

Guest Editorial Preface

Reaching Beyond Bureaus: Perspectives and Challenges of Sustainable, Non-Bureaucratic Government

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Can we ... ?

... govern without bureaus? Can we go beyond what human kind had so far in terms of governing societies – go beyond electing representatives every couple of years, who then steer the vast bureaucratic machinery which we perceive as “the state”? Can we use ICT (information and communication technology) to enable humanity to fundamentally restructure the governance of the public domain?

We're the first generation in human civilization, which has available a ripe set of ICT. Never ever in human history before could we interact in a way we can do nowadays. Besides: ICT have reached a level of maturity and penetration in the last ten years, which enables us to go truly beyond approaches we have seen so far. In the last few decades we have seen radical transformation in telecommunications, in transport, logistics, credit transfer, navigation, etc. But we haven't yet seen transformation in the governance of public matters. The novelties we experienced so far, are limited to progress in terms of online tax returns, e-voting, or open data. But these novelties do not impose a transformation of an existing culture, but rather reinforce this culture by enhancing traditional principles of operation by means of ICT.

This special issue follows the question, if (and if so, how) ICT could introduce a new culture of public governance; or – if not, which constraints are blocking transformations. The issue called for path-breaking visions, arguments and experiments towards self-managed government / community self-management enabled by the possibilities of the digital age. More specifically, it called for answers to questions like:

- Can dislocated (potentially very large) groups of people make decisions about common assets or common matters, which do not need to be interpreted by institutions?
- Is it unavoidable to delegate decision-making to institutions (like parliaments, government agencies, ...)?
- How can a society self-organize its common budget (taxes etc.)?
- Can core social functions be realized without central institutions?
- How can a society dynamically self-organize its public sector institutions / projects / programs and bind them directly to collaborative decision making?

This special issue of the *International Journal of Public Administration in the Digital Age* contains five full research papers or research notes, respectively, three of which are drawn from a selection of the best contributions to the *Beyond Bureaucracy Workshop* that took place as part of the 2015 Summit of the Information Society for Information Studies at the Vienna University of Technology in June 2015. Two of the papers were accepted from an open call.

“Does Bureaucracy Stifle Moral Agency?” Adeyinka Adewale, in the first article in this issue, traverses the history of bureaucracy from antiquity to modern times, finding bureaucracy being an essential cornerstone of human civilization. Given this important role of bureaucracy in human society, the author reflects critically on bureaucracy’s implications on the morality of its human agents, concluding that moral agency is stifled by bureaucratic organization indeed. How then, Alois Paulin asks, can ICT be used to bypass bureaucracy? “*Informing Public Governance: Towards a Basis for a Digital Ecosystem*” introduces *informatization* as a new dimension for controlling systems using ICT. Inspired by the principles of Internet-based peer-production and Open Source technological ecosystems, the author argues for a sustainable technological platform to steer bureaucratic organizations by means of technology.

But are ICT a panacea? Uroš Pinterič’s “*ICT as the Path Beyond Bureaucracy? The use of ICT by Ignorance of the Citizens*” argues that the motivation for change remains a hindrance, which prevents significant real progress in transforming existing bureaus by means of ICT. But not only established bureaucrats don’t care much for technology, also the citizens, the author finds, pose no significant driver for a technology push. Self-organized communities, Karin Hansson and Love Ekenberg, warn, may easily fall pray to inequality and bias. Their article “*Embodiment and Gameplay in Networked Publics*” focuses on the issue of representativeness, arguing that the producers of online information are often representing specific groups, contexts, experiences, and opinions – a stumbling block for peer-produced governance?

Or would an “e-State” be doomed to be a utopia? Nnanyelugo Aham-Anyanwu and Honglei Li in “*e-State: Realistic or Utopian?*” argue that ICT can merely support government institutions, but not replace them. Guided by the narrative of the social contract theory, an e-state, the authors argue, would bring society back to an ancient state of anarchism, rather than bring about a self-organized and self-governed civilization. But is this conclusion justified?

The selected articles present an interesting selection of different views, and offer starting points for a continued research and discussion on how technology will influence the future of governance for generations to come. The fields of beyond bureaucracy and government informatization remain open and evolving, with some important questions to require answers, like how can societies be completely self-organized with regard to its decision making, or which architectures and design would enable such. We’re determined that similar future works will provide with answers the topic.

Will the state of the future use technology to control its citizens, or will the citizens master technology to control the state?

Think about it ...

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