

National reform programs in local practices: Using discourse as a strategic resource

SWG 05: Strategizing discourse: strategy-as-practice and the discursive turn

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Abstract

This paper investigates how discourse can be mobilized as a strategic resource when introducing a public sector reform program in a local government setting. We explore how actual day-to-day practices, contexts, and processes relate to the shaping and localizing of broad strategic discourses. In particular, we emphasize the practices in which national strategic formulations are legitimized and accepted or abandoned by the actors involved. Building on a case study conducted over a two-year time span, we show how a local actor engages with and promotes a national reform program by evoking a discourse with strategic intentions. First we present how the national reform program is translated into a local government by the evoking of historically produced and context dependent discourses. Next we show that locally produced discourses need to be evoked and re-attached to the national reform program in order to enable new local practices. Our study shows that formal reform programs and strategies are never stable and firm objects; rather, they are constantly enacted and changed as part of discursive practices. Thus individuals enter a discursive space from where to engage strategically with the creation of new local practices.

Keywords: discourse, strategy, organizational practices, public sector institutions

Introduction

Today, the accumulation of texts such as national strategies, project initiatives, and local strategy notes are ever present in public sector institutions such as hospitals, universities, and government agencies. For managers this means that the strategy discourse has become so integrated into the organizational language that it is commonly accepted as a determinant for success and failure. A closer look into the practices and social relations within the existing strategy discourse literature indeed suggests that discourses create organizational reality (DiMaggio et al. 1993). In this view, strategy does not simply mirror reality – the practices, activities and negotiations of discourses – but creates reality (Fairclough 1992; Whittington 1996). Furthermore, the historical and powerful nature of the relationship between strategy and discourses give some positions (upheld by certain actors) the possibility to speak and act while others are disregarded and silenced. As a result, the way in which someone is in a position to talk about strategy and the way we analyze particular strategic actions is related to the exertion of power formations with political implications (Fairclough 1992; Marinetto 2007).

While strategic discourse has been studied in relation to management (Hardy et al. 2000; Schultze and Stabell 2004) organizational issues (Keenoy et al. 1997; Grant et al. 2001) and power (Whittington et al. 2006), the practice-oriented aspects of strategic discourse levels remain underexplored (Hardy et al. 2000). We still know relatively little about how discursive aspects of strategy are managed in practical relations. For instance, the tension between studies of recursive forms of strategic actions at macro levels and specific intra-organizational contexts and individual cognition has been highlighted in literature (Whittington 1996; Jarzabkowski 2004). Recent attempts to address such issues e.g. (Hay and Richards 2000; Chia and MacKay 2007) have revealed a highly complex scene of macro, micro and meso discourses wherein actors act, perform and produce meaningful connection to engage in strategy discourses. This paper addresses the issue of how actively to use discourse as a strategic resource in the shaping and localization of a national reform initiative. We study the introduction of the national reform program, eDay3, in a local government to explore how discursive practices are spanning multiple levels and to examine how a number of management practices are used to translate strategy into practice. The local government is the organization in focus and the practices between the external and internal sphere serve the object of analysis. We focus on the actions of an individual actor to show how discourses can

be evoked to shape, enact and make sense of macro level strategies in a local context, thus enabling the formation of new local practices.

We present data from a case study that spans a two-year time period to present how the national reform program is first formulated into a local government by the evoking of historically produced and context dependent discourses. We then demonstrate that locally produced discourses also need to be evoked and re-attached to the national reform program in order to enable new local practices. Our study shows that formal reform programs and strategies are never stable and firm objects but rather are constantly enacted and changed as part of discursive practices.

Theoretical framing

Discourse theory

Discourse analysis is an amalgam of different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, philosophy linguistics, and literature (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The concept of discourse is highly complex. Often, however, the term “discourse” is used without further definition (Phillips and Winther Jørgensen 1999), resulting in the concept being categorized as “fuzzy” (Van Dijk 1996; Alvesson and Karreman 2000). In this paper the concept of discourse is related to the idea that language is structured in patterns, which human statements and actions follow (Alvesson and Karreman 2000). Moreover, research on discourse in organizations is associated with the study of texts, although what constitutes a text is also a matter of debate (Wodak 2001). This study is concerned with the use of strategic texts in particular organizational settings and follows the definition of discourse from Fairclough (1992) who defines discourse as a set of texts, statements, and practices that bring objects into being. According to Foucault, discourse is correspondingly related to an act of power as it operates by rules of exclusion (Foucault 1971). Discourse is thus constituted by what can be spoken of, where and how one may speak and who may speak. However these objects are not placed in a void but rather related within networks. Foucault uses the example that a book is not made up of individual words on a page, each of which has meaning. In contrast “...*a book is caught up in a system of reference to other books, other texts, other sentences*” (Foucault and Gordon 1980). Thus the meaning of a particular book can only be seen in the connection to a larger network of knowledge, ideas and intentions related to it.

When people act within a certain discourse they produce texts, understandings and actions within a set of patterns related to a specific social domain (Hall 2001). For instance, we can identify a certain *medical* or *political* discourse, which serves as a frame or space for action. As a result, a discourse can be identified as a particular way of understanding and speaking about parts of the world. It is important to notice that these patterns or structures of language should not be considered firm and stable, but rather are in a state of constant change. Thus, a discursive analysis requires an examination of language, the production of texts and processes of communication as well as the interactions between actors in organizational and institutional settings (Grant et al. 2001). Within theories of discourse, language is increasingly being understood as the most important phenomenon accessible for empirical investigation in social and organizational research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). As linguistic structures are not stable, a key interest within this perspective is the presence of a variety of discourses constantly aiming to win hegemony. The understanding of these struggles, negotiations or battles has to be deconstructed in order to understand, for example, power within a society (Derrida 1970; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Avgerou and McGrath 2007).

In line with this, Van Dijk argues that “...*discourse studies should deal both with the properties of text and talk and with what is usually called the context, that is, the other characteristics of the social situation or the communicative event that may systematically influence text or talk. In sum discourse studies are about talk and text in context*” (van Dijk 1997). Discursive activity is then most appropriately studied as a constitutive part of its local, global, social and cultural contexts (Hardy et al. 2000). As a result, discourses are shared and social, emanating from interactions between social groups and societal structures in which the discourse is embedded (Hardy et al. 2000).

Discourse as a strategic resource

To examine how discourse can be used as a strategic resource, we build on the model of discourse by Hardy et al. (2000). The model shows how the enactment of a discourse happens in a co-constitutive relationship between social structures and particular discursive activities. Strategic actors “*must locate their discursive activities within a meaningful context if they are to shape and construct action*” (p. 1128). This means that we must examine the broader context to determine the scope and limitations that it provides for action.

In this study, discourses are seen as an interrelated set of texts with practices of production, dissemination and reception that bring an object into being (Parker 1999). This theoretical perspective is used to study how individuals engage in activities and to investigate how they access different discourses in order to generate new meanings that help the enactment of particular strategies (Hardy et al. 2000). The historical dimensions of the study suggest in line with e.g. Hardy et al. (2000) and Wodak (2001) that actors cannot simply produce “adoption-discourses” to suit the own immediate needs. Instead they must locate and derive meaningful activities within their historical context if they want to create and construct new forms of actions leading to adoption of a particular information system.

In this study we describe two phases; the first describing the discursive formations of a national reform program in a local government setting, and the second portraying how the locally produced discourses need to be evoked and re-attached to the national reform program in order to enable new local practices. To do so, we build on Hardy et al.’s (2000) framework which introduces three circuits for investigating discourse as strategic resources:

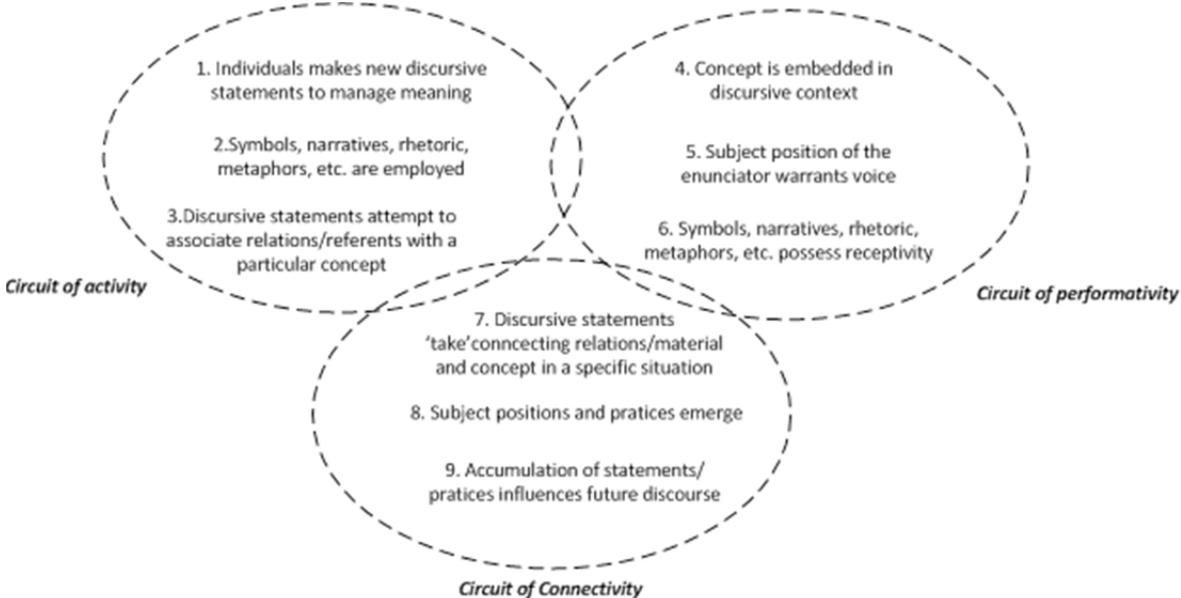


Figure 1: Discourse as a strategic resource

The *circuit of activity* comprises the individuals who are attempting to use discourse strategically. Here individuals make statements to manage meaning, e.g. “IT [information technology] creates better service for citizens, which is suitable since we are producing services to the citizens”. These statements involve the creation and dissemination of various texts, including the introduction of specific symbols, narratives and metaphors. Within these

texts there is an attempt to associate particular concepts with certain referents in order to create objects. According to Hardy et al. (2000), it is likely that specific statements attempt to associate relations with a particular concept. This could occur, for example, when a specific department in the local government argues for an IT system to have specific characteristics in relation to their department and not others. The circuit of activity views every action as historically and contextually dependent, which means that an action within a local government cannot exist without being contingent on the context wherein the actor is located.

When the circuit of activity is referred to in the analysis it will be used to identify how some actors actively choose certain concepts and put these concepts in relation to others. In this process some statements will be acknowledged with high receptiveness among certain actors while other statements will fade. As a result, which discourse actors rely on in order to make sense or create meaning of a national reform program is highly important and complex. If a local project manager chooses only to use national discourses he/she may have to fight very hard (engaging in other discourses as well) to obtain understanding and willingness among local colleagues. If a local project manager chooses to use only very localized discourses of a specific local government he/she might have problems accounting for a project to the central administration of the local government or the national level. As a result, discourses are not something that just happens; they are actively produced and re-produced in various activities at different levels. The lens of the circuit of activity provides a tool to capture some of the activities that occur in a process of the adoption of a national program. To make sense of these activities they should then be analyzed through their relation to other activities.

If the activities are to have any political effect, they must entail other actors and become embedded in a discursive context. This is referred to as the *circuit of performativity*. The acts and statements put forward are not placed in a vacuum but have to be reformulated and recreated in order to give meaning in a specific context. How the interpretation is received depends on the position of the subject who enunciates the interpretation. Three characteristics should be in place to ensure successful interpretation of a concept into a local context: first, there should be a relation between the overall concept and the local reality; second, the subject who brings forward this interpretation has a mandate to do so; and third, the new chosen concept should be able to possess receptivity at both local and national levels. The circuit of performativity derives from Lyotard's study (1984) where the following questions

are posed: “Who transmits the national policy into the local government? What is transmitted? To whom? Through which medium? In what form? And with what effect?” (Lyotard 1984). If the articulations do not resonate with those of locally situated actors they will fail to convey the meaning intended by the enunciator and consequently be ignored.

The processes in the circuit of performativity happen when the concepts evoked in discursive statements are embedded in the larger discursive context. Consequently the relevant concepts must be created in such a way that they provide meaning for those individuals to whom they are directed. An individual does not have a free choice in employing concepts and cannot conjure a new object out of thin air (Hardy et al. 2000). What legitimates knowledge in the “post-modern condition” is thus how well it performs or enables a person to perform in particular roles. In what Lyotard describes as a cybernetic society, knowledge is legitimated by how “performative” it is. Knowledge and decision making is for the most part no longer (in the computerized world) based on abstract principles but rather on how effective it is at achieving desired outcomes (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard seeks a form of legitimization that will work in a manner akin to performativity, without recourse to a meta-narrative, but also without the tendency toward a uniform totalization of opinion. In the circuit of performativity the enunciator warrants voice by taking on particular roles to gain receptivity among other actors through certain kinds of symbols and narratives. If they do not resonate with other locally situated actors they will fail to convey the meaning intended by the enunciator and consequently be ignored. In this sense the circuit of performativity can be said to embrace and engage the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains. The circuit of performativity is, as a result, interested in what actions and roles are created in order to establish legitimacy to act. Some positions need to be negotiated and some discursive understandings need to be evoked in order for an IT system to attract attention and potentially be adopted.

The *circuit of connectivity* describes the intersection of the circuits of activity and performativity. Hardy et al. (2000) point to the relevance of new discursive statements to successfully attach relations and/or material referents to create a specific object in the eye of other actors. Accompanied by this new object, subject positions and practices emerge from which actors attempt to discuss and share meanings in order to bridge various earlier and contemporary understandings. The accumulation of statements and practices in the bridging-

processes becomes an embedded part of the context of the local organization and as a result influence the future discourse.

Research design and setting

The study design

The case study investigates the discursive activity which took place between the national level and the local government level regarding the introduction of the Danish eDay3 program in Aalborg local government.¹ The study is wedged between the national strategy discourses and the specific discursive acts in the local practices from an intermediate aggregation level to acknowledge the mutual coherence of groups of actors as well as the elasticity of digital infrastructural demands, strategy formulation and local settings. This is illustrated in figure 2:

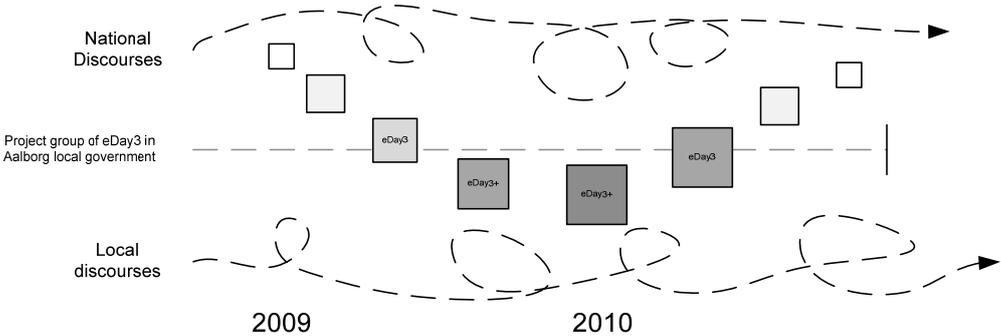


Figure 2: Illustration of the life of eDay3

We build on a PhD project that includes five sets of empirical data. *The first data set* consists of the first author’s working experience in the Danish Ministry of Finance with the specific eDay3 initiative in focus. Here the author worked with the formulation of strategies and national attempts to push reform projects forward. A particular interest that arose from this experience was how projects become articulated formally and informally in the intersection between the national and local levels. *The second set of data* consists of observation studies over a period of two weeks in the citizen service office in Aalborg local government. The aim was to gain insight into the relations between the employees at the citizen service, the use of IT systems and the communication with the citizens. *The third data set* builds on sixteen

¹ Aalborg local government is the third biggest local government in Denmark with 200,000 inhabitants. It is located in the western part of Denmark far away from the Danish capital and the national level.

interviews with six employees in Aalborg Local government, five employees at the agency level, and five in the Ministry of Finance. The interviews were all designed as semi-structured interviews. The topics discussed in the interviews focused on the national reform program, its adoption, as well as questions concerning the role of the interviewee in relation to this initiative. *The fourth data set* consists of seven workshops held in Aalborg local government, in the Danish Agency of Governmental Affairs, and in the Ministry of Finance. Some of the workshops were initiated by the research team to discuss topics for further investigation, others by Aalborg local government in order to create concrete organizing directions, and yet others were held at a national level in order to discuss what could be expected from the local governments. *The fifth data set* builds on an analysis of 79 formal documents, including national strategies, informal notes and documents, and project descriptions and formulations. The method of investigating discourses in these texts consisted of five consecutive steps: Step 1 consisted of the selection of texts and was based on the reading of existing literature on the topic and searching the ministerial achieves. Step 2 consisted of identifying key concepts in the documents. In step 3, the text passages were ordered chronologically in order to see how concepts were related. In step 4, the chronological overview was used to identify when discursive changes occurred over time and step 5 served to identify changes in superior and inferior discourses in the strategies.

The case: eDay3 the digital reform

The first eDay program was established in Denmark in 2003. The purpose of the project was to initiate more efficient and rationalized internal and external working routines. As a part of this all Danish state, regional and local governments had the right to demand communication with other institutions where possible through electronic exchange (Henriksen and Damsgaard 2007). In particular this meant that institutions during their time of transformation towards e-government could reject paper-based communication with other institutions. This initiative was meant to create networked effects within the public sector, but these kinds of network were created within the frames of more traditional chains of command and were established not by recommendations but by legal force.

Following the eDay initiative, eDay2 was established in 2005 demanding that all public institutions should be able to receive secure, digitally encrypted e-mails from citizens and companies. With eDay2 all public institutions committed to have an official e-mail address, which could be used by the citizens.

In 2007 the Danish Government, Local Government Denmark, and Danish Regions agreed upon the eDay3 program under the formulation “*Easy access to the public sector on the internet*”. The purpose of this initiative was to give citizens and businesses alike a significantly higher degree of efficiency and flexibility in the services provided on the Internet. More specifically, the objective of eDay3 included the following three aspects: (1) Every citizen-directed self-service solution with identification must include easy-log-on and digital signature; (2) Every self-service portal must be integrated with the national centralized portal; (3) All institutions must enable contact and replies through “digital mail” and thus be able to send mass mailings through the “digital mail” box.

In this paper we focus on the eDay3 program and the period from 2009 until 2010 in which the program was introduced into Aalborg local government. We have divided our description into two phases. Phase one concerns the period of 2009, in which a set of activities were initiated to establish local interest for eDay3 in the local government.

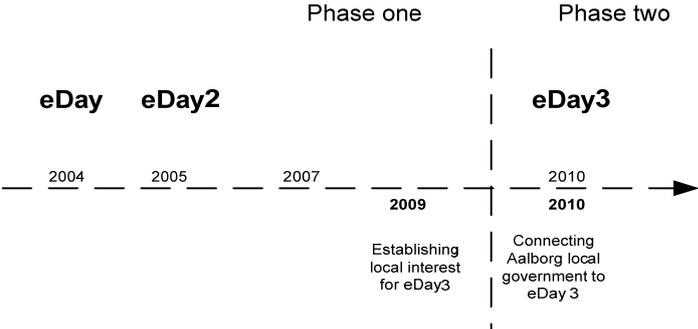


Figure 3: Overview of phases one and two

During 2010, phase two, formal decisions were made in Aalborg local government on how to be a part of the overall eDay3 initiative and how to coordinate work across seven discipline-specific departments.

The two phases should not be seen as being entirely separate, and are conceptualized in this way only in order to show how actions and enunciations differ in relation to the strategic purpose of a specific time. In phase one various actors tried to position themselves and argue for or against the establishment of a specific eDay3 project in the Aalborg local government. When the project was eventually decided on, the agenda changed to considering how to draw the project in the direction of the specific interests of the involved actors.

Phase one

The eDay3 program caught local attention long before the national level demanded any action. Different actors in Aalborg local government stated that just to wait for the program to “hit” the organization was insufficient. One particular actor, a key employee at the IT office, stated that this project ought to be used to establish a more consistent way of using IT in the local government. In phase one, Aalborg local government was in a process of re-organizing and effectuating their own and first strategy “Aalborg Local Government IT Strategy 2008”. Three cross-coordinating steering committees were put together in the mayor’s department and projects were managed and measured on their potential to create economic savings. In this phase huge efforts were put into the making of clear decision-making routes within the local government. In this process several actors emerged as candidates for dominant roles in the years to come. The three specific topics serving as guiding topics in the mayor’s department were citizen-service, communication, and IT.

During 2009, three workshops were held targeting decision-making structures in the local government. Moreover in the autumn a process of formulating a local eDay3 project began. Consequently, the IT office within the mayor’s department initiated a project with the purpose of establishing an eDay3 project including communication, citizen-service, and IT. The initial objective was to gather knowledge about the national demands of the project and to create a basis for decisions to be made locally. The key member of the IT office argued for a coordination group across the seven departments of Aalborg local government. In the months that followed, he visited the departments to present the eDay3 project as a coordination opportunity. He evoked a special local atmosphere by arguing for a unique opportunity to make the eDay3 a success in the local context. He demonstrated his familiarity with the specific history of IT in the local government and articulated that IT had now become a tool of efficiency and administrative savings in contrast to earlier understandings. By emphasizing his contextual knowledge he created a mandate to represent the challenges of the seven departments both internally within the local government and at the national level. As this line of argumentation gained receptivity among the local departments he articulated that the formal role of the project manager was nothing more than that of a facilitator. With support from the mayor’s office and the board of directors, he appointed a local steering committee with coordination and decision-making abilities.

By the end of 2009 it was clear that the IT group with the backing of a group of directors would succeed in formulating a new project for eDay3. Even though the topics within eDay3 concerned citizen-service and communication just as much as IT, the IT group managed to take control over the project. As the key member of the IT office became the formal project manager, he proposed the creation of a “new” project called eDay3+ to accentuate that it would take a substantial effort to be able to create efficiency and savings in all departments. This localized the project even further as those departments that were initially skeptical now saw new possibilities. Establishing the localized eDay3 project led to new positions where key members of the local departments were invited to participate in the central group concerning difficulties with the implementation of the project. The project manager set up the new project group with a straight line to the vice-director of Aalborg local government. Representatives from each of the seven departments were selected to join the group. Another key player in the group, also from the mayor’s department, was the former citizen service group. Furthermore a strong relation was created to Local Government Denmark as the new project manager and the representative from the Family and Employment department participated in national working groups addressing how to connect to the national e-mail box. In phase one it is evident that Aalborg local government worked intensively to create new structures for decision-making. By the end of 2009 this resulted in a highly centralized organization where a group in the mayor’s office was coordinating projects and employees that earlier had referred to a manager at the departmental level. In this process the project manager from the IT office succeeded in localizing the reform program into Aalborg local government.

Phase two

By the beginning of 2010, the first official eDay3 project meeting was held in the local government. The meeting was concerned with how the procedures for knowledge gathering in the departments should take place. Of key concern was to find out precisely what was agreed on at the national level and on this basis to find out what the frame for the project in Aalborg local government should be. Moreover, the project was the first large-scale project under the new strategy in the local government. As a result the question of how the division of labor should be managed between the project group and the different departments was considered an important issue. At the time of the initiation of the project group in the local government, the national level had still not formulated and clarified exactly what the local governments were supposed to do. More issues such as choosing an external print system and establishing

how to create a reasonable payment model internally between departments could only be solved locally at this point. Also, it was clear quite early on that some department would find it relatively easy to restructure their communication flow to match the new mailbox requirements, whereas others (particularly those with citizen contacts) would face wholly different challenges.

One of the most significant challenges that emerged was that while the national eDay3 project had been sent out for public EU tender at the ministerial and agency level, this only resulted in a specification of demands for particular solutions. These solutions were then designed and built by the winning vendor (in the case of the digital mail box the company “eBoks”, which already ran a similar service for private companies, won), but nothing more happened. In this gap between national political decisions, EU tenders and concrete actions at the local governmental level the project manager and the project group were expected to introduce the digital mailbox into the local government. This also meant that the project manager and the project group in the local government could not just sit back and wait for instructions on how to adopt the system. They had to actively participate in discussions both locally and nationally in order to come up with directions to follow. This was evident in the communication with other local governments as they met in national committees. The decisions made in Aalborg were not in any way the norm. Aalborg local government decided not to be a frontrunner; however, they still wanted to extend the project and perform better than the minimum requirements put forward at the national level. This particular decision was also a part of a more overall latent and complex strategy in Aalborg aiming for a way to satisfy both the local and the national levels. In Aalborg local government during 2010 the project group and the project manager succeeded in formulating a project and a plan to follow, which both aligned with the local interests and did more than what was actually expected with regard to the national level. As a result, in 2010 the Aalborg local government still had high hopes for the potential savings and overall efficiency promised in the adoption of a new national digital mailbox. By the end of 2010, the project group, which was established to manage the eDay3 project in Aalborg local government, was dissolved. Remaining tasks were relocated to other groups.

Discourse as a strategic resource in eDay3

From national to local project – phase one

The localization of national IT projects was a huge issue in early 2009 in Denmark. The national level worked towards efficiency, service and quality, and the same concepts were mentioned in the first IT strategy in Aalborg local government. Another vital topic in the strategies at both levels was cross-sector or departmental coordination work. In Aalborg local government, efforts towards cross-coordination were made through three groups (IT, communication, and citizen service). Actors within the local government engaged in these efforts by arguing that increasingly complex external environments gave rise to economic pressures: *“If Aalborg local government keeps managing IT as it has done previously there will be many employees sacked in the departments”* (Workshop with citizen service and IT group, Aalborg local government).

Instead of waiting for national programs to “hit” the local government, several actors and groups locally moved towards establishing coordination relationships which would be able to use IT as a tool for meeting the efficiency requirements.

Circuits of activity

Several actions were taken in the process of creating eDay3 as a local project. First, a number of individuals made statements to help manage meaning and to enable understanding in the local context: *“The national level doesn’t know yet what is going to happen, but we will use eDay3 as an event and lever for more consistent IT in general”* (Interview with project manager, Aalborg local government). In this period, many statements and comments were made about how to translate the eDay3 project into a local project. These statements all referred to the unique setting and history of Aalborg local government: *“Aalborg local government has always been known for moving in our own direction. I think we should do this again this time”* (Interview with project manager, Aalborg local government).

In the circuit of activity, we see how the project manager of the central IT office initially started to articulate discursive statements, positioning the eDay3 project as a key tool to enhance IT integration in the local government: *“We need a local steering committee with coordination abilities within IT, communication and citizen service. We need this group so that we actively can respond and transform accordingly to national demands and local*

complexity” (Interview with project manager, Aalborg local government). By this statement, he sought to manage both meaning and complexity of the national eDay3 project and to formulate it into the local context. Several symbols and metaphors were employed in this process in order to obtain a shared understanding. A “three-legged stool” was used as an illustrative example of how the three cross-coordinating groups should work together. Moreover the metaphor of a “traffic light” was often brought up. The traffic light symbolized that the project could be either in red, yellow or green. This metaphor was used to enable a simple categorization of the relationship between the national level and the local project. By using this metaphor, he evoked a symbol that everybody could relate to and portrayed how the local government could act accordingly.

This action by the key actors made two vital things possible. First, it enabled a way of localizing the project as something unique to Aalborg. This formulation did not just follow the lines of arguments from the national level but created its own. Second, it provided a highly progressive response to the emerging critiques from several departments. It acknowledged that Aalborg local government was not able to fulfill the initial national requirements, but instead of complaining about this, it raised the bar for what was to be done. In this way the key actors not only dealt with problems at the national level but also provided “evidence” of savings locally over a longer time span. One of the critiques raised was that the minimum requirements would not create any real savings due to the low amount of actual users of the digital mailbox. By setting even higher goals, the actors succeeded in arguing that the digital mailbox would actually create savings in most departments. This action also created the feeling of a much more localized project as it was just “a little bit better” than the national standard: *“It will be a hard task, but if we work together in order to achieve our goals it is realistic to have 50% of the citizens connected to the digital mailbox by November 2011”* (Document of eDay3 initiation, Aalborg local government). By expressing the need for a cross departmental steering group, the project manager associated the concept of what had become the eDay3 project with efforts in all seven departments. As a result, most departments stated that the only way of localizing the project within the government was to join forces and create a local steering committee.

Circuits of performativity

Activity alone did not mean that the new object, i.e. the localized project, would necessarily be created. In the circuit of performativity, the member of the central IT office (who was not

yet appointed project manager) initiated conversations with the seven departments. Here the performativity entails how and why certain positions were created and how these were received among other actors. Only some actors could “take” certain positions and only some discourses could be used to back a certain position. The member of the IT office who eventually became the project manager of the local eDay3 project was in a position where he could produce the majority of the texts in the process and he served as secretariat of the initial meetings. He worked as a senior employee of the IT office alongside the vice director of the local government. Someone in this position could warrant a voice, as he was able to speak to both upper and lower levels of the local government. In order to become project manager for the local eDay3 project he evoked discourses referring back in time: *“We need to do this in our own style as we did in the 1990s, otherwise we will never succeed. This means that with IT here in our local government we will be efficient primarily because we know the specific needs and demands from our citizens”* (Interview project manager, Aalborg local Government). In addition he articulated how the history of IT in Aalborg had changed over the last 10 years and hereby gained receptivity in the local departments, showing that he understood the local context.

After demonstrating his respect for the local and specific context he formulated a role from which to operate: *“My role here is not a formal role. I cannot decide anything. I am here to listen to what representatives in departments are concerned about and to help them solve problems with the help of IT. So I may be labeled as a project manager but I see my role as a facilitator”*. By explaining that the new role as a project manager was merely that of a facilitator, he created a space for himself with local support. A new position for him as a project manager was created as somebody who possessed knowledge about both the national level and the specific local context. Having created a position for himself, he emphasized that the eDay3 project was more an internal IT project to re-organize the local administration than it was a communication or citizen service project: *“The project is expected to increase digital communication with citizens from the local government but in order to facilitate this, the most important issues are consistency and efficiency in the internal working routines”*.

Circuits of connectivity

In the circuits of connectivity the activity and performativity intersected and created a new object. The discursive statements described in the circuits of activity were connected to relations and concepts in a specific situation. As the new project manager succeeded in

gaining receptivity both centrally and locally, new positions were created as both he and members of the seven departments formed a new group with a decision-making mandate.

At the end of phase one, the eDay3 project had been formulated and was waiting for final approval from the board of directors. As a last preparation before the approval, a document was sent out for review in the seven departments. This document was a very informal draft stating the initiation of the eDay3 project. Instead of using the standard template for notes in Aalborg local government, the project manager used a simple word document in draft version with unfinished lines: *“This recommendation has been sent in editing rounds in all departments and in the cross coordination groups. It is recommended that (??)... With these comments (??)...”*. This unfinished document immediately created receptivity in the departments as they could see how they were able to raise a voice within the project. The document resonated with the local aim for bottom-up development, which was entirely written out of the formal strategies both at the national and local levels.

As the activities and performativity intersected during late 2009 the connections resulted in the emergence of new positions and roles to be taken. Certain members from the departments were promoted to participate in the new project and positions within the new established project group were fought for, won and lost. The position of the project manager had at this point been obvious for a while. The key employee of the IT group had, through his activity and earlier positions, successfully made the eDay3 project gain receptivity both in the department and in the group of directors. As he managed to gain receptivity both centrally and locally, new positions were created as both he and members of the seven departments formed a new group with a decision-making mandate.

As eDay3 was formalized, a new object between the national and local levels had been created. Accordingly a new opportunity for Aalborg local government to play at the national level emerged. External collaborators in, for example, Local Government Denmark began to take notice of the development. When the new project manager and the members of the new project group articulated the localized version called eDay3+, they clearly stressed how Aalborg local government was not satisfied with the information, knowledge gathering or interest at the national level. Some of the challenges raised by Aalborg local government possessed great receptivity by other local governments that were facing similar problems with

just waiting for a solution to be sent out from the national level: “*Here in Aalborg we have chosen to do something completely different than what you are suggesting. We cannot wait for you to find the right technical solutions for us to use. As a result we have chosen to extend the project and go beyond what your expectations are*” (Workshop at national level). With articulations like these, the new project manager from Aalborg local government quickly took a position as “expert of local challenges”. Thus, he was constantly referred to as the extreme case and asked during meetings about this particular situation in Aalborg. His role at the national level had a highly dual character at this point. On the one hand, he represented bottom-up arguments which central workshops were meant to highlight. On the other hand, he posed “irritating” questions that the persons arranging the workshops had to answer: “*Thank you very much for the question. We know that this is a problem for you, but we will have to wait for the agency of governmental affairs to present a rollout plan, so we have to move on to the next topic...*” (Answer from the workshop coordinator from Local Government Denmark).

By the end of phase one in 2009, it was evident that the localized eDay3 project was created in Aalborg local government. Deriving from the discourse both at local and national levels the project had evoked the main conditions from the national level. Complex discursive processes of activities, performativity and connectivity supported the new project established at the end of phase one; however, this was a fragile and unstable position. As a hybrid object discursively bridging local departments, local central administration and national central administration it was exposed to constant battles. It was potentially in conflict with the local departments if they did not feel they were heard. It was potentially in conflict with the central administration of the local government if it could not provide the savings needed, and it had been created in opposition to the national level in order to provide the local departments the ownership needed for them to participate.

Summary of phase one

In the *circuit of activity* we see how the member of the central IT office initially started to (1) articulate discursive statements, positioning the eDay3 project as a key tool to enhance IT integration in the local government. By this he managed meaning and complexity of the national eDay3 project and formulated it into the local context. By using the traffic light as a metaphor (2) he evoked a symbol that everybody could relate to and portrayed how the local

government could act accordingly. By claiming the need for a cross departmental steering group (3) he associated the local concept of eDay3 with efforts in all seven departments.

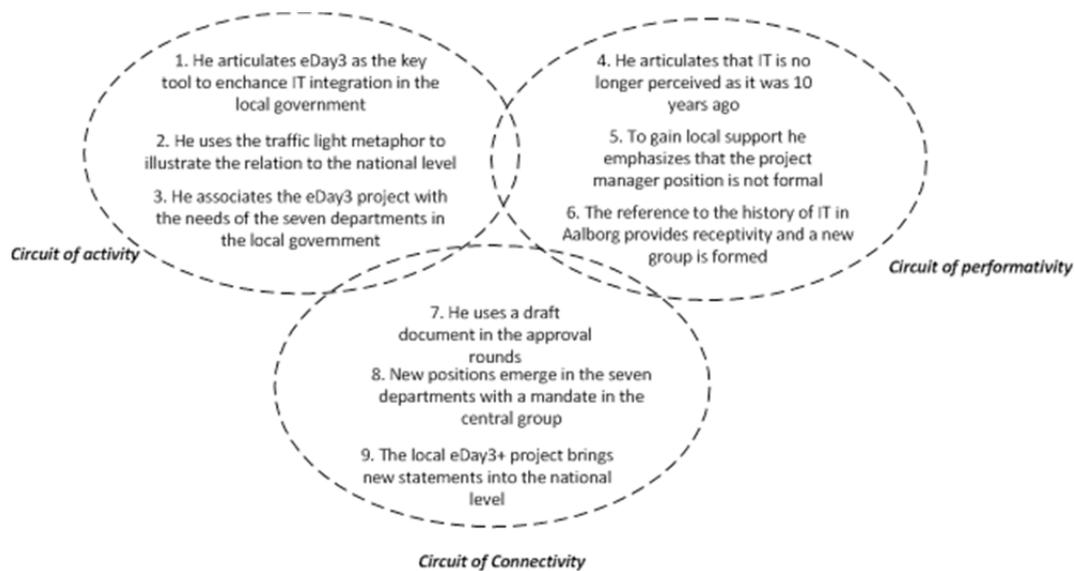


Figure 4: Discourse as a strategic resource in phase one

In the *circuit of performativity* the member of the central IT office initiated conversations with the seven departments. When he (4) articulated how the history of IT in Aalborg had changed over the last 10 years he gained receptivity in the local departments, showing that he understood the local context. By explaining that the new role as a project manager was merely that of a facilitator (5), he created a space for himself with local support. A new position for him as a project manager was created (6) as somebody who possessed knowledge about both the national level and the specific local context.

In the *circuit of connectivity* the use of a draft document (7) became a discursive statement of negotiation, which connected national ambitions to local complexity. As he managed to gain receptivity both centrally and locally, new positions were created (8) as both he and members of the seven departments formed a new group with a decision-making mandate. The project manager now argued at a national level, raising some of the statements, problems and challenges from the local departmental level and as a result (9) the accumulation of statements were used in an attempt to influence the national discourse.

From local back to national project – phase two

After the eDay3 project was created, the new project manager engaged in a discursive counter attack to address the demands from the national level. The second phase consequently entails

a second round of discursive activities, performativity and connectivity in which the project manager aimed to re-attach the project to the concept of a national project. In phase one, emphasis had been on the local discourses in order to gain receptivity toward the national eDay3 project. In phase two, discourses from the national level and the central administration of Aalborg local government needed to be evoked in order to sustain the project's position. The position could not be upheld if the project did not support the overall strategy of both the local government and the national level. As a result the discourses evoked in order to secure support from all seven departments had to be formulated once again in order to comply with the national level. Thus, key actors would attempt to create a new and more complex object in order to protect the local eDay3 project in the local government. This object would, as in phase one, be created on the basis of historically embedded discourses, but the activities in phase one meant that actors now had to evoke some of the national discourses in order to further balance the project.

Circuits of activity

In the circuit of activity the project manager started to articulate discursive statements, repositioning the eDay3 project within the national discourse. By this he managed meaning and complexity by arguing that some of the benefits potentially achieved by eDay3 were highly related to the following formulations from national strategies. The project manager began, from the first project meeting, to evoke discourses intended to enable a discussion of how to frame the project in relation to the contemporary national efforts taking place: *“We need to align our project with the national strategy, otherwise we cannot survive. This means that we need to start using their language and terms in order to facilitate the correct results”* (Project group meeting). The project manager evoked similar symbols and metaphors as in phase one; however, now they took on a quite different meaning. He re-evoked the metaphor of a traffic light but now used it to illustrate how easy it was to “be in green” and thereby to align with the national level ambitions. He also stressed that this project was of outmost importance for the local government in general: *“This is a very special project, with a special steering committee. Normally we don’t have special steering committees but this is a highly important project to us. If we want our project to succeed we need to focus of central automation of many tasks to be efficient”*.

The local eDay3 project was once again put in relation to the national level discourse which emphasized how local governments should use cross-coordination of IT and digitalization as one of the most powerful tools for change, innovation and efficiency.

Circuits of performativity

In the circuit of performativity certain roles and positions were now of a different nature compared to the first phase. The local version of eDay3 was still meaningful, but it was beginning to lean more towards the national project again. The project manager no longer articulated his role as someone put in place to secure the interest of the local departments. Now he argued that he had been put in a very difficult position as the mediator between the national and the local levels. In this specific role he could not do anything when the national level or others interfered: *“The role I am playing in this project is very different from that of being a project manager of a “normal” project. Normally we have a project and a vendor. Here the project can agree upon something and then it is decided how things should be. In the case of eDay3 this is completely different. The Danish agency of governmental affairs is the owner of the project, not us. We don’t know when to decide and sometimes what to decide. As an example we did not know in April when we were supposed to connect to the digital box. We were then told “you should be ready in May””*.

This also created a different role to play at the national level where Aalborg local government was no longer in an opposing role. The project manager argued that even though the local government was not a “flagship” they would be successful in adopting the national eDay3 program. Now Aalborg local government became one of the local governments that other local governments wanted to copy and their efforts were also noticed by the Danish agency of governmental affairs: *“We have heard what went on in Aalborg local government. They are not a part of our flagship program but still they find ways to connect to the system. That proves to us that we are doing something right”* (Danish Agency of Governmental Affairs). Moreover, as new roles and practices emerged in the re-attached project, the organizational forms of the cross-coordinating groups were changed. The main difference between earlier organization forms and the new was the placement of groups more centrally in the local government that had more direct responsibility. Now employees in rank 2 (which is staff positions just below the directors) were situated in these groups in order to make quicker decisions.

Circuits of connectivity

In the circuit of connectivity the statements about cross coordination and efficiency possessed receptivity particularly at the national level, which showed that the project manager was familiar with the national context and aimed to comply with these directions. This shift in direction created new roles at the national level, as the project manager and Aalborg local government were now used as examples of how to meet the minimum demands required from the national level. At the local level, the organizational change that led to the dissolving of the eDay3 project group also created new positions and roles as other groups gained more influence. The accumulation of statements, practices and discourses from the eDay3 project in Aalborg local government changed both the national discourse as well as local practices.

In a national evaluation of how local governments performed online, Aalborg local government was asked if they were able to reach the national eDay3 requirements in time. Their answer explicitly illustrated how Aalborg local government had now reconnected the local project of eDay3 to the national discourse of efficiency: *“Aalborg local government works closely together with key actors in the region, other local governments and Aalborg University. On this basis Aalborg local government is ready to expand the demands for efficiency for eDay3 and will also be ready to meet the minimum requirements by November 1st, 2010”* (Official answer to the Ministry of Science, 2010).

After the activities in phase two, the project had protected itself from further attacks from the national and central administration levels. Moreover, it had also to some extent made itself immune to complaints and contradictory challenges from within local departments, as these had been dealt with in phase one. By the end of phase one, the project manager had succeeded in localizing a national project into Aalborg local government. In phase two he had then engaged in discursive activities to re-attach the project to national ambitions and demands. He had, in this process of two phases, actively defended both the interests of the local government and the position of the project as having national significance. When the project succeeded in being re-attached to the Aalborg local government’s central administration and the national aims, the relevance of the project group correspondingly disappeared. As a result, a suggestion was made in November 2010 to re-organize again. It was articulated that there no longer was a need for a project group concerning eDay3: *“There is no longer a specific need for this group to exist. There are two tasks left to fulfill. One is to implement the external*

print system and the other one is to get more citizens to actually use the digital mailbox.”
 (Interview with project member, Aalborg local government).

Summary of Phase two

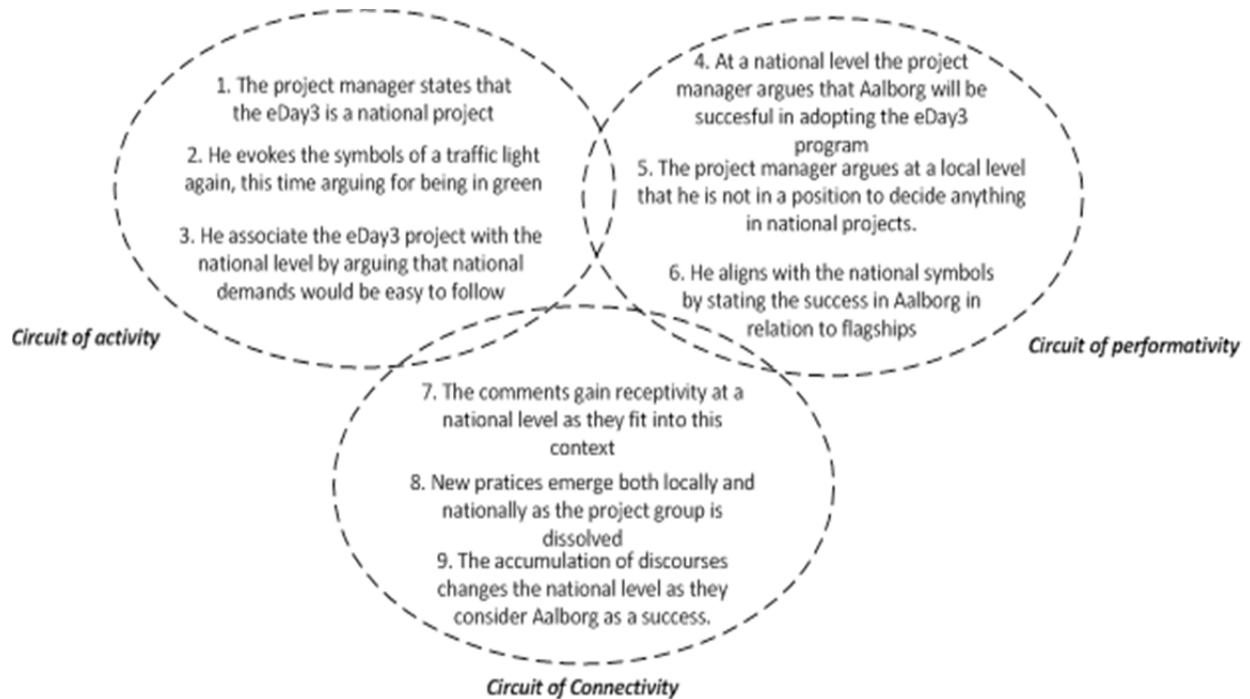


Figure 5: Discourse as a strategic resource in phase two

In the *circuit of activity* the project manager started to (1) articulate discursive statements, repositioning the local eDay3 project into the national eDay3 discourse. By this he managed meaning and complexity by arguing that some of the benefits potentially achieved by eDay3 were highly related to the following formulations from national strategies. He evoked similar symbols and metaphors as in phase one; however, now they took on a quite different meaning. Following the national level discourses he once again evoked the metaphor of the traffic light (2), but in phase two this metaphor was used to illustrate how easy it was to align with the national level ambitions (3).

In the *circuit of performativity* the project manager initiated statements at the national level of how Aalborg local government, although previously in opposition, would benefit from the eDay3 program (4). In the local government he argued that he was not in a position to change everything that was decided on the national level (5). His position and role was merely concerned with how to align different internal and external actors. At both the national and local levels he then aligned the work by using the national metaphor of a flagship (6). He

argued that even though the local government was not a “flagship” they would be successful in adopting the national eDay3 program.

In the *circuit of connectivity* these statements possessed receptivity particularly at the national level as he used concepts formulated in national level strategies (7). This showed that he was familiar with this context and aimed to comply with these directions. This shift in direction created new roles at the national level as the project manager and Aalborg local government were now used as examples of how to meet the minimum demands required from the national level. At the local level, the organizational change that led to the dissolving of the eDay3 project group also created new positions and roles as other groups gained more influence (8). The accumulation of statements, practices and discourses from the eDay3 project in Aalborg local government changed both the national discourse as well as local practices (9).

Discussion and concluding remarks

The case study shows how a key member of the IT office in Aalborg local government engages in discursive activities to generate new meanings that help the enactment and localization of the national eDay3 program. Our case study shows that broad strategic discourses need to be grounded in the prevailing discursive context (thus enacted-in-practice and localized) in order to make sense and be accepted by the actors involved. Furthermore the local discursive activities have to be legitimized back into a broader national context. This indicates that we should bridge macro and micro levels and study the discursive activities that take place at the meso level (as shown in figure 2). By taking this approach we argue for the inter-textual nature of discourses (Fairclough 1992; DiMaggio et al. 1993) and attempt to investigate the linkage between strategic discourses and the context in which they arise.

The findings also indicate that the space for managerial activity is complex and constituted both within historical, national and local discourses. The space and possibility for action is not something stable that is mandated hierarchically. Rather, actors need to discursively take control of their positions. Conceptually, our findings point to the importance of the role of the project manager as a boundary spanner (Aldrich and Herker 1977; Tushman and Scanlan 1981; Levina and Vaast 2005). The framework of discourse as a strategic resource has offered a glimpse of the dynamics at play when an individual actor takes on a mediating or a boundary spanning role to bridge national strategies with local practices. As we saw in the

analysis, the project manager could not only articulate his role as someone put in place to secure the interest of the local departments. Rather, he found himself in a very delicate position as the mediator between the national and the local levels. Future research extending the framework might enable deeper understanding of the way boundary-spanning personnel selectively act on relevant information, summarizing and directing it to different organizational units in terms of strategy work. As described in this paper, information does not contain simple verifiable facts. The expertise of the boundary role occupant consists of interpreting what information might be important to organizational success, including determining who gets what information, depending upon the uncertainty of the information processes (Tushman and Scanlan 1981). As the project manager of the IT office engaged in discursive activities, boundary roles appeared, evolved, and changed as part of his actions. Future research on this topic might explore how the role of a boundary spanner is involved in maintaining or improving the political legitimacy of his statements over time. This is not a role that just anyone can take, but rather has to be fought over and won. The boundary spanner, as a result, has to strive for hegemony in the organization. In the case of Aalborg local government, hegemony should not only be perceived as intra-organizational but from a multi-scalar perspective it also involves mediating arguments between inside and outside organizations.

As a result, it is important to analyze the nature of current individual activity to understand contemporary organizations. Concepts and perceptions in organizations are constantly changing and the notion of an autonomous local government, the role of the citizen, and the space for managerial action mean different things at different times (Salskov-Iversen et al. 2000; Pedersen et al. 2008). Thus it becomes central to ask what motives and interests are hidden within the concepts and how actors can actively engage in discourse to promote certain interests. As pointed out by Latour (1987, p.109) “*interests are what lie in between actors and their goals*” (Latour 1987) and are articulated as actors select what they believe will help them reach their goals (Flyverbom 2011). Key actors in Aalborg local government therefore actively evoked discourses in their activities in order to connect the national IT solution to the local context.

When the eDay3 project in Aalborg local government was introduced the activities reinforced systems of domination by institutionalizing new premises for decision-making within the

local government. This was seen when new cross coordination groups were created and new routes of decisions were enforced. Across the different departments the adoption of the digital mailbox correspondingly resulted in new rules, assumptions and values embedded in the new technology. Following Orlikowski and Robey (1991), the embedded values of technology act “...as a moral imperative, comprising elements in an organizational system of legitimization” (p. 34). With the historical context in mind the argumentation of the eDay3 project and the digital mailbox can be seen as *self-legitimated* (Lyotard 1984 p.47). On the one hand, the IT system was legitimized by means of its efficiency through arguments such as “*IT saves working routines*” and “*digital mail is more efficient than letters*” (E-government strategy, 2007-2010, p.13). On the other hand, this efficiency was legitimized on the basis of the characteristics of the IT system. In the process of the national reform program implementation, the digital mailbox was self-legitimized due to the discursively created relation between IT and efficiency, which fits contemporary aims and goals at both the national and local levels.

The self-legitimization of the eDay3 project and the digital mailbox was part of a governing tool, referred to as *context control*, which is argued to be a specific governing form especially eminent in computerized societies “...since “*reality*” is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all to these games by mastering “*reality*”” (Lyotard 1984, p.47). The control of the context in this research was seen in the relationship between discourses, policies and activities. Control must be discursively exercised as a validation and legitimization of the arguments put forward in specific contexts. As a result, the ability to control how contexts are interpreted makes some IT solutions seem logical and natural at a specific point in time whereas others might seem inappropriate. If IT solutions from earlier reform programs were proposed today they would most likely not possess much receptivity among central actors of Aalborg local government because such solutions would imply opposite perceptions of both service and organizational structure. As a result, the ability to control the interpretation of past and current contexts sets the frame for how individual actors can act and perform. The very deployment of technology within an organization thus represents a normative sanction (Lyotard 1984).

To conclude this paper we wish to underline the importance of longitudinal case studies to be able to show how national strategies become translated into local practices by the evoking of historically produced and context dependent discourses. Another important message here is that locally produced discourses need to be evoked and re-attached to the national strategies over time in order to gain legitimacy. In this way, our study shows that formal strategies are far from stable and firm objects but rather constantly enacted and changed as part of discursive practices.

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