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

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## Abstract

Government information systems failures are filling not only newspapers, but also parliamentary and administrative reports. This paper deals with a case in which information and communication technologies (ICT)-related failure claims introduced by the media influenced the parliamentary agenda, and intra-governmental relations. Drawing on a narrative analysis of a Dutch parliamentary commission's hearings, it argues that the way the issue was initially framed by the media and then adopted, un-problematized, by Parliament steered the direction of action toward specific administrative solutions, thus shaping the landscape of possible organizational alliances. The paper recommends a proactive role of parliaments in framing ICT projects.

*Keywords:* information system, failure, frame, public administration, media, information infrastructure

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

Digital government faces a paradox. On the one hand, e-government programs still ~~perceive~~ conceive of 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~~ in 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<sup>i</sup> expenditures are often seen as an unjustified "waste" of public money. With the ongoing recent economic crisis shrinking resources for ~~front-end~~ public services such as health-care and education, the invisibility of information infrastructure (Aurigi, 2008; DeNardis, 2012) has become a hindrance in justifying growing-increasing expenditures on ICT. Therefore, criticisms of the gap between high investment and the (~~alleged~~ claimed) lack of results 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; Lyytinen & 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 ~~was~~ launched, but also the Chief Executive ~~had~~ was forced to resign (MacKinnon & Goodwin, 1992).

More recently, in the UK the Cehild Support Agency system, the Ppassport Agency system, the tax credit system, the Rrural Ppayments Agency system (Syal, 2013), and the NHS patient record system (Curtis, 2011; Syal, 2013) have ~~reached~~ made newspapers headlines<sup>2</sup> and professional blogs<sup>2</sup> (Ballard, 2013) ~~headlines~~ as ~~cases~~ examples of major failures. These and other cases ~~in turn became object of~~ were investigation ~~ed~~ not only by the National Audit Office, but also by parliamentary commissions, such as the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) (2011).

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3 The Netherlands ~~are-is~~ another country in which ~~a number of several~~ parliamentary  
4 working groups and commissions have been set up to address ~~claims of~~ failure ~~claims~~  
5 originally ~~raised-reported~~ by ~~the~~ media. ~~They are a relevant case in two main respects.~~ First,  
6 ICT failures have been ~~addressed-death with~~ by ~~manya high number of~~ political initiatives,  
7 some of which ~~have been were~~ launched *ad hoc*. ~~Differently-Unlike in from~~ the UK (where the  
8 PASC is a permanent parliamentary committee that conducts inquiries about a broad range of  
9  
10 ~~problems~~, not only failures nor information systems), in the Netherlands temporary  
11 commissions and working groups ~~have been were~~ established with the specific purpose of  
12 addressing ICT failures. ~~Secondly~~, in this context media-triggered claims often do not stop at  
13 the political discursive level, but can come to affect the organization of administrative inter-  
14 departmental relations.

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18 This was ~~visible-demonstrated~~ in the workings of a recent (~~i.e.~~ 2012-2014) Dutch  
19 temporary parliamentary commission on failures in governmental ICT programs. ~~This~~  
20 commission was established to investigate claims of huge “wasting” of public money as  
21 initially reported by newspapers. Newspapers’ ~~close frame~~ identified failures as a ~~single~~  
22 government-wide ~~issue-problem having and attributed those to uniquely~~ technical causes  
23 ~~alone~~. By adopting this formulation without further problematization, the Parliament *de facto*  
24 reinforced and legitimated it. This seamless adoption eventually turned out to have  
25 consequences not only for the political debate on ICT failures, but also for the operational  
26 organization of inter-departmental relations.

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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~~

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3 highlight ~~also~~ the importance of *how* ~~those such~~ issues are constructed. The cascading  
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5 activation model, for instance, assumes that interpretive frames “leak” from the higher level  
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7 of government down to parliamentary and expert elites, then to the media and their frames  
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9 and – finally – trickle down to public opinion (Entman, 2004). However, when their content  
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11 resonates with “cultural congruence”, specific frames can become influential enough to feed  
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13 back from the lower to the higher levels (Entman, 2003).  
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17 We suggest that the discussion on ~~who~~ which one (media or politics) exerts more  
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19 influence over the other can turn out to be not so much a binary argument (i.e. does politics  
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21 influences media ~~vs. media influence politics or vice-versa~~), but rather a function of the  
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23 alliances facilitated or hampered in a specific time period by a specific frame. Analysing the  
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25 fortune success of a specific frame as a function of its content, this paper shows how situated  
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27 representations of actors and causes can trigger path dependencies that shape the landscape of  
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29 possible alliances and inevitable deadlocks.  
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33 On the other hand, this inextricability of content and context does not only affect the  
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35 political debate on ICT failures. Once the Parliament adopts a specific frame as dominant, this  
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37 latter can acquire some power to enforce changes in the operational organization of inter-  
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39 governmental relations. While literature has amply addressed the relationship between media  
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41 debates and policy processes (Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994), the extent to which  
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43 the inner workings of the administrative organization are affected by public debates is an  
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45 under-investigated field of inquiry, to which this paper attempts to contribute.  
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49 The following section presents the main theoretical frames on media and government  
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51 upon which this work is built. In particular, it compares phronetic planning research and  
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53 cascading activation as far as direction of influence and attitude toward frame content are  
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55 concerned. In Section 3, methodological choices are accounted for, as far as both data  
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57 collection and data analysis are concerned. HereIn that section, we also briefly introduce a  
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specific understanding of failures as unstabilized assemblages, drawn from the Science and Technology Studies research field that underpin~~ning~~ 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. Thate 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 appear~~ing~~ed in this journal, Klijn, van Twist, van der Steen, & Jeffares (2014) identified three perspectives on the media's influence ~~over on~~ government: public relations, mediatization, and agenda setting. ~~To~~ For the purposes of this research, only the second and third ~~ones of these~~ are relevant~~considered~~.

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 forcing them to adapt to ~~its~~ 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).

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3 The agenda setting perspective is explicitly focused on how the media can influence  
4 the political agenda. “The agenda perspective highlights the complexity of the interaction  
5 between media and governance processes and the various factors that might influence the  
6 impact of media attention on [political] agenda setting” (Klijn et al., 2014, p. 8). Authors in  
7 this tradition consider the role ~~that the~~ media play in ~~putting-placing~~ a specific problem under  
8 the spotlight. ~~A few~~Some of them focus in particular on how a policy issue comes to be  
9 constructed as the result of struggles among actors that compete to set the political agenda  
10 (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).  
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20 Drawing on both perspectives, Flyvbjerg (2012) describes how planning research on  
21 megaproject<sup>ii</sup> failures was able to generate media exposure and top positions in the public  
22 agenda, thus in turn effectively gaining political impact in transforming planning practices.  
23  
24 The “phronetic planning research” Flyvbjerg and his colleagues pursue consists of “injecting”  
25 research results into the media coverage of megaprojects. According to the author, this form  
26 of publication triggers some “tension points”<sup>iii</sup> that make the story relevant for the media, and  
27 are thus likely to enter the political agenda. With their focus on power and “suspicious  
28 practices”, tension points are in fact potentially generative of story-telling that is interesting  
29 for the media. Therefore, alliances become possible between planning researchers providing  
30 studies on cost overruns, benefit shortfalls, risk, optimism, and deception, and media hungry  
31 for narratives of conflict and crisis.  
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45 When, for instance, phronetic researchers released results about the first Danish  
46 megaproject,<sup>iv</sup> the threats received by ~~the a~~ highest-ranking government ~~official in~~  
47 ~~infrastructure planning worked as litmus paper revealing-revealed~~ that a tension point had  
48 been reached. Not only did ~~this-phronetic~~ strategy raise-gain media attention, but the issue  
49 moved to a high position in the public agenda, and ultimately it led members of the Danish  
50 Parliament to address the media debate in ~~the P~~parliamentary agenda (Flyvbjerg, 2012).  
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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~~ At the other ~~end~~ side of the spectrum, the cascading activation model accounts for the influence of government on the media by focusing on the frames that circulate ~~among~~ at the ~~different~~ various levels of society (Entman, 2003; 2004). This model was developed to explain parliamentary and lobbying elites’ influence ~~in~~ on U.S. foreign policy; however, it can also provide valuable insights ~~also~~ 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 ~~that~~ for frames ~~from~~ at lower levels to move back up to leaders. For example, “journalists possess less

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3 ability to shape news frames than members of the administration or elite networks” (2003, p.  
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5 422).

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

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16 In summary, while – drawing upon agenda setting theories – approaches native to the  
17 field of planning and infrastructural failures highlight the power of ~~the-phronetic~~ researchers  
18 to influence ~~the~~ media— and politics, ~~in turn~~—by harnessing conflict and opposition, frame-  
19 based approaches native to foreign policy scholarship assume a more hierarchical model of  
20 influence, nevertheless mitigated by “cultural congruence”. In ~~what follows~~the remainder of  
21 this paper, we address a case similar to that depicted by phronetic planning researchers, in  
22 which mass media debates on failures in infrastructure developments turned out to be  
23 successful in influencing the parliamentary agenda. However, we show not ~~simply-just~~ that  
24 the conduct of the media had consequences for the political agenda, but also that *the way in*  
25 *which the issue at stake was framed by the media steered the direction of action ~~along-toward~~*  
26 *specific organizational solutions*. In other words, the case analysed suggests that the  
27 discussion ~~on-about who-which one~~ (media or politics) exerts more influence over the other  
28 can reveal unexpected situatedness, if only one takes into consideration *how an issue is*  
29 *constructed*. In a given situation, specific representations of actors and causes can trigger path  
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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~~To obtain data, we ~~have~~ analysed the hearings of the Dutch temporary parliamentary commission on governmental ICT projects. ~~In addition to the commission hearings~~, ~~M~~inisterial 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, ~~these~~ 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).<sup>v</sup> 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 in~~ the public sector. In particular, it was ~~aimed tasked with~~ finding out why significant investments had returned considerably fewer ~~results-benefits~~ than ~~expected-promised~~. To this end, the commission was ~~meant tasked with~~ to assessing ongoing projects ~~by finding and recommending~~ methods to standardize project management.<sup>vi</sup> In April 2014, the first hearings took place, ~~and t~~. 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 meant to~~ translated into the political agenda some debates that up to that moment had ~~gone on~~taken place in traditional media or internet blogs. The commission was a sense-making endeavour, which – by directly

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3 and explicitly addressing Dutch citizens<sup>vii</sup> – contributed to the stabilization of criticism as a  
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5 structuring dynamic of the national politics of informatization.

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

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19 As to the methods for data analysis, in the ~~vast continuum~~wide range of approaches to  
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21 narrative policy analysis (Van Eeten, 2007), we ~~moved toward~~chose narratology~~the~~  
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23 narratological extremity, which privileges the close reading of the specifics of texts (Bal,  
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25 1998). First, we identified the narratives built~~present~~ in the accounts by individual  
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27 informants. Here, the unit of analysis ~~were~~~~was~~ single hearing sessions (about 1,5 hour-long),  
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29 during which members of the ICT commission ~~used to~~posed questions to individual  
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31 informants. Since for the purposes of this paper we concentrated on high-level decision-  
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33 makers (e.g. ministries, public executives), there was no need to reconstruct collective  
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35 narratives that were representative of ~~different~~diverse types of actors (Van Eeten, 2007).

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

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51 This is ~~in fact~~ a major methodological suggestion drawn from that branch of Science  
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53 and Technology Studies calledtermed “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT). ANT explains the  
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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 ~~enrolles~~ 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.

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3 Things changed in early June 2007, when an article entitled “Automation swallows  
4 billions of euros” appeared ~~on~~in the *Trouw* newspaper (Dekker, 2007). Drawing on  
5 international comparative research, the article ~~alleged~~claimed that more than six billion euros  
6 per year were being “wasted” in “automation systems” by “the “government”. The article  
7 reported calculations by professors from the universities of Eindhoven and Amsterdam ~~that~~;  
8 showed that of all ICT projects, 30 percent were never ~~realised~~completed, 50 percent  
9 encountered serious problems, and only 20 percent could be termed successful.  
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18 These claims ~~pushed~~drove the Lower House of the Parliament into investigating  
19 “why so many ICT projects were running out of hand” ~~as the chairman of the 2012-2014~~  
20 commission ~~chairman~~put it). On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2007, the first debate took place in the Lower  
21 House, ~~led~~chaired by an *ad hoc* working group. Over the years, several audit initiatives ~~have~~  
22 followed, up to the current parliamentary commission on ICT projects on which this case  
23 study is based.  
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32 Like in the accounts by phronetic planning researchers, in the Dutch case the alliance  
33 between researchers and mass media reporting on failures in infrastructural developments  
34 succeeded in influencing the parliamentary agenda, such that *ad hoc* working groups and  
35 commissions were established, rather than the other way round, as Entman’s model would  
36 suggest. Even more, the effects of the media debate were not limited to the political agenda.  
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43 As the 2014 commission’s hearings revealed,<sup>viii</sup> the *Trouw* article activated a series of upward  
44 cascades that had also consequences ~~also~~ for inter-departmental relations. However, these  
45 consequences were not simply triggered by the diffusion of the issue to other media – other  
46 newspapers and expert blogs *in primis* – and political elites, as Flyvbjerg’s approach would  
47 suggest. The way the issue was originally constructed had a major role in making some  
48 alliances more likely, ~~and~~while hampering others. As a matter of fact, the way in which the  
49 “failing ICT projects” issue was framed by the *Trouw*<sup>2</sup>s article rested on two premises:  
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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~~ have technical causes, and therefore ~~should be addressed through~~ require technical knowledge.

First, in defining the issue, the *Trouw* article referred to “all ICT projects” “in the government” (*bij de overheid*).<sup>ix</sup> That is, ICT infrastructural failures were framed as ~~one-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 ~~named-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~~ as technical in nature (e.g. software bugs) (Dekker, 2007). ~~Conversely, t~~ The article might have mentioned, but it did not identify 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 ~~had~~ drafted used a ~~rather-closed~~ very narrow frame, but also ~~the~~ Parliament immediately closed it ~~immediately~~ off. No counter-frame was offered by the ~~p~~Parliamentary bodies in order to ~~put~~ together construct an alternative narrative. On the one hand, “ICT projects in government” was the standard definition by which parliamentary initiatives ~~were~~ had been labelled since

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3 2007. In particular, the 2012-2014 parliamentary commission framed information  
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5 infrastructures as a partitive totality to be addressed Cabinet-wide, rather than at the level of  
6  
7 individual departments. As we will see in the next sub-section, this framing enabled the  
8  
9 Lower House to demand an overview of all governmental informatization activities, thus  
10  
11 engaging in direct confrontation with the Cabinet. This in fact pre-selected and sharply  
12  
13 reduced, in turn, shaped the range of possibilities-options available to stem-prevent future  
14  
15 failures.  
16  
17

18  
19 On the other hand, the parliamentary commission embraced ~~the~~ *Trouw*'s  
20  
21 understanding of ICT projects as primarily technical endeavours requiring exclusively  
22  
23 technical knowledge (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2013). During the commission hearings, only  
24  
25 one civil servant resisted an instrumental understanding of information infrastructure  
26  
27 development as something separate from the primary processes of policy making: "there are  
28  
29 no such things as ~~ICT-governmental ICT~~ projects, but only projects led by the government" (a  
30  
31 public officer).  
32  
33

34  
35 In summary, by seamlessly adopting the Trouw frame without further  
36  
37 problematization, parliamentary working groups and commissions *de facto* reinforced and  
38  
39 legitimated it. Far from being an unquestionable objective fact, the "failing governmental ICT  
40  
41 projects" issue was the result of researchers and a newspaper framing information  
42  
43 infrastructure development as a primarily technical activity taking place government-wide, and  
44  
45 and of political actors (i.e. parliamentary working groups and commissions) adopting this  
46  
47 definition without problematizing it. In Entman's terms, we have here a case of "total  
48  
49 dominance" by one frame initiated by the alliance between researchers and a leading  
50  
51 newspaper, and reinforced by parliament the commission works (besides other media outlets).  
52  
53 As we will show in the following sub-sections, this seamless adoption had consequences for  
54  
55 the administrative response to failure claims.  
56  
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### 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 ~~sums-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.

1  
2  
3 Second, the RICTC role was intended to report on all projects that had ~~some-any~~  
4 information technology component. As the previously-mentioned civil servant noted, what  
5 fitted into this category was not unambiguous. Far from being ontologically grounded, the  
6 distinction between technical and non-technical projects was consistent with *Trouw* originally  
7 framing the issue as technical, and with ~~the~~ Parliament accepting that characterization  
8 unquestioningly.  
9  
10  
11  
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15

16 The new coordinating role was therefore established as endowed with purposefully  
17 centralizing ~~tasks-functions~~by design. The RICTC ~~function~~ was meant to access-achieve a  
18 complete overview of all workings-ICT projects of the whole Cabinet ~~as far as information~~  
19 ~~infrastructures were concerned~~, and to be the main source of information for ~~the~~ Parliament.  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24 Unsurprisingly, deciding which actor should actually assume the RICTC role was not  
25 straightforward.  
26  
27  
28  
29

30 The solution initially envisaged by the Parliament was to delegate the RICTC role to  
31 one ministry. However, this solution collided with both constitutional and unwritten  
32 bureaupolitical logics. On ~~the~~ one hand, in the Dutch constitutional system ministers have  
33 overall responsibility for their departments, ~~and which~~ are completely constitutionally  
34 independent ~~from-of~~ each other (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005). Granting coordinating  
35 responsibility over ICT to one ministry would have meant subordinating other ministries'  
36 autonomy to a *primus-inter-pares* (i.e. ~~one-first~~ among equals). For this reason, members of  
37 the Cabinet resisted the idea of delegating the new role to one member:  
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47

48 The Lower House actually wanted the Minister for Internal Affairs to take overall  
49 responsibility for all ICT projects. At the request of the Chamber, I dutifully explained  
50 this to the Cabinet. The cabinet members – by the way, together with me ~~himself~~ – did  
51 not find that a good idea. I have already mentioned the reason for that: you should not  
52 have just one person, if at all possible, responsible for all government ICT projects ~~of~~  
53  
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18

~~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 bureaupolitical 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 s~~Summarizing previous arguments, the media first and ~~in their wake~~ then 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 entailed centralized purposefully exerted centralized controlling tasks~~. Indeed, the RICTC role was expected to ~~access-achieve~~ a panopticon-like ~~overview of all over~~ government-wide technical activities, and to act as mediator between ~~the~~ Parliament and the Cabinet. Because of ~~its-this~~ nodality, it turned out to be difficult to delegate this role to an actual actor; constitutional and bureaupolitical 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 attributions~~ solution of the conundrum ~~could exploit this was found in this~~ ongoing

1  
2  
3 centralization trend, and solutions ~~analogous similar~~ to those created for other operational  
4  
5 tasks were found.

6  
7 Here ~~is follows~~ a description of how this happened, ~~starting from the end in reverse~~  
8  
9 ~~chronological order~~. In a 2010 letter to the Lower House of Parliament, the Minister for  
10  
11 Internal Affairs ~~requested asked~~ that her Ministry be given the coordinating role in ~~all modes~~  
12  
13 ~~of the~~ operational management ~~of for~~ the whole Cabinet. The Minister's request was  
14  
15 motivated by budget-cutting imperatives:  
16  
17

18  
19 [Establishing a coordinating ministry for operational management] was not just about  
20  
21 ICT, but also about the operational management of central Government. The main driver  
22  
23 to appoint a coordinating minister was the established objective of reducing the size of  
24  
25 the civil service by 10,000 employees. [...] Members of the Cabinet had to do this jointly.  
26  
27 Then, you have to agree on how to achieve such a cut, what you cut, how many officers  
28  
29 remain at which departments, and so on. Certainly at that point there was a need for  
30  
31 coordination. (Former Minister of Internal Affairs)  
32

33  
34 In the words of the former Dutch Minister of Internal Affairs, the policy-making vs.  
35  
36 operational management dichotomy<sup>x</sup> was ~~invoked alluded to~~ in order to overcome ~~some~~  
37  
38 deadlocks in ~~the order of~~ inter-departmental relations when it came to ~~massive-substantial~~  
39  
40 restructuring of the civil service. While – as we have seen above – policy-making was  
41  
42 constitutionally ~~allocated the preserve of to~~ individual ministries, operational management  
43  
44 could follow a different path. As a consequence, technical operations (including personnel  
45  
46 management) could be centralized under the responsibility of one ministry, provided that they  
47  
48 were not delegated to political ~~figures-bodies~~ (i.e. the minister ~~herself~~), but ~~to~~ technical ones  
49  
50 (i.e. a new Directorate General<sup>5</sup>; see below).  
51  
52

53  
54 Indeed, throughout the period 2007-2010 centralization of operational management  
55  
56 across inter-departmental relations was a novelty for the Netherlands, as a brief historical  
57  
58 reconstruction can demonstrate.<sup>xi</sup> In the Dutch ministerial ~~order system~~, until 2006 operational  
59  
60

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1  
2  
3 management tasks were carried on by autonomous units ~~at-in~~ each ministry.<sup>xii</sup> However, ~~at~~  
4 ~~that in 2007 time~~ operational management ~~started to~~ followed a movement toward  
5  
6 centralization that culminated in the 2010 letter to the Lower House of the Parliament ~~referred~~  
7  
8 ~~to above~~.

9  
10  
11  
12 As early as 2007, operational management had ~~established-transformed~~ into something  
13  
14 more than a set of tasks replicated within each ministry. A few months after coming into  
15  
16 office, the Minister of Internal Affairs (~~whose hearings we are here analysing~~) ~~appointed~~  
17  
18 ~~established~~ a new Directorate General ~~for~~ Central Organization and Operational Management  
19  
20 (DG COOM) in her Ministry. The tasks of the new DG included “the development,  
21  
22 implementation, maintenance and evaluation of ~~a~~ *Government-wide common vision of ~~the~~*  
23  
24 *operational management*, and ~~the~~ ~~contributing~~ to the preparation of proposals for *further*  
25  
26 *cooperation and integration* in that ~~-area~~ ~~field~~” (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en  
27  
28 Koninkrijksrelaties, 2007).

29  
30  
31  
32 The strengthening of a coordinating role for operational management at the central  
33  
34 Cabinet level was further enforced by the ministerial decree of 4<sup>th</sup> July 2008 entitled “Central  
35  
36 Government Reform”:

37  
38  
39 the Cabinet sets new government-wide goals for ~~the~~ operational management. The  
40  
41 Cabinet considers ~~it~~ necessary for ~~the~~ operational management that a framework policy at  
42  
43 the central level shall be enacted. This should cover the field of Human Resource  
44  
45 Management, *Information Management and Information- and Communication-*  
46  
47 *Technology*, Procurement, Housing and ~~Facilities~~ Management. Therefore, I have  
48  
49 established the Directorate General Central Organisation and Operational Management  
50  
51 (DG COMM) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Council of Ministers has agreed to  
52  
53 the terms of reference of this DG COOM. In line with this, the administrative units across  
54  
55 the operational management of the civil service will also be reorganized as to their tasks,  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

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) – ~~which whose office~~ was ~~appointed to~~ located in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

We suggest that ~~the 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 ~~of 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 ~~it the RICTC function~~ had been conceived of as a political role, ~~the its~~ introduction ~~of the RICT\_C function~~ would have been more sensitive to constitutional logics. Instead, by framing it as a technical ~~figure function~~, the RICTC role could be attributed

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22

to an operative actor (i.e. the CIO), rather than to a political one (i.e. a member of the Cabinet). Figure 3 summarizes up 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 unsuccessfully 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 bureaupolitical 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 is was described as having operational management knowledge: “the attention and knowledge for operational

1  
2  
3 management that are proper to Internal Affairs are not proper to other [departments], which  
4  
5 are more focussed on policy” (Former Minister of Internal Affairs). By inference, other  
6  
7 ministries (e.g. Public Works and Water, Defence, and Housing) ~~hold~~ have specific policy  
8  
9 specific knowledge necessary to carry ~~on~~ out their functions.  
10

11  
12 ~~In~~ During the commission hearings, a parallelism ~~is~~ can be traced between these two  
13  
14 types of knowledge and the policy-making vs. operational management dichotomy. Actors  
15  
16 with policy-making tasks are characterized by specific expertise in their particular domains of  
17  
18 intervention. ~~Differently~~ Conversely, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has no specific expertise,  
19  
20 but a “systemic” form of knowledge, that is necessary to address operational management  
21  
22 tasks. This coupling of task attribution and type of knowledge is described by the former  
23  
24 Minister of Internal Affairs as the “system accountability” construction:  
25

26  
27 ~~with~~ by “system accountability” it is intended that you [i.e. Internal Affairs] are not  
28  
29 directly responsible for the content, but you are responsible for the system. Some tasks,  
30  
31 for instance, are decentralized to municipalities. They are more directly responsible for  
32  
33 them, but the Minister [of Internal Affairs] keeps a kind of system accountability for what  
34  
35 happens. I mentioned the advantage of that, and I maintain that if you as minister have  
36  
37 system accountability for ICT projects of the government, it does not mean that you are  
38  
39 personally responsible for any IT project. I use the example of the [ICT] security system  
40  
41 in road tunnels. It would be extremely foolish to give a project in that area to the Ministry  
42  
43 of Internal Affairs, which has no expertise in the field of traffic and transport; and  
44  
45 ~~neither~~ also does ~~it~~ not have a large staff of officers expert in the field of traffic and  
46  
47 transport. (Former Minister of Internal Affairs)  
48  
49

50  
51 This ~~binary~~ coupling of task attribution and type of knowledge also included a pattern  
52  
53 of distribution of accountability. It delegates accountability over “content” to local authorities  
54  
55 and other ministries, and accountability over “system” to Internal Affairs. We sum up the  
56  
57 “system accountability” construction in Table 2.  
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3 | ~~However, in~~ a deeper analysis, ~~however~~, policy specific expertise and systemic  
4 knowledge do not constitute a real dichotomy, since they are defined according to  
5 heterogeneous logical criteria (Rutgers, 2001). On one hand, policy specific forms of  
6 expertise are defined according to fields of application and required disciplines. This is the  
7 classical functional form of organization, in which a clear set of competencies is organized  
8 according to the “unity of command” principle (Raadschelders, 2000). On the other hand, it is  
9 not as intuitive to define “systemic knowledge”. In the system accountability construction,  
10 systemic knowledge is not defined with respect to a specific set of competencies, but only in  
11 relational terms. First, it is the form of knowledge necessary to address operational  
12 management tasks. Second, it is the peculiar form of knowledge held by the Ministry of  
13 Internal Affairs. Third, it is a form of meta-knowledge useful ~~to-for~~ supervising the  
14 deployment of content-specific knowledge.  
15  
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29 Systemic knowledge thus resembles what ANT and STS scholars term “technical  
30 knowledge”: an apolitical and instrumental rationality that ~~purposefully-deliberately~~ avoids  
31 addressing any political decisions (Latour, 1996). This is why systemic knowledge in the  
32 commission hearings came to overlap with ICT-related expertise: “you need to just hold  
33 together content and system, that is, ICT. You should not separate that” (former Minister of  
34 Internal Affairs). In other words, ICT knowledge is a form of black-boxed knowledge: useful  
35 ~~to-for~~ exerting supervision, but never ~~in-turn~~ subjected to evaluation, or even description. ~~In~~  
36 ~~this respect, the delegation of coordinating ICT responsibilities (i.e. the RICTC role) to an~~  
37 ~~actor endowed with systemic knowledge (i.e. the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the~~  
38 ~~CIO) turned out to be an inevitable truism.~~  
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### 52 Discussion. Shaping the Landscape of Possible Alliances and Inevitable Deadlocks

53  
54 | At the outset of this analysis, we saw that the newspaper-Trouw article addressed  
55 framed failures in governmental information infrastructures by adopting two unquestioned  
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1  
2  
3 assumptions. First, failures had to be addressed government-wide, rather than at the level of  
4  
5 individual departments or ministries. Second, failures ~~concerned~~ resulted only from technical  
6  
7 ~~activities~~ shortcomings, ~~rather than the primary processes of government.~~

8  
9  
10 The resulting “failing governmental ICT projects” issue was seamlessly adopted by  
11  
12 ~~the~~ Parliament, which – instead of proposing a counter-frame – performed the last function  
13  
14 associated with any new frame: it endorsed a remedy to the problem (Entman, 2004, p. 5). A  
15  
16 RICTC role with government-wide scope and overview on all ICT activities was thus  
17  
18 identified as the main stabilizing element, and ~~an actual~~ CIO was appointed at the  
19  
20 administrative level of operational management. This, in turn, affected the inter-departmental  
21  
22 organization of the Cabinet, with Cabinet-wide operational management of information  
23  
24 systems ~~falling under~~ becoming the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, through  
25  
26 its coordinating CIO.

27  
28  
29 Similarly to cases described by phronetic planning researchers, this case shows that –  
30  
31 when it comes to government infrastructural failures, ~~and differently from the field of foreign~~  
32  
33 ~~policy~~ – ~~the~~ media directly can influence not only the political agenda, but indirectly even  
34  
35 the very organization of the administration. If we compare this case with Entman’s scheme in  
36  
37 Figure 1, it apparently ~~shows~~ predicts the opposite results: new frames initiated by the media  
38  
39 can be strong enough to influence the parliamentary elite. Even more, once ~~the~~ Parliament  
40  
41 adopted the media-initiated frame as dominant, this ~~latter~~ frame acquired the some power to  
42  
43 ~~steer~~ drive changes in the organization of inter-departmental relations (i.e. the centralisation  
44  
45 of operational management in the hands of the Ministry of Internal Affairs).

46  
47  
48  
49 The ~~However, it is also true that the~~ diffusion of the ICT failure issue to political elites  
50  
51 and indirectly to administration could rely on some congruencies. The *specific way the issue*  
52  
53 *was originally framed* had a major role in making some-certain alliances more likely, and  
54  
55 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~~ resolution. 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 bureaupolitical -constraints ~~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 bureaupolitical logics (see Figure 3).<sup>xiii</sup>

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 along 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 found wide resonance in the financial climate of late 2000s/early 2010s. As a matter of fact, the premises ~~s~~ 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.<sup>xiv</sup> As a consequence, this case reveals a pattern of influence on government by narratives of failure that is rather

1  
2  
3 different from that described by the phronetic research approach. While phronetic research  
4  
5 argued that the media tend to influence planning practices toward more traceable political  
6  
7 accountability, our case study shows that when narratives of failure continue their journey  
8  
9 into the governmental-administrative agenda, they can tend to boost magnify financial  
10  
11 concerns, rather than principles of democratic accountability.  
12  
13

14  
15 However, this explanation risks echoing functionalist reasoning. ~~It~~ Nor does it add  
16  
17 much to a heuristic of change. A complementary explanation for the sensitivity of the  
18  
19 government to media claims of ICT failures might be found in the organizational reputation  
20  
21 literature. According to Maor, Gilad, & Bloom (2013, p. 582), government agencies are  
22  
23 “more likely to respond to opinions about core functional areas with regards to which [they  
24  
25 have] a generally weak reputation, or about matters wherein [their] reputation is still evolving,  
26  
27 and to keep silent over functions regarding which [they] generally enjoy a strong reputation”.  
28  
29 These authors argue that the intensity of a response to criticism is inversely correlated to the  
30  
31 strength of their reputation in a specific area.  
32  
33

34  
35 Adopting this framework as an explanation would suggest that the Dutch Parliament  
36  
37 strikingly reacted to media-triggered ICT failure claims because informatization is an area  
38  
39 wherein-in which its reputation is uncertainweak. Indeed, in the commission hearings the  
40  
41 weak reputation of government agencies with regard to ICT expertise was a recurrent  
42  
43 recurring leitmotiftheme, as ~~it~~ is also widely acknowledged by-in the literature in-on  
44  
45 eGovernment (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006). The introduction of a RICTC  
46  
47 role endowed with technical knowledge was exactly-intended preciselya-way to counter-act  
48  
49 this lack of knowledge.  
50  
51

52  
53 Therefore, under this lens the same parliamentary working groups and commission on  
54  
55 ICT failures might be conceived of as an attempt by the Dutch Parliament to improve its  
56  
57 reputation as far as information systems and ICT expertise were concerned.<sup>xv</sup> At the same  
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2  
3 time, we cannot avoid noticing that this goal was only partially achieved. During the  
4  
5 parliamentary commission's hearings, ~~in fact~~, one ~~of the strictest~~ constant requirements  
6  
7 request was asked that ~~informants-witnesses~~ refrained from using technical jargon. As we have  
8  
9 discussed in Section 4.4, "ICT knowledge" was "black-boxed" as a form of systemic  
10  
11 knowledge. While ICT knowledge can act as an umbrella term for ~~very different~~ a wide range  
12  
13 of skills (e.g. data center management, programming, application development), none of these  
14  
15 specializations was mentioned in the commission's working papers, nor were other technical  
16  
17 and/or social details mentioned, that could have helped explain the causes of system failures.  
18  
19

### 20 21 Conclusions

22  
23 This paper has described the media-prompted rise of the notion of "failing  
24  
25 governmental ICT projects" ~~issue~~ in the Netherlands ~~in~~ since 2007, and has ~~followed~~  
26  
27 considered how it linked (or did not link) with other governmental-administrative logics.  
28  
29 Despite some tentative solutions (e.g. ~~the appointing a general~~ CIO), as of today the actor-  
30  
31 network built to prevent considerable cost and time overruns of ~~overrunning~~ ICT projects has  
32  
33 not yet stabilized into a permanent governance structure, as recent press statements by the  
34  
35 parliamentary commission's chairman have shown (Stokmans, 2014b; Veldwijk, 2015).  
36  
37

38  
39 In its final report published in October 2014, the Dutch parliamentary commission  
40  
41 advocates ~~for~~ the creation of an ICT responsible agency ~~that to~~ supervise the development of  
42  
43 information infrastructures across the ~~different various~~ ministries. If ~~in~~ ~~the~~ abstract terms, the  
44  
45 solution remains the same ~~up to know discussed~~ (i.e. a government-wide supervisor endowed  
46  
47 with systemic knowledge), what changes is the actual, concrete actor ~~called-tasked with to~~  
48  
49 fulfilling this ~~is a~~ role. The commission suggests creating ~~the an~~ "Office for ICT Assessment"  
50  
51 (Bureau ICT-toetsing (~~←~~ BIT), a temporary ICT authority composed of "independently-  
52  
53 minded and autonomous experts" (Dutch temporary commission on government ICT projects,  
54  
55 2014, p. 2). As a further confirmation of our analysis, in its reaction to the report, the Cabinet  
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3 has proposed the appointment of the new BIT under the control of the Cabinet-wide CIO  
4  
5 (Veldwijk, 2015).

6  
7 ~~Conversely~~Differently, following Roe (2013) we suggest that the figure in charge of  
8  
9 “managing the mess” should possess *both* systemic knowledge about the macro design *and*  
10  
11 expertise of specific projects. As Roe has pointed out, trying to handle wicked problems from  
12  
13 a macro perspective that can only rely on formal and deductive knowledge might easily  
14  
15 worsen problems. Likewise, “managing the mess” from a micro perspective endowed only  
16  
17 with experiential knowledge of micro operations might lack in reliability-~~scope~~. According to  
18  
19 Roe, actual mess management should be delegated to mid-level professionals, who can  
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21 integrate the macro perspective with contingent scenario formulations, and the micro  
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23 perspective with pattern recognition drawn from experience of individual projects. Similarly,  
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25 we suggest that the BIT – or any other agency having ICT coordinating functions – should  
26  
27 pursue the integration of both deductive and experiential knowledge, if it aims ~~at~~for  
28  
29 success~~fully in~~ halting or preventing the haemorrhage of disasters in ICT projects (Pelizza &  
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31 Hoppe, 2014; Hoppe, 2015).

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36 To conclude, the case study comes with a recommendation to those actors in charge of  
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38 translating any media debates into the political and governmental agenda. (~~In this case, they~~  
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40 are parliamentary working groups and commissions). As we have seen, addressing  
41  
42 infrastructural failures can lead to ~~different~~ a variety of organizational outcomes, depending  
43  
44 not only on how an issue is initially constructed by the media, but also on whether this  
45  
46 construction is adopted with or without problematization by political and administrative  
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48 actors.

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51 We might wonder whether we would have obtained the same organizational solution  
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53 (i.e. coordinating CIO under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), if failures  
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55 scarcity of benefits had been ~~problematized~~ framed by ~~the~~ Parliament in a different way than  
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3 | that adopted by the *Trouw*, so that they did not align with the financial logic and the ongoing  
4 movement of centralization of inter-departmental relations, but rather with constitutional,  
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7 | bureaupolitical considerations-rationales. Parliamentary groups and commissions would have  
8  
9 | the possibility opportunity to steer the number of possible organizational solutions, but if only  
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11 | they problematized how the issues framed by the media are translated into the political and  
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13 governmental agenda.  
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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> I.e. ~~billion-worthy-T~~transport infrastructures such as bridges, dams, submarine tunnels costing billion euros.

<sup>iii</sup> 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).

<sup>iv</sup> 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).

<sup>v</sup> 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~~ing further more explicit this key methodological and epistemological assumption.

<sup>vi</sup> 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).

<sup>vii</sup> Not only were the commission hearings ~~were~~ 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).



<sup>viii</sup> 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.

<sup>ix</sup> 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).

<sup>x</sup> 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-subsumed~~ come 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).

<sup>xi</sup> As Raadschelders recalled, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ~~operative~~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).

<sup>xii</sup> 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 unit; the direction Personnel, Organization and Information of the DG Management Public Sector (Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2006).

<sup>xiii</sup> We have in this case what Roe (1994) would call a ‘metanarrative’: an impasse between conflicting narratives (i.e. the constitutional/bureaupolitical 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~~ devisable.

<sup>xiv</sup> This case also highlights ~~also~~ another analogy between media influence and NPM reforms from the 1990s. As Raadschelders and Bemelmans-Vidéc (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 operative-operational (i.e. economic) levers. In a similar way, in the case described

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4 in this paper the introduction of the RICTC role by-passed constitutional constraints, and  
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6 interacted with developments ~~going on~~ at the operational management level.

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8 <sup>xv</sup> Actually, the attempt was conducted at three levels: institutional (by ~~the~~ Parliament), party-  
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10 political (by the ~~then~~ leading party in the Dutch government coalition, which established the  
11  
12 commission), and individual (by the commission chairman).  
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## Tables

Table 1 – Steps for data analysis

Steps	Unit of analyses	Example
<b>1 – Frame identification</b>	Single hearing sessions involving ministries, senior government officers, contractor executives, civil servants	ICT failures as government-wide issue
<b>2 – Identification of actor/task patterns</b>	Single frame	Cabinet is responsible for project implementation, Parliament must control
<b>3 – Identification of mediators</b>	Actor/task patterns	RICTC as responsible for ICT coordination between departments, it also mediates between Cabinet and Parliament

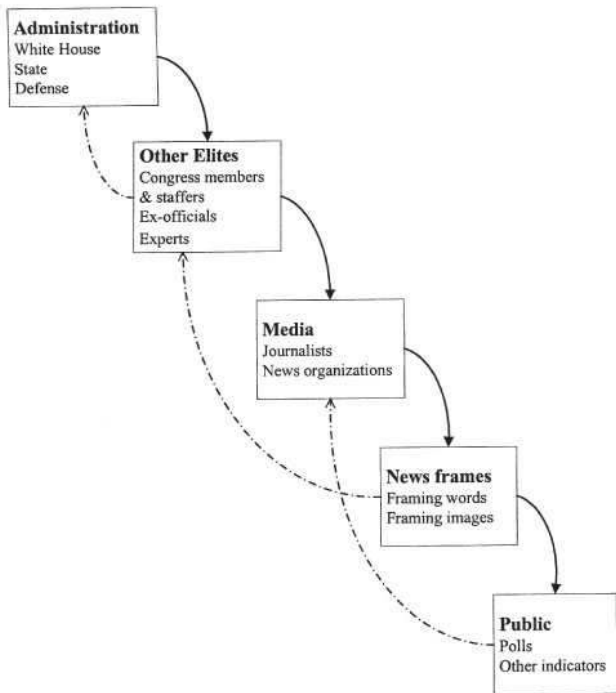
Table 2 – ‘System accountability’ construction

<b>Institutional actors</b>	<b>Other ministries and local authorities</b>	<b>Internal Affairs</b>
<b>Tasks</b>	Policy-making	Operational management
<b>Type of knowledge</b>	Policy-domain specific expertise	Systemic
<b>Type of accountability</b>	Over ‘content’	Over ‘system’

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Figures

Figure 1 – Cascading network activation (source: Entman 2003; 2004)



Review

Figure 2 – Continuities between the RICTC role and initial issue framing

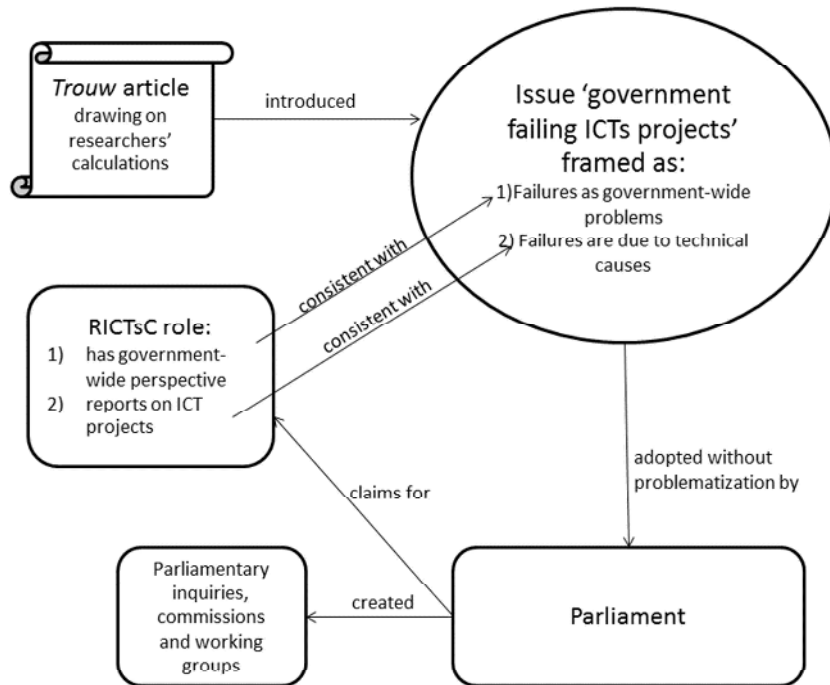
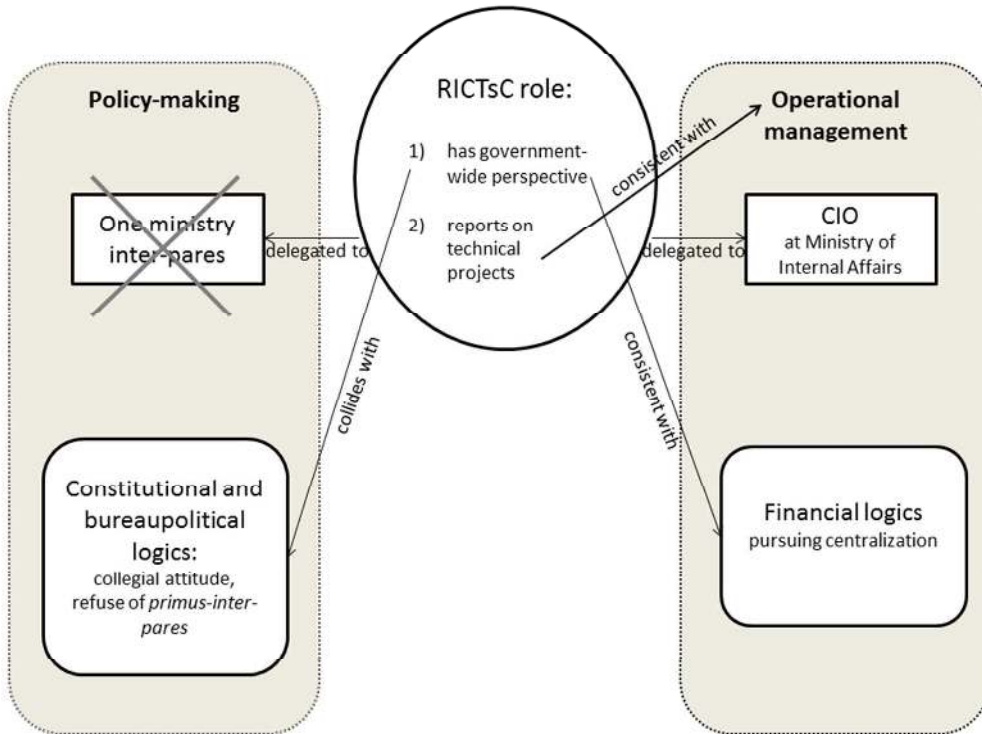


Figure 3 – RICTC role attribution: possible alliances and deadlocks



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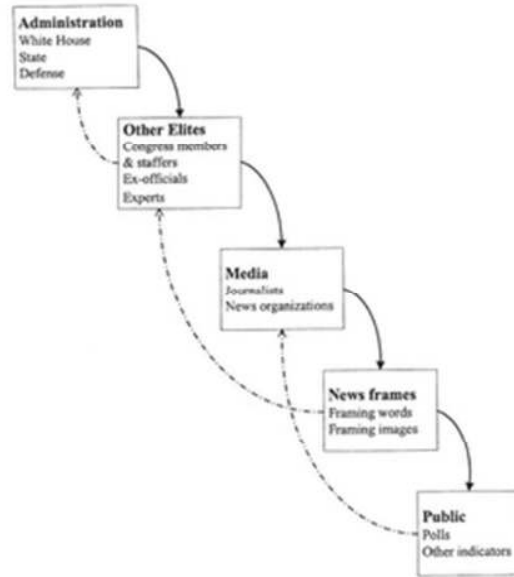


Figure 1 – Cascading network activation (source: Entman 2003; 2004)  
23x25mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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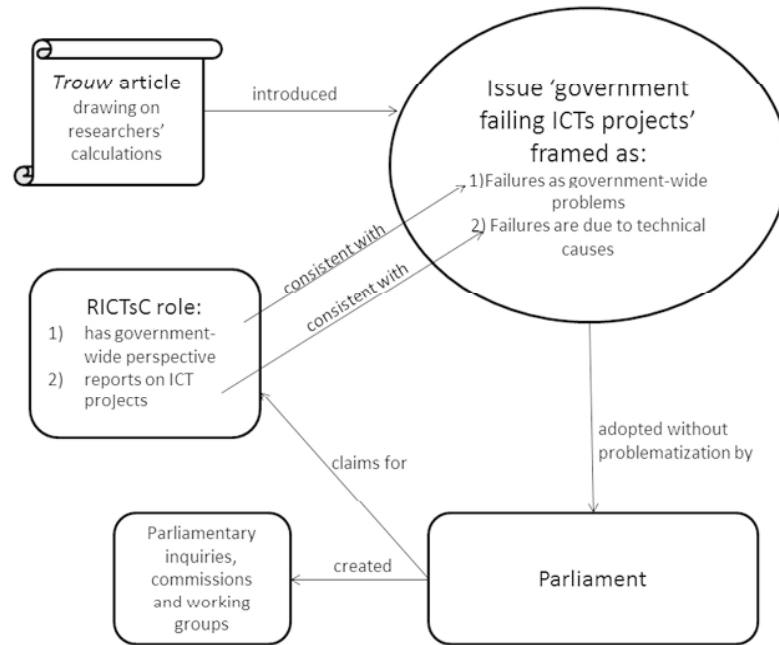


Figure 2 – Continuities between the RICTsC role and initial issue framing  
112x84mm (300 x 300 DPI)



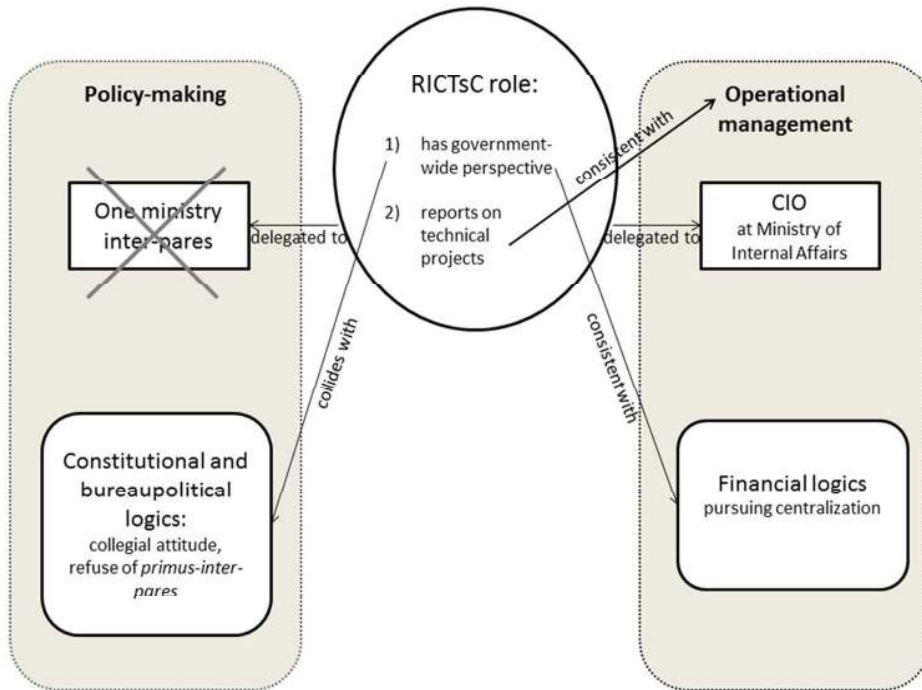


Figure 3 – RICTsC role attribution: possible alliances and deadlocks  
112x84mm (300 x 300 DPI)