

# Meta-Services as a Buffering Mechanism on the Way to Relational Public Services

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## ABSTRACT

This position paper discusses the concept of meta-services—services that bridge the gap between the existing public services and the latent citizen needs—as a critical element in the transition from transactional to relational public services. The paper is based on the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project, Civic Agency in Public E-service Innovation (CAPE). The project explores new forms of civic agency in public sector service development in collaboration with public libraries and citizens in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing→Interaction design process and methods

## KEYWORDS

community engagement, digital civics, public sector, libraries, service design

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## 1. Introduction

Civic agency and forms of citizen participation have recently received increased research attention in public sector design. In HCI research, there has been what is called a civic turn with an increased focus on how community-based design research can provide digital tools relevant for public service development [3]. A sign of this civic turn was a new research area that emerged around 2015, termed digital civics [4, 6], also referred to as civic media or civic tech [1]. Digital civics is described as a cross-disciplinary research area mainly

concerned with supporting citizens as agents of democracy with and through technologies and in dialogue with public institutions [6]. This envisioned democratic agency includes digital support for inclusion in civic life, enabling citizens to organize around civic assets, and most importantly for this paper, participation in civic technology design [3].

The emergence of digital civics challenged the dominant transactional model of public service delivery and citizen interaction with the public sector by bringing a new perspective to public service provision. Digital civics explores “how digital technologies can scaffold a move from transactional to relational models of service provision, organization, and citizen empowerment, and the potential of such models to reconfigure power relations between citizens, communities and the state” [6]. This is typically done through collaborations between local governments and citizens. By introducing participatory platforms, for example, citizens take an active role in shaping service provision. This can take the form of platforms for civic debate, crowdsourcing platforms for city, open data uploaded by citizens’ mobile apps for civic engagement, etc. [1].

Following digital civics, our goal in the CAPE project was to empower citizens and help local governments achieve the shift toward relational service models. Despite being at the forefront of the digitalization of the public sector, however, the Nordic countries are still far from getting there. The current service provision models for services that affect all residents, such as national identity verification systems or healthcare platforms, follow a top-down model. This lack of citizen engagement in service development risks the exclusion of certain groups and the reproduction of unjust practices, which, in turn, leads to the so-called digital divide.

Against this backdrop, the CAPE project explored new forms of civic agency in public sector service development in collaboration with public libraries and citizens in three Nordic countries. We collaborated with the local municipalities, organizations, and communities across the three project sites: Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Malmö. Our interventions served as

a testbed for moving to relational models of service provision and redefining power relations. A starting point was that public libraries could have a significant role for empowering citizens in public sector design. There are several reasons why libraries have a strong potential to serve as hubs for citizen engagement and partners for participatory design and technology education in general. They could also become innovation hubs for citizens through their non-commercial nature and long tradition of bridging the digital divide [5]. We will discuss how certain library services, which we call meta-services, bridge this divide. Further, we argue that these meta-services are critical for a successful transition to relational public service provision.

## 2. Public sector digitalization and the digital divide

The strong push toward what is called a digital society in the Nordic countries means that more and more of the interaction between citizens and their governments is expected to take place digitally through services accessed on the Internet. This change creates a form of inequality that is referred to as the *digital divide*, meaning that the citizens who lack the skills needed to use digital public services risk being marginalized.

In the Nordic countries, many public libraries offer support to digitally challenged citizens through IT help desks hosted within libraries, often attended by volunteers, as a complement to other public support services. In the CAPE project, we studied volunteer-driven IT helpdesks in Denmark and Finland [2]. Over the last year, we also did a case study of how IT support is provided to citizens in Ballerup, Denmark, for the newly rolled out national digital identity verification service called *MitID* [My ID]. The public function that offers support to citizens with all digital skill levels for services such as *MitID* is called *Borgerservice* [Citizen Service]. However, it provides basic support only. Once the service is up and running on citizens' devices, they are referred to the IT helpdesk in their local library. In Ballerup Library, this helpdesk service, called *IT-stuen* [The IT Room], offered digitally challenged citizens extensive help. The attendants were volunteering peers who provided elaborate explanations and other on-demand support, even training. That is, there is a clear distinction between the support offered through *Borgerservice* and the support for the digitally challenged provided by *IT-stuen* at Ballerup Library. We refer to buffering services such as *IT-stuen* that cater to citizen needs not covered by public services as meta-services (see Figure 1).

## 3. Meta-services as an element in a relational model for public sector service development

In essence, the term meta-service (from the Greek μετά, meta, meaning *after* or *beyond*) means service behind a service. A

meta-service has two basic characteristics. First, it fills the gap between the existing support system for a public service and the kind of support citizens who use that service need beyond what is already available. In this way, it acts as a buffering mechanism. For example, the volunteers at *IT-stuen* provided support for the digitally challenged beyond the limited support *Borgerservice* already offered. This allowed them to accommodate the specific needs of the older adults of the community (service behind a service). Second, since a meta-service addresses the needs not covered by the relevant public service, it knows what works and what does not work—and it could feed this knowledge into the relevant public service to improve it. For example, the volunteers at *IT-stuen* knew about the nature of the gap. This knowledge could then be used to improve *Borgerservice*, but more importantly, it could be used to improve the *MitID* app to better match the needs of the older adults of the community who sought help at *IT-stuen*.

Meta-services are not necessarily limited to IT-related problems and digital services. For example, Rosengård Library, the immigrant neighborhood of Malmö, Sweden, provided job seekers with the extra support they needed in their interactions with the Swedish Public Employment Agency. The meta-service is integrated into what in Sweden is a common library support activity, known as the language café. As with *IT-stuen*, it is operated by volunteers. This meta-service handles a different kind of service problems than *IT-stuen*, but it has the same potential to feed into the relevant public digital services to improve them.

In summary, meta-services can provide vertical knowledge sharing from citizens to public service organizations that could potentially strengthen civic agency in public sector design. If meta-services that handle the same type of problems (e.g., IT helpdesks in libraries) are networked, for example, then this knowledge-sharing and agency could be strengthened even further through horizontal knowledge sharing across libraries. Our goal in the CAPE project is to further explore the potential of meta-services as a core element in a relational model for public sector service development.

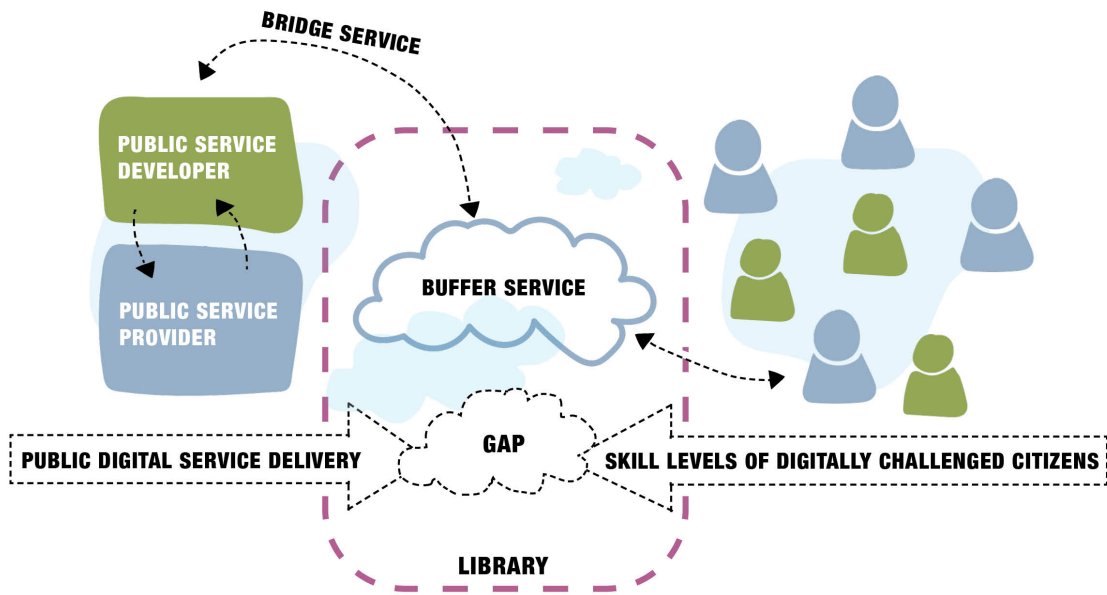


Figure 1. Meta-services as a buffering mechanism.

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