1987), and MacIntyre (1970). March and Olsen promote an institutional approach to public administration that focuses on the rules that guide behavior and interactions of individ-

uals, groups and organizations in public administration. By rules they mean the routines, procedures, conventions, roles, strategies, organizational forms, and technologies around which political activity is constructed. These rules, and their embodiment into myths, function as a shared frame of reference that enables individuals, groups, and organizations to deal with contradictions of politics that can never be fully resolved. They act to integrate behavior in a sensible way: Myths can be seen as a source of inspiration that actors can use to enact social reality (Weick, 1969).

In understandings of myth, the stories that unfold defy history since they admit no alternative: There is no place for social or natural actions that can stop them (Mosco, 2004). Given the revealing and inspirational character of myths, simply debunking these myths may be of limited value. MacIntyre (1970) has pointed out that myths are neither true or false, but living or dead. What is of interest with respect to the actual implementation of e-government is what myths represent and how myths fall short of established bases of meaning and experiences with ICTs in public organizations. Therefore, in the subsequent sections, we analyze what kind of myths can be discerned in national e-government policies, and reflect on the question of whether there is indeed an inescapable telos involved in the e-government myths, or whether otherwise compelling contrary evidence can be envisaged.

## MYTH I: A NEW AND BETTER GOVERNMENT

### Reconstruction of the Myth of a New and Better Government

The first myth eminent in the analysis of the various national policy documents is the purified image of a new and better government. In such a reformulated government, ICTs are seen as helping the realization, with little effort, of administrative machinery that is responsive, client oriented, and cohesive.

In the UK documents *Modernising Government* (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999), *E-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age* (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2000), and *Transformational Government* (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2005), e-government is seen as having only one purpose: to make life better for citizens and businesses. The focus upon the improvement of electronic service delivery assumes that it will deliver what people really want, fully exploiting government's information resources:

New technology offers the possibility of making access to information about government easier . . . The digital age also offers the possibility of a better informed and more participative democracy through electronic consultation and better

responses to feedback. (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 8)

In *Transformational Government*, the promise of a new and better government is stretched further:

The specific opportunities lie in improving *transactional* services ... in helping front line *public servants* to be more effective ... in supporting effective *policy outcomes* ... in reforming the *corporate services* and *infrastructure* which government uses behind the scenes. (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2005, p. 3; emphasis in original)

In the UK vision, emphasis is on the notion of intragovernmental cooperation: "To improve the way we provide services, we need all parts of the government to work together" (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 4).

Australia's *Government Online: The Commonwealth Governments Strategy* (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2000) articulates the goal as improving the quality of all public services, and increasing responsiveness of public service delivery. *Government Online* is the natural extension of the emphasis on service quality and meeting the needs of clients, which has already been put forward in previous reports, such as *Investing in Growth* (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 1997). In this specific document, the goal of putting all appropriate government services online by 2001 was established. Moreover:

Government Online will contribute more broadly to service quality beyond just the impact on individual agencies and their service charters. Online technology has the potential to break down traditional barriers faced by clients. (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2000, p. 5)

In the 2006 Australian policy document *Responsive Government*, there is also reference to a technologically enabled, seamless governmental apparatus:

It will be possible to group diverse transactions and complete them at the same time, without navigating the underlying structure and complexity of government. People will be able to interact with many areas of government without needing to understand exactly which agencies deliver which services. (Department of Finance and Administration, 2006, p. 8)

The mission of the Canadian e-government policies, as formulated in the *Government Online* programs (Treasury Board, 1999, 2000, 2006), is to advance the federal government's citizen centred service delivery vision collaboratively across departments and other levels of government.

In the Danish vision on e-government, *From Vision to Action: The Information Society 2000* (Ministry of Research and Information Technology, 1995), e-government is described, conceptualized, and discussed in the context

of the network society: a worldwide short circuit of time, space, people, and processes. As such, the Danish case (at least until 2004) is an exceptional case in the sense that ICTs are seen as contributing to free access of information, grass-roots democracy, personal development of individuals in workplace and private life, and transparency of the administrative apparatus:

The new technologies must give all citizens free access to information and exchange of information, and the possibilities for increasing the citizens' self determination are to be exploited. It must be ensured that the technologies are not used for monitoring citizens or invading their privacy. (Ministeriet for Videnskab Teknologi og Udvikling, 2000, p. 9)

In order to accomplish the goals described earlier, policymakers put emphasis on lifelong learning, the stimulation of e-commerce, more effective and cheaper public service delivery, the stimulation of grass-roots digital democratic initiatives, and the establishment of information intensive organizations in specific regions (so-called information technology [IT] lighthouses). The vision just given of e-government contrasts with that of the 2004 policy document *The Danish eGovernment Strategy 2004–06* (Digital Taskforce, 2004). In this document the vision is articulated in one sentence: "Digitalization must contribute to the creation of an efficient and coherent public service with a high quality of service, with citizens and businesses in the centre" (Digital Taskforce, 2004, p. 4).

In the Netherlands, *Action Program for Electronic Government* (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relationships, 1999) and *The Digital Delta* (Ministry for Economic Affairs, 1999) present the goals of e-government as increasing the accessibility of government, improving the quality of public services, and enhancing the internal efficiency of government. They portray e-government as a vehicle for getting the Dutch government to actively focus on its role as producer of public services. In a subsequent document, *Contract with the Future* (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relationships, 2002), the scope of e-government is broadened: The political participation by citizens is identified as an area that deserves stimulation.

If one scrutinizes the major barriers that obstruct the realization of e-government objectives, one can observe a wide variety of barriers noted in the texts, including:

- The absence of interoperability and (technical) standards (Treasury Board, 1997).
- Agencies fostering local interests at the expense of citizens' interests (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999).
- A decentralized approach to ICT development (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999).

- Inability to redefine working routines and develop new ICT-based products (Digital Taskforce, 2002).

We see that a new and better government is rhetorically crafted in the wordings of the various policy documents. This new and better government is seen as acting as a whole or *joined up*, as per the British jargon. Technology is seen as playing a decisive role in (1) the actual achievement of a joined-up administrative apparatus (and thus, in the redefinition of information relations with internal stakeholders' see "The Concept of E-Government" section) and (2) realizing online transactions between government, on the one hand, and citizens and businesses (external stakeholders) on the other hand.

### Reflections on a New and Better Government

Each of the countries that were studied tries to establish citizen or business centric one-entry points. However, the goal of integrated electronic service delivery—especially in relation to contact and transaction services—leads, in practice, to serious integration and coordination problems. Integrated service delivery implies that several back offices should work together in handling questions, requests, et cetera. They need to share information and knowledge across internal and external organizational boundaries. In essence, the exchange and sharing of information and knowledge between these back offices implies the integration of several information domains, each with its own legal framework, its own information systems, its own data definitions, its own routines and procedures, its expertise and experience, and its own frames of reference (Homburg, 1999, 2000; Bellamy & Taylor, 1997). The cooperation of the back offices and integration of different information systems and policies implies that positions and interests will have to change (Homburg & Bekkers, 2002). Thus, ICT is not only a source of innovation but is also a source of resistance or even what is referred to as a "battle of the back offices" (Homburg, 1999; Knights & Murray, 1992; Kraemer et al., 1985, 1987; Kraemer & King, 1986; Kumar & van Dissel, 1996). This battle is the Achilles heel of e-government. An examination of recent assessments of the e-government initiatives in general (Gartner, 2000; OECD, 2003) and the assessments of e-government practices in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands show that the lack of cooperation between these back offices is still a major problem. In a Dutch study on interorganizational electronic service delivery, Van Venrooij (2002) has shown that the most important impediments to integration are coordination problems due to an ambiguous distribution of tasks and legally defined competences among the back offices. While these offices should be working together, the plurality of the actors and interests at stake, together with the lack of a common

vision or sense of urgency about the necessity to work together, prevents cooperation. Similarly, a focus on service delivery structures instead of a focus on the processes of service delivery or the incompatibility of data systems and data definitions prevents the desired integration. Remarkably, if the integration problem of the back offices are addressed in various e-government policy documents, it is primarily and predominantly articulated as a technical problem for which a technical solution exists (OECD, 2003). It is rarely seen as a problem of institutional design, that is, in terms of actors, their interests, their power bases and resources, their relationships and their strategies, and conflict and compromises (Homburg, 1999).

### MYTH II: THE MYTH OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS AND INSTRUMENTALITY

#### Reconstruction of the Myth of Technological Progress and Instrumentality

In the United Kingdom the various promises of ICT are written in the imperative: "ICT will...," for instance, "make our life easier" (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 7). Similarly, in the UK "Transformational Government" White Paper, the use of technology is described as "creating and retaining the capacity and capability to innovate and use technology effectively as technology itself develops" (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2005, p. 4).

ICT as an exogenous driving force is also evident in Danish documents. Introducing the Internet, the authors of the Danish policy document *From Vision to Action Info Society 2000* speak of a network-like environment that is not amenable to government control. Consequently, the information society is seen as developing into an open and decentralized society: "The numerous global networks with their debates, databases and dissemination of information do not lend themselves to control. They invite both anarchy and refreshing debates" (Digital Taskforce, 2002, p. 4). In general the Danish see the information society as a revolution in progress that cannot be missed. The only question is how to respond to it.

Dutch programs like *Digitale Delta* (Ministry for Economic Affairs, 1999) and *Action Program for Electronic Government* (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relationships, 1999), show a strong belief and trust in the potential of modern ICT. Optimism prevails about the progress ICT will bring.

In Australia's *Government Online* (2000), there is hardly any sphere of activity that could not be improved by online government—to achieve more, and to do it more quickly and efficiently. Online access to information

is seen as having a significant impact on regional communities, older Australians, and the disabled. Online service delivery is seen as complementing and replacing existing traditional service channels and providing around-the-clock access to government from almost everywhere, breaking down the barriers of distance or mobility that some clients face.

The Canadians also see a changing landscape in which distance perishes and a picture of ubiquitous computing dawns. ICT infiltrates almost every aspects of modern life, resulting in the rise of a new set of expectations and demands. People have nomadic access to their information and computing systems from publicly shared access points. ICTs allow us to imagine new ways of connecting citizens, of eliminating the barriers of distance, and of giving a fuller, richer meaning to democracy and citizenship (Treasury Board, 1999, p. 4).

### Reflections on Technological Progress and Instrumentality

In the various national policy documents, there is a strong belief and trust in the potential of ICTs. Optimism prevails in the descriptions of the progress the information society and Internet technology will bring. Things that were previously unthinkable will now happen. Public administration has a moral duty to use the most advanced “tools” to reinvent government. The dominant view of technology that is exhibited in several of the policy documents is a selective combination of determinism and voluntarism. Both positions are brought together by the assumption that the emergence of the information society coincides with technologies whose potential cannot be denied.

Using existing reflections on the use of ICTs in organizations (Snellen & van der Donk, 1998; Bellamy & Taylor, 1997; Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1981), however, it is possible to question the generic effects of ICTs. Often, effects are specific and context dependent, and in the policy documents studied, political, socio-organizational, and institutional settings are hardly mentioned or paid attention to. These effects are limited and context dependent because the introduction of ICT in public administration is a social intervention in a policy and organizational network, which influences the position, interests, values, and (information) domains of the actors involved. Thus, the introduction and use of ICT is not a neutral but a political intervention (Homburg, 1999; Kling, 1987). ICT in the public sector very often strengthens the existing frames of reference, power relations, and positions within a policy sector (Kraemer & King, 1986; Bekkers, 1998; Zuurmond, 1998; van de Donk, 1998). Assuming this is not so can be regarded as another myth: a myth of (unquestioned and ubiquitous) material and technological progress.

### MYTH III: THE MYTH OF E-GOVERNMENT AS RATIONAL INFORMATION PLANNING

#### Reconstruction of the Myth of Rational Information Planning

In the documents that were studied, a picture emerges in which application of ICT tools (in the right way) is seen as a precondition for institutional renewal. For instance, in the Canadian e-government documents four priorities to stimulate a smooth implementation of e-government are identified: aligning various ICT infrastructures, developing a world-class ICT workforce within government, the improvement of the management and success rate of ICT investments, and the minimizing of risks of ICT projects. In the Danish strategy, collaboration between the private and public sector is seen as a necessary condition for Denmark’s transition toward the information society. The focus is on implementing a relatively small number of projects with realistic goals and clear deadlines. In Australia’s *Government Online*, a national approach to e-government is promoted based upon a number of priorities: a systematic approach to placing its information and services online, relevant enablers (i.e., authentication, privacy, and security), the development of transaction and payment services, and cross-agency collaboration. In Dutch accounts of electronic government, there is an emphasis upon the establishment of virtual services counters, which are theme oriented, such as “living and building,” “care and welfare,” “companies,” and the reduction of “administrative costs for companies.”

When we compare the initiatives across countries we see that the primary focus is on the use of rational planning and management methods to accompany the introduction of ICT. Only the Danes chose an incremental approach; the Dutch paid no attention, in the documents we studied, to an implementation strategy. The secondary focus is on the development of all kinds of technological applications that should be developed and deployed.

#### Reflections on Rational Information Management

In the UK, Australian, and Canadian documents, corporate information planning and project management techniques are seen as intrinsic to the e-government project. The path forward is presented as a question of setting goals, formulating action plans, allocating budgets, and identifying clear roles and responsibilities. A number of technocratic assessments of the practice of e-government (Accenture, 2002; OECD, 2003) identify pitfalls in the effective implementation of e-government, such as bad planning and bad project management.

In the scholarly literature two serious issues have been raised about such an approach (Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Gazendam, 1993; Ciborra, 2002). One, the actual practice

of ICT planning and implementation does not always reflect the systematic methods and procedures of information systems management models. ICT-driven innovations in private and public organizations are mostly the result of the bubbling up of new ideas from the bottom (Ciborra, 2002; Homburg, 1999). Two, formulating and implementing e-government can be viewed as a governance problem that takes place in the context of a network of organizations. On the one hand, standardization and integration in the back office is needed to allow for interorganizational information exchange, while on the other hand, standardization and integration may intensify existing dependencies and enshrine these dependencies in the technology (Ciborra, 2002; Homburg, 1999; Homburg & Bekkers, 2002). Consequently, excessive integration fuels interorganizational tensions and conflicts.

The fact that in various documents the down sides of integration and standardization are ignored and strategic planning practices are heralded gives rise to another myth: the myth of rational information planning.

#### **MYTH IV: THE MYTH OF CITIZEN AS EMPOWERED CONSUMER**

##### **Reconstruction of the Myth of Citizen as Empowered Consumer**

In many policy documents the citizen is portrayed as an intelligent and “empowered” consumer, while government is presented primarily as a service organization. For instance, a UK report notes, “People are aware of the possibility and benefits of excellent service, and they expect it in all dealings with business. . . . The challenge for the public sector is that the same growing expectations will be applied to government services” (Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 8). Similarly, according to an Australian report, an online environment will allow individuals to customize their online channel with government, to make it more useful, familiar, convenient, and in many instances transparent. The government should facilitate this by “bringing government closer to people to encourage people to interact with government” (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2000, p. 7).

Although all the documents analyzed recognize, at least to some degree, intelligent, technologically empowered citizens-as-clients, two types of refinements can be observed.

One, the notion of citizens as mere customers is modified in the Canadian e-government thinking—they are portrayed as playing the role of good citizens (Schudson, 1998). In this role, citizens are allowed and even encouraged to speak up and participate (electronically) in the democratic process.

Two, the notion of the omnirational consumer (who knows his or her preferences, is able to master both bureaucratic and ICT skills, and actively engages in conversation with government agencies) is refined in the Danish e-government document, in which attention is paid to the increased social polarization into a two tier-society with ICT winners and ICT losers. The Danish report proposes the use of ICT to support the personal development of the citizen and to give individuals the opportunity to exercise their influence to speak up: “Individuals must, themselves, demonstrate their constructive interest in the potential of the info-society and avail themselves of opportunities in the educational system, public libraries, et cetera” (Ministeriet for Videnskab Teknologi og Udvikling, 1996)

It must be noted, however, that the somewhat enlightened vision of citizens in the Danish documents until about 2000 is abandoned in subsequent documents (Digital Taskforce, 2002, 2004; Ministeriet for Videnskab Teknologi og Udvikling, 2000) (see also Myth I). In other words, the multifaceted and somewhat enlightened vision of citizens seems to have become narrowed down to the notion of a consumer of public services.

In the Netherlands, the emphasis is also upon the citizen as a consumer of government services. In *Contract with the Future*, a relationship between the rise of the empowered and intelligent citizens and the process of individualization is identified. These new citizens demand a government that is responsive to their needs and is able to generate an open and horizontal dialogue, and that organizes its internal processes in a transparent way.

We thus see that the dominant image of the citizen is that of someone who acts as and should be approached as a consumer. It is only in the Canadian and Dutch documents that attention is drawn to the democratic and participatory role of citizens, but still the emphasis remains primarily upon the consumer role of citizens.

##### **Reflections on the Citizen as Consumer**

The image of an intelligent citizen, who uses the possibilities of the Internet in optima forma to improve his or her position as a consumer of government services, is dominant across the documents. It is assumed that citizens will demand a public administration that also uses the possibilities of the Internet in optima forma: a public administration that enables them to act as empowered and intelligent citizens. These assumptions about the role of the citizen and government are not without risk.

Fountain (2001) points to the so-called legitimacy paradox of public service delivery. In her view, the improvement of the quality of public service delivery paradoxically does not increase the legitimacy of government; rather, addressing citizens as consumers and defining government as a production company ignores the public and political



character of service delivery. A focus on service delivery (and a focus on the consumer rather than on the citizen) narrows the multidimensionality of citizenship and public administration and may therefore decrease legitimacy. The challenge for e-government is to develop participative forms of electronic service delivery and to address citizens at the same time as their identities as consumer, voter, and a Good Citizen or “citoyen.”

## CONCLUSION

In this article we take a cultural perspective on various national e-government policies and interrogate the myths underlying these policies by “reading against policy documents.” We analyze and reflect on the inescapable telos that these policies present to us in terms of the words chosen, their visionary sketches, mechanisms, and outlooks. Our basic question was: With what myths did the “bricoleurs” of e-government policies try to supersede the banality of everyday life, and what kind of rhetoric is used to actually celebrate institutional renewal?

Our analysis shows that there is indeed a dominant, powerful mythical component to many e-government policies. Dominant in these policies is an inescapable telos suggesting that technology by itself enables or even causes public sector agencies to transform themselves from self-centered conglomerates to citizen-oriented administrative apparatuses. ICTs are depicted as enabling government and citizens to communicate with each other and to enable the delivery of services in a customer-friendly way. Underlying this core myth of e-government, in which a new and improved government is presented as a seamless web, a number of other myths play an important role: the myth of inevitable technological progress, the myth of rational planning, and the myth of empowered citizens.

From the outset, it has never been our intention to ruthlessly debunk or demystify these rhetorical statements. As has been indicated, myths are created through *bricolage* and have mobilizing capacities that lift politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens out of the banality of everyday administrative practice and into the possibilities of actual (presumably desirable) institutional innovation. As such, they are of value. Nevertheless, the chasm between the ambitious goals and aspirations of e-government policies on the one hand, and the rather disappointing pace of implementation of actual electronic services on the other hand, raises questions about the usefulness of the myths. Are we seeing another case of the incisive observation made by Edelman years before the current e-government craze—“words that succeed and policies that fail” (Edelman, 1977, p. 3)?

We conclude that in evaluating and refining e-government programs, it is important to bear in mind the rhetoric and reflect upon the myths it embodies. It is also vital that the significant chasm between sublime

rhetoric of e-government and the muddy practice of actual e-government implementation be the subject of further academic observation and debate. Only then, to paraphrase Karl Popper (1966, p. 157), will the myth of e-government have a canvas-cleaning effect.

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## APPENDIX I: LIST OF NATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT POLICY DOCUMENTS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

The policy documents that were used in the analysis are listed here. In general documents that sketch visions and policies at national levels and of a general nature were selected. Documents that focus on specific topics (like technical standards to be used in government-to-government exchanges, or conditions for e-procurement, or proposals for architectural foundations of e-government services) were not selected.

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### United Kingdom

1999	Modernising Government	2005	Government On-line 2005—From Vision to Reality . . . and Beyond
2000	E-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age	<b>Australia</b>	
2005	Transformational Government—Enabled by Technology	1997	Investing in Growth
		2000	Government Online, the Commonwealth Government's Strategy
<b>Netherlands</b>		2006	Responsive Government (A New Service Agenda)—2006 E-Government Strategy
1999	The Digital Delta	<b>Denmark</b>	
1999	Action Program for Electronic Government	1995	From Vision to Action: Info-Society 2000
2002	Contract with the Future	1996	The Info-Society for All—The Danish Model
2003	Actieprogramma Andere Overheid (Action Program Modernising Government)	2000	Towards E-Government: Vision and Strategy for the Public Sector in Denmark
<b>Canada</b>		2000	Digital Denmark—Conversion to the Network Society
1999	Strategic Directions for Information Management and Information Technology: Enabling 21st Century Service to Canadians	2004	The Danish eGovernment Strategy 2004–2006
2000	Government On-line: Serving Canadians in a Digital World		
2000	Results for Canadians: A Management Framework for the Government of Canada		

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