



Teaching Public Service in the Digital Age: A Briefing For Potential Research Collaborators

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What is this briefing for?

We have written this briefing document to inform research academics and professionals worldwide about our aspiration to collaborate with them on a range of key research questions whose answers will critically inform both the teaching of public policy and public administration, as well as the implementation of policies and the delivery of services within governments.

We hope to excite and engage possible research collaborators both in universities and governments, and to throw open the door for possible partnerships. If you find this briefing contains issues you might wish to collaborate with us on, or if you are a funder and you are interested in supporting this work, you are warmly invited to write to us at contact@teachingpublicservice.digital



What is Teaching Public Service in the Digital Age?

Teaching Public Service in the Digital Age (TPSDA) is an international collaboration of scholars and practitioners focused on increasing the number of public servants who have the fundamental skills they need to succeed in the digital era. It is primarily volunteer driven with key contributors mainly being professors and lecturers in universities from Chile to Germany. It also benefits from various digital government practice experts, from Canada to Singapore. Support also comes from the Public Interest Technology University Network, which has been our key funder.

TPSDA's primary approach to making social impact is to help educators teach critical new skills to current and future public servants. We do this by developing and sharing open access teaching materials, and by actively teaching and networking with educators who want to deliver better digital era skills to their students, whether in universities or in governments.

Thus far we have published two key sets of materials, which are available free of charge on our website:

- A set of [Digital Era Competencies](#), describing the minimum capabilities all public services leaders now need to have.
- A [full syllabus](#) developed for use by MPP and MPA lecturers, professors and program directors. This syllabus has already been translated into German, and is now being translated into Spanish, by members of our community.

Why are we focusing on research?

The content of TPSDA's competencies and syllabus is largely based on a set of hypotheses about the skills and knowledge that public servants need for the digital age. These hypotheses emerge from a sort of modern craft tradition: they reflect accepted best practice in leading digital era workplaces, and have been largely validated in the private sector. In turn, these



practices have become accepted as ‘gold standard’ by digital government service teams and in the digital government standards and playbooks that have emerged in recent years.

While these hypotheses were a useful starting point to develop TPSDA’s initial teaching materials, it’s now time to test and refine them through research. This research is important for a number of reasons. Primarily, we believe that research has to be an important driver of our work because it is only right to take a sceptical approach to all teaching, and ask ‘Is what we are teaching the best that it could be?’

In the study of business implementations of technology, there are already fairly large scale studies that back some of the central tenets of digital era working, [such as the use of agile project management](#). But these are generally lacking in specifically government domains, leaving large and fundamental questions unanswered.

So, there are also reasons to conduct this research that are specific to our focus on teaching digital era *public service* competencies, and more broadly, to our focus on strengthening public sector governance in the digital age.

When it comes to defining the skills, approaches and mindsets that are key to successful digital era governments, the risk of groupthink and unchecked assumptions is high. An active community on Twitter, Medium, and in the digital government conference and trade fair circuit advocates strongly for these approaches with only rare moments of disagreement between advocates. Certain consultants have staked their business models on advancing disciplines such as agile management, user research, and data analytics as saving graces for underperforming public services. Staff move between digital service teams across different governments, spreading a shared and potentially homogenous view of the challenges facing today’s governments, and a shared view of the approaches that will resolve these challenges. Similarly, global rankings and newly emerged global clubs - like the Digital Nations - are driving common approaches to digital public service design across many different jurisdictions.

As this new orthodoxy spreads, public servants attempting to implement these new and potentially disruptive digital approaches within their own institutions often face staunch



opposition. This can mean that those most intimately aware of the possible limitations and nuances of accepted best practice in digital era *government* face few incentives to openly discuss the potential weakness or limits to new approaches, since doing so may only fuel existing opposition to these new approaches even where their adoption can generate value. Worse, the sometimes adversarial nature of digital government transformation efforts can lead to unhelpful strawman argumentation. Those advancing digital reforms may caricature and exaggerate the limitations of status quo styles of public administration, while those resisting digital reforms may be inclined to exaggerate the risks of these reforms without having sufficient evidence to justify these fears.

In this context, research could provide a helpful check on a global digital era government orthodoxy that has become settled relatively quickly, and without always benefitting from critical reflection and evidence-based testing.

How we developed an approach to research

In March and April 2021 we spoke with an international group of members of the [TPSDA contributors community](#), as well as two independent experts and asked these people to develop research questions that, if answered, would provide evidence that would help TPSDA improve its teaching materials.

We asked our interviewees for research questions that - if investigated and answered robustly - could uphold or challenge the normative ideas and practices contained within the TPSDA competencies and the TPSDA syllabus. Here, we were particularly interested to know if those we spoke with read any of our key materials and thought, ‘Hmmm, I’m not 100% sure that’s always true’.

For example, where we state in [Unit 3](#) that ‘The waterfall tradition causes major delivery problems to almost all digital government activity in which citizens are key users’, we wanted to know what research questions and corresponding evidence might lead us to refine or reject this argument? What case studies, policy issues or jurisdictions might suggest that this argument is



stated too strongly, or is true in some cases but not others? We also asked our interviewees which research questions would help us better understand how to advance digital reforms and innovations in today's governments, and specifically, about the role that teaching and training could play in these efforts.

Our goal in these conversations was to think ambitiously about the research that would have to be done for us to be much more robustly confident about the empirical foundations of TPSDA's syllabus and competencies. We wanted to explore which research questions we would tackle if we faced no constraints on funding, time, and access to data.

Our Proposed Research Streams

Drawing on our interviews, subsequent discussions amongst TPSDA community members, and others' reflections on empirical gaps at play in digital government reform efforts¹, we have identified three research streams that we believe need to be pursued to test and refine TPSDA's teaching materials, and more broadly, to ensure current digital governments reforms are supported by a strong evidence base.

Research Stream 1 - In what circumstances do accepted best practices in digital era governance successfully bring about intended change in government? In what circumstances do these best practices fail to achieve public value, or worse, generate harm?

Our first stream of research focuses on the approaches and practices that have emerged as accepted best practices of modern digital governments, and asks: do these always generate public value and bolster government's effectiveness, or, do these approaches and worldviews

¹ Special mention is owed to Richard Pope, who in May 2021, as we were writing this document, published a Twitter [thread](#) that included a series of questions about digital government in need of research and critical enquiry. This document includes many of the questions Richard raised in his post, and we are grateful for his sharp insight on the empirical gaps at play in current approaches to digital government.



sometimes generate harm, and undermine the effectiveness of government? Is public value potentially destroyed?

Within this stream, we're focused on research questions that critically examine the effects that deploying agile methods, user research, advanced data analytics, and open working practices, amongst other elements of current digital government orthodoxy, have on the delivery of public services, on the accountability of the state, on the government-citizen relationship, and ultimately, on the quality of democratic governance and public sector management writ large.

Evidently, at present, the assumption is that these practices are good things - that they improve public services and should be widely adopted. This is why these practices are included in our competencies and syllabus. It's also why they're near universally reflected in the Digital Standards and digital government strategies of today's public sector institutions, and promoted in the academic literature on digital government.

Part of the support for these approaches emerges from the fact that they've proven their value in private sector firms where their uptake has been more widespread than it has in the state. We can also point to public sector case studies where government services and policies have been genuinely improved by adopting these practices.

But today's digital government orthodoxy may owe more to data on the failures of other approaches, than evidence of its own success in government contexts. Researchers in public administration domains have long criticized governments' limited engagement with users and stakeholders, siloed management of policy issues, services and data, and overzealous commitment to long-term planning over iterative learning. Advocates of the new digital government orthodoxy have more in common than they might often realise with a previous generation of public administration reformers who highlighted the flaws of industrial era bureaucratic management and the New Public Management wave that swept through government administrations from the 1980s onwards. By this argument, digital government orthodoxy is justified by a rich body of empirical research of *what doesn't work in government*.



However, it would be irresponsible to continue to advance these practices on this largely negative evidence base alone. In particular, as we start to see more governments across different jurisdictions, regions and political systems take up modern digital practices and as the use of these practices scales to become a mainstream, standard operating procedure in government, we are in a position to document the consequences - both welcome and worrisome - that they pose for the quality of government when they're actually put to work, as opposed to being discussed in the abstract as ideal states of affair we have yet to see come to life.

We anticipate that the benefits and risks of digital era practices will vary by context, and that we therefore need research which identifies the policy issues, levels of government, or political systems in which agile, open working, and multidisciplinary teams are more likely to create value, and similarly, the cases in which these practices are likely to fail or generate harms (and where, in turn, their adoption should be discouraged).

We also know that the digital government orthodoxy now spreading globally finds its genesis in the experiences and worldviews of a small set of governments, and of a relatively homogeneous set of generally privileged individuals working in these governments. As a result, we need research that checks and scrutinizes the biases that these governments and individuals have brought to the project of digital government transformation, and in particular, we need to consider how minority and traditionally excluded voices might change what we define as 'good' and 'bad' practice and outcomes when it comes to digital era governance.

The implication of this research stream for our work is clear: where we find that the digital government practices we currently promote can cause harm, we need to refine how we teach these practices, and we need to alert government agencies that may be deploying them without awareness of their limitations or side-effects.

Some questions that we think should be answered within this stream of research are:

- Are there real-world cases where the lack of detailed forward planning that is inherent to agile have caused policy or service delivery failures? Are efforts to upend waterfall methods sometimes throwing the baby out with the bathwater?



- There is a hypothesis currently circulating in some quarters that ‘discovery paralysis’ resulting from design thinking approaches is actually leading to slower service delivery and innovation than might otherwise be the case. Is there any evidence of this?
- Does working in the open, at least in the short term, invite more government criticism than it does generate empathy and trust between government and the public?
- Does government as a platform override autonomy for parts of the state that is important for good government?
- How much benefits versus how much harm have real world open data, open code and open working practices brought to governments and societies that have embraced them?
- Do privileged western assumptions shaping accepted best practice in digital era governance result in recommendations that are inappropriate for other contexts, or that are likely to produce harms of the sort that the privileged typically ignore?
- What are the limitations of a user needs-first focus when applied to government?



Research Stream 2 - What conditions support effective implementation of best practice in digital era governance, and how can public sector organizations generate these conditions?

Our second stream of research focuses on effective implementation of best practices in digital government. Here we are less concerned with the ‘what’ of best practices (the focus of Stream 1), and instead examine the ‘how’ of best practices. This research will help us understand the institutional, cultural and procedural conditions that allow government teams to effectively roll out best practices in digital era governance in their organizations.

Research within this second stream will evolve as findings from stream 1 emerge; as we learn more about the practices that support or alternatively, threaten, effective digital era government, research on how best to implement these practices in government bureaucracies should adjust its focus accordingly.

The following research questions fit into this stream of enquiry:

- What conditions (organizational, financial, personnel and leadership) need to be in place for particular practices in digital era government to succeed?
- Are there styles of leadership that are characteristically ‘digital’? Do these styles enable long term, beneficial reforms or do they set back such reforms?
- Does the existence of a set of written rules about how to do digital government (e.g. digital service standards) reduce public servant’s intellectual curiosity when solving problems?
- Given that they challenge the vertical silos traditionally used to define accountability structures in government, multidisciplinary teams and platform governance models may require accountability structures that are new to a given government. What are these accountability structures and how can they be integrated into public sector management and the broader political system of ‘checks and balances’ in which public service organizations operate?



- What approaches are most successful when it comes to encouraging broad uptake of best practices in digital government across a public sector organization?
- How should the tactics and institutional role of digital service teams evolve as digital competency grows across a government organization, including amongst senior decision-makers and political leaders/offices?

Research Stream 3 - How can training and education advance digital transformation efforts in today's governments?

In recent years, conversations about how best to advance digital reforms in government have increasingly turned to the question of skills and competencies. Within these conversations, it is generally accepted that while digital reform demands significant organizational, policy and cultural changes within public sector institutions, it also cannot materialize unless we add new skills and competencies to public servants' toolkits. By this logic, digital transformation is as much a human resources and education project as it is a public management reform movement.

Reflecting this interest in digital era public sector competencies, governments have introduced digital academies to update the skills and knowledge of current public servants, and we have also started to see some graduate feeder programs to government, such as Masters of public policy and administration programs, including more content relevant to digital era government in their curricula.

But what difference does education and training make to digital reform efforts in practice? And how should education and training be designed and rolled out in order to best support digital reform in today's governments? These questions frame our third stream of research.

This stream begins from the hypothesis that improving the digital competency levels of public servants is a necessary (although by no means sufficient) enabler of successful digital government transformation. We are particularly committed to research that investigates how



and under what conditions digital competency building enables digital government transformation, but also seek to illuminate the ways in which training and education may fall short as enablers of more significant, lasting digital reforms in today's governments. We also include research that asks how best to embed training on digital era competencies into the lives of future and current public servants.

Some questions that fit into this stream of research are:

- To what extent do public servants that complete training and education on digital government competencies find they are able to make use of the learning in their public sector careers?
- Do all public servants need a certain level of digital and data literacy? If so, what does that baseline of literacy include? If not, which types of public servants don't need minimum levels of digital and data literacy, and which do?
- Which group's digital skills failings have the most significant impact on policy development and service delivery (e.g. executives, policy analysts, political staff)? What are the best ways to engage and educate this target group?
- What are the typical educational journeys of most new public servants, and at which points in that journey is it most feasible and beneficial to include training on digital competencies?
- What are the mid-career educational journeys of most mid-senior public servants, and at which points in that journey is it most feasible and beneficial to include training on digital competencies?
- Is there a risk that raising the digital competency levels of public servants merely leaves them frustrated and disillusioned, given that at least in the short term, there remain many barriers to actually applying best practice in digital government in public sector organizations?
- Does education and training focused on digital government only attract those that are already enthusiastic about digital government, or can it engage a broad range of public servants?



- What are the most damaging beliefs that ordinary public servants have about technology, and how do they come to learn these? What do they need to be taught to un-learn these?

Next Steps: the Public Service in the Digital Age Research Workshops

The research streams we've laid out in this document require a large, diverse, connected and well-resourced research network. TPSDA will help build this network through a new initiative: the Public Service in the Digital Age Research Workshops.

These workshops will provide a venue for digital government researchers to gather at an intimate virtual meeting during which invited speakers will present a paper in progress, and participants will debate, discuss and provide feedback on the paper. The workshops will also serve a matchmaking function by helping participants to identify opportunities for collaboration. If you're interested in participating in the workshop, [please fill in this form](#).

We are especially eager to connect with researchers from a range of disciplines in order to draw on a rich diversity of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and existing bodies of knowledge.

We're keen to work with individuals at all stages of their careers, whether that be graduate students just starting out or established researchers, and with researchers working in a variety of settings, including governments, think tanks, academic institutions and within community organizations. Last, we know that this work must be driven by a diverse group of researchers and we are committed to ensuring that the work we support amplifies voices that have historically been marginalized or excluded within research processes.

We are extremely excited to get started on the research questions included in this briefing, and even more excited to engage with the many researchers and policymakers already working hard to build the evidence base on which digital era government reforms rest.