

WHAT ARE THE BIG QUESTIONS OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH?

A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

KEYNOTE SPEECH DELIVERED ON OCTOBER 24, 2019
19TH EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT
NICOSIA, TURKISH REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

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- Research Interests
 - Digital government
 - Government reform
 - Public policy
 - Local government
 - Comparative public administration

WHAT IS THE BIG QUESTION APPROACH?

- The big questions approach was initiated by Robert Behn in 1995 with his “The Big Questions of Public Management” article, in which he argued:
 - There are big questions in every field of scientific research that **scholars more or less agree on the importance of**, and try their best to answer through research.
 - Identifying and attempting to answer big questions is necessary, if a discipline claims to have a **scientific status**.

HOW DID THE BIG QUESTIONS DEBATE START?

- A series of articles on the big questions of
 - Public management (Behn, 1995)
 - Public administration education (Kirlin, 1995)
 - Public network management research (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001)
 - Non-profit management (Lohmann, 2007)
 - Environmental ethics (Keller, 2010)

WHY ASK BIG QUESTIONS?

- «Any field of science is **defined by the big questions that it asks**».
- «A research field “should be **driven by research questions**, not by the data or the methodology».
- Big questions, are instrumental in the **construction of and socialization into a research community and coproduction of a research agenda**.

APPLICATION OF BIG QUESTIONS APPROACH TO DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH

- "A big question approach" in digital government research can also be beneficial.
- Based on reviews of the digital government literature:
- Yildiz, Mete (2012). Big questions of e-government research. *Information Polity*, 17(3, 4), 343-355.

THE NEED FOR BIG QUESTIONS IN DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

- (Some) Problems of Digital Government Research
 - Definitional vagueness,
 - Lacking explanatory power,
 - Being under-theorized,
 - Focusing on outcomes rather than processes of digital government,
 - Being a quasi-autonomous outgrowth of its referent fields of information systems & public administration.

BIG QUESTIONS OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH (YILDIZ, 2012)

- Q1: How can digital government studies be better connected to and grounded in the mainstream public administration research?
- Q2: How can digital government studies be more multidisciplinary and comparative?
- Q3: How to better measure and evaluate digital government performance and results?
- Question 4: How to produce novel and more usable concepts, models and theories in digital government research?

Q1: How can digital government studies be better connected to and grounded in the mainstream public administration research?

- There seems to be a serious **disconnect** as digital government research had limited success in influencing mainstream public administration research.
- Digital government studies should be better connected to and grounded in the mainstream public administration values and research.

Example 1: What are the strategies used by street level bureaucrats in digital government research?

- Street-level bureaucrats are public officials working in direct contact with citizens (teachers, doctors, police officers, etc.). Resources are low, expectations are high and multiple.
- Digital government studies will benefit from the findings of research on street level bureaucrats on dealing with the **implementation gap** that so many digital government projects suffer from.

Q2: How can digital government studies be more multidisciplinary and comparative?

- There is an agreement on the **fragmented status** of digital government research and **lack of communication** among its researchers.
 - Fragmentation lowers the quality of research because of **duplication** and wasted effort.
 - The lack of comparative research also **weakens the ability to generalize** findings.
- Coordination is thus severely needed not only between researchers and practitioners, but also between researchers belonging to different disciplines.

Example 2: How can organization theory be useful to understand and explain digital government applications?

- For example, institutional theory of organizations, which helps explain internal **conformity to the rules and trends** of the institutional environment.
- Institutional theory necessitates the incorporation of the boundedly-rational, social, and political aspects of decision-making, such as concerns of **legitimacy, stability, and survival**.

Q3: How to better measure and evaluate digital government performance and results?

- Evaluation of performance in government organizations and employees is one of the basic objectives of current **government reform** movements.
- Evaluation of technical, organizational, social and financial benefits and risks of digital government applications to convince decision-makers to **launch, develop or terminate digital government projects**.
- It is necessary to develop ways to measure the success and failure of digital government projects.

Example 3: What are the risks of using benchmark studies in digital government?

- Using benchmarking for digital government evaluation can be a **problematic**.
- While benchmarks can be useful in focusing public and political attention on the importance of digital government, they may **not be reliable** tools for measurement.
- The real danger of digital government benchmark studies is the risk that some countries may develop their digital government systems in a way to **satisfy the benchmark(s) and rise in rankings, rather than being guided by their own local and national priorities**, and technical design or citizen needs.

Question 4: How to produce novel and more usable concepts, models and theories in digital government research?

- Absence of theory **inhibits communication** among scholars, between scholars and practitioners; and it also **hinders knowledge accumulation, and legitimacy and recognition building** in digital government studies.
- It is argued that the leading discourse on digital government is not shaped by the academia, but by the producers of the “**grey literature**” of consultancy firms, think tanks, international organizations and benchmark studies.

Example 4: Do we need new categories of digital government interaction?

- Explanatory power of the established digital government interaction categories (G2C, G2G, G2B) are useful but insufficient for explaining the dynamic nature of digital government development, especially as it pertains to the evolving role of citizens.
- Therefore, a case can be made to propose additional categories in digital government research.

MORE QUESTIONS?

- Input from **seven Linked-In fora** & the **e-government e-mail list** at the University of Washington
- **33 people** posted messages
 - Proposing new questions
 - Voicing criticisms

MORE QUESTIONS

- Mark Hudson
 - How can digital government best serve citizens?
- Jose Luis Tesoro
 - How can digital government studies be better connected to ICT4D studies?

MORE QUESTIONS

- Panos Panagiotopoulos
 - How to understand the new interactions between citizens and governments?
- Meliha Handzic
 - How can we capture and organize what has been learnt so far?
 - How to develop a set of "evidence-based principles", or some sort of a "knowledge tree" based on research done so far?

EMERGENT TOPICS AND ISSUES IN DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- How can emerging technologies and new ways of organizing can be integrated into digital government?
 - Big data
 - Internet of things
 - Crowdsourcing
 - Crowdfunding
 - Artificial intelligence
 - Wearable technologies, etc.

CRITICISMS

- Mark Forman
 - Academics' knowledge **has fallen so far behind the practices** being studied that few academics are capable of constructive research.
- Pallab Saha
 - Is the term digital government **even relevant** in today's world?
- Jochen Scholl
 - **Public administration research is not the best place** for "grounding" digital government research.

FINAL WORDS

- How to proceed?
 - A **special issue** in a digital government journal on big questions?
 - More discussion in digital government e-mail/whatsapp lists?
 - More interaction among scientific communities attending different conferences (such as EGPA, ECDG, ECEG, EGOV, HICCS and DGO) on big questions?

Thank you for listening!

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For questions & comments:

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