Data-driven Government: An Opportunity for Public Administration Research

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak here and share my ideas and opinions with you.

In his presentation, Ed Parsons of Google has shown us what is possible with modern IT and hopefully inspired you to fantasize about how these technologies will change your fields of research and work.

Geert Bouckaert has presented us a rare case of such fantasizing in Public Administration Research.

I believe we need more of that and more thinking about the impact of IT on government in Public Administration Research in general.

Here, I have to contradict Wolfgang Drechsler who thinks we have already done enough thinking about IT in government and should move on to nanotechnology. This is not the case!

Instead, I find that Public Administration Research, after a brief period of bloom 25 years ago, has delegated – or "ghettoized", to borrow Christopher Pollitt's words – the thinking about IT and government to the e-government research community, that – being mostly from the field of information systems – asks very different questions than a social science Public Administration Researcher would.
As a result, I find much of the ideas and questions raised in the late 80s and early 90s to be much more topical than what is written in the e-government literature today – even though much of the technology didn't even exist back then.

But why not leave it to the e-government nerds?

Because advances in information technology are fundamental to government.

Public administration itself has often been portrayed as a form of information processing, and the evolution of government is closely tied to the available information technologies. As James Scott artfully shows in his seminal book "Seeing like a state", where he demonstrates how modern statistics and cadastral maps rendered the local level legible and thus set the preconditions for centralized nation states.

Now imagine, if the emergence of statistics enabled the move from a feudal system to modern nation states, then how profoundly will the new, powerful data technologies change how we govern our societies?

Public Administration Research can either be at the forefront of thinking up what this change might look like, or analyse and categorize what has happened 20 years after the fact, as we've done in the last decades.

And we have the right tools to do so!

Let me quickly try to disentangle what we talk about with these new "data-driven" technologies: From my research, I find that these technologies actually come down to three functions.

1. Rule-based automation
2. Monitoring / surveillance

3. Pattern recognition / learning

By themselves, none of these aspects is new:

Rule-based automation is essentially what the entire "rational bureaucracy" of Max Weber is about and becomes very concrete in the widespread image of the "machine government", and was a hot topic back in the 60s when "cybernetic government" was en vogue.

Monitoring has always been at the centre of government: Think about the censuses, the PPBS systems of the 60s, and NPMs performance monitoring. The centrality of monitoring to government is nicely captured in the double meaning of the word "to control" – after all, you can only manage what you can see.

Pattern recognition and learning may be new in the computer-powered way we see it today, but the almighty policy analyst of the 1960s that I read about in books on the planning euphoria seemed to have served the same function and goals.

No doubt Big Data, the Internet of Things and modern analytics give a new quality to all of these, especially when we see all three functions combined – but my point is: These are not entirely new issues, and we know what to ask and what to look for.

Thus, I'd like to end on three questions that Public Administration Research has to work on in this new area to stay relevant, not least because public administration practitioners are desperately looking for guidance, and once again seem to have nowhere to turn to but the consultancies.

1. How to balance Google- and Amazon-like convenience, which citizens nowadays expect from their governments, with the protection of citizens' privacy?
   Sure, a government that knows everything about its citizens can respond to their needs before they even realize they have them. But do we want government to know everything?
2. Power shifts as a result of data-driven government, especially in terms of depoliticisation and knowledge political dynamics.
   What issues are still considered the object of political decision-making if almost everything can be solved technocratically with expert systems?
   Whose knowledge counts? What about the local knowledge of citizens and veteran bureaucrats experience? These are not hypothetical developments, but phenomena already known e.g. from the introduction of the COMPSTAT, statistics-based management, within US police departments, where it severely questioned the value of senior policemen's experience.
3. Structure and processes of government as we know them.
   Our government is essentially built for the information technology of the 19th century, with a few minor adjustments.

So how does a truly data-driven government look like?

It is hard for Public Administration Research to let go of established structures, question them and think up alternatives.

Here are three examples from the literature and my own research:

1. Agile policymaking, where policies are implemented iteratively and with a lot of experimentation, akin to Google's permanent Beta state. Instead of drafting and enacting a law and realizing five years later after the first evaluation that nothing works as expected, we can now closely observe how new policies impact society, how citizens react to them, and adjust the policies accordingly in near real time. However, this requires much more leeway for the executive branch of government than we are used to.

2. In the literature from the 90s, there is a lot of talk about direct citizen-bureaucracy relations, where feedback doesn't take the long way via the political sphere but there is direct – or rather indirect in terms of data-driven monitoring of citizens' needs and satisfaction – responsiveness by the bureaucracy to the citizens.
3. Building on the idea of direct citizen-bureaucracy relations, management consultancies currently paint a picture of data-driven government that evokes the supermarket state as envisioned in the 1980s, where citizens are seen as consumers and their satisfaction – closely monitored by data technologies - is the ultima ration for every government agency.

Ultimately, we have to face the question that Geert also implicitly raised in his presentation: Do we still need public administration in its current form in ten or twenty years' time?

These are just some of the challenging questions that data technologies pose to Public Administration Research.

Think about them, discuss them, come up with more.

This is a chance for Public Administration Research to – if not be a little utopian – at least be on the forefront of a discussion and reform movement.

Let's not waste this opportunity to become relevant again and shape the digital future of government!