

Customer Focus in UK e-Government: Or, Putting the Politics back into e-Government

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Abstract

The techniques and technologies of customer service, as introduced under the guise of e-government, have brought certain aspects of public service users into sharp focus, but at the expense of other aspects. It is hypothesised that this effect may lie behind the failure of half a decade of IT-enabled change in public services to improve 'customer satisfaction'. Remedying this situation, it is suggested, will require a re-examination of the model of the customer which underpins customer service as it has been adopted by public service organisations.

Keywords: e-government; public services; customer service; representation; CRM

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEMATIC

Achieving widespread citizen acceptance and take-up of services via new channels presents an urgent and important challenge if we are to realise the benefits from these new and innovative ways of working. In order to do this, we need to improve our understanding of customer preferences, as well as their needs (Cabinet Office, 2006: 52).

In this paper we address an apparent anomaly in UK e-government. Bluntly put, the problem that we want to start with is this: the IT-enabled reform process that goes by the name of e-government has had the idea of customer focus at its very centre, yet there is remarkably little evidence that the actual customers are responding to being focused on in this way. International comparisons have begun to draw a picture of UK e-government matching international standards in terms of the “supply side” but with disappointing take up by the intended users: in short customer focus without (many) customers.

How can we explain this phenomenon of e-government without e-citizens? A range of explanations have been put forward to account for this denouement. Is this just a matter of low awareness, remediable by another advertising campaign and the passage of time? Or are our supposedly world class e-government systems in fact poorly designed and plagued by what Richard Heeks (2006) calls ‘design-reality gaps’. Or is it a matter of relative performance in which, however much public services have improved, they have failed to keep pace with improvements in the private sector?

Our contention in this paper is that there is something more fundamentally wrong here. Specifically, we argue, the problem concerns the representation of the customer underpinning the technologies and techniques of customer focus as they have been adopted by government. We start by pointing out that organisations don’t actually focus on customers; rather they focus on a representation of the customer. These representations shape – perhaps better focus – the attention and the capacity of the organisation to respond to their customers. Issues and areas which fall outside of this focus become invisible, inaudible or incomprehensible to the organisation. It is, we argue, at least partially this problem that generates the ‘they’re not listening’ effect associated with a broad sense of public disaffection with public services.

We complete the paper by arguing that what is required is a democratisation of e-government which is focused on a process of rethinking the representations that underpin the technologies, systems and processes constituting e-government. To recycle a well known slogan from a rather different context, we conclude that there should be “no taxation without representation!”

2 CUSTOMER FOCUS.... WITHOUT CUSTOMER SATISFACTION?

Governments have been putting the customer at the centre of e-government in the UK since the late 90s. The *Modernising Government* 1999 White Paper makes clear the close links between the customer, or user, focus and the joining up of services. The emphasis on public service users builds on a long established critique of the public services as being particularly liable to ‘producer capture’ – that is, services which come to be designed and managed for the benefit of the professionals producing those services rather than their ‘users.’ The adoption of the business concept of ‘customer focus’ was, at first, tentative. The White Paper is clearly informed by the notion of customer focus, albeit couched in the more acceptable terms of a focus on ‘public service users’. According to the White Paper the overarching goals of the modernising process are:

Ensuring that policy making is more joined up and strategic.
Making sure that public service users, not providers, are the focus, by matching services more closely to people’s lives.
Delivering public services that are high quality and efficient.
(Cabinet Office, 1999: 6, emphasis in original).

While UK national Government was, at first, somewhat reluctant to use the “customer” label, the suppliers of hardware, software and consultancy who have sought to supply the increased demand which e-government represents have been less coy. A good example comes from the consultants Deloitte Touche, who have produced an influential set of ‘Global public sector studies’ (2000; 2001; 2003a; 2003b) on e-government. As early as 2000, the company’s e-government report, *At the Dawn of E-government* was subtitled ‘The citizen as customer,’ while the 2001 report, *e-Government’s Next Generation* was subtitled, ‘transforming the government enterprise through customer service.’ By

2003, however, (Deloitte Touche 2003a; 2003b) the theme (and language) of the reports had shifted to highlight the cost saving potential of e-government. Those earlier reports had, however, done their job and had placed the notions of customer service, customer focus and customer satisfaction at the centre of the e-government agenda.

Subsequent central government policy documents have been far more upfront about using the notion of customer focus. Almost any UK policy document relating to e-government in the period since 2000 would suffice to make the point. Here we use the example of a 2002 ODPM Guidance to local authorities on the principles that should guide their e-government efforts.

Joined up in ways that make sense to the *customer*.

Accessible at times and places most convenient to the *customer*.

Customers will have more choice over the way in which they contact and receive public services.

Delivered or supported electronically, facilitating faster, more reliable and better value services.

Delivered jointly, where appropriate, by local and regional partnerships, and connected to a national infrastructure.

Delivered seamlessly, so that *customers* are not asked to provide the same information more than once and service providers are better able to identify, reach and meet the needs of service users.

Open and accountable so that information about the objectives, standards and performance of local service providers and their elected representatives will be freely and easily available.

Used by *e-citizens* through effective promotion of available and accessible new technologies and helping local people to gain the necessary skills to take advantage of the Internet. (ODPM, 2002b: 4 – italics added)

Customer service is, it seems, widely accepted as the core goal of e-government. In spite of this consistent emphasis on the need for customer service, it is precisely this aspect of the e-government programme above all others that is widely seen as underperforming.

First, there are concerns about the poor level of service users' actual take up of the new, customer-focused channels and media which have been built in the name of e-government. For example, in her recent review of UK E-government, Helen Margetts has characterised the situation as follows:

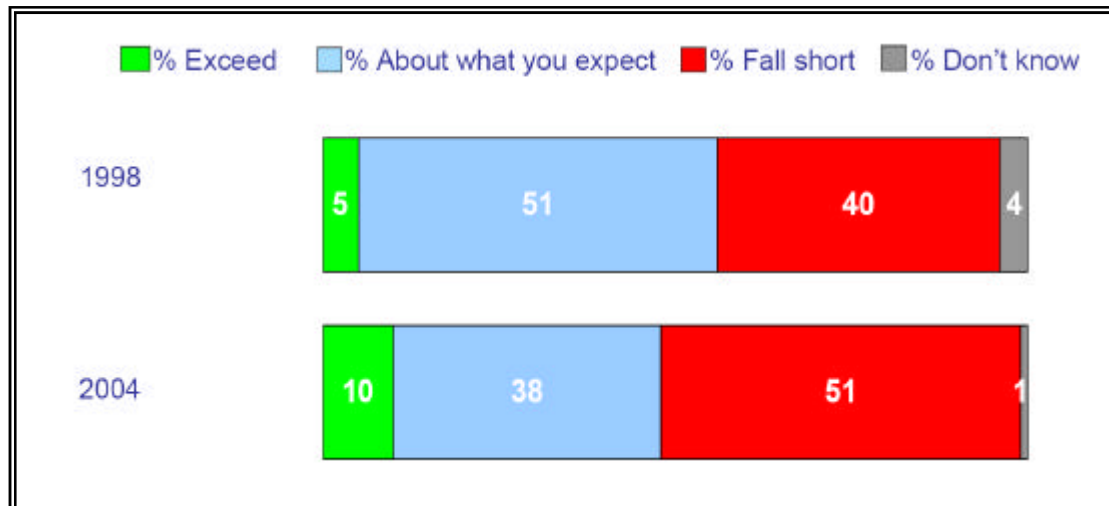
From the demand side, in the United Kingdom at least, the rhetoric is still running ahead of the results. The evidence ... suggests that some of the potential for e-government remains unused. For most citizens, the Internet has brought far more change to their relationship with their bank or various commercial outlets and to their social life than to their relationship with government. Although the United Kingdom scores highly in some of the international rankings of e-government when it comes to actual usage it lags behind other European countries, North America and Australia (Margetts, 2006: 262; See also Jones and Williams, 2005).

European comparisons carried out by Eurostat (2005) indicated that the UK was below the European average for citizen take up of internet-based e-government channels and that it was at the bottom of the 25 Member of States of the EU for business take up of new channels.

It is not only the poor citizen take-up of the new channels offered by e-government that has caused concern. We should not fall into the trap of thinking of e-government as simply 'government on the web'. The technologies and techniques of customer focus are not reliant on any particular channel – modern CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems support telephony and face-to-face contacts as well as web-based interaction. There appears to be strong evidence of an entrenched preference among UK citizens for face-to-face and, above all, the telephone channel (see DCLG, 2006 and Dawn Hands/BMG, 2001). E-government technologies should be having effects in these, more traditional, channels too. But there is, at best, limited evidence that they have had this effect. For example, recent Ipsos MORI research on public attitudes (Page, 2007) suggests that overall satisfaction with public services has actually declined between 1998 and 2004 (see figure 1.). The picture which the

research paints is, of course, more subtle than that bald assertion: there is a group for whom public services have improved significantly, even if this group is outnumbered by those whose expectations have not been met. A similar mixed picture emerged from the Cabinet Office's (2004) attempt to review user satisfaction across a range of public services. However, this research did note that in respect of local government, which both delivers a lot of citizen interaction and has seen substantial investment in Customer Service technologies, 'overall satisfaction ... has dropped notably over the past three years' (2004: 6).

Figure 1: Satisfaction with Public Services (Source: Page, 2007)



Responses to the Question 'Thinking generally about what you expect of public services like local councils, schools, would you say they greatly exceed or slightly exceed your expectations, are about what you expect, fall slightly short or fall a long way short of your expectations?' Base: 2004 - all respondents (1,502); 1998 (5,064).

What is clear is that the investments that have been made in the technologies of 'customer focus' and the techniques of Customer Relationship Management have not (yet) led to the expected improvements in measured levels of customer satisfaction. The British government seems puzzled by the apparent contradiction. Its most recent initiative in this area is the formation of Citizen Panels which directly confront the relationship between the individual and the state in terms of three core questions. First among these is the question of customer care:

1. How can public services make a step change on customer care?
...
 2. What can the state and individuals do to change culture, expectations and aspirations?
How far can the state go in tackling damaging behaviour, and promoting positive, and what should be left to individuals and communities?
....
 3. How should we update the relationship between citizens and the state, focusing on rights and responsibilities?
...
- (Page, 2007)

This initiative follows on from the local government 'e-citizen' project (<http://www.e-citizen.gov.uk/> [Accessed 17 January 2007]) which bills itself as 'raising awareness and driving take-up of Local Authority e-channels'. The 'E-citizen' project includes a 'take-up campaign' advertising the existence of e-channels through which individuals can interact with local government services, a set of 'e-citizen' 'proof of concept' research studies and a set of 'e-Citizen Live' dissemination events.

There are even some signs that the current government love affair with the customer label might be waning. The 2006 review for HM Treasury by Sir David Varney is suggestive of a new caution about the use of the customer label. Varney argues that the customer identity is, for public services a 'partial' identity and that an exclusive focus on the individual customer can obscure the wider needs of 'citizens and businesses.' Varney is clear that 'there is a lot public services can learn from the best parts

of the private sector on how to engage and deliver services for the customer.’ Nevertheless, he continues:

Many of those in public services also focus on the customer. However, within the public service this is often taken to mean the individual who receives a particular benefit or entitlement, rather than considering the needs of the individual as a whole. People rarely identify themselves as being customers of a particular government service. Often they are trying to deal with a task or an event that does not fall neatly and obviously on any one part of government, such as becoming unemployed, getting married, starting a business or dealing with bereavement. As these events will often cut across departmental responsibilities, the focus has to be on understanding what the individual needs. If the government continues to interpret the term ‘customer’ as being limited to those who transact with government at single points then government will continue to serve citizens and businesses without fully addressing their needs (Varney, 2006: 23).

For Varney then, the ‘customer’ works against a fully ‘rounded’ view of the citizen by focusing only on that aspect of the individual which a particular department or agency interacts with: not so much a customer focus as customer blinkers. Yet Varney’s perspective does not challenge the notion of Customer Focus (or in Varney’s preferred terms, Customer Insight) – rather it argues for a more ‘joined-up’ approach to implementing customer focus based on ‘setting some common standards to ensure that public sector organisations can deliver genuinely joined-up services’ (2006: 31).

To what extent there is widespread public acceptance of the customer label is also not clear. The Ipsos MORI research (Page, 2007) suggests that, when confronted with statements such as ‘Britain’s public services need to start treating users and the public as customers’ some 81% of those surveyed (adults 16+) agreed. (On the conceptualisation and measurement of customer satisfaction in the public sector in the UK see Donovan, Brown and Bellulo, 2001; MORI, 2002; Van Ryzin, 2006). However, more in depth research has shown that at least some individuals, in at least some specific public service contexts, are wary of the customer label. John Clarke and Janet Newman (2005), for example, found that health service users are far more inclined to think of themselves as ‘patients’ or ‘service users’ than ‘consumers’ or ‘customers’. Neither ‘citizens’ nor ‘consumers’ are “the primary categories through which [people] live, and think about, their connections to public services”. Clarke and Newman conclude that the resilience of people’s conceptions of ‘publicness’, ‘membership’, and ‘collaboration’ are both a resource and a problem for New Labour’s approach – “the assertiveness of health users (their willingness to ‘stand up’) is constantly glossed by New Labour as ‘consumerist’, but the desires and anxieties about both the present state of the NHS and its imagined futures suggest a failure to install a consumerist subjectivity” (2005: 13).

To summarise the situation crudely, over half a decade of attempts to bring about technology-enabled re-orientation of public services around the needs of the customer not only has failed to see customer satisfaction in public services rise significantly, but has actually seen it decrease. In homage to Robert Solow’s famous encapsulation of the productivity paradox, we might say ‘we can see the technologies and techniques of customer focus everywhere in public services, except in the customer satisfaction numbers.’ Why? This question is taken up in the next section.

3 COMPETING EXPLANATIONS FOR A LACK OF SATISFACTION

A range of explanations for this paradox have been suggested, each identifying a different culprit. One answer is simply to deny that the very visible investment in contact centres, CRM software, customer service training, and so on has brought about any discernable change in the individual customer’s experience of local government. A variant of this perspective would hold that it is too early to be looking for decisive evidence of changes in customer satisfaction. The key point for this school is that the apparent rapid pace of change in terms of structures and technologies within the public services masks a much slower process of cultural change. Such a cultural change has to overcome a deep rooted resistance to change within the public services. In some versions of this story, such resistance may be conscious and explicitly or implicitly organised (the bureaucrats are hanging on to their privileges for grim death) or unconscious and disorganised, but nevertheless powerful. The implicit solution set for this school includes: maintaining the pressure for customer service; further structural change to ‘unfreeze’ deeply held habits within the public services (e.g., through the introduction of greater choice); and further promotion of the disciplines of customer service among front line staffs (e.g., through customer training). In short a cultural strategy focused on changing the culture of public service workers.

An alternative solution shifts the focus from the 'customer-facing' workers to the technologies themselves and their suppliers, both within and outside the public services. The most eloquent exponent here is Richard Heeks (2006). Heeks begins his recent book on implementing e-government with the bald assertion that 'most e-government projects fail' (2006: 3). The dominant reason for these failures, according to Heeks, is what he describes as 'design-reality gaps' – in short the failure to adequately capture the organisational and individual 'requirements' at the design stage leading to technologies which are not 'fit for purpose' when it comes to implementation. Other explanations which focus on the technology either concentrate on the quality of design (e.g., web site usability¹, etc.) or, more typically, on the capacity of public servants to manage large and complex IT projects. In some variants of this perspective, a portion of blame is placed on the IT and systems supplier community (providers of hardware, software and, most importantly, consultancy) who are accused, at best, of overselling the capabilities of their products and services.

If the management of the design and implementation of the technologies and techniques of e-government is to blame, the solution is focused on improving the design and implementation capacity of public services and their ability to manage IT systems and services contractors.

Each of these explanations focuses on processes and forces within the public services and their supplier community. A final set of explanations focuses on relations outside the public services themselves. A first version of this outward perspective examines communication between public services and the public. In this explanation, the public are unaware of the benefits of new customer-focused technologies because they have not experienced them. The solution, then, is clear: advertising and other marketing activities such as the 'connect to your council' campaign, (part of the E-Citizen project mentioned above). A second externally focused explanation looks even further. This final perspective is framed in terms of the 'relative' performance of public services when set against (the best of) private services. This argument does not deny that the investments in customer service have produced improvements in the customer experience of public services over time (i.e., when compared with the customer experience of the same services years earlier) but argues that this is irrelevant. For this school of thought, customer satisfaction (CS) is determined by the simple equation

$$CS = \text{expectation} - \text{experience}$$

It is, then, customer service performance relative to expectations, that is important, and if expectations rise faster than the quality of our experiences of customer service, then customer satisfaction will decrease, even with improvements in customer experiences. The final point in this perspective is to argue that our expectations of customer service are set, not by our past experience of public service interactions, but by (the very best of) our interactions with the private sector. In short: why can't public services be as good as amazon.co.uk or as personalised as myspace.com?

Each of these explanations – whether focused on customer facing staff, the design and implementation of IT or the communications or the marketing functions of public services and customer expectations and comparisons – retains the basic framework of the customer service model. What if it is this model itself, rather than the ways in which it is implemented, that is at the heart of the problem of low take-up of, and poor satisfaction with, the outcomes of e-government enabled customer service?

4 A THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

There is, of course, nothing new about questioning the adoption of the customer model in public services (see, for example, Aberbach and Christensen, 2005; Alford, 2002; Fountain, 2001, du Gay 2000 for some flavour of the various critiques). The general tenor of these critiques has been to highlight the collective, that is public, nature of public services on the one hand, and the significance of egalitarianism in the distribution of public services (contrasted with strategies of 'customer segmentation' in private services) on the other.

In this paper we want to take a different tack. We want to focus on what, in practice, adopting a technology-supported customer service strategy actually means. What, exactly, is the focus of customer focus technologies? The obvious reply is that customer focus implies focusing on the customer. This is, however, too simple an answer. To begin to develop a more sophisticated response we will make a

¹ A major UK government website cull announced in January 2007 entails a reduction from 951 to 26 websites and the streamlining of information through two 'supersites'.

short detour via Gregory Bateson's 1972 essay, pathologies of epistemology (in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 2000[1972]).

Bateson begins his essay thus:

First I would like you to join me in a little experiment. Let me ask you for a show of hands. How many of you will agree that *you see me*? I see a number of hands – so I guess that insanity loves company. Of course, you don't "really" see *me*. What you "see" is a bunch of pieces of information about me, which you synthesise into a picture of me. You make that image. It's that simple (Bateson, 2000[1972]: 456).

What Bateson is so elegantly alluding to is the motivated aspect of vision or seeing. What we see is, to some extent, the product of our own activity of organising sense data into something meaningful for us. From this point of view, while the environment is certainly 'out there' (it is, fundamentally, a realist ontology), our perception of it is always the work of choosing and ordering which elements to bring into focus and which to ignore or leave as a blur, of making decisions about where to draw the boundaries between objects and between figure and ground. We make those choices and impose meaning on the constant stream of sense data that bombard us. We make the image. It is that simple.

We make that image. But we do not, of course, make that image alone or without help. The most basic categories and frameworks which we use to make sense of sense data are, to a very large extent, inherited from the wider culture. In the context of the organisation, this general cultural framework, or common sense, is supplemented (and sometimes contradicted) by more specialist, domain specific organisational or professional frameworks and taxonomies. Thus, what is true of individuals is, in this case, also true of organisations. Organisations don't react to "the environment" – they react to a representation of the environment (see e.g., Manturana and Varela, 1998 for one interesting take on this phenomenon). This representation is not a mere reflection of the environment but rather a carefully constructed image of the environment built on often painstaking collection of data and its subsequent organisation into charts and tables, facts and narratives. What we must always remember, however, is that it is within the organisation that the choices about which facts and which narratives to select are made.

In so far as 'the customer' is seen as a part of the organisational environment, it too is a representation, constructed using a *selection* of 'customer' data drawn from a variety of mechanisms, but selected and ordered according to a representation that is built and maintained within the organisation. Thus, while the concept of customer focus is intended to orient the organisation externally, to do this it must first orient the organisation internally, towards its own processes and techniques and the categories and narratives which underlie them. Before the organisation can turn outwards, it must turn inwards. Strictly speaking, then, public services thus cannot be built "around the customer" – they must be built around a *representation of the customer*.

The need for such a representation predates the introduction of e-government. However, prior to the adoption of computer-based CRM Systems and the like, the representations of public service users remained diffuse, localised and shared through a mixture of bureaucratic process (forms and filing) and the shared norms introduced by professional training and supported by professional practice. The technologies of e-government have imposed a new requirement for a much more explicit and shared representation of the customer. As Paul Dourish has argued,

...there is simply no questioning the central role of representation in developing computer systems. Software is a representational medium, from the interface on the screen to the bits on the disk. What is called for then is a more nuanced understanding of the role that those representations play, how they are subject to a variety of interpretations, and how they figure as part of a larger body of practice (Dourish, 2004: 208).

The adequacy of the representations which are embodied in information systems is a well established academic concern. Academic computer scientists explicitly worry about 'ontologies' (although there is less evidence of these concerns feeding through into much of the software that is deployed in typical e-government implementations).

If the organisational routines of customer service and, the information systems on which they are built, rely on representations, then our concern here is with three important questions. Who gets to build these representations? What tools and materials are used to build these representations and what constraints do these impose? What are the consequences when these individuals and groups build these representations with these tools and materials and they are employed in practice?

5 “CUSTOMER INTIMACY”: KNOWING THE CUSTOMER AND SEEING LIKE A STATE

Customer Relationship Management is based on the goal or target of knowing your customer, of establishing what Varney (2006: 24) calls customer insight, or in Laudon and Laudon’s unfortunate phrase, ‘customer intimacy’ (2007: 260). We cannot, post-Foucault, see such knowledge, let alone such *intimate* knowledge, as a purely innocent appropriation of facts from a stable, objectively knowable world. Foucault’s coupling of knowledge with power should orient us to the extent to which knowledge constitutes its object. Indeed it is possible to make a coherent argument that contemporary Customer Relationship Management technologies do not record information about the customer but rather call that identity into being, shaping a new customer subjectivity (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004).

Our argument here is less radical. Let us start by drawing attention to the visual metaphor behind the notion of ‘customer focus’. Knowledge about the customer is to be gained by looking. But as we have argued, seeing is an active process: in an important sense we see what we are looking for. In figure 2, for example, those who are told to look for a man playing a saxophone (perhaps even implicitly, for example by viewing the picture in the context of other pictures of musicians) will tend to see a man playing a saxophone. By contrast, those told or led to expect a picture of a woman’s head are more likely to see that image. You can only *recognise* what you have already ‘cognised’ (i.e., that of which you have established a mental model). The paradox is that, in order to make sense of the external world we must first look inward to our taxonomies, models and schemas.

Figure 2: Is it Bill (playing the sax) ... or Hilary?



Customer service technologies embody just such taxonomies and models. Customer Relationship Management systems which are precisely designed to focus the organisation’s attention on the (external) customer, similarly require the organisation to first focus on the (internal) model of the customer. And this model is, to a very large extent, one that is built into the systems which support Customer Focus. These technologies increasingly form the ‘lens’ through which public services focus on their users.

There is, of course, a substantial literature on how the state envisages its populations, in James Scott’s (1998) memorable phrase ‘seeing like a state’. As Scott has argued certain forms of knowledge require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality.’ (Scott, 1998, 11)

However this literature has focused on the state's vision of aggregates of individuals – populations, groups, classes – and the (statistical) technologies and techniques used to order and represent them *en mass* (see e.g., Porter, 1995; Bowker and Star, 2002). The technologies and techniques of Customer Focus and Customer Relationship Management take Scott's notion of focus to a new and much more individualised level.

Which aspects of the public service user are brought into sharp focus by these technologies and which aspects are softened or rendered less visible? The customer that is brought into being is, of course, the classical *homo economicus* of positive economics. This public service user is envisaged as individual, characterised by means-ends rationality, coherence, self-knowledge and self-interest. Additionally the model of the customer that emerges from the rhetoric of customer service in public services is time pressured, demanding and constantly susceptible to rising expectations. This is the model that CRM systems and their associated technologies are built on and this is what they are looking for, what they are ready to re-cognise.

6 COMPUTER SAYS “NO”

If the techniques and technologies of customer service enable public services to see certain aspects of their users, they also obscure other aspects. Behaviours that are not comprehensible in terms of the self interested, self-knowing individual become meaningless or their meaning is blurred. To shift the metaphor from vision to hearing, we can point to the increasingly noted opinion of public service users that ‘they’re not listening,’ that the management of public services are unable to process and comprehend certain aspects of what their users are trying to tell them (see e.g., McHugh, 2006). To mix the two metaphors then – ‘they’re not listening because they can’t see us’.

This effect is not restricted to public services. The disempowered worker, portrayed in the television comedy programme Little Britain, whose catch phrase is ‘computer says “no”,’ is as likely to work in the private as the public sector. Linda Penny (2005) has beautifully captured the mock sincerity – in her phrase, the ‘corporate bullshit’ – of private sector customer service with its refrain of “your call is important to us.” As Harry Frankfurt (2005) has pointed out, what makes this kind of statement into Bullshit is not that it isn't true. After all, your call really is, in the end, important to the organisation. What makes it bullshit is the lack of sincerity behind it. Your call is important to us, not because you are important, but because your business is important to us. All that changes with the transfer to the public sector or the monopoly infrastructure provider is that what is important about your call is reflected not in the ‘bottom line’ but in the performance management statistics or the volume of complaints to the regulator.

What is to be done? First it is clear that representation *as such* is not the problem. Organisations can only interact with their environments through the mediation of a representation of that environment. The vision of a more direct and “authentic” interaction with the users of public services is another kind of Bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005). Rather than try to avoid the problems of representation by going around it, we propose to tackle representation head on.

One approach here would be to join those who extol ‘the active citizen’ and the much more direct participation of individuals in the governance and management of public services, through mechanisms such as the membership of boards and citizen juries. In this sense, then, users might seek to increase their ‘representation’ within public services. This approach has its limits. As Declan McHugh has recently argued, the desire to be heard does not imply that people are keen to participate more directly in the governance and management of public services:

While the call for more participatory democracy has a visceral emotional appeal, in practice it may only succeed in engaging those already over-represented amongst voters and party members—that is, the educated, affluent and middle-aged. Mechanisms designed to provide greater opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in decision making as a means of increasing legitimacy and reducing the perceived democratic deficit may therefore have the opposite effect (McHugh, 2006: 551).

Such approaches also underestimate the extent to which experiences are shaped by operational decisions taken by professionals, rather than policy decisions taken by governing bodies. Even if we were to endorse widespread acceptance of the ‘active citizen’ role, we would emphasise the importance of first examining how this role relates to the models which underpin the techniques and technologies that mediate service users’ interaction with state bodies.

The problem then, for us, is much more one of opening up representation at the level of the models – representations that are embedded in the standard operating procedures of customer service and its associated technologies. Perhaps the most important component of this is to reverse the desire for ‘intimate’ or ‘personal’ knowledge that is deeply embedded in the theory and practice of customer service. Richard Sennett (2004) has, as usual, got to the heart of the matter. For Sennett the problem with such knowledge is that it shows a lack of respect for the autonomy of the other, the public service user. It doesn’t give space to the other to present themselves as an autonomous being because the public service organisation already ‘knows’, or thinks that it knows, what the user is like. Sennett puts it as follows:

Autonomy, as we have seen is not simply an action; it requires also a relationship in which one party accepts that he or she cannot understand something about the other. The acceptance that one cannot understand things about another gives both standing and equity in the relationship. Autonomy presupposes at once connections and strangeness. (2004: 177)

What is necessary is not that the public services gain intimate knowledge, constructed through the categories and classifications of customer service with their ready-made understandings of the needs of the user, but rather that the user is given some space to define themselves and their priorities. This requires, ironically, that public services show more humility about their levels of understanding of the priorities and needs of users – in Sennett’s phrase ‘the acceptance that they cannot understand things about the other’. The danger is that throwing more ‘understanding the customer’ technology at customer service will actually undermine the capacity of public services to listen to their users and register their needs and concerns.

7 CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO ‘REALLY’ LISTEN?

Let us briefly rehearse the argument. Customer service in public services is only working in so far as the model – the representation of the customer – of the customer on which it is based is meaningful to that customer. When the model is not meaningful it creates dissonance – the public service provider can only see and register their effect on the customer in the terms provided by their model of the customer. Public service user responses that fall outside the parameters of the representation or model become meaningless or have their meaning blurred. This generates the ‘they’re-not-listening’ effect that surveys of public service users have noted.

This kind of effect cannot be reduced by “better marketing” but only by rethinking the model of the customer in a more complex way. That rethinking will involve actually engaging with “customers” and letting them take a role in building the way they are represented. This is, of course, a political process. But it need not imply the dreadful vision of more ‘participation’ in focus groups and meetings as much as the recognition that each service encounter needs a little space for the negotiation of the representation of the user – which might go well beyond the bounds of the customer stereotype.

There are some signs that, in parts of the public sector reform movement, this kind of realisation is being taken seriously. Some of the conclusions to a recent study for local government (Back/RBA, 2006) chime well with this view. For example, the research showed that young people ‘want to set the agenda not just respond to yours’ [that is, the council’s]. Even more tellingly, e-democracy national project leader is quoted as saying: ‘Rather than concentrating on mechanisms to help them speak, authorities should focus on improving their ability to listen, understand and engage...’ (Back/RBA Research, 2006: 7-8)

Yes, of course, most people will respond to the ‘customer’ label to some extent, if it implies an improved choice of access channels; more efficient delivery and other benefits that are relevant to them as individuals. Some data do suggest that some users of public services do want to be treated more as they are by private sector service providers some of the time. But when they are engaged with on a deeper level it seems that they do not relate so easily to the idea of being a ‘customer’ (Clarke & Newman, 2005). They see their relationship with the state differently. So even if uptake of e-channels begins to improve over coming years, feelings of satisfaction towards the public’s relationship with public services may not necessarily follow without a re-thinking of the basis of that relationship.

How can public service organisations solve this satisfaction gap? This paper is not the place to prescribe detailed solutions – a task, no doubt, for a major socio-technical research programme. What we would suggest here, however, is that by approaching e-government by way of the ‘customer’ model that infuses the concept of customer service (and its associated techniques and technologies) at the core of the programme, we start to appreciate how the service user is being represented – and hence understood – by public service organisations. And this is a good place, we argue, from which to begin

to understand why service users may not be fully satisfied with their relationships with those organisations. It leads us to question whether a set of customer-focused practices that have emerged in a commercial setting and which rest on a particular notion of the relationship between server and served can be expected to reliably deliver satisfaction in a public services setting. Further, it suggests that any attempt by government policymakers and practitioners in public services to re-think how the complexity of the service user's role(s) may be more adequately accommodated, needs to be sensitive to the ways in which those roles are re-presented within the technologies and techniques of e-government. Finally, we would suggest that those technologies and techniques should be based on listening to, understanding, and engaging with those users – enabling the user to represent themselves and not to always have the work of representation done for them.

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