

Covid-19 transforms the government: here's what to look at

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic affected all of us. The pandemic, its rapid spread and its tragic implications remind us that the world is interconnected and that a great number of problems can only be solved through collaboration. Covid-19 reminds us in this way that multilateralism is not outdated (Caporaso, 1992; Ruggie, 1992; Surdej, 2020). Rather, more of “effective multilateralism” (Bouchard *et al.*, 2013) is needed today not only to address the implications of the pandemic but also to preempt the USA the implications of the next one (Katz *et al.*, 2018; Visvizi, 2015; Gates, 2020). Rules and norms are needed to make it work. Governments should be the vanguard here.

This pandemic sheds light on the intrinsic connection among the government, citizens and data. This connection is powered by the ever more astounding advances in information and communication technology (ICT) and, even more so, by our ability to make sense of large sets of data. In the center of this connection lies trust, in many instances safeguarded by regulations, e.g. as in the case of the European Union (EU) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). However, what about personal data collected during an emergency, such as Covid-19 airport screenings? And what about individuals outside GDPR's jurisdiction? The issue of data, and especially, the need to secure our personal data from unauthorized use, is the government's responsibility to create a “data ecosystem” (Calzada and Almirall, 2020; Karkin and Janssen, 2020) of data storage, retrieval and use which are safe for the user and user-friendly. Covid-19 just reminds us of the obvious.

Covid-19 and, the frequently heroic, attempts to contain its spread and address its implications bring to the surface questions of individual and group responsibility, accountability and – the underlying them – notions of loyalty, affiliation and belonging. In this way, Covid-19 places solidarity in the spotlight. Whereas the popular discourse on Covid-19 portrays solidarity as an expression of responsibility within and among society members, the notion of citizens' solidarity with the state is much less clear in that discourse. And yet, the imposition of measures as harsh as lockdown, in some cases, reinforced by heightened police and military presence on the streets, the use of ICT-enhanced methods of monitoring and surveillance – all of which mean that individual liberties have been curbed – require a degree of trust toward the government. What if that trust is broken by the government? Consider the cases of Hungary and Poland (Hegedüs, 2020).

From a different angle, Covid-19 exposed the so far largely concealed, or perhaps just ignored, web of connections and interactions within and among our societies; the social networking sites (SNS) attest to that. Twitter and Facebook activities, to mention just these

TGPPP readers are well-aware of the change in the journal's stewardship that has taken place as of January 1, 2020. From its inception, *TGPPP* was edited by Professor Zahir Irani, under whose editorship over the past 13 years, 50 issues of the journal were published. In this way, *TGPPP* established itself as one of the leading journals defining the field and promoting cutting-edge research influencing the academic debate. The academic community, ourselves included, remains grateful to Professor Irani for his work. As we, Professors Anna Visvizi, as the Editor-in-Chief, and Miltiadis D. Lytras, as the Associate Editor, are taking over the journal, we can only hope that we will fill the shoes of the previous editor-in-chief and so will advance the debate to the benefit of all stakeholders. At this point, we would like to thank, the Publisher, Ms Hazel Goodes, and Ms Catherine McAteer, the Content Editor, as well as the entire team for their professionalism.



two, during the global lockdown surged. That activity revealed how good-willed individuals can console each other. However, it also confirmed that SNS can be sites of misinformation, propaganda, radicalization and subversion (Visvizi *et al.*, 2019; Aljohani *et al.*, 2020; Mora-Cantallops *et al.*, 2019; Pujol *et al.*, 2019; Thompson, 2012). On a positive note, the Covid-19 crisis fostered more efficient communication strategies that governments pursued through the SNS. However, in these trying times, instances of abuse of SNS and politicization of Covid-19 have also taken place. In other words, the government is not neutral in these complex contexts. Much more needs to be done, in terms of research, regulatory effort and policy-making to harness the potential SNS bear for effective, unbiased communication between the government and the citizens and vice-versa.

Finally, new forms of collaborations and new alliances were formed during the Covid-19 pandemic. International organizations, national governments, civil society organizations, the business sector, the army and grass roots movements and local communities were all engaged in the joint effort to deal with the emergency. Clearly, the government is part of the reconfigurations thus prompted.

Covid-19 transforms the government. The scale of that impact is still unknown, but technology is the key part of it (Visvizi and Lytras, 2019; Lytras *et al.*, 2020). Reflecting on Covid-19 through the lens of papers included in this issue of *Transforming Government: People, Process And Policy*, the first and direct observation is that many of the challenges and issues that Covid-19 brutally forced us to star at today have been present before. The only difference is that Covid-19 proves that governments may have not been transforming efficiently enough. The following section offers a brief insight into the content of the papers included in this issue.

Key topics and questions addressed in this issue

The collection of papers included in this issue offers an insight into diverse topics that reflect the ways in which the government is transformed today. Interestingly, even if the case studies featured are not related to Covid-19, the topics and issues the authors address seem to be speaking directly to the myriad of concerns our societies face today, in lockdown. Indeed, the key topics that the contributing authors address include:

- the rules and principles of personal data collection and use;
- data ecosystems;
- principles of ICT governance;
- ICT and the public sector's innovation capability;
- e-government strategies in developing countries;
- the role of soft factors, including competencies and skills, in boosting the efficiency of e-government initiatives; and
- the role and potential of social media in context of disaster management.

From the perspective of Covid-19 and its implications, the papers included in this issue could not be more valid.

The collection of papers opens with a highly timely paper, in which – by reference to Barcelona – the authors make a case for “data ecosystems”, i.e. on those lessons, the data infrastructures and institutions endowed with the task and capable of protecting citizens' digital rights in cities and regions (Calzada and Almirall, 2020). While the authors embed their discussion in the context of the EU and the GDPR, the findings of their research and the points they make, render this paper highly valid today as the question of the use and protection of personal data in times of global pandemics is yet to be explored.

The following paper (Luna-Reyes *et al.*, 2020) addresses the principles of ICT governance and their role in boosting innovation capability in the public sector, especially at the local levels of government. By querying the complex administrative structure of Mexico, the authors make a case for a link between the principles of ICT governance and capabilities to prompt innovation. Clearly, ICT plays a pivotal role in boosting public sector's innovation capability. Yet, the really interesting point this paper makes is that it is the specific set of ICT governance principles that may enhance innovation capability, through increased capability of knowledge acquisition, assimilation, transformation and exploitation. As the authors argue the ways, in which ICT governance principles support innovation are also linked to the size, resources and complexity of the local government.

In the discussion on the performance of local government, the notions of measuring the quality, efficiency and innovation capability become increasingly important. In this same context, the notion of good governance joins the conversation too. This is the focus of the next paper included in this collection. By reference to the case of Morocco, the authors (Chakiri *et al.*, 2020) argue the existing approaches to measure good governance at the local level of government have a bias-component inherent in them. To bypass that challenge, the authors devise an unbiased assessment technique consistent with the development of a framework that automates the design process of a data warehouse. This provides local and central decision-makers with factual, measurable and accurate local government data, which in turn help to assess the performance of local government.

The following paper takes up the question of competencies and their role in boosting the effectiveness of government, and especially the sustainability of e-government initiatives and strategies. By examining the process of establishing e-government structures in India, the authors (Hooda and Singla, 2020) verified the hypotheses long-term success of e-government requires that so-called core-competencies are instilled in government agencies. The authors define these competencies and elaborate on their specific role in securing e-government sustainability and hence success.

By focusing on the 2011 typhoon Washi that left more than 60,000 people homeless, the authors of the next paper (Malawani *et al.*, 2020) explain how social media can be used by the government to collect and examine data in view of identifying the victims' needs and expectations. In this way, as the authors argue, on the one hand, the government's response may be more targeted, timelier and, so, more efficient. On the other hand, what the authors are hinting at, the role of social media in the process of disaster management should be rethought. In other words, great and unexplored potential exists, and governments should be able to tap into it.

Gobin-Rahimbux *et al.* (2020) engage with the topic of ICT infrastructure and its application in context of smart local governance. By reviewing the nascent body of literature that explicitly deals with the question of designing and implementing ICT infrastructure at the local council level, here applied to the case of Mauritius, the authors seek to identify typologies, benchmarks and best practices. As a literature review, this paper highlights many interesting avenues of research yet to be explored.

The authors (Kirat Rai *et al.*, 2020) of the following paper examine the factors influencing the acceptance of, or the behavioral intention to use, the government-to-government (G2G) systems in developing countries. By exploring the case of Nepal, the authors identify and test several factors conducive to G2G acceptance. Apart from the well-established in the literature factors conducive to user's acceptance of G2G systems, the authors also point to the importance of other factors. These include the leaders' commitment and awareness of the system and the system's transparency. The really interesting facet of this paper is that it offers a glimpse into an e-government initiative implemented in one of the least developed countries (LDCs) – an

issue only seldomly discussed but with powerful implications for the apparently growing digital divide and new forms of exclusion.

The volume closes with a paper that examines the notion of politicization of e-voting in Kazakhstan. The thrust of the case, as [Kassen \(2020\)](#) argues, is that Kazakhstan, one of the post-Soviet republics, used e-voting technology starting from 2004, only to discontinue in 2011. As the author argues, the initial introduction of e-voting was consistent with Kazakhstan seeking to attain certain political and economic goals most closely related to modernization and acquiring a certain international position. The decision to discontinue the use of that technology has been dictated by a variety of factor, not all of them technology related.

Value added

The papers included in this issue of *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* make an interesting collection of conceptually and empirically sound insights into key issues that influence the transformation of government around the world today. The papers included in this issue mirror predominantly challenges specific to the developing world, including the LDCs. While the EU and the implications of the GDPR are featured by reference to the case of Barcelona, the remaining papers take the reader on a fascinating journey into diverse facets of the encounter of ICT and government in Mexico, Morocco, India, the Philippines, Mauritius, Nepal and Kazakhstan. Each of the cases discussed in detail in this issue allows the reader not only to get a good grasp of tools and methods that have been used but also of country specificities. The implementation of ICT-enhanced frameworks and infrastructures dominates the discussion in this issue. The implicit argument that weaves through and through this issue is that the human factor is the key one that makes technology useful and usable. This issue highlights therefore that soft issues are necessary for the adoption and efficient use of technology in the context of government, including specific competencies and skills, transparency, leadership and trust.

Our vision

Our vision for the journal is to promote inter- and multi-disciplinary, agile, concept- and practice-driven research on the broadly defined subject of transforming government through its people, processes and policy. We believe that in the multi-layered context of the 21st century, several overlapping perspectives to these issues exist. These have to be brought together if we are to understand and explain what makes the government work and deliver to the society. In this view, *TGPPP* encourages multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches to issues, processes and developments that directly and indirectly influence government's nature and power of government and the way in which it operates. This may well include issues located at diverse levels of analysis thus addressing questions pertinent to community, city, domestic, regional, international and global perspectives on government. *TGPPP* is an academic journal and so places emphasis on conceptually and methodologically sound debate on current and emerging issues in the fields of politics, economics, technology and business to reach and inform decision-makers at all levels of the decision-making process. In this way, *TGPPP* aims to build bridges between the worlds of academia and policymaking to promote evidence-based research. In brief, *TGPPP* aspires to establish itself as a venue of front-line thinking about government and the complex multi-scalar environment, in which it evolves.

From vision to action

The Covid-19 pandemic has already seriously impacted society, economies and politics across the globe. The need for diverse stakeholders, domestically and internationally, to

communicate, co-ordinate and collaborate has tested the resilience, interoperability and efficiency of existing modes of governance. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the salience of social networking sites and their profound role in official and unofficial government communication strategies. At the same time, the current state of emergency has been used by several governments to curb democracy and freedom. From a different angle, the Covid-19 crisis has also fostered new ways of collaboration among governments and international organizations and among grass roots movements and local communities. Indeed, new dynamics have been infused in the international system prompting new sources of pressure, new challenges and new opportunities for the government to transform. *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* is seeking research papers that address issues of governance during the Covid-19 pandemic. Please, visit the journal's website for more details.

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