



How are citizens' public service choices supported in quasi-markets?



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ABSTRACT

Many countries have introduced quasi-market reforms that enable citizens' choice in education, health-care, and other public services. The research question in this paper is the following: How can Web-based decision support help citizens to make calculated public service choices in quasi-markets? In Section 3, the paper focuses on how decision support design helps citizens make such choices as they isolate, examine, and rank alternatives. A case study, set in Sweden, explores 14 cases of decision support in education, healthcare, elder care, and the public pension system. Decision support is most evident in the area of education, but decision support is found in the other areas as well. In most cases, the support consists of information on the right of choice and instructions on how to search among alternatives. Many areas permit direct comparisons, but some areas only permit more indirect comparisons. All 14 cases explain how to make a choice, but only a few cases offer a ranking device. The decision support for choice is inconsistent with the theoretical model of calculated choice in all aspects despite the trend toward greater consistency with the model. Our results call for a critical discussion of technology design that aids citizens as consumers or customers in their relationship with public services.

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1. Introduction

In many countries, new institutional arrangements, in the form of market reforms, have been introduced that affect the administration and deliverance of public services (Le Grand, 2007). For more than two decades, different types of market reforms have been important features in education systems in many OECD countries (Grubb, 2002). Such reforms are also found in healthcare (Chauvette, 2003) and in other public service areas.

These institutional arrangements, using supply/demand mechanisms, often strengthen citizens' ability to make choices about the public services that affect them. Some mechanisms allow citizens to make their choice of services directly while others permit citizens to make their choices more indirectly (e.g., through a mediating, contracting agency). Although the sellers, or service providers, in these markets may not necessarily strive to maximize their profits, they are very aware they exist in an environment where other sellers/providers compete for the same citizens–buyers. The citizen–buyers do not use private capital when they make their public service choices. Instead, they have vouchers that allow them

to “shop around” for public services. These arrangements are often described as quasi-markets (Le Grand, 2007).

Clearly, the central figure in such arrangements is the citizen. Yet there is little research on how to support citizens when they make choices in quasi-markets (Greener, 2007; The Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2007; Winblad & Blomqvist, 2013). In the limited research available, the focus is the information needs of citizens as they choose schools or doctors, and the design of Web-based support for such choices (Allen & Burgess, 2011; Leckie & Goldstein, 2011; Ranganathan, Hibbard, Rodday, & de Brantes, 2009). It is also important to note that the design of such technology, often Web-based, decision support for citizens influences their relationship with the state (Chadwick & May, 2003; Gauld, Goldfinch, & Horsburgh, 2010; Lips, 2007). This relationship can be discussed in terms of citizens, patients, service users as well as customers and consumers.

The focus in this paper is the sociomaterial constellation consisting of technology (“web-based decision support”) and people (“citizens with a right to choose”) where the possibility of making calculated choices in quasi-markets is present. The research question is the following: how can Web-based decision support help citizens to make calculated public service choices in quasi-markets? In Section 3, we focus on the design of technological decision support, especially as it can help citizens make calculated choices (cf. Callon & Muniesa, 2005). Our study, which is set in the

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context of Swedish public services, contributes to the research on decision support in quasi-markets as well as the research on the materiality of markets (cf. MacKenzie, 2009) with specific reference to the sociomaterial design of Web-based support for choice.

2. Previous research on decision support for citizens' choice

Coulter (2010) discussed the introduction of, and the need for, well-designed support for patient choice in a healthcare setting. Green, McDowell, and Potts (2008), who studied the Choose & Book system, found that doctors still retain considerable influence on patients' choices. Ranerup, Norén, and Sparud-Lundin (2012) and Damman (2010) conducted broad surveys of technical support for choice in healthcare in Sweden and in Holland, respectively. Fasolo, Reutskaja, Dixon, and Boyce (2010), Moser, Korstjens, van der Weijden, and Tange (2010), and Ranganathan et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of design as an influence on choice itself. They described the various kinds of information that designs provide, such as quality information or patient evaluations. Interestingly, Angst, Agarwal, Gao, Kuhntia, McCullough (2014) discussed the voluntary provision of quality information by hospitals in a study of the costs of providing such information. There is far less research on decision support in elder care; furthermore, the research that is available is somewhat contradictory. Meinow, Parker, and Thorslund (2011) described cognitive difficulties that the elderly have in making choices. However, Goodwin (2011) argued that the elderly can make such choices. Winblad and Blomqvist (2013) claimed that both properly designed technologies and more information are needed.

Regarding education, research in UK focuses on how parents used quantitative information ("League Tables") to choose schools for their children (Allen & Burgess, 2011; Leckie & Goldstein, 2011). More recent studies examine if and how quality information affects parents' choice of schools in Chile and the Netherlands (Gomez, Chumarcero, & Paredes, 2012; Koning & van der Wiel, 2013), as well as more generally how information should be designed and provided (Allen & Burgess, 2013). A general theme in the research on choice in education is that, despite difficulties, simple performance tables are useful. More specifically, in a study of the visual and textual designs of support for school choice, Wilkins (2012) claimed these designs express cultural, historical, and pedagogical values.

In one of the few studies on choice related to public pension investing, Ranerup (2007) concluded that support for choice might exist if the intention is to provide information on rather advanced knowledge levels. Sundén (2004) described technological support for choice as a complement to written information. Hagendorff, Hudson, and Keasy (2006) described the complexity or "Byzantine" logic of designing electronic support for choice and advice for pension annuities that would satisfy the various needs of retirees.

In sum, most of the research on citizen choice, which is rather "non-theoretical", has been conducted in healthcare settings, probably because of the many different kinds of healthcare choices (e.g., doctor, hospital, treatment, primary care clinic, etc.). However, to our knowledge, as yet, there is no research that examines in comprehensive fashion, decision support for choice in several different public service areas. To fill this research gap, our intention with this theory-based, comparative case study is to provide a comprehensive study of available, Web-based support in four public service areas.

3. Theory

Our study falls within the current sociomaterial tradition with its focus on the joint activities of people and technology (Jones, 2014; Leonardi, 2012). This tradition is concerned with people's use of technology in general, viewing technology as a socio-technical system that emphasizes the interdependence of social and technical subsystems (Leonardi, 2012). This tradition grew out of an older tradition based on workplace studies conducted in the 1930s and developed, for example, by key figures at the Tavistock Institute, including Fred Emery, Ken Bamforth, Eric Trist, and others).

The sociomaterial tradition is more radical than this older tradition because of its focus on how people and technology act *together*. In a discussion on the roles of people and technology, McMaster and Wastell (2005, p. 179) concluded: "[T]echnology cannot act without people, any more than people can act without technology. Agency cannot be reduced to either pure humans or pure machines."

Leonardi (2012, p. 34) took a broader perspective in his discussion of sociomateriality:

[T]alking about sociomateriality is to recognize and always keep present to mind that materiality acts as a constitutive element of the social world, and vice versa. Thus, whereas materiality might be a property of a technology, sociomateriality represents that enactment of a particular set of activities that meld materiality with institutions, norms, discourses, and all other phenomena we typically define as 'social'.

Of course, practical situations exist in which the social and the material act together or, as described by Leonardi (2012), are "constitutively entangled." For example, several researchers are now engaged in the on-going debate on the theoretical and methodological problems in this tradition. This debate, among other things, occurs in the investigation of "mute" technology and in the investigation of agency and separation among the "hybrid" actors of people and technology (see Ceez-Kecmanovic, Galliers, Henfridsson, Newell, & Vidgen, 2014; Leonardi, 2013; Mutch, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2013). Some, although not all, studies in this tradition combine theoretical and empirical research (Jones, 2014). In our study, we contribute to a particular stream in this research with our focus on markets and their constructed nature. This approach allows us examine the sociomaterial design of Web-based support that helps citizens make their calculated public service choices.

We call attention to other important studies that take this approach. Callon (1998), for example, studied how actors use economic theories to construct markets in which people as well as technologies are involved in choice. MacKenzie (2009) used mostly financial market case studies in his study that deals with how economic agents are constructed, often in a very material sense. In more recent publications, Jeacle and Carter (2011) and Scott and Orlikowski (2012) studied how the spread of technology in the travel sector allows people to evaluate and rank travel services using technology that displays these evaluations on computer screens. They also looked at how technology creates trust by displaying other people's evaluations. In all of these cases, people's joint activities with technology are the de facto focus, which makes technology an important component of a hybrid actor.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Pollock and DiAdderio (2012) focused on technologies used in a material sense for ranking options via computer screens. In their study of how lists and graphic design aimed at ranking influence the actions of human actors in the market, they created an additional layer between the individual consumer and the market. In line with these perspectives, we find that technology not only provides the traditional (and neutral) decision support for choice, but also mutually influences, or controls, citizens when they make their choices.

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