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Towards a typology of adaptive governance in the digital government context: The role of decision-making and accountability

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ABSTRACT

The notion of adaptive governance was originally created to capture forms of collaboration in socio-ecological systems that can respond to rapid changes in the environment. However, such a notion also has a great potential to be transferred and understood in the digital government context, where there is an increasing need to establish forms of collaboration that can respond to swift changes in the environment related to technology and citizen demands. Drawing on the analysis of four cases of IT-related project collaboration, we put forward that the degree of sharing of decision-making power and of accountability between government and non-government actors is critical to developing different types of adaptive governance. Findings show that the distribution of decision-making power and of accountability can be decoupled, resulting in three types of adaptive governance – namely polycentric, agile, and organic governance. We contribute to research by detailing and empirically testing the notion of adaptive governance in a digital government context, and to practice by highlighting the role of the distribution of decision-making power and of accountability in devising adaptive governance strategies.

1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of public issues and the rapid advancement of Information Technology (IT) and services (e.g., social media, big data, smart cities) put high demands on governments to develop the capacity to evaluate, respond to, and implement new technologies and processes. Moreover, as governments in the last decades have increasingly transferred their capabilities externally through outsourcing projects (Cordella & Willcocks, 2010), they are often left with reduced skill sets and limited capacity. This has created challenges for governments to adapt to swift changes, especially in the implementation of IT-related projects (Gil-Garcia, Zhang, & Puron-Cid, 2016; Mergel, 2016; Tassabehji, Hackney, & Popovič, 2016).

Confronted with such challenges, governments have sought to deliver public services through new working relationships with private organizations (Klievink, Bharosa, & Tan, 2016). These relationships are characterized by the voluntary combination of separate private and public organizations into a coherent service delivery system (Bertot, Estevez, & Janowski, 2016; Scupola & Zanfei, 2016). In such new organizational set-ups, established governance mechanisms for enhancing control and enforcing procedures are no longer suitable for reacting and adapting quickly to changes in the environment (Gong & Janssen, 2012;

Janowski, Pardo, & Davies, 2012). Governments are thus expected to adopt new governance practices to accommodate the evolving and dynamic collaborative relationships around government (Ojo & Mellouli, 2016).

This emphasis on devising flexible arrangements that can adapt to changes in the environment is echoed in the principles of *adaptive governance*. The concept of adaptive governance has been formulated within studies on social-ecological systems (SESs) (Chaffin, Gosnell, & Cosens, 2014), but has the potential to be applied to different contexts. Recently, a call has been made to use the notion of adaptive governance in investigating government IT initiatives (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016). The notion of *adaptive governance in the context of digital government* has been tentatively characterized by “decentralized bottom-up decision-making, efforts to mobilize internal and external capabilities, wider participation to spot and internalize developments, and continuous adjustments to deal with uncertainty” (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016, p. 4). This type of governance aims at making governments more adaptable to changes in their surrounding environment, while also preserving stability and accountability, which are highly valued by government organizations.

While potentially suitable to capture the need of governments to establish governance practices that can respond to swiftly changing

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environments at a conceptual level, the notion of adaptive governance still needs to be further detailed and empirically tested in the context of digital government practices. Further research is required to identify, stemming from the abstract principles of adaptive governance, the key dimensions across which adaptive governance can vary in the specific contexts of IT-related project collaboration.

When transferred to a digital government context, the dimensions of *decision-making power* and of *accountability* become of key importance. To find a balance between achieving greater adaptability and maintaining stability (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016), governments engaged in IT-related project collaboration need to move away from hierarchical principles of governance, and rethink the way decision-making power and accountability are distributed among government and non-government organizations.

Existing research on governance of collaboration between government and non-government actors shows the importance of the distribution of decision-making power (Doberstein, 2016), and of accountability (Papadopoulou, 2007) in governance arrangements. However, it's still unclear how different configurations of distribution of decision-making power and accountability across government and non-government actors provide a ground for the adaptiveness of governance arrangements. This study thus aims at tackling this gap by answering the following research question: *How can decision-making power and accountability be distributed among government and non-government actors in adaptive governance arrangements in the context of digital government?*

Drawing on an analysis of four cases of collaboration between government and non-government actors in IT-related projects, we aim to refine the conceptualization of adaptive governance in a digital government context by proposing a typology based on the two dimensions of distribution of decision-making power and of accountability.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss existing research on the governance of collaboration between government and non-government actors, and the emergence of the concept of adaptive governance in a digital government context. We highlight the gaps in current research, arguing for the need to focus on the role of decision-making power and accountability in investigating the notion of adaptive governance. In Section 3, we explain four cases of IT-related project collaboration between government and non-government actors in China as our sources of empirical data, and illustrate the methods of data collection and analysis used in our study. In Section 4, we present the findings from the analysis of the four cases, focusing on the distribution of decision-making power and of accountability between government and non-government actors. Drawing on these findings, in Section 5, we propose a typology of adaptive governance based on the nature of the distribution of decision-making power and of accountability, putting forward three types of adaptive governance. In Section 6, we present the implications of our study for both the research and practice of adaptive governance in a digital government context, and discuss the limitations of the study. In the concluding section, we summarize our study and identify avenues for future research.

2. Background

2.1. Adaptive governance in the digital government context

Governance has been defined as an attempt to improve coordination between relatively dependent actors for the purpose of solving societal problems (Klijn, 2008) and, within research on Information Systems, as the solution that individuals and organizations devise for addressing issues of coordination (Markus & Bui, 2012).

The wide array of studies on governance has been clustered around four main views of governance (Klijn, 2008) which – rather than emphasize the structure of government or the limit of government capacity – emphasize the process of governing: 1) the good governance perspective, focusing on the principles of a properly governed state and

how government operates; 2) governance as New Public Management, focusing on how to improve the performance of government by shifting the role of implementation to non-state actors (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994); 3) multi-level governance, focusing on the use of networks crossing agency boundaries and levels of government (Rukanova, Wigand, van Stijn, & Tan, 2015); and 4) network governance, focusing on the complex processes taking place in networks of public and non-public actors (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

The two perspectives of governance as New Public Management and of network governance (Lecy, Mergel, & Schmitz, 2014) have aimed at capturing how government and non-government actors concur in the design, implementation, and management of policies through different forms of collaboration (Bovaird, 2005; Provan & Kenis, 2008). This has in turn characterized the increasing complexity of contemporary policy-making. Empirical research on governance shows how established mechanisms of governance that imply enhancing control and enforcing procedures are found no longer suitable for reacting and adapting to swift changes in the environment (Chatfield & AlAnazi, 2015; Gong & Janssen, 2012). Established approaches to the governance of the interactions between government and non-government actors, such as the ones inspired by the New Public Management, fail to capture the complexity and the change introduced by digital networks (Dawes, 2009; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). In particular, collaboration between public and private actors in IT-related projects is found to require new governance practices that can respond to rapidly changing environments (Janowski et al., 2012).

The need to adapt to swiftly changing environments lies at the core of the concept of *adaptive governance*. The term adaptive governance originated within research on socio-ecological systems (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003) and was coined to indicate a new approach to governance for managing uncertainty and complexity stemming from critical environmental challenges, such as transboundary pollution, tropical deforestation, and climate change (Chaffin et al., 2014). As such, the concept of adaptive governance has been fruitfully employed to describe strategies to cope with transformations linked to climate change (Brunner & Lynch, 2013), community relocation (Bronen & Chapin, 2013), and ecological systems (Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005; Robertson & Choi, 2010).

In recent years, the concept of adaptive governance has been applied to areas other than socio-ecological systems. These include international trade (Cooney & Lang, 2007), health research (Andrew & Kendra, 2012), political science (Heilmann & Perry, 2011), disaster research (Djalante, 2012; Djalante, Holley, & Thomalla, 2011), and law (Garmestani & Allen, 2014). As a result, the concept of adaptive governance has developed to include a variety of dimensions, depending on the specific context of study. These dimensions include: flexibility in response and adjustment (Bodin & Crona, 2009; Bodin, Crona, & Ernstson, 2006; Folke et al., 2005; Lebel et al., 2006), learning (Pahl-Wostl, 2009), individual leadership and trust building (Folke et al., 2005; Olsson, Folke, & Berkes, 2004; Olsson, Folke, & Hahn, 2004), and power sharing (Folke et al., 2005). This abundance of dimensions had contributed to the concept's popularity but has also defused clarity on the topic and resulted in the absence of a shared definition.

Surprisingly, to date the promising concept of adaptive governance has not yet been applied to the area of digital government. Only recently there has been a call to unfold the potential of the concept of adaptive governance to be used in the context of digital government (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016).

Since *adaptive governance in the context of digital government* is only loosely referred to as “a principle providing strategies for dealing with uncertainty and adapting to changes originating from the environment” (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016, p. 3), it has no established definition yet. Nevertheless, from the perspective of government, four key characteristics of adaptive governance in the context of digital government

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