

Exploring the Dangers of Digital Government: Issues, Concerns, and Negative Impacts

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1. Introduction

As a field of study, Digital Government research has studied government practice, policy implications and frameworks, technologies, governance, engagement, and other matters related to technology-enabled government. Research has focused on a multitude of topics, including inter-operationalization, administrative modernization, citizen engagement, transparency and openness, participation in democratic processes, and more [1, 2, 3, 4].

Broadly, much of the published research identifies a range of challenges and opportunities that digitally-enhanced government brings with it in general, and on modern platforms such as social media in particular. Little, if any, attention has been given, for example, to the [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]:

- Rise of anti-democratic uses of social media by governments and political figures.
- Mainstream (as opposed to in the context security efforts) citizen surveillance possibilities of interoperational digital government systems.
- “Closing” of government through selective and/or altered release of government data.
- Attacks on government institutions and credibility by the governing via digital platforms such as social media.
- Potential attacks on democratic elections and leaders through falsified content on social media platforms.
- Use of public-private partnerships that utilize private networks and technology infrastructures that do not conform to public sector privacy, security, public data, records retention, or other public sector legal or regulatory requirements.

2. Goals of the Minitrack

This minitrack explores concerns with digital government applications, implementations, and practice. More specifically, the minitrack moves away from an often optimistic perspective of open, transparent, and engaged digital government to address questions such as:

- Are there potentially harmful applications and uses of digital government to the institutions of government, citizens, and others in the public sphere?
- Can social media platforms potentially harm democracies in general and participatory democracy in particular? In what ways?
- What strategies, policies, and other efforts can, do, or should governments, citizens, civic groups, and others engage in to ensure democratic principles in the face of potential threats from technology-enabled government?
- What are the implications for adopting innovative uses of social media from non-government contexts to the government context?
- Are social media platforms increasingly another branch of government that require ‘checks and balances’?
- What are the implications for government use of digital technologies that provide inaccurate information to the public and/or sound false alarms in emergency or security-related matters?
- What are the considerations and implications for open, but potentially biased, data?
- How do governments engender trust in the institutions of governments in an era of false news and “alternate facts” increasingly promoted and enabled via digital sources?

3. Papers

In the paper “Disintermediating Government: The Role of Open Data and Smart Infrastructure,” Johnson explores two types of civic engagement technology – open data and smart city infrastructure

– and selected issues regarding civic technology adoption and unintended outcomes. More specifically, the paper explores how these technologies can disintermediate government from citizens. The paper discusses four mechanisms that can drive disintermediation, including the use of legal frameworks, jumping of scales, conversion of public to private goods, and the creation of standards. A potential outcome is the shift in the role of government from a service provider to a more background role as a data custodian or regulator, ceding critical service provider roles to the private sector.

Thiel and Ledet address the lack of knowledge and trust in official authorities and privacy concerns in relation to public participation in public discourse in their paper entitled “The Role of Pseudonymity in Mobile e-Participation.” Their paper uses a long-term field study with a mobile participation prototype, to investigate citizens' participation patterns in relation to their choice in username (real name vs. pseudonym). The findings from the study suggest that while engagement served less socializing purposes, social appreciation was not affected by pseudonymity. The data further suggests that those participating with their real-names lost trust in the local government. The study found no evidence that pseudonymity impacts the level of participation, but participants indicated to favor using a pseudonym in future interactions.

The paper “Leveraging NLP and Social Network Analytic Techniques to Detect Censored Keywords: System Design and Experiments,” by Leberknight and Feldman takes a more technical perspective by using a natural language processing (NLP) application to study Internet regulation in the form of online censorship and Internet shutdowns. By using an NLP application and a cross country analysis, the paper seeks further investigation into new methods for measuring and quantifying Internet censorship practices around the world. The paper presents findings from two experiments involving search engine queries of banned keywords to demonstrate censorship practices vary across different search engines, suggesting opportunities for developing circumvention technologies that enable open and free access to information.

In the paper “Social Media, Open Platforms, and Democracy: Transparency Enabler, Slayer of

Democracy, Both?” Bertot explores the use of social media platforms in the U.S. context in anti-democratic ways, such as circumventing expected administrative, legislative, and judicial processes; creating a policy making process that resides outside constitutional and deliberative channels; and stifling debate among and between government officials through public criticisms through social media. Further, as discovered during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, foreign governments have used social media platforms to interfere with sovereign nation elections through concerted efforts to falsify facts, create false stories (“fake news”), and sow discord among electorates. Using the U.S. context, this article presents a preliminary exploration of the emerging perils that social media represents to democracies, from administrative (management and operations of government) and democratic (governance) perspectives. The paper identifies several areas for future research given recent developments in the negative impact of social media on democratic practices, processes, and policies.

4. References

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