Public Values and Decision Making in the Swedish e-Government Context

This thesis addresses topics of public values and decision making in relation to the use of technology in the public sector. The research is conducted in the Swedish government context. A range of values that is specific to the public sector has been defined and classified in prior research. These public values can be defined as normative agreements of how a government should act. The Swedish government spends SEK 46.5 billion on information technology every year. Some of these funds are invested in improvements that are intended to increase efficiency and openness, as well as to make it easier for citizens to use government services. Such ambitions are studied in the e-Government research field. The literature suggests that reasons to question the promised values of implementing technology in the public sector exist and that many initiatives ultimately fail. The public sector has some unique features that may increase complexity, such as the variety of stakeholders and multitude of organizations that are both involved in the development process and affected by the outcomes. The purpose of this thesis is to explore public values and decision making in the Swedish e-Government context by posing three research questions. 1: How can public values be utilized in decision making? 2: Under what conditions are decisions made in the studied context? 3: How can value-based decision making be adopted by e-Government practice? The thesis is based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from case studies and a survey. Its theoretical contribution is a comparison of theoretical concepts from decision theory and public values, which are then applied to e-Government. Several fragmented concepts from e-Government can be tied together under decision theory. The study’s results show that many decisions are taken under a great deal of uncertainty due to the absence of formal support mechanisms. The Swedish public administration leans toward a variety of project models in its work with e-Government, and these models constitute the arena in which decisions are made and risk analysis is performed. However, many risks as well as opportunities reside beyond the studied projects’ control. Holistic stakeholder inclusion and risk analysis are suggested as practices beneficial for increasing value and reducing uncertainty. The thesis concludes by suggesting that further research should continue to apply concepts from decision theory on e-Government. This includes revealing the motivations and values behind digitalization of the public sector.