A Storytelling Approach for Electronic Government Research

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Abstract

Electronic government has a history of repeating projects that previously proved difficult to implement. One possible reason for this is that we do not learn enough from past experiences. Lessons are not widely shared and we do not always get the “full story”. Only a narrow group have the ability to understand and access research findings. The use of a storytelling approach could make electronic government research more comprehensible, and accessible. It could also be used as an analytical tool to bridge theory and practice. However, storytelling approaches are currently not used within this research field. In this paper, I present an analysis of the value of using storytelling to show how including multiple voices, examining myths, and writing stories could play an important role in dealing with electronic government challenges.

1. Introduction

Once upon a time, not so long ago, researchers began to highlight the need for a new direction in electronic government research. The reason was the identification of a lack of guidance for ambitious projects.

Governments are perceived as early adopters and at the cutting edge of ICT deployment [1]. However, the history of electronic government has two sides. When it comes to the implementation of what can be regarded as rather uncomplicated projects, electronic government has many good stories to tell, with numerous successful applications and systems [1]. Conversely, when it comes to more ambitious ideas on how to reform the way the public sector operates on a fundamental level, the story is quite different. Many problems have been raised and, since the 1990s, there has been a steady stream of new ambitious ideas in electronic government, leaving behind a trail of uncompleted projects [1].

Clearly, there is a need to understand why this is happening. However, the first two decades of research output in electronic government were heavily criticized for frequently having too narrow a focus [4, 8, 9, 11, 36]. Electronic government projects are difficult to plan and implement because they involve many stakeholders and actors [8, 29]. Furthermore, they are usually not implemented in one organization but extend over several organizations within the public sector [8, 29]. To make it even more complicated, these organizations can have different rules, regulations and legislations that must be followed [13, 29].

Whilst there is a lot of research in the field, many researchers are of the opinion that it does not sufficiently address the multifaceted or fundamental questions of governance [4, 9, 11, 36]. To change this situation, many have highlighted the need for a new direction. For example: “… most research and most advances in practice address narrowly defined categories of concern such as government organization, citizen services, interoperability, or personal privacy. By contrast, the future presents complex and dynamic challenges that demand a more holistic and flexible perspective” [4]. Another example was the suggestion that electronic government research should address public administration concerns, to a greater extent, including the politics-administration dichotomy, intergovernmental relations and governance in general [36].

Mounting criticism has led to the research agenda being significantly deepened and widened [28]. However, the problem may not just be the narrow focus or the lack of empirical studies; the problem may be that we do not learn enough from studies already carried out. According to Nielsan and Madsen [24], the knowledge derived from IT projects is generally limited. Usually we are better at planning new projects than we are at learning from previous experiences. This is confirmed by the persistent optimism in, for instance, interoperability. Even though many interoperability projects have failed, we do not give up, we keep trying [1]. Typically, the learning that has taken place is gained through participation, written project documentation and evaluation [24]. According to Nielsan and Madsen [24], what is lacking is a
narrative perspective, which could be used to make sense of past actions through, for instance, the use of storytelling techniques. Ever since communication first began, humans have been telling stories. Storytelling functions as a means of explaining the world and making the incomprehensible comprehensible [2].

The storytelling research fits well within the qualitative interpretive tradition. However, storytelling is more than “ordinary” interpretive research; it is interpretive, qualitative research that can be widely understood [15]. Readers of research are usually a narrow group. Often, research is only read by funding bodies, reviewers or fellow academics [22]. Lately, the focus on publishing research results in scientific journals has increased because of the way universities’ performance is measured. This can lead to problems. As Richardson and Coulthard [26] have stated, the bureaucratic measures of success can be barriers to good research. Research should be accessible to a larger group and storytelling can help in this regard by making the research more widely understood.

What makes storytelling different from other interpretive approaches is the pursuit of stories. This pursuit influences the whole research process. Storytelling could, hence, be defined as a research approach in which empirical material is gathered in the form of stories, data is analyzed by using stories or story elements, and the findings are presented in the form of a story [15].

Traditional techniques for knowledge sharing usually focus on individual rather than collective experience. They present facts and principles as they are, without the negotiation that occurred before the facts became facts [24]. In contrast, stories always have a viewpoint, a narrator. Events are seen through the narrator’s eyes and include the main deliberations [3]. Furthermore, narrative theory states that humans understand their experiences not as concepts, but as stories organized in a narrative form [3]. Experiences that are not structured as a story are, consequently, more easily forgotten. Storytelling techniques aid the memory and increase the level of learning [3].

Accordingly, using a storytelling approach could be beneficial both for addressing the need for broader scope and for reaching out to a broader audience.

In this paper, my main aim is to present an analysis of the value of using a storytelling approach in electronic government research to advance both research and practice. It should be pointed out, however, that storytelling is one of many research approaches and different approaches are beneficial in their own way. However, storytelling is lacking in electronic government research (see section 2 for more information) and I seek to address this gap. I do this by answering the questions: “What is the value of using storytelling in electronic government research and how could a storytelling approach be used to bridge theory and practice?”.

An additional aim of this paper is to make people think. One question to bear in mind when reading this paper is: “should research be easy or difficult to understand?”. This paper is a purely theoretical essay, and is structured as follows: in the next part (2) the method for identifying the research gap is presented. In section 3 there is a brief introduction to the role of stories in policy making. Thereafter, in section 4, I give an account of what storytelling is and discuss the value of storytelling in electronic government. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion and the conclusions drawn.

2. Method

When initiating this work I had a suspicion that the use of storytelling approaches does not exist in electronic government research. To see if my suspicion was true I conducted several searches in Scopus (Elsevier’s database of peer-reviewed literature). I used the search terms ‘electronic government’ and ‘storytelling’ in different combinations and spellings. The searches were made in the title, abstract and keywords. The outcome was that there were no relevant results. One paper [30] pointed to the benefits of listening to stories when gathering empirical data but, otherwise, the paper had nothing to do with storytelling methodology. Consequently, if storytelling could be shown to still exist, it is not being labeled as storytelling. The next step was, therefore, to search with related terms to see if this resulted in any relevant hits. First, I searched for narrative-related research (by using the terms narrative or narratives). The outcome of this search was that the papers found were judged irrelevant. This judgment was made through reading the title and abstract. Once again I identified [30] which was the least irrelevant paper of those found. The others were health-related studies (22 of 40), using the words ‘electronic’ (usually because of electronic health records) and ‘government’ in their descriptions. Consequently, they were not relevant for the concept of electronic government. In those remaining, one other reason for their irrelevance was that the researchers used narrative methods (such as narrative synthesis, narrative interviews, narrative review, narrative and discourse analyses, content analysis, etc.) for data collection or the presentation of findings, but not for both. Another reason was that the word narrative was
used to refer to a “master narrative”, i.e. a shared view of something. Furthermore, there were also conference reviews (n=6) that mentioned various conference papers and these papers addressed both electronic government and narratives, but in separate papers. Thus, the search for narrative/s did not contribute any relevant papers.

The next step was to search for some words frequently used in storytelling research, such as ‘myth’, ‘metaphor’, ‘story’ and ‘fable’. The outcome of this was a number of papers that used these words but had nothing to do with the storytelling method. Consequently, my suspicion that storytelling research approaches are not used within the electronic government research field was confirmed by the searches. Important to point out is, however, that there is an exception to this is, a paper [12] that I (and a co-author) have written previously.

3. The role of stories in policy making

Stories play an important part in contemporary policy making. In early literature on public administration, the politics-administration dichotomy was explained in terms of politicians making policy decisions and assigning their implementation to government agencies [33]. Today, the policy process is more complicated; it does not only involve politicians and administrators [10]. Society is changing and this has an impact on policy making. Nowadays, policy making occurs, according to Hajer [10], in an ‘institutional void’. Here, Hajer [10] was referring to the fact that, on their own, the established institutional arrangements lack the power needed to deliver the requested and required policy results. They are, instead, part of a network of governance in which non-political actors play an increasingly important role [10]. These two different outlooks on public policy making are called government and governance [34]. Government refers to the processes that involve politicians and administrators, who are employed by the state to produce politics. Governance involves more actors and refers to governing in collaboration, i.e. the network control that is characteristic for contemporary Western society [34].

Values and beliefs play a crucial role in terms of their input in the policy process [25]. Historically, three elements have been involved in defining policy making [10]. First, a stable political order has been assumed. Second, there should be knowledge produced in politics that is not political in itself, but scientific. Third, there should be interventions that are problem focused and aimed at changing the given course of events [10]. These requirements are no longer something that can be taken for granted [10]. Governance creates a new arena for new forms of collaboration and ways of acting [34]. Hence, governance changes the conditions for political engagement [32]. In governance, politics is seldom focused on finding one solution that fits all; instead, different actors and organizations are given more opportunities to solve matters in a way they feel appropriate [34]. Essential for governance structures is cooperation between different actors and networks, and an openness that allows different issues to be raised on the political agenda. Networks have always existed in the political context to develop new ideas, but their role today is to also shape and implement policies [34].

This development has several benefits. Governance can, for example, carry out important change processes that government actors and institutions cannot do on their own. Nevertheless, related to this is a challenge concerning governing [21]. Openness to ideas and participation is encouraged. However, allowing actors in networks to drift away and act without governing at all is something that should be avoided; the work carried out in networks should not lose connection with the political decision-making process. Still, this involves a fine balancing act. The networks’ strength is that they are self-organizing and self-governing and, accordingly, the challenge for anyone trying to control these networks is to provide strategic government without undermining autonomy [21]. To do this calls for management strategies other than mere government regulation and order [21].

Löfgren and Sørensen [21] talked about the meta-control of networks: by this, they referred to “regulation of self-regulation” to make the networks coordinate their efforts. This is perceived to be a way of combining decentralized and self-organized networks with a centralized strategic leadership in an age characterized by a fragmented public administration [21]. One strategy is to influence a network through discursive narratives [21]. Through discursive narratives, the network is allowed to operate in peace, but the content is affected. When using discursive narratives, an effective approach is to tell about a “new age”, to create a systematically arranged representation of reality. Using a high production of future visions creates a common understanding of where we are going and why. The aim is, hence, to inspire self-governing networks with mental images that give rise to classic dilemmas in public administration, such as availability, customer orientation, cost effectiveness, aging of the population, and so on. Such mental images produce a story that the actors can relate to, and create meaning and identity [21]. Additionally, they inspire innovation and
creativity. However, as previously described, one
problem that has arisen in electronic government is
that, since the 1990s, there has been a steady stream of
new ideas, leaving behind a trail of uncompleted projects [1]. This relates to ideas that aim to reform the
way the public sector operates. Many of these ideas
have failed when put into practice. Nonetheless, history
seems to repeat itself. Ideas arise and spread, then lose
ground and are replaced by new, similar ideas that are
just presented in a different way [1, 14-27].

According to Rövik [27], visionary ideas have a
cyclical nature. Ideas with great symbolic value for
widespread norms spread quickly; these can include
norms of rationality, efficiency, effectiveness,
development, democracy and so on. Such ideas are
often met with enthusiasm because they represent a
“package” that offers a contemporary problem
description. Rövik [27] stated that these ideas are on a
journey; they have limited duration and are durable as
role models for a limited period.

In terms of electronic government, this
phenomenon has been noted by several researchers [1,
14]. For example, Ilshammar et al. [14] noted that even
though the meanings ascribed to computers, the
political visions, and the main arguments have changed over time, the plans for action have always
remained the same. Ilshammar et al. [14], therefore,
talked about electronic government as “old wine in
new bottles”.

The potential offered by electronic government is
great [7]. What is talked about is that every promised
benefit can be realized. We can have both increased
efficiency and improved quality, simultaneously.
Hence, there is no talk of contradictions between
different goals [7]. Thus, to be able to move forward
we need more nuanced stories.

In contemporary policy making, stories do indeed
play a crucial role. Many future visions are constructed
to make people act and to gently steer them in a desired
direction. Thus, these visions need, to be complemented
by critical reflection to a greater extent. Electronic
government research could, on an increasing scale,
contribute to this. However, to do so, the research must
be accessible, comprehensible, and comprehensive.
Storytelling research could help in all these regards and,
through so doing, play an important role in a changing
society with new rules for policy making.

4. Storytelling – a qualitative, interpretive
research approach

One subject for debate has been the quality of
qualitative research [22]. It has been suggested that
the quality of qualitative research should be evaluated
with scientific rigor (the quality or state of being strict
in conduct and believable) and practical relevance in
mind [22]. Practical relevance is especially important
in electronic government research since it is a research
field that is situated between the worlds of academia
and practice. The debate over how to create a good
balance between scientific rigor and practical
relevance has existed within the information systems
(IS) research field for some time now. IS researchers
have paid great attention to scientific rigor in the
pursuit to make IS accepted as an academic field,
albeit at the cost of producing an output that is relevant
for IT professionals [22, 26].

These two requirements, scientific rigor and
practical relevance, should, however, not be seen as
contradictory; actually they are two sides of the same
coin. If the research is of no use, it does not matter how
good the research process itself has been. It is how
useful the research is that counts [26].

One reason for the low adoption of storytelling in
electronic government research could, perhaps, be that
its use in other disciplines has raised some criticism.
Researchers in interpretive traditions in general have
been called journalists or soft researchers and
storytelling work in particular has been described as
unscientific, full of bias, or entirely personal [17].
Scientific rigor is a topic heavily debated over the
years and in IS there has been, and still is, a battle
between positivism and interpretivism [26]. This is a
well-known battle and some researchers seem to want
to vanquish positivism; however, this is not what the
battle should be about. Instead the wish should be to
assert the right of interpretivism and to measure the
quality of interpretive research using suitable criteria
[26]. In IS, the criteria for positivism have been
applied to interpretivism, which has weakened the
claims of the latter. Consequently, attention has been
drawn to the method rather than the interpretation [35].
Positivist research provides a clear path to the way in
which the quality of the research should be evaluated.
For interpretivism, the path is not at all that clear [26].

3.1. Subjectivity and the role of the
researcher

To find the right criteria for interpretive research it
is necessary to turn to the origins of qualitative
research [26]. Qualitative research has its origins in
anthropology and sociology; thus, key to qualitative
research is the development of understanding.
However, the pursuit of understanding is an unending
activity that is in constant change and variation. Social
reality and our knowledge of it is something
negotiated. We must, therefore, capture the sayings
and doings of people, i.e. we must understand our fellows, the people with whom we share our lives. Furthermore, we must also understand ourselves. Understanding is how we gain knowledge and this understanding comes from within ourselves; consequently, we cannot stand apart [26]. Thus, subjectivity is important in interpretive research and, according to this research tradition, is not seen as something bad. People are a part of their stories and this is something that should be recognized, rather than being seen as bias. When we share stories we are transformed. When we share our stories, new stories emerge and we gain understanding. In interpretive research in general, and in storytelling research in particular, there is a pursuit of multiple voices. The interest in multiple voices is in part epistemological, linked to the question of re-presentation and partly linked by ethics to the question of representation [19]. The authority of the author should be brought in alongside other voices.

3.2. Fresh insights through fantasy

It is important that the researcher always have preconceptions. One way to “free” ourselves from familiarity and think anew is to use fantasy. Fantasy allows us to recover a clear view and make use of imagination to transform our understanding. This is one of the powers of storytelling and one of the reasons why Richardson and Coulthard [26] proposed storytelling as a way to develop good qualitative research. Richardson and Coulthard [26] stated that it is to myth and magic we must turn. Then, from fantasy we can come back to reality with a new understanding. In turn, Kendall and Kendall [15] noted that traditional analysis techniques may inhibit creativity in interpretation. This is not the case for storytelling researchers since they are, in many ways, liberated from the constraints of traditional methods.

3.3. Credibility, transferability and dependability

All this may sound too good to be true. To be free from constraints and to look positively upon subjectivity may appear more like a fairytale than reality. However, the outcome of any research still needs to be a legitimate research product. To assure this, three things are especially important: credibility, transferability and dependability [17]. Credibility is about showing that multiple constructions are represented adequately, and that interpretations were made. When confronted with the experience, readers should be able to “recognize” it. Transferability is about context, which, if described carefully, should allow the judgment of transferability to be made. Finally, dependability is about describing the full research process carefully so it can be audited by the reader [17]. Consequently, the story (which is the research product in storytelling research) should be vital; it should give context and information that capture the reader’s attention and it should present voices and multiple views [15].

When presenting these voices and views, careful consideration should be given to the audience and the storyteller’s place in the story [17]. The telling of the story should make the experience come alive. This implies a need to include events, characters and what the characters say and do. Furthermore, the story should capture and hold the reader’s attention; it should spur the imagination and let the reader participate in the created worlds [17]. Good research is like a good journey; it transforms both the research and the people that are met along the way [26].

3.4. Value for electronic government

If all these requirements are met, the result is, indeed, a broader range of research, because it is not possible to be narrow in scope and still live up to these expectations. In addition, by including all these details, the research becomes easier to understand for people outside academia. Storytelling could, thereby, be used as an analytical tool to bridge theory and practice. In electronic government there is a plurality of users of knowledge; thus, storytelling could be used to extend the concept of knowledge beyond the academic domain to provide practical insights into the nature, form and processes of electronic government, all of which have been critically reflected upon.

It should be noted that storytelling is not about reducing the quality or state of research. The same quality standards should apply as for other interpretive research. In essence, storytelling is about using different tools to make the research more comprehensive and accessible and, thus, bring about an increase in quality.

3.5. Storytelling fieldwork

A distinct aspect of storytelling as a research method is collaboration with organizational participants in the creation of a meaningful story [15]. However, in the past, researchers have treated stories as if they impede data gathering. Historically, it was demanded that data gathering be highly structured and almost ritualistic to avoid bias and minimize intrusion: “The mindset that accompanied data gathering (before it slowly became
information analysis) was to locate pieces of data, both physically in reports and memos, and orally in interviews" [15]. The result was that early authors tended to discuss fragments of narratives rather than capture an entire story. To obtain the full story it is important to look at the organization, its members, its interactions, its purpose, how it manages to survive, and the good that it engenders for society and individuals [15]. Consequently, the pursuit of stories in research involves an all-inclusive approach to the research subject. The ethnographic research tradition found in anthropology is a good starting point for a philosophical basis for such studies [31]. In this tradition, in-depth case studies are promoted, because they involve frequent visits to the field site over an extended period. The difference between in-depth case studies in general and storytelling case studies is that stories are sought after. Still, in-depth case studies can be used as inspiration. Some clues as to how to carry out in-depth case studies can be found in, for example, Walsham [31] and Klein and Myers [16].

However, just being in the field is no guarantee that the right data is collected. A second feature of the anthropological tradition is concerned with “thick description” [31]. In storytelling, “thick description” is achieved by gathering stories. These stories should both be discovered and sought [15]. They could, for example, be discovered through informal interactions. You may hear them in the lunch room or over coffee but you can also provoke them by asking people to tell you their stories. The interviews performed when doing storytelling research are, therefore, not structured, because structured interviews do not allow the participant to tell their stories. Instead, the goal is to ask the participant to tell you about their experiences and request this information be presented in the structure of a story [15]. Kendall and Kendall [15] stated that one way of doing this is to ask the participant to “please tell a story”. This can, however, be problematic for some participants, because not everyone is a good storyteller. To get the participants to tell their stories is probably the biggest challenge to carrying out storytelling research. It is important that the interviewee is allowed to narrate as freely as possible about his or her experience. The hope is that the narrator will become engaged in the story that is being shared; if not, encouraging prompts such as Who? What did you feel? and What happened next? can be used to keep the story going [18].

Stories can be sought through a group activity or one-to-one interviews. The benefits of seeking stories in a group is that the participants are allowed to build on each other’s comments to collectively create a hero, place blame on a villain or solve problems [15]. The main benefit of one-to-one interviews is that the interviewee may feel more relaxed this way and share things that otherwise would not be shared. Consequently, a combination of both approaches may be most fruitful [15].

Stories can be complete or they can be gathered as fragments [2]. In the organizational context, the definition of a story (something with a beginning, middle and end) does not always apply. Everyday stories do not necessarily have this structure. They may also be unfinished, undefined, inconclusive, unstructured, unconscious or unfamiliar [2]. Consequently, it is important to be sensitive when seeking stories. This is, indeed, a challenge for which there is no secret recipe. The researchers need to make choices on their own and adapt their approaches to the situation to get as much out of it as possible.

3.6. Analysis and design

After collecting the empirical material the next task is to analyze it. However, every time we look upon the world we are all too prone to perceive it according to our established patterns [5]. Consequently, it is easy to see the same things over and over again. To move beyond the obvious requires analytical skills and a good analytical process [5]. Fantasy can help in this [26]. According to Denning [6], abstract analysis is easier to understand when seen through the lens of a well-chosen story. For this, Bittel and Bettoni [2] recommended the use of fairytales, because they embody interaction and collaboration and create a community. They do so because they are open to interpretation. For instance, is the fairytale of Cinderella about jealousy, complex family relations or justice? How a fairytale is perceived can vary and this inspires a discussion. People recognize themselves in fairytales; they can relate to and know the story. Well-known existing fairytales provide a “community” in which people can participate. Through fairytales people have a “common ground” and people’s different interpretations of the story encourage them to exchange ideas [2].

To use a fairytale in the analysis could, perhaps, be dismissed as a crazy thought. Often, people are deterred by what they believe are “crazy methods” [5]. In contrast, traditional methods that immediately make sense are usually not questioned. A common method used in scientific analysis is to break the material to be analyzed into parts and then put these parts back together again [15]. Discourse analysis, for instance, is about breaking text into manageable pieces that are suitable for analysis. However, this does limit creativity [15], because new ideas do not emerge. What does take place is merely analysis and analysis concerns what already exists. Human perception and
cognition serve as a self-organizing system and this system needs some provocation if it is to give rise to creative thinking [5]. To use provocations in the analysis is about changing concepts and perceptions. The human mind perceives what it expects to see, which means that we can only develop an idea that we already have. Provocation can take us away from our normal perception patterns and place our thinking in an unstable position. In this way, it can lead us to a new idea [5]. Such provocations can be achieved by using the symbolic power and dramaturgical structure of a fairytale [2]. Using a fairytale in the analysis is, consequently, a way to get away from our established patterns, to move beyond the obvious and to allow creativity to be a part of the analysis process. Interpretive research is often mistaken for always being hermeneutical, but this does not have to be the case [19]. Myers and Avison [23] stated that there are many different modes of analysis; besides hermeneutics another common is “narrative and metaphor”. In narrative and metaphor, symbolism and stories play an important role [23].

When searching for a fairytale to use, the reference point is important, because there must be some consistency. Richardson and Coulthard [26], for instance, selected the story of “The Lord of the Rings” to create a parody about the struggles that IS research methodology has faced. In this parody, the ring of power was used as a metaphor for positivism, a hard enemy for the small Hobbits to vanquish (a metaphor for IS researchers who perform interpretive research). The use of a fairytale in analysis was promoted by Richardson and Coulthard [26] and Bittel and Bettoni [2]. However, not all storyteller researchers have promoted this explicitly. Kendall and Kendall [15], for instance, did not talk about using existing fairtales; rather, they talked about creating them. In their analysis framework they included a number of story elements that could be used in the analysis: for instance, to identify the myth, the enemies, the heroes and the quest. The use of metaphors is always a requirement in storytelling because it is a way of thinking anew. Metaphors are also a powerful tool for illustrating and explaining complex issues. To find relevant metaphors use of a fairytale may help. In Richardson and Coulthard [26], for example, the authors used the characters and plot of The Lord of the Rings to illustrate the struggle of interpretive researchers to make interpretive research accepted in the IS discipline.

However, stories used for analysis and finding metaphors do not have to be just fairtales. One problem in electronic government that has been brought to light in this paper is that history seems to repeat itself. This situation could be illustrated by using a well-known Greek fable such as the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus defied the mighty god Zeus. As punishment for this he was sentenced to roll a heavy stone up a high mountain. To cope with the task, he was forced to use all his powers. When the stone was pushed up on top of the rock it rolled down the other side and Sisyphus had to start again from the beginning. This fable can be seen as a reference point for electronic government because of the difficult assignments that are undertaken and the fact that history repeats itself. Sisyphus was cursed to roll the stone up the hill for eternity, i.e. to repeatedly practice useless efforts and experience unending frustration. However, to escape his punishment Sisyphus decided that physical work was fun; thus, Zeus failed to punish him after all.

One wisdom that can be derived from this fable is that even that which seems meaningless can have meaning. If this story was to be used in analysis we would have to ask ourselves: Is this also the case for electronic government? Just like Sisyphus's work, life has no lasting value. It is we humans who must create value in our lives. We can choose to think that what we do has value, just like Sisyphus decided to value his work. Could this be the reason that we keep trying, despite previous failures? Thus, using a story should encourage new thinking, enabling us to see things in a different way. In this case, maybe the story does not explain that much; however, it does encourage us to think anew.

3.7. Write the story!

After the analysis and design, the research findings should be presented as a story. The dramaturgical structure of a story can help the reader to acquire knowledge and to transfer this knowledge. Storytelling is not just about reflecting upon the content of the story, but also how it is to be written [17]. There is no single way to create a story; rather, there are many different ways. Various researchers have their own view on how it should be done. Richardson and Coulthard [26] presented a rather flexible approach in order to inspire new ways to write, communicate and discuss. According to them, what is important is to create stories that people will listen to and connect with. In their view, it is more important that the stories are heard than that they follow some rigid structure. Richardson and Coulthard [26] also says that qualitative researchers need to make their own choices, because there is no simple step-by-step recipe to be followed. What is important, however, is that there are three parts to a tale: the storyteller, the subject of the story and the audience. It is essential to include
multiple voices. In particular, the voices of minor characters should be heard, because there is a need to capture both uniqueness and variety. Complete stories have a plot, flow and characters [2] and the stories told may be of journeys, adventures, battles, injustices or hope [26]. Furthermore, they can be non-linear and portray contradictions, tragedy or living experience. It is the audience that decides whether or not it is a good story [26].

A more structured view on how to construct a story was presented by Nielsen and Madsen [24]. In their view, a story is sequential, with events that evolve around actors. The sequences describe incidents, states of minds or actions [24]. A story begins by presenting the settings, including characters, problems, time and so on. Thereafter, the episodes in the story follow. Each of these episodes should have a beginning and should develop in the direction of a goal. Furthermore, each episode should link to the overall story [24]. According to Nielsen and Madsen [24] there are four elements of storytelling: 1) a narrator’s perspective, 2) actions towards a goal controlled by agents, 3) sequences that are established and kept, and 4) sensitivity towards the unusual. In this way, stories function as explanations and excuses for the extraordinary and the unexpected.

Kendall and Kendall [15], in turn, pointed to the importance of investigating myths. Stories take on a mythic stance when they represent a shared vision. Kendall and Kendall’s way of writing the story is structured, in contrast with that of Richardson and Coulthard [26]. They proposed 18 story elements that should be included, such as the myth, the adventure, heroes and enemies, the lessons learned in the quest and the outcome of the story. Furthermore, there could also be an epilogue to the story in which the storyteller explains what has happened after the story has ended. Like Nielsen and Madsen [24], Kendall and Kendall [15] believe that a story should be episodic. They highlighted three important aspects of storytelling; it should be vivid, it should contain the elaboration of a myth, and it should be episodic.

Writing the findings of the research as a story can result in several benefits. If carried out well, the story should contribute to a wider understanding, aid the knowledge sharing, capture the reader’s attention and inspire discussion and action. Furthermore, it should spur on the imagination and make research findings easier to remember than if they were presented in a traditional way. One important aspect to recognize, however, is that storytelling may be problematic because of the word limits imposed on journal papers. Kendall and Kendall [15] suggested that one way to handle this is to shorten the story in the paper and then add a link to a website for the complete story.

There are both similarities and differences between how different researchers present storytelling. Nielsen and Madsen [24] focused on the importance of a narrator’s voice when capturing and sharing knowledge across IT projects. They pointed to the importance of including the negotiation that went before the facts became facts. Hence, there is a need to capture all perspectives to get a “vivid” understanding. In the same spirit, Richardson and Coulthard [26] focused on different voices. For them, the goal is to capture the unique, i.e. voices that stand out from the crowd. According to them, research is about understanding the people with whom we share our lives. An important tool to use in this quest is fantasy.

In contrast with Richardson and Coulthard’s focus on the unique, Kendall and Kendall [15] focused on investigating common views through the examination of myths. A myth is a shared belief of people within a society or an organization. The elaboration of a myth is an important part of exploring the elements of a story [15]. Finally, Bittel and Bettoni [2] stated that it is important to use fairytales, because it creates a community within which the teller and the reader can be inspired to discussion. In summary, the key characteristics of storytelling are that storytelling approaches should give careful consideration to: 1) a narrator’s voice, 2) multiple voices and negotiation, 3) myths, and 4) the use of fairytales and metaphors. The readers’ experience of reading the results is important; their attention must be captured and the story should spur on their imagination.

As has been shown, different researchers have slightly different views on how storytelling should be carried out and what should be in focus. Thus, storytelling researchers need to make their own choices and use those parts that fit.

One argument put forward in this paper is that research should be of use. A model (Figure 1) that can be used for inspiration when carrying out storytelling research is therefore included.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Many researchers have highlighted the need for a new direction in electronic government research. In this paper I have analytically shown how a storytelling approach could be used to both make the research more comprehensive and easier to understand by a wider audience. The following research questions were asked: “What is the value of using storytelling in electronic government research and how could a storytelling approach be used to bridge theory and practice?” Its value lies in the fact that it is not possible to have a narrow focus in storytelling, because you
have to include multiple voices and strive for comprehensiveness. Storytelling offers a way to capture a variety of perspectives, voices and discourses that are part of government. Government is not something stable that can be captured and described in general terms.

Stories function as powerful tools to make people act. However, storytelling could also play an important role in avoiding time being spent on the “wrong things”. Myths (assumptions that are used to inspire organizations to act) play a powerful role in impacting on public policy making. Myths usually promise a “better future” in some way and the motive for this better future is to highlight things that need to change. In contemporary Western society policy changes are no longer controlled from the top; they are initiated by dedicated people who take an idea and turn it into action. Such participation is encouraged. However, electronic government is a vague concept that does not provide clear directions for action. Electronic government is a complicated quest and to understand how complicated there is a need to contextualize and to capture the multiple perspectives that exist in this context. This is the key to storytelling. Additionally, storytelling encourages us to, in multiple steps, think anew; both during the research process and the reading of the research results. Consequently, applying a storytelling approach could be really beneficial for electronic government.

The bridge between academia and practice is achieved by using a clear and illustrative language. In the introduction I asked if research should be easy or difficult to understand. This relates to usefulness. If we want research to be of use it has to be understandable. Storytelling could contribute to this. Usually, readers of research are a narrow group. Storytelling allows the research to be more widely understood and easier to remember. We all appreciate a good story and when we hear one, we usually also remember it.

The major limitation of this paper is that it is a purely theoretical essay. The word limit meant that it was not possible to include an example. However, as mentioned in the method section I (and a co-author) have written a paper [12] using a storytelling approach previously and this paper could be used as an example.

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5. References