

TOOLS FOR CONSUMER DEMOCRACY?

The Role of Cybermediaries in Quasi-Markets

Agneta Ranerup

Abstract

Through their choice of education, among other things, citizens are in a position to influence the production of public services, thus exercising ‘consumer democracy’ as outlined by Bellamy & Taylor. This article focuses on the framing of citizens as consumers in quasi-markets and the role of cybermediaries in this process, with special reference to the market for publicly financed education in Sweden. In this study four cybermediaries in the quasi-market for education in Sweden are examined. The most important research question concerns to what extent the processes of framing have resulted in cybermediaries that provide citizens with facilities to act as informed and calculative consumers. The result indicates that all cybermediaries contained information about available choices. Few had facilities for calculating agents’ preferences as well as facilities for ranking alternative choices, and there were no facilities for describing actions to produce a preferred result. Several controversies were found concerning, for example, how the information should be provided, how to provide facilities for ranking, as well as what aspects should be allowed to affect the design of facilities to calculate agents’ preferences. This paper recognizes the controversial dimension of quasi-markets, but emphasizes the democratic value of cybermediaries to support consumers in their choice of services as appearing in this study.

Keywords: *Cybermediaries, Quasi-Markets, Internet, Citizens, Actor-Network Theory*