Service, Openness and Engagement as Digitally-Based Enablers of Public Value?  
A Critical Examination of Digital Government in Canada  
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ABSTRACT
Public value creation is increasingly viewed as a central pivot of a government’s digital transformation. The objective of this article is twofold: to better understand some of the major inhibitors of public value creation within a context of digital government, and to offer some fresh insight into how such inhibitors may be overcome in order to strengthen public value creation by leveraging digital governance innovation. In pursuing this objective, the author adopts the Government of Canada as a broad, qualitative and exploratory case study of digital government’s capacities to generate public value. These findings reveal many structural and cultural inhibitors within the Government of Canada to innovation and public value creation across the inter-related realms of service, openness and engagement. How inhibitors can be addressed and eventually overcome is also discussed as a basis for future public sector reform and academic and applied research.

KEYWORDS
Canada, Data, Democracy, Dialogue, Digital, Engagement, Governance, Government, Information, Openness, Public value, Service, Technology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public value creation is increasingly viewed as a central prism of government’s digital transformation (O’Flynn, 2007; Roy, 2013; Bannister and Connolly, 2014; Pang et al., 2014). For example, the Government of Canada has recently embraced an OECD definition of digital government predicated upon this linkage. Yet at the same time, transformation often collides with the gravitational pull of tradition and the public sector penchant for caution and incremental change. While public value pursuit seems evermore intertwined with notions of greater openness and engagement (for reasons explored and referenced below), models of traditional public administration are often predicated upon an ethos of hierarchical control and information secrecy (Roy, 2013).

Accordingly, the objective of this article is twofold: to better understand some of the major inhibitors of public value creation within a context of digital government, and to offer some fresh insight into how such inhibitors may be overcome in order to strengthen public value creation by leveraging digital governance innovation. In pursuing this objective, we adopt the Government of Canada as a broad, qualitative and exploratory case study of digital government’s capacities to generate public value. We seek to first explain why and how the current structures of digital government are poorly suited to public value creation (despite language deployed by the Government itself embracing the latter). Building on this dissection, we then aim to shed new light on how digital innovation in public sector organizations can lead to public value generation – and the sorts of technological, institutional (including political), and organizational factors shaping the public sector’s evolving capacities (Janssen and Helbig, 2016).

The Government of Canada (GOC, or federal government) represents a highly relevant and useful case study with which to examine the aforementioned dynamics in a real-world digital government context. Lauded as an e-government leader in the early 2000’s, the country’s federal government has since languished into something of a laggard in recent years – a characterization supported by various academic studies, third party ratings (notably the United Nations and Accenture among others), and perhaps most notably the GOC itself. In its 2017-launching of a renewed digital government effort, the GOC recognizes the quicker progress made by many other countries, with specific reforms and initiatives highlighted accordingly.

Given the complexity and breadth of initiatives being examined, we have utilized a qualitative and exploratory case study methodology. Specifically, we adopt an ‘interpretive or social constructivist’ approach to qualitative case study research [which] supports a transactional method of inquiry, where the researcher has a personal interaction with the case’ (Hyett and Kenny, 2014). The author’s personal interaction with the case stems from prior academic studies of digital government in Canada, interactions and discussions within training and graduate educational forums devoted to digital government, numerous research consultancy engagements with the Canadian public sector, and a set of fifteen, semi-structured qualitative interviews with senior managers from within the digital government community (both inside and outside of government). Notwithstanding any methodological limitations, this multi-layered investigatory approach to gathering insights and evidence is a highly useful constructivist undertaking necessitated by the many facets of digital government activities that are nonetheless interdependently shaping the Government of Canada’s strategies and capacities for public value creation.

The article is organized as follows. Building on this brief introduction, Section two explains the main foundations of public value management (PVM) and contrasts PVM with both traditional public administration (TPA) and new public management (NPM). Along with these three governance typologies, the emergence of digital-era governance (DEG) is further examined as an additional lens of better understanding today’s public sector evolution. Shifting from a conceptual to a more applied lens, section three examines three of the main components of the Government of Canada’s pursuit of digital government over the past decade – specifically seeking insight and evidence of attempts to leverage digital innovation into some form of public value creation (and where possible,
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