CHAPTER FIVE

ROYAL NORWEGIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Then we found out in disbelief that the information we provided was scribbled on pieces of paper, there were pieces of paper disorderly lying all around the table. One stack was held in place by a cup of coffee. Somebody took a sip of the coffee and the papers flew around in all directions! All of us helped to collect the pieces of paper so that information would not be lost. [...] I really thought that in 2004, one of the world’s richest countries would come up with a portable PC, phone-service and Internet/mail. But this did not happen.¹

5.1 Introduction

In recent decades, Norway has become one of the world’s leading information societies. As a 2004 OECD report points out, “Norwegians are rapid adopters of new technology in general and new consumer electronics have penetrated rapidly. [...] In 2003, two out of three households had access to a PC at home and every other household had access to the Internet from home. 1.1 million individuals (one third) submitted and signed their tax return forms electronically in 2003 (Skatteetaten, 2004), and 1.9 million customers had Internet bank accounts in 2002 (Norges Bank, 2003)—near the top internationally. Three in five Internet users purchased goods over the Internet in 2003. [...] Thus the population is well versed in using ICT [...]”² E-governance initiatives have been a top priority for virtually all Norwegian governments in recent years and agencies of the Norwegian public sector have been leading internationally in adopting and using technologies.³ It comes

hence as somewhat of a surprise that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (N-MFA), had been a severe laggard in comparison with other agencies of the Norwegian government and even in comparison with other foreign ministries in implementing and using IT in support of its operations.\(^4\) In the context of the current study, it is interesting to explore the effects of IT on a foreign ministry characterized by a strong *esprit de corps*, strict adherence to traditional diplomatic norms, structures, routines, and by traditional scepticism to organizational modernization (Ibsen 1911, Omang 1954, Colding 1978, East 1981, Christensen and Egeberg 1989, Blichner and Sangolt 1993, Christensen 1996, Neumann 1998, Neumann and Leira 2005).

This chapter first outlines the institutional characteristics of N-MFA. The IT infrastructure of the Ministry is then described. This is followed by a discussion of the effects of IT on the Ministry by focusing on the three core organizing principles of diplomacy. Conclusions follow.

### 5.2 Institutional Background and Characteristics of N-MFA

Although a fully fledged Norwegian foreign ministry was established first on June 7, 1905, that is on the very same day as the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian Union was announced, Norway did conduct separate quasi-diplomatic activities prior to that date. This was facilitated by the fact that Norway did have its own separate parliament, government, civil service and military forces; all anchored in Norway’s 1814 constitution. Norway’s foreign affairs was one of the few areas in which the Swedish king had retained the ultimate authority (Norman 1982:392). Nevertheless, as of 1838, there had been an office of consular and commercial affairs within the Norwegian Ministry of Interior in Christiania (Oslo) handling primarily foreign commercial activities of Norway. In 1899, the Department of Commercial, Consular and Foreign Business was set up within the same ministry. Then in 1901, the Ministry of Interior itself was re-named to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, Shipping and Industry (ibid., p. 393).

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