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## National IT plans: Critique and debate

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## National IT plans: Critique and debate

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In recent years, several governments and also the commission of the European Union have produced national IT-plans or other central reports about the importance of IT, possibilities, challenges, etc. In Norway, a committee of several “statssekretærer” (vice ministers) has produced such a report, “Den norske IT-veien: Bit for bit” (“Bit by bit” for short, see reference).

In this short note we would like to make some remarks about “Bit by bit”, addressing issues that we think are either politically or scientifically critical. We would also like to invite other researchers to follow up, to present similar reports and initiatives from other countries, and bring in other issues than those we bring in here. The report outlines necessary research efforts for the Norwegian

society, the research community should therefore participate in discussions about such reports.

The report clearly demonstrates the relevance of our field and the priority given to issues we too find important. Moreover, there is an emphasis on use of IT which is in line with views emphasised by the Scandinavian IS community. In Norway, the report has created good debates, and we do hope that it will be followed up by concrete political actions.

### **1. Technological optimism**

“Bit by bit” provides an optimistic view on IT. IT is described as a promising and important technology, as a band wagon on which we have to jump. Current uses of IT are described almost entirely as

positive. Problems, conflicts and contradictions are underestimated or outright ignored. As a typical example, in the introduction ("Bit by bit", page 7, our translation) it is stated that:

"We see that tasks which previously required specialist competence, now can be performed by most of us, because a lot of the knowledge is built into the products."

This is stated without any qualifications, reservations or critique. Minor concerns over privacy, work-environment, etc., are aired late in the report, but never as if there are any serious conflicts. Technological promises are described as obtained realities, and critical concerns are described as minor issues. Thus, the report expresses an over-optimistic and conflict-free view of IT. Moreover, in this way use of technology is reduced to acquiring technology, overseeing the real issues of taking IT into use, and also overseeing important political options for changing priorities, i.e. through increased attention to implementation and use of IT.

## 2. Governing IT

To be a product of a social-democratic government, there is little emphasis on political control over the development. The IT-revolution is described as a given, as a process to which we can only contribute as supporters. We certainly agree that recent developments in IT: globalisation, standardisation of hardware and software, the creation of information infrastructures and the market power of some vendors, etc., leave less room for political action than conventional technologies. In fact, we would

have liked (and expected) this issue to be critically examined. Could we, for example, choose not to use Internet? On a progressive political agenda of today, we need to search for and create room for political action.

There are two main political instruments mentioned in the report. The first being the public sector as an important customer, creating demand for solutions considered important for the society as a whole. The second, and closely related, instrument, is a clear understanding of the public sector as a forerunner. Given reduced political leeway, we still think there is room and need for political action beyond these instruments.

As an example: there are strong trends today towards a pragmatic standardisation on products from one vendor: Microsoft Corporation. Given the size of the installed base of Microsoft Word, it is very attractive to buy these products. It is common to exchange documents as "attachments", i.e. as files which almost only can be read by computers with Word-compatible software. Thus, without active intervention, we move towards standardisation on products from one vendor. This combination of mutual dependency in use and close to *de facto* monopoly by one company creates a critical situation (what have we, in our community, done to prevent this?). This very situation changes the conditions for small software suppliers (OLE and all that); certainly an important issue when we are concerned with future jobs in the domestic IT industry.

For many years, responsibility for IT has been delegated to each public authority in Norway. The report puts strong emphasis on coordinating the use of IT in different public authorities and at differ-

ent administrative levels (state, county, municipality). This is a central political priority, expressing important understanding of where potential results can be found. This need for coordinating IT is not followed up, however, with mechanisms for achieving it. The rationale behind decentralised control over IT is that each authority (and its management) should be responsible for how it organises its own work. This is a sound principle, when IT is used to support internal operation. Today, however, focus is shifting to the use of IT between organisations and between organisations and their customers, a shift which is far from easy to achieve.

To us, coordinating IT between relatively independent authorities poses a dilemma with no easy solution. Simple centralisation will still have negative side-effects. Voluntary co-ordination may be far too weak. Co-ordination through common standards may suffer the same destiny as OSI. A possible alternative is to launch subsidised common solutions (networks, databases with high-data-quality, etc.): leaving responsibility with each independent authority, but countering the incentives of making local solutions.

### 3. Technology independence

As a general principle, "Bit by bit" suggests that media-legislation, administrative rules, etc. should be technology or media independent. We are well aware of the importance of this principle to researchers in computers and law, and we have no difficulties sharing the ideal. We have our doubts, however, as to the realism in this aim. We experience that, for

example, e-mail is used in a way which is different from traditional written or oral communication. It is not clear to us what rules or norms to apply for use of e-mail, and we certainly fear that insisting on treating e-mail as any conventional (pre e-mail) medium will greatly reduce the potential use of e-mail.

We fear that technology independent rules either will result in unwanted and unforeseen negative consequences for new technologies or that the rules, in order to avoid such problems, will be so general and abstract that they will be hard to interpret and understand.

### 4. Need for research

The optimistic view on IT in the report reflects a belief in the automatic realisation of the potential of IT once it is taken into use. The abundance of IT-failures in the Norwegian public sector, together with IS research of use, show that this is not the case. We need interdisciplinary, yet focused research to support effective use of IT in organisations. This is especially important for immature technologies such as Internet, Internet being strongly focused in the report. Such an orientation of IT research is very remote to research programs and the whole organisation of research in Norway. This problem is not solved by "Bit by bit" which leaves the responsibility of research in applied IT almost entirely in the hands of the private sector. What we need is *basic* research in the use of IT!

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## References

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