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Authors	Visvizi, Anna
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Editorial: Government and the global digital transformation: the other side of the mirror

Introduction

Amid the global digital transformation, the seemingly simple question of the government delivering on peace, justice and strong institutions turns into a conundrum. Several factors weigh in on what the government can do, envisages to do and dares to do today. State power, *raison d'être*, the nature of the global order, including global governance, are just a few of the issues that need to be factored in the analysis. Clearly, questions of ideology, including the degree of government intervention in the economy, the very definition of market economy and even of the scope of (economic) freedom are equally important in the conversation about the government today. People, and so personalities, do matter too, in that they influence the way things are done, expressed and communicated, regardless of the institutional, i.e. frequently rigid, structural confines.

The discussion on government and its transformation is a part of a broader and well-established in social sciences debate on politics, the policymaking process, institutions, people embodying these institutions, as well as on ideas and ideology. The inroads of information and communication technology (ICT) and the broadening of the specter, in which certain government functions can be aided by ICT-enhanced solutions, led to the emergence of a highly potent strand of research best captured by the terms “e-government” or “digital government.” Although the “classic” debate on government is prone to use the well-established conceptual approaches to the study of government and politics, the digital government research features a strong preference to engage with the intricacies of ICT, also in connection to diverse aspects of technology acceptance and ways of making the process more efficient. Frequently, due to the specificity of the publishing process, e.g. mind the word count limits, this otherwise fascinating research drifts away from the key concepts specific to the study of politics, government, the political realm and political processes. In this way, research on government and politics, follows two – not always parallel – paths today, essentially depriving us of the opportunity to understand how ICT-based tools and approaches impact on the mechanisms underlying the political process and the functions of the government.

Considering that the government is “of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863), whereas the delivery of peace, justice and strong institutions is the key set of the government’s objectives, in times best characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, it is necessary that these two strands of research come much closer together. In other words, it is necessary to refurbish bridges between the classic political science-based research on government, including public policy approach, and the ICT-driven perspective on government and its public service delivery. In this way, it should be possible to identify, name and explore issues, processes and mechanisms that mar policymaking and governance (be it at local, regional, national or global levels) today. As the war in Ukraine rages, as (underreported) humanitarian disasters define the fate of people in several



locations in Africa and as pressures on democracy mount in the Western world, the contexts in which governments operate could not be more fragile. Notably, the government itself may be a part of the challenge and the source of a country's fragility.

The objective and the content of the special issue

Against this backdrop, the objective of this special issue was to recognize that digital technologies and platforms create leverage to improve the work of the government today, and yet, also to stress that there is a world beyond ICT-enabled tools and applications. Indeed, the papers included in this special issue address diverse aspects of the so-defined context. The topics that they address can be divided into three groups. The first group of papers dwells directly on digitalization and thus explores the notions of authoritarian regimes and digitalization, e-government and its value-added for crisis management, as well as the salience of data quality in open government data (OGD) initiatives. The second group of papers investigates how ICT-based solutions influence specific functions of the government including the delivery of justice and promotion of growth and development in rural areas. The third group of papers looks at the government as the facilitator of growth in the private sector in such areas as start-up ecosystem development, sustainability-oriented accounting standards and education policy geared toward supplying the labor market with graduates equipped with the set skills in demand by the private sector.

Specifically, the paper by Yan Pei, titled "Crisis management of authoritarian regimes in the digital era: the case of epidemic prevention and control in China," explores the question of how authoritarian regimes conduct crisis management through application of technology, institutions and people. The findings suggest that China's response toward COVID-19 was heavily influenced by the government's perception of the crisis, which in turn influenced how the remaining institutions acted. In this context, technology and ICT-based solutions were developed, applied and iterated in line with the needs of the institutions, rather than of the public interest. The second paper included in the collection, authored by Saida Dammak, Sonia Mbarek and Mouna Moalla, is titled "E-government, political system and COVID-19 in Africa: lessons for future disruptive shocks." The objective of the paper was to explore the role of government-curated mobile tracing applications in the process of combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications in Africa. As the authors conclude, less economically and technologically developed countries, with generally authoritarian political systems, e.g. selected African countries, were able to contain the spread of the pandemic more effectively than several democratic, economically and technologically more developed countries. The authors of the following paper, i.e. Abiola Paterne Chokki, Charalampos Alexopoulos, Stuti Saxena, Benoît Frénay, Benoît Vanderose and Mohsan Ali, titled "Metadata quality matters in open government data (OGD) evaluation! An empirical investigation of OGD portals of the GCC constituents," make a case for the quality of metadata in context of OGD initiatives.

The next group of papers explores how ICT-based solutions can be used in the delivery of specific government functions. The authors of the first paper comprising this part of the special issue, Zulfia Hanum Alfi Syahr, Novian Uticha Sally and Muhamad Zaky Albana, and titled "The bailiff's services in the electronic judicial era in Indonesia," focus on Indonesia and the judicial process delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop they argue in which ways integrating ICT-based solutions with the judicial process could render the delivery of justice more efficient.

In the following paper, titled "Rural development and digital technologies: a collaborative framework for policymaking," the authors Rosangela Feola, Antonella Monda, Roberto Parente, Massimiliano Vesci and Antonio Botti showcase how ICT-based tools and

application may be useful in promoting growth and development in rural areas. The idea is to use digital technologies to enable collaboration between actors involved in the agri-food chain and related food tourism. The authors identify five sets of actions, including the definition of territorial identity, involvement of internal and external supply chain actors, definition of quality standard, cooperation of intra and infra supply chains and communication through technology, which are necessary for boosting collaboration between the agri-food chain and agritourism. Subsequently, the underlying mechanisms and processes are explored and discussed.

The third group of papers offers a qualitatively different take on the government in that, implicitly, it conceptualizes it as a smart agent of change. Notably, Francesc Font-Cot, Pablo Lara-Navarra and Enric Serradell-Lopez, in their paper titled “Digital transformation policies to develop an effective startup ecosystem: the case of Barcelona,” argue that the role of the government in the global digital transformation is to ensure that digital infrastructure is reliable and efficient enough to guarantee an entrepreneurial ecosystem for investment in innovation and startups. Accordingly, the paper elaborates on how the local government and policies implemented at the local level have been consequential in the process of creating an effective startup ecosystem in Barcelona. In the next paper, titled “An energy company’s journey toward standardized sustainability reporting: addressing governance challenges,” Gennaro Maione examines the intricacies and implications of corporate sustainability reporting strategies derived from the Global Reporting Initiative Standards. Against this backdrop, the role of government in promoting sustainability and sustainability reporting standardization is highlighted. Finally, the paper by Raheel Nawaz, Ernest Edem Edifor, Samantha Reive Holland, Qi Cao and Leo Shixiong Liu, titled “The impact of degree apprenticeships: analysis, insights and policy recommendations,” examines the growth of degree apprenticeships in the UK. As the authors argue, although claims and speculations about degree apprenticeships and their impact have been made by high-profile politicians, lobbyists and training providers, the evidence base has not been sufficiently scrutinized. This paper does so by looking especially at the impact of degree apprenticeships on social mobility and productivity, also in connection with the necessary policy strategy.

Conclusions

Given the interconnectedness of today’s world, at least in terms of communication, dissemination of news (as well as misinformation) and, from a different angle, global value-chains and supply chains, the role of the government invariably evolves. The challenge, so it seems, for every government today is to be able to connect the domestic context with the external one in a manner that would benefit the society at large, i.e. all stakeholders, while at the same time serving the international community. More reflection and more research are needed to understand and explain the variety of issues, topics and cases thus emerging and, hopefully, feed the findings in the policymaking process. This Special Issue sought to highlight it.

Anna Visvizi

*SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland and
Effat University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia*