Birth of a Failure: Consequences of Framing ICT projects as Failures for the Centralization of Inter-Departmental Relations

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Abstract

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Digital government faces a paradox. On the one hand, e-government programs still perceive the informatization of administrative procedures as a driver for rationalization, innovation, and economic growth. On the other hand, failure rates in public administration’s digital infrastructure development represent major examples of irrational investments to the eyes of both the media and citizens.

Traditionally, e-government studies and practitioners have tended to see in information and communication technologies (ICT) the embodiment of Weber’s promises of bureaucracy as an organizational form rooted in standardized legal-rational authority (Weber, 1980). “In the second half of the 20th century information technologies have been regarded much as Weber’s conception of bureaucracy was regarded in the first half – that is, a rationalising force in government” (Margetts, 2003, p. 4). For this reason, e-government has been associated with “modernisation”, “efficiency improvement”, “procedural streamlining”, and “simplification” as forms of rational standardization.

On the other hand, public and media debates increasingly depict the informatization of the public sector as a never-ending, complex, expensive, and uncertain process, and ICT expenditures are often seen as an unjustified “waste” of public money. With the recent economic crisis shrinking resources for public services such as health-care and education, the invisibility of information infrastructure (Aurigi, 2008; DeNardis, 2012) has become a hindrance in justifying growing expenditures on ICT. Therefore, criticisms of the gap between high investment and the (alleged) lack of benefits have flourished on expert blogs (Ballard, 2013; Bloch, Blumberg, & Laartz, 2012;
Veldwijk, 2013), as well as in the more traditional media (Bos, 2014; Stokmans, 2014a; Tromp, 2013).

How has it happened that technologies on which so many expectations were placed that promised so much came to be framed in such a dystopian way?

Failures are a long-standing concern in the information system literature (Jiang & Klein, 1999; Lyttinen & Hirschheim 1987; Sauer, 1997). However, while in the private sector ICT failures are usually set aside regarded as unavoidable by-products of innovation, when it comes to taxpayers-funded projects failures are often accompanied by public criticism and high visibility in the media. In some cases, debates can migrate into the political domain, reach be the subject of parliamentary attention debate, and even trigger consequences in the organization of the administrative consequences.

The case of the London Ambulance Service (LAS) is a well-known example in this regard (Beynon-Davies, 1995; 1999; Finkelstein & Dowell, 1996). In 1992, the newly built developed LAS Computer-Aided Despatch system (LASCAD) crashed failed, leading the newspapers to report that between 20 and 30 patients might have probably died as a direct consequence of the breakdown (Watts & MacKinnon, 1992). Following this claim, not only was a parliamentary public inquiry launched, but also the Chief Executive had was forced to resign (MacKinnon & Goodwin, 1992).

More recently, in the UK the Child Support Agency system, the Passport Agency system, the tax credit system, the Rural Payments Agency system (Syal, 2013), and the NHS patient record system (Curtis, 2011; Syal, 2013) have reached made headlines as cases examples of major failures. These and other cases in turn became object of were investigated not only by the National Audit Office, but also by parliamentary commissions, such as the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) (2011).
The Netherlands are another country in which several parliamentary working groups and commissions have been set up to address claims of failure originally raised by the media. They are a relevant case in two main respects. First, ICT failures have been addressed by many high number of political initiatives, some of which have been launched ad hoc. Differently, unlike from the UK (where the PASC is a permanent parliamentary committee that conducts inquiries about a broad range of problems, not only failures nor information systems), in the Netherlands temporary commissions and working groups have been established with the specific purpose of addressing ICT failures. Second, in this context media-triggered claims often do not stop at the political discursive level, but can come to affect the organization of administrative inter-departmental relations. This was visible in the workings of a recent Dutch temporary parliamentary commission on failures in governmental ICT programs. This commission was established to investigate claims of huge “wasting” of public money as initially reported by newspapers. Newspapers’ close frame identified failures as a single government-wide issue having and attributed those to uniquely technical causes alone. By adopting this formulation without further problematization, the Parliament de facto reinforced and legitimated it. This seamless adoption eventually turned out to have consequences not only for the political debate on ICT failures, but also for the operational organization of inter-departmental relations.

Using this case as evidence, this paper on one hand attempts to extend the concept of framing as a model of the relationship between government and the media to the field of government infrastructural failures. While agenda setting and other approaches that are specifically focused on infrastructural failures stress the role of media in putting a specific issue under the spotlight of the political agenda, different other scholarly perspectives also...
highlight also the importance of how these issues are constructed. The cascading activation model, for instance, assumes that interpretive frames “leak” from the higher level of government down to parliamentary and expert elites, then to the media and their frames and – finally – trickle down to public opinion (Entman, 2004). However, when their content resonates with “cultural congruence”, specific frames can become influential enough to feed back from the lower to the higher levels (Entman, 2003).

We suggest that the discussion on who which one (media or politics) exerts more influence over the other can turn out to be not so much a binary argument (i.e. does politics influences media vs. media influence politics or vice-versa), but rather a function of the alliances facilitated or hampered in a specific time period by a specific frame. Analysing the fortune success of a specific frame as a function of its content, this paper shows how situated representations of actors and causes can trigger path dependencies that shape the landscape of possible alliances and inevitable deadlocks.

On the other hand, this inextricability of content and context does not only affect the political debate on ICT failures. Once the Parliament adopts a specific frame as dominant, this latter can acquire some power to enforce changes in the operational organization of inter-governmental relations. While literature has amply addressed the relationship between media debates and policy processes (Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994), the extent to which the inner workings of the administrative organization are affected by public debates is an under-investigated field of inquiry, to which this paper attempts to contribute.

The following section presents the main theoretical frames on media and government upon which this work is built. In particular, it compares phronetic planning research and cascading activation as far as direction of influence and attitude toward frame content are concerned. In Section 3, methodological choices are accounted for, as far as both data collection and data analysis are concerned. HereIn that section, we also briefly introduce a
specific understanding of failures as unstabilized assemblages, drawn from the Science and Technology Studies research field that underpinning this research. In Section 4, a case study is described narratively, resulting from the comparative analysis of some hearings held before the Dutch parliamentary commission on ICT. That case shows how the media’s framing of governmental ICT policies as “waste of public money” has triggered political support pressures and, eventually, led to organizational transformations in government procedures, actors and tasks. In Section 5 we discuss these results of the narrative analysis, and finally in Section 6 we draw some conclusions.

**Literature on Media, Government, and Infrastructural Failures**

In an article recently appearing in this journal, Klijn, van Twist, van der Steen, & Jeffares (2014) identified three perspectives on the media’s influence over government: public relations, mediatization, and agenda setting. To For the purposes of this research, only the second and third ones of these are relevant.

The conceptual framework on mediatization concentrates on the intrinsic characteristics of the media system, and identifies some biases – or termed “media logics” – that can strongly influence political or administrative rationales. According to Bennett (2009), four types of informational biases can be identified as the result of recent economic developments in the media business: 1) strong personalization of events; 2) emphasis on conflict and crisis; 3) focus on isolated stories out of context; and 4) preoccupation with social order. The “media logics” can invade other domains, such as the political and administrative ones, making them adapt to their inherent requirements (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Strömbäck, 2011). This “invasion” mainly takes the form of politicians and public executives adapting to the media logic by “speaking in sound bites and dramatizing their performance” (Klijn et al., 2014, p. 9).
The agenda setting perspective is explicitly focused on how the media can influence the political agenda. “The agenda perspective highlights the complexity of the interaction between media and governance processes and the various factors that might influence the impact of media attention on [political] agenda setting” (Klijn et al., 2014, p. 8). Authors in this tradition consider the role that the media play in putting-placing a specific problem under the spotlight. Some of them focus in particular on how a policy issue comes to be constructed as the result of struggles among actors that compete to set the political agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

Drawing on both perspectives, Flyvbjerg (2012) describes how planning research on megaproject failures was able to generate media exposure and top positions in the public agenda, thus in turn effectively gaining political impact in transforming planning practices. The “phronetic planning research” Flyvbjerg and his colleagues pursue consists of “injecting” research results into the media coverage of megaprojects. According to the author, this form of publication triggers some “tension points” that make the story relevant for the media, and are thus likely to enter the political agenda. With their focus on power and “suspicious practices”, tension points are in fact potentially generative of story-telling that is interesting for the media. Therefore, alliances become possible between planning researchers providing studies on cost overruns, benefit shortfalls, risk, optimism, and deception, and media hungry for narratives of conflict and crisis.

When, for instance, phronetic researchers released results about the first Danish megaproject, the threats received by the highest-ranking government official in infrastructure planning worked as litmus paper revealing that a tension point had been reached. Not only did this phronetic strategy raise media attention, but the issue moved to a high position in the public agenda, and ultimately it led members of the Danish Parliament to address the media debate in the parliamentary agenda (Flyvbjerg, 2012).
Phronetic planning researchers look for tension points in order to question existing planning practices, and thereby create space for new, more democratic, effective and transparent procedures (Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). However, the notion of “tension point” itself reveals little of its content, apart from its being controversial. Following the mediatization perspective above mentioned above, emphasis is put on controversy, conflict and crisis as vectors to reach-achieve media attention, regardless of the situated meanings being conveyed.

On the other end of the spectrum, the cascading activation model accounts for the influence of government on the media by focusing on the frames that circulate among the different various levels of society (Entman, 2003; 2004). This model was developed to explain parliamentary and lobbying elites’ influence on U.S. foreign policy; however, it can also provide valuable insights for our field of analysis.

The cascading activation model assumes framing as the process of “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2004, p. 5). The model proposes a five-tier metaphorical cascade in which frames and influence spread from one actor on the top of the network to the others (Figure 1). Actors are: 1) the level of government administration; 2) parliamentary and expert elites; 3) media and 4) their frames; and 5) civil society.

According to Entman, the spread of “ideas” is highly stratified. As with actual waterfalls, while moving downward is relatively straightforward, for ideas to move upward an additional “pumping mechanism” is required. Looking at figure 1, while influence proceeding from the executive branch level exerts the greatest strength, it is much more difficult for frames from at lower levels to move back up to leaders. For example, “journalists possess less
ability to shape news frames than members of the administration or elite networks” (2003, p. 422).

However, despite this hierarchical conceptualization, Entman acknowledges identifies a “pumping mechanism” that can enforce frames generated at the lower levels. What he calls terms “cultural congruence” measures the ease with which a frame can cascade or rise up through the different levels. Drawing on hegemony theory (Augelly & Murphy, 1988), he argues that “the more congruent the frame with schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy. […] The most inherently powerful frames are those fully congruent with schemas habitually used by most members of society. Such frames have the greatest intrinsic capacity to arouse similar responses” (2003, p. 422, original emphasis)

In summary, while – drawing upon agenda setting theories – approaches native to the field of planning and infrastructural failures highlight the power of the phronetic researchers to influence the media— and politics, in turn—by harnessing conflict and opposition, frame-based approaches native to foreign policy scholarship assume a more hierarchical model of influence, nevertheless mitigated by “cultural congruence”. In what follows the remainder of this paper, we address a case similar to that depicted by phronetic planning researchers, in which mass media debates on failures in infrastructure developments turned out to be successful in influencing the parliamentary agenda. However, we show not simply just that the conduct of the media had consequences for the political agenda, but also that the way in which the issue at stake was framed by the media steered the direction of action toward specific organizational solutions. In other words, the case analysed suggests that the discussion on about which one (media or politics) exerts more influence over the other can reveal unexpected situatedness, if only one takes into consideration how an issue is constructed. In a given situation, specific representations of actors and causes can trigger path
dependencies that shape the landscape of possible alliances and inevitable deadlocks. Before that, we briefly describe the methodology used in this study.

**Method**

As to data collection, we have analysed the hearings of the Dutch temporary parliamentary commission on governmental ICT projects. In addition to the commission hearings, ministerial decrees, newspaper articles and expert blog posts were also analysed, in order to cross-check the actors’ accounts. The selection of the newspaper articles and blog posts was not conducted on a statistically valid sample. Rather, those newspaper articles and expert blog post were analysed, that had been explicitly acknowledged as relevant by informants themselves during the parliamentary hearings. This choice followed a constructivist approach that does not assume *a priori* some media or sources as more relevant than others, but does consider the citations made by informants as *a result* relevant in themselves (Latour, 2005). The parliamentary commission on ICT was established in 2012 as one of the eight research commissions required by the “Future and Research Agenda 2012” approved by the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament in late 2011. The ICT commission was expected to understand report on the causes of the alleged high failure rates in informatization projects of informatization of the public sector. In particular, it was aimed at finding out why significant investments had returned considerably fewer results than expected. To this end, the commission was tasked with assessing ongoing projects by finding and recommending methods to standardize project management. In April 2014, the first hearings took place, and the final report was published in October 2014. The commission’s hearings provided rich opportunities for analysis in three respects. First, being a parliamentary initiative, the commission was translated into the political agenda some debates that up to that moment had taken place in traditional media or internet blogs. The commission was a sense-making endeavour, which – by directly
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and explicitly addressing Dutch citizens\textsuperscript{vii} – contributed to the stabilization of criticism as a structuring dynamic of the national politics of informatization.

Second, the hearings allowed the comparison of accounts given by a vast arraywide range of actors (ministries, local authorities, civil servants and public managers, consultants, executives from supplying companies, small entrepreneurs), some of whom would have been difficult to reach for a research interview (e.g. ministries). Third, since inbecause during the hearings informants were explicitly asked to provide their explanations of why projects failed, their accounts described in unexpected details the inner workings of the government.

As to the methods for data analysis, in the vast continuumwide range of approaches to narrative policy analysis (Van Eeten, 2007), we moved towardchose narratology the narratological extremity, which privileges the close reading of the specifics of texts (Bal, 1998). First, we identified the narratives built present in the accounts by individual informants. Here, the unit of analysis were was single hearing sessions (about 1,5 hour-long), during which members of the ICT commission used to posed questions to individual informants. Since for the purposes of this paper we concentrated on high-level decision-makers (e.g. ministries, public executives), there was no need to reconstruct collective narratives that were representative of different diverse types of actors (Van Eeten, 2007).

Second, for each narrative being identified we recognized couples pairs of opposing actors. In particular, we looked at how tasks and roles were distributed among actors, according to the competences and types of knowledge they were said to have. Third, we looked at whether other actors mediating the frictions between the opponents were recognizable. This additional step was crucial, as it assumed that infrastructural failures were unstable assemblages that needed to enrol further actors to reach achieve stabilization.

This is in fact a major methodological suggestion drawn from that branch of Science and Technology Studies called termed “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT). ANT explains the
relationship between elements (i.e. actors, both human and non-human) and the whole assemblage (i.e. networks) in terms of “translation”. Translation refers not only to the transformation of meaning from one language to another one, but also to the position an actor comes to occupy in a network as the result of the alignment of its and others’ interests (Latour, 1987, p. 117).

ANT therefore explains failures in terms of actor-networks that are as not yet stabilized actor-networks, and which need to enrol new potential actors (both humans and technologies) through a chain of translations that iteratively defines and positions them in the network. As the number of actors enrolled increases, the network is both lengthened and strengthened, to the point at which it becomes stable. If failing infrastructures must need to enrol additional actors to reach achieve stabilization, by tracing those actors which mediated frictions we thus hoped to figure out discover which new actors were enrolled in the Dutch governmental ICT projects to counteract prevent failures. Table 1 summarizes these three analytical steps.

Results. The Case of the Dutch Parliamentary Commission on ICT

“Failing Governmental ICT Projects” in the Media: Government-wide and Technical

Government ICT infrastructural failures entered the Dutch public agenda as a fully-fledged issue only in 2007. According to the hearings, until 2007 there was no comprehensive monitoring overall picture of ICT projects going o operating at the governmental level, nor a comparative analysis of their development. ICT activities were dispersed around the directorates in charge of personnel, organization and information at the various government departments, such as the directorates in charge of personnel, organization and information (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2006). Most importantly, informatization used to be the responsibility of each individual ministry.
Things changed in early June 2007, when an article entitled “Automation swallows billions of euros” appeared in the Trouw newspaper (Dekker, 2007). Drawing on international comparative research, the article alleged that more than six billion euros per year were being “wasted” in “automation systems” by “the government”. The article reported calculations by professors from the universities of Eindhoven and Amsterdam that, showing that of all ICT projects, 30 percent were never completed, 50 percent encountered serious problems, and only 20 percent could be termed successful.

These claims pushed the Lower House of the Parliament into investigating “why so many ICT projects were running out of hand” (as the chairman of the 2012-2014 commission put it). On June 13th 2007, the first debate took place in the Lower House, led by an ad hoc working group. Over the years, several audit initiatives have followed, up to the current parliamentary commission on ICT projects on which this case study is based.

Like in the accounts by phronetic planning researchers, in the Dutch case the alliance between researchers and mass media reporting on failures in infrastructural developments succeeded in influencing the parliamentary agenda, such that ad hoc working groups and commissions were established, rather than the other way round, as Entman’s model would suggest. Even more, the effects of the media debate were not limited to the political agenda. As the 2014 commission’s hearings revealed, the Trouw article activated a series of upward cascades that had also consequences for inter-departmental relations. However, these consequences were not simply triggered by the diffusion of the issue to other media – other newspapers and expert blogs in primis – and political elites, as Flyvbjerg’s approach would suggest. The way the issue was originally constructed had a major role in making some alliances more likely, and while hampering others. As a matter of fact, the way in which the “failing ICT projects” issue was framed by the Trouw’s article rested on two premises:
1 – Failures in information infrastructures are a government-wide problem, and therefore should be addressed in a centralized way;

2 – Failures in information infrastructures primarily reveal technical causes, and therefore should be addressed through technical knowledge.

First, in defining the issue, the Trouw article referred to “all ICT projects” “in the government” (bij de overheid). That is, ICT infrastructural failures were framed as a single government-wide phenomenon. The article did not refer to single discrete informatization activities scattered around the various departments, ministries or at other governmental levels (e.g. municipalities), but to what could be termed a “partitive totality” (Greimas, 1976): an ensemble of distinct entities that can nonetheless only be conceived in an aggregate manner – namely, “governmental ICT projects”.

Second, the Trouw article framed “governmental ICT projects” as primarily technical activities aimed at automating existing administrative processes (automatiseringssystemen). By definition, automation refers to the streamlining of existing procedures through the use of machines, with the aim of reducing human intervention. This dichotomous approach was reinforced by the article, which identified failures with problems of a technical in nature (e.g. software bugs) (Dekker, 2007). Conversely, the article might have mentioned, but it did not, identified different causes, such as the non-use of perfectly running software, as the scholarship on technology and users has shown (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003; Wyatt, 2003).

Given this specific framing, it is important to note that not only had the newspaper used a rather closed very narrow frame, but also the Parliament immediately closed it off. No counter-frame was offered by the parliamentary bodies in order to put together an alternative narrative. On the one hand, “ICT projects in government” was the standard definition by which parliamentary initiatives were labelled since...
2007. In particular, the 2012-2014 parliamentary commission framed information infrastructures as a partitive totality to be addressed Cabinet-wide, rather than at the level of individual departments. As we will see in the next sub-section, this framing enabled the Lower House to demand an overview of all governmental informatization activities, thus engaging in direct confrontation with the Cabinet. This in fact pre-selected and sharply reduced, in turn, shaped the range of possibilities options available to stem prevent future failures.

On the other hand, the parliamentary commission embraced the Trouw’s understanding of ICT projects as primarily technical endeavours requiring exclusively technical knowledge (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2013). During the commission hearings, only one civil servant resisted an instrumental understanding of information infrastructure development as something separate from the primary processes of policy making: “There are no such things as ICT-governmental ICT projects, but only projects led by the government” (a public officer).

In summary, by seamlessly adopting the Trouw frame without further problematization, parliamentary working groups and commissions de facto reinforced and legitimated it. Far from being an unquestionable objective fact, the “failing governmental ICT projects” issue was the result of researchers and a newspaper framing information infrastructure development as a primarily technical activity taking place government-wide, and of political actors (i.e. parliamentary working groups and commissions) adopting this definition without problematizing it. In Entman’s terms, we have here a case of “total dominance” by one frame initiated by the alliance between researchers and a leading newspaper, and reinforced by parliament the commission works (besides other media outlets). As we will show in the following sub-sections, this seamless adoption had consequences for the administrative response to failure claims.
Introducing a New Role: the Responsible for ICT Coordination (RICTC)

We might say that the Trouw article performed three of the four basic functions that the cascading activation model attributes to frames: 1) it defined a condition as problematic; 2) it identified its causes; and 3) it conveyed a moral judgement of those involved (Entman, 2004, p. 5). The fourth function – i.e. endorsing remedies to the problem – was left to the parliamentary bodies.

The primary measure devised-proposed by the Parliament to stabilize governmental ICT project costs and time overrunning-overruns was claiming for a new control function. A “responsible for ICT coordination” (RICTC) role was meant to exert control, and to provide the Parliament with a constant overview of ICT projects being developed by all central government departments making up the Executive.

As Figure 2 sum-up shows schematically, the way this new role was envisaged by the Parliament showed continuities with the way the issue was initially constructed by the Trouw article:

1 – The RICTC role was expected to report from a government-wide perspective;
2 – The RICTC role was expected to report on all projects having some information technology component.

First, the RICTC role was intended to have a government-wide insight. This was not the only possible level of analysis-solution, since individual ministries would also have been in a position to report individually to the Parliament. However, the level selected entailed solution adopted was to-establishing a single coordinating role with the duty of reporting to the Parliament about all ICT activities going-initiated by the Cabinet. This solution was consistent with the construction of the issue of “failing governmental ICT projects” as a partitive totality.
Second, the RICTC role was intended to report on all projects that had any information technology component. As the previously-mentioned civil servant noted, what fitted into this category was not unambiguous. Far from being ontologically grounded, the distinction between technical and non-technical projects was consistent with Trouw originally framing the issue as technical, and with the Parliament accepting that characterization unquestioningly.

The new coordinating role was therefore established as endowed with purposefully centralizing tasks functions by design. The RICTC function was meant to achieve a complete overview of all workings ICT projects of the whole Cabinet as far as information infrastructures were concerned, and to be the main source of information for the Parliament. Unsurprisingly, deciding which actor should actually assume the RICTC role was not straightforward.

The solution initially envisaged by the Parliament was to delegate the RICTC role to one ministry. However, this solution collided with both constitutional and unwritten bureaupolitical logics. On the one hand, in the Dutch constitutional system ministers have overall responsibility for their departments, and which are completely constitutionally independent from each other (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005). Granting coordinating responsibility over ICT to one ministry would have meant subordinating other ministries’ autonomy to a primus-inter-pares (i.e. one-first among equals). For this reason, members of the Cabinet resisted the idea of delegating the new role to one member:

The Lower House actually wanted the Minister for Internal Affairs to take overall responsibility for all ICT projects. At the request of the Chamber, I dutifully explained this to the Cabinet. The cabinet members – by the way, together with me himself – did not find that a good idea. I have already mentioned the reason for that: you should not have just one person, if at all possible, responsible for all government ICT projects of
government. [...] If you make just one minister responsible, then you have to change the
Constitution. (Former Minister of Internal Affairs)

On the other hand, this resistance also revealed the collegial attitude proper to the
Dutch Cabinet, where bureau-political logic prevents one minister from imposing her or his
will on the other members of the Cabinet. As one member of the temporary commission
summed it up, “it might be not so much the juridical arguments that are prohibitive, but the
more political and administrative arguments that may be the real obstacle” (a commission
member).

Informatization and the Centralization of Operational Management

In summarizing previous arguments, the media first and in their wakening
politicians framed the issue of “failures in governmental ICT projects” in such a way that the
main role introduced to stabilize the actor-network (i.e. the RICTC) identified to stabilize the
actor-network was designed to deliberately entail centralized purposefully exerted centralized
controlling tasks. Indeed, the RICTC role was expected to achieve a panopticon-like
overview of all government-wide technical activities, and to act as mediator between the
Parliament and the Cabinet. Because of this nodality, it turned out to be difficult to
delegate this role to an actual actor; constitutional and bureau-political considerations
prevented it from being attributed to one a single ministry inter-pares.

Other logics not directly related to informatization came to drive the conundrum out of
the deadlock. Between 2007 and 2010, a movement toward the centralization of operational
management (bedrijfsvoering) was taking place at the Dutch government. This resulted
mainly in one ministry assuming a Cabinet-wide coordinating role for operational tasks. Since
the RICTC role was framed as technical and Cabinet-wide, the problem of its
attribution solution of the conundrum could exploit this was found in this ongoing

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centralization trend, and solutions analogous to those created for other operational tasks were found.

Here is a description of how this happened, starting from the end in reverse chronological order. In a 2010 letter to the Lower House of Parliament, the Minister for Internal Affairs requested that her Ministry be given the coordinating role in all modes of the operational management of the whole Cabinet. The Minister’s request was motivated by budget-cutting imperatives:

[Establishing a coordinating ministry for operational management] was not just about ICT, but also about the operational management of central Government. The main driver to appoint a coordinating minister was the established objective of reducing the size of the civil service by 10,000 employees. [...] Members of the Cabinet had to do this jointly. Then, you have to agree on how to achieve such a cut, what you cut, how many officers remain at which departments, and so on. Certainly at that point there was a need for coordination. (Former Minister of Internal Affairs)

In the words of the former Dutch Minister of Internal Affairs, the policy-making vs. operational management dichotomy was invoked in order to overcome some deadlocks in the order of inter-departmental relations when it came to massive restructuring of the civil service. While – as we have seen above – policy-making was constitutionally allocated to individual ministries, operational management could follow a different path. As a consequence, technical operations (including personnel management) could be centralized under the responsibility of one ministry, provided that they were not delegated to political figures (i.e. the minister herself), but to technical ones (i.e. a new Directorate General, see below).

Indeed, throughout the period 2007-2010 centralization of operational management across inter-departmental relations was a novelty for the Netherlands, as a brief historical reconstruction can demonstrate. In the Dutch ministerial ordersystem, until 2006 operational
management tasks were carried on by autonomous units at each ministry. However, at that time operational management started to follow a movement toward centralization that culminated in the 2010 letter to the Lower House of the Parliament referred to above.

As early as 2007, operational management had established into something more than a set of tasks replicated within each ministry. A few months after coming into office, the Minister of Internal Affairs (whose hearings we are here analysing) appointed a new Directorate General for Central Organization and Operational Management (DG COOM) in her Ministry. The tasks of the new DG included “the development, implementation, maintenance and evaluation of a Government-wide common vision of the operational management, and the contribution to the preparation of proposals for further cooperation and integration in that areafield” (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2007).

The strengthening of a coordinating role for operational management at the central Cabinet level was further enforced by the ministerial decree of 4th July 2008 entitled “Central Government Reform”:

the Cabinet sets new government-wide goals for the operational management. The Cabinet considers it necessary for the operational management that a framework policy at the central level shall be enacted. This should cover the field of Human Resource Management, Information Management and Information- and Communication-Technology, Procurement, Housing and Facilities Management. Therefore, I have established the Directorate General Central Organisation and Operational Management (DG COMM) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Council of Ministers has agreed to the terms of reference of this DG COOM. In line with this, the administrative units across the operational management of the civil service will also be reorganized as to their tasks,
responsibilities and mandates. (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2008, authors’ emphasis)

The change in intergovernmental relations entailed a reorganization of tasks and responsibilities across administrative units. The Directorate Personnel, Organization and Information, for instance, was composed of a Directing Director Staff, an Employment Department, a Labour Quality Department, an Organization Department, and an Information Department. The 2007’s ministerial decree re-allocated these direction departments to the newly constituted DG COOM.

Given As a result of the ongoing enforcement of a Cabinet-wide coordination for operational management, the role of RICTC followed the same destiny similar to that fate of the coordinator of personnel management. Following a pattern similar to that which led to the constitution of the DG COOM, the RICTC role was attributed to a brand new technical actor – the Chief Information Officer (CIO) – whose office was appointed located in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

We suggest that this solution to the initial deadlock was possible because of the way the RICTC role was defined, which in turn resonated with the way in which the “failing ICT project” issue was initially framed. As Figure 3 shows, on the one hand, it was because the RICTC was expected to perform government-wide centralized tasks that it could join an existing movement toward the centralization of operational management. The need for a coordinating figure was a common feature of both financial and informatization logics, and acted as a “handle” for the latter to connect to the broader movement.

On the other hand, if the RICTC function had been conceived of as a political role, the introduction of the RICTC function would have been more sensitive to constitutional logics. Instead, by framing it as a technical figure, the RICTC role could be attributed
to an operative actor (i.e. the CIO), rather than to a political one (i.e. a member of the Cabinet). Figure 3 summarizes this articulation argument.

Therefore, at this stage it is worthwhile to investigate in a little more depth the partitioning of knowledge that allowed this construction. This is where an STS approach can most importantly successfully supplement frame-based theoretical models.

**Content-Specific and Systemic Knowledge**

Due Thanks to the creation of the DG COOM and of the coordinating CIO, from 2007 to 2010 the Ministry of Internal Affairs centralized tasks that were previously duplicated in each ministry. We have seen that this was possible by invoking thanks to resuming the policy-making vs. operational management dichotomy inherent in NPM: it was only operational management tasks that were delegated to the DG COOM and the CIO, thus by-passing constitutional and bureau political logics that by definition apply to policy-making.

These changes in the inter-departmental order were also facilitated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs claiming to act as mediator between the Parliament and the Cabinet:

I used the arguments and pressure of the Parliament in the Cabinet to have things done there [i.e. in the Cabinet]. When I said in the Cabinet that I had had a general consultation with the Parliament and that they insisted that I gave them a list of [ICT] projects, this gave put me in a position with colleague ministries such that they had to support me.

(Former Minister of Internal Affairs)

As the STS literature points out recalls, knowledge plays a crucial role in positioning actors at the intersection of different logics (Law, 1991). On which type of knowledge could the Ministry of Internal Affairs rely, in order to claim a nodal position as mediator between the Parliament and the Cabinet?

During the hearings, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was described as having operational management knowledge: “the attention and knowledge for operational
management that are proper to Internal Affairs are not proper to other [departments], which are more focussed on policy” (Former Minister of Internal Affairs). By inference, other ministries (e.g. Public Works and Water, Defence, and Housing) have specific policy specific knowledge necessary to carry on their functions.

During the commission hearings, a parallelism can be traced between these two types of knowledge and the policy-making vs. operational management dichotomy. Actors with policy-making tasks are characterized by specific expertise in their particular domains of intervention. Differently, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has no specific expertise, but a “systemic” form of knowledge, that is necessary to address operational management tasks. This coupling of task attribution and type of knowledge is described by the former Minister of Internal Affairs as the “system accountability” construction:

with “system accountability” it is intended that you [i.e. Internal Affairs] are not directly responsible for the content, but you are responsible for the system. Some tasks, for instance, are decentralized to municipalities. They are more directly responsible for them, but the Minister [of Internal Affairs] keeps a kind of system accountability for what happens. I mentioned the advantage of that, and I maintain that if you as minister have system accountability for ICT projects of the government, it does not mean that you are personally responsible for any IT project. I use the example of the [ICT] security system in road tunnels. It would be extremely foolish to give a project in that area to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which has no expertise in the field of traffic and transport; and neither does have a large staff of officers expert in the field of traffic and transport. (Former Minister of Internal Affairs)

This binary-coupling of task attribution and type of knowledge also included a pattern of distribution of accountability. It delegates accountability over “content” to local authorities and other ministries, and accountability over “system” to Internal Affairs. We sum up the “system accountability” construction in Table 2.
However, in a deeper analysis, policy specific expertise and systemic knowledge do not constitute a real dichotomy, since they are defined according to heterogeneous logical criteria (Rutgers, 2001). On one hand, policy specific forms of expertise are defined according to fields of application and required disciplines. This is the classical functional form of organization, in which a clear set of competencies is organized according to the “unity of command” principle (Raadschelders, 2000). On the other hand, it is not as intuitive to define “systemic knowledge”. In the system accountability construction, systemic knowledge is not defined with respect to a specific set of competencies, but only in relational terms. First, it is the form of knowledge necessary to address operational management tasks. Second, it is the peculiar form of knowledge held by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Third, it is a form of meta-knowledge useful to supervising the deployment of content-specific knowledge.

Systemic knowledge thus resembles what ANT and STS scholars term “technical knowledge”: an apolitical and instrumental rationality that avoids addressing any political decisions (Latour, 1996). This is why systemic knowledge in the commission hearings came to overlap with ICT-related expertise: “you need to just hold together content and system, that is, ICT. You should not separate that” (former Minister of Internal Affairs). In other words, ICT knowledge is a form of black-boxed knowledge: useful to exerting supervision, but never in turn subjected to evaluation, or even description. In this respect, the delegation of coordinating ICT responsibilities (i.e. the RICTC role) to an actor endowed with systemic knowledge (i.e. the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the CIO) turned out to be an inevitable truism.

Discussion. Shaping the Landscape of Possible Alliances and Inevitable Deadlocks

At the outset of this analysis, we saw that the newspaper Trouw article addressed framed failures in governmental information infrastructures by adopting two unquestioned
assumptions. First, failures had to be addressed government-wide, rather than at the level of individual departments or ministries. Second, failures concerned only from technical activities shortcomings, rather than the primary processes of government.

The resulting “failing governmental ICT projects” issue was seamlessly adopted by the Parliament, which – instead of proposing a counter-frame – performed the last function associated with any new frame: it endorsed a remedy to the problem (Entman, 2004, p. 5). A RICTC role with government-wide scope and overview on all ICT activities was thus identified as the main stabilizing element, and an actual CIO was appointed at the administrative level of operational management. This, in turn, affected the inter-departmental organization of the Cabinet, with Cabinet-wide operational management of information systems falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, through its coordinating CIO.

Similarly to cases described by phronetic planning researchers, this case shows that – when it comes to government infrastructural failures, and differently from the field of foreign policy – the media directly influenced not only the political agenda, but indirectly even the very organization of the administration. If we compare this case with Entman’s scheme in Figure 1, it apparently shows the opposite results: new frames initiated by the media can be strong enough to influence the parliamentary elite. Even more, once the Parliament adopted the media-initiated frame as dominant, this frame acquired the same power to steer changes in the organization of inter-departmental relations (i.e. the centralisation of operational management in the hands of the Ministry of Internal Affairs).

However, it is also true that the diffusion of the ICT failure issue to political elites and indirectly to administration could rely on some congruencies. The specific way the issue was originally framed had a major role in making some certain alliances more likely, and while hampering others.
On the one hand, the fact that the “failing ICT project” issue had been defined as government-wide facilitated the mutual reinforcement with centralizing logics already going prevalent on at the level of inter-departmental relations. The need to introduce a RICTC role with government-wide scope “resonated” with the centralization of operational management pushed-driven by financial logics imperatives. On the other hand, the fact that the issue was framed as having technical causes impeded any juridical-political solution, while it enabled facilitated an operational one solution. The technical character of the issue led actors to also conceive of also the RICTC as a technical role. This in turn allowed by-passing the constraints posed by constitutional and bureau-political logics. If it had been conceived of as a political role, the introduction of the RICTC would, in fact, have been more sensitive to constitutional and bureau-political logics (see Figure 3).

In other words, the way the issue was initially framed by the media and then adopted by the Parliament shaped and unintentionally pre-selected the landscape of possible alliances and inevitable deadlocks it steered the direction of action toward specific organizational solutions.

If we follow Entman’s notion of “cultural congruence”, we could hypothesize that the frame proposed by the Trouw was so congruent with ongoing schemas that it was able to reverse-engineer the Entman’s cascade. Therefore, which ones were the schemas that dominated the political culture, to the point that the cascade model could be inverted?

It is undeniable that claims of infrastructural failures involving public resources could find wide resonance in the financial climate of late 2000s/early 2010s. As a matter of fact, the premises under which the Trouw article framed the “failing governmental ICT projects” issue postulated the “precedence of economically based values over legally based values” (Moe, 1994, p. 114) introduced twenty years ago by NPM. As a consequence, this case reveals a pattern of influence on government by narratives of failure that is rather
different from that described by the phronetic research approach. While phronetic research argued that the media tend to influence planning practices toward more traceable political accountability, our case study shows that when narratives of failure continue their journey into the governmental-administrative agenda, they can tend to boost magnify financial concerns, rather than principles of democratic accountability.

However, this explanation risks echoing functionalist reasoning, nor does it add much to a heuristic of change. A complementary explanation for the sensitivity of the government to media claims of ICT failures might be found in the organizational reputation literature. According to Maor, Gilad, & Bloom (2013, p. 582), government agencies are “more likely to respond to opinions about core functional areas with regards to which [they have] a generally weak reputation, or about matters wherein [their] reputation is still evolving, and to keep silent over functions regarding which [they] generally enjoy a strong reputation”. These authors argue that the intensity of a response to criticism is inversely correlated to the strength of their reputation in a specific area.

Adopting this framework as an explanation would suggest that the Dutch Parliament strikingly reacted to media-triggered ICT failure claims because informatization is an area wherein its reputation is uncertain weak. Indeed, in the commission hearings the weak reputation of government agencies with regard to ICT expertise was a recurring theme, as it is also widely acknowledged by the literature on eGovernment (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006). The introduction of a RICTC role endowed with technical knowledge was exactly intended to counter this lack of knowledge.

Therefore, under this lens the same parliamentary working groups and commission on ICT failures might be conceived of as an attempt by the Dutch Parliament to improve its reputation as far as information systems and ICT expertise were concerned.
time, we cannot avoid noticing that this goal was only partially achieved. During the parliamentary commission’s hearings, in fact, one of the strictest constant requirements request was asked that informants witnesses refrained from using technical jargon. As we have discussed in Section 4.4, “ICT knowledge” was “black-boxed” as a form of systemic knowledge. While ICT knowledge can act as an umbrella term for very different wide range of skills (e.g. data center management, programming, application development), none of these specializations was mentioned in the commission’s working papers, nor were other technical and/or social details mentioned, that could have helped explain the causes of system failures.

Conclusions

This paper has described the media-prompted rise of the notion of “failing governmental ICT projects” issue in the Netherlands in since 2007, and has followed considered how it linked (or did not link) with other governmental-administrative logics. Despite some tentative solutions (e.g. the appointing a general CIO), as of today the actor-network built to prevent considerable cost and time overruns of overrunning ICT projects has not yet stabilized into a permanent governance structure, as recent press statements by the parliamentary commission’s chairman have shown (Stokmans, 2014b; Veldwijk, 2015).

In its final report published in October 2014, the Dutch parliamentary commission advocates for the creation of an ICT responsible agency that to supervise the development of information infrastructures across the different various ministries. If in the abstract terms, the solution remains the same, up to know discussed (i.e. a government-wide supervisor endowed with systemic knowledge), what changes is the actual concrete actor called tasked with fulfilling this role. The commission suggests creating the an “Office for ICT Assessment” (Bureau ICT-toetsing - BIT), a temporary ICT authority composed of “independently-minded and autonomous experts” (Dutch temporary commission on government ICT projects, 2014, p. 2). As a further confirmation of our analysis, in its reaction to the report, the Cabinet
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has proposed the appointment of the new BIT under the control of the Cabinet-wide CIO (Veldwijk, 2015).

Conversely, differently, following Roe (2013) we suggest that the figure in charge of “managing the mess” should possess both systemic knowledge about the macro design and expertise of specific projects. As Roe has pointed out, trying to handle wicked problems from a macro perspective that can only rely on formal and deductive knowledge might easily worsen problems. Likewise, “managing the mess” from a micro perspective endowed only with experiential knowledge of micro operations might lack in reliability-scope. According to Roe, actual mess management should be delegated to mid-level professionals, who can integrate the macro perspective with contingent scenario formulations, and the micro perspective with pattern recognition drawn from experience of individual projects. Similarly, we suggest that the BIT – or any other agency having ICT coordinating functions – should pursue the integration of both deductive and experiential knowledge, if it aims at successfully in halting or preventing the haemorrhage of disasters in ICT projects (Pelizza & Hoppe, 2014; Hoppe, 2015).

To conclude, the case study comes with a recommendation to those actors in charge of translating any media debates into the political and governmental agenda. In this case, they are parliamentary working groups and commissions. As we have seen, addressing infrastructural failures can lead to different a variety of organizational outcomes, depending not only on how an issue is initially constructed by the media, but also on whether this construction is adopted with or without problematization by political and administrative actors.

We might wonder whether we would have obtained the same organizational solution (i.e. coordinating CIO under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), if failures scarcity of benefits had been problematized-framed by the Parliament in a different way than...
that adopted by the Trouw, so that they did not align with the financial logic and the ongoing movement of centralization of inter-departmental relations, but rather with constitutional, bureaupolitical considerations rationales. Parliamentary groups and commissions would have the possibility opportunity to steer the number of possible organizational solutions, but if only they problematized how the issues framed by the media are translated into the political and governmental agenda.
Notes

i While the authors would prefer to use the term “information system”, for the purpose of this article they adopt the term “ICT”, which is preponderantly used in the case study analysed.

ii I.e. billion-worthy transport infrastructures such as bridges, dams, submarine tunnels costing billion euros.

iii Tension points are a ‘type of power relation [which] is particularly susceptible to problematization and thus to change, because it is fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge, and potential conflict’ (Flyvbjerg 2012, 171).

iv The ‘so-called “Great Belt fixed link” (1987-1998) was meant to connect East and West Denmark, and link Scandinavia with continental Europe across the entrance to the Baltic Sea’ (Flyvbjerg 2012, 170).

v This second-grade objectivity is one of the key epistemological starting points of the ANT approach underpinning this research (Latour, 2005). We thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting to make further explicit this key methodological and epistemological assumption.

vi The seven projects were: the modernization of the personal data register (mGBA), the electronic patient dossier (EPD), a surveillance system for the tunnel infrastructure, a digital communication system for emergency services (C2000), the electronic debit card for public transport (OV), the vehicle register, and finally unemployment and social assistance electronic services (Werk.nl).

vii Not only were the commission hearings streamed live and then made available on YouTube, but also the discursive strategy of the commission members was explicitly oriented to “having these issues understood by the Dutch citizens at home” (commission chairman).
Key government and administrative informants-witnesses during the hearings agreed in acknowledging a causative role of the article published by Trouw for the subsequent organizational developments. Following the constructivist approach above-mentioned above, this shared acknowledgment must be treated as a result in itself, and methodological choices must follow accordingly. Therefore, the following analysis concentrates on the peculiar framing activated brought about by this article.

In this respect, it is important to note that in the Dutch Constitution ‘government’ (overheid) is any executive branch at any level: central government, provinces, municipalities, water boards. On the other hand, ‘national government’ (Rijksoverheid) refers only to the central government in The Hague (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005).

It is not among one of the goals of this paper to reconstruct the contested history of the foundational politics vs. administration dichotomy. That such a history is usually traced back to Woodrow Wilson’s 1887 article ‘The Study of Administration’ tells-says a lot about the number of sedimentations a comprehensive, serious study should take into account include. For a map of the almost endless debate on this issue, see Du Gay (2000, pp. 114-135), Overeem (2009). For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to mention that in the Dutch administrative system, both personnel management—as well as and information systems—is a task subsumedcome under operational management. There are historical reasons for that. As Raadschelders has recalled (2000), in the early 20th century’s welfare state, staff units responsible for internal functions (i.e. personnel, financial, organizational and—more recently—information management) were created within each ministry as a consequence of functional reorganization. It was the New Public Management (NPM) reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s that re-ignited the debate about the decoupling of operational management and from policy-making (Hood, 1995; Moe, 1994; Pollitt, 1995). During this period, the long-
standing dichotomy between politics and administration was re-enacted as a system in which politicians should avoid any involvement with the routine operations of government management, while executives and officials should efficiently implement the required policies by means of private-sector-like techniques (Du Gay, 2000).

As Raadschelders recalled, in the early 20th century, operant-operational staff units were created within each ministry. As late as 1949, the first U.S. Hoover commission still recommended that personnel, accounting, financial, and budgeting functions be decentralized to single agencies (Moe, 1994).

For instance, the Directorate-General (DG) Function, Control, Audit and Certification; the unit Financial, Economic Affairs and Control; the direction Financial Operational Management; the unit Strategy, Innovation and Account management; the direction Personnel, Organization and Information of the DG Management Public Sector (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2006).

We have in this case what Roe (1994) would call a ‘metanarrative’: an impasse between conflicting narratives (i.e. the constitutional/bureaucratic political logic vs. the Parliament’s need for a Cabinet-wide supervisor) in which actors develop new narratives (i.e. the supervisor as a technical role attributable to an actor with that has operational management tasks). The new narrative in turn recast the issue in such a way that a solution was could be devisedable.

This case also highlights another analogy between media influence and NPM reforms from the 1990s. As Raadschelders and Bemelmans-Videc (2007) have pointed out, NPM reforms have mainly concerned the operational level: they tend to avoid directly affecting the constitutional foundations of the juridical system, and rather to influence them by pulling operant-operational (i.e. economic) levers. In a similar way, in the case described
in this paper the introduction of the RICTC role by-passed constitutional constraints, and interacted with developments going on at the operational management level.

Actually, the attempt was conducted at three levels: institutional (by the Parliament), party-political (by the then leading party in the Dutch government coalition, which established the commission), and individual (by the commission chairman).

References


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### Table 1 – Steps for data analysis

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<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Unit of analyses</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1 – Frame identification</td>
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<td>ICT failures as government-wide issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Single frame</td>
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<td>3 – Identification of mediators</td>
<td>Actor/task patterns</td>
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### Table 2 – ‘System accountability’ construction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional actors</th>
<th>Other ministries and local authorities</th>
<th>Internal Affairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Policy-making</td>
<td>Operational management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of knowledge</td>
<td>Policy-domain specific expertise</td>
<td>Systemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of accountability</td>
<td>Over ‘content’</td>
<td>Over ‘system’</td>
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Figure 1 – Cascading network activation (source: Entman 2003; 2004)
Figure 2 – Continuities between the RICTC role and initial issue framing
Figure 3 – RICTC role attribution: possible alliances and deadlocks
Figure 1 – Cascading network activation (source: Entman 2003; 2004)
23x25mm (300 x 300 DPI)
Figure 2 – Continuities between the RICTsC role and initial issue framing

112x84mm (300 x 300 DPI)
Figure 3 – RICTsC role attribution: possible alliances and deadlocks

112x84mm (300 x 300 DPI)