

Research Paper

A shift in argumentation and justification?
Collaborative public administration in the context of national digitalisation strategies

Abstract

Collaboration has become one of the buzzwords of our time. Particularly, in the popular context of public sector innovation and e-government research, collaboration seems (inter alia) discourse-determinative (e.g. Sørensen & Torfing, 2011; OECD, 2018). Although the interaction between both public-public and public-private actors is hardly a new phenomenon and has always played a crucial role in the policy cycle all over Europe, networks and partnerships are increasingly being perceived as an effective and legitimate form of governance to survive in an age of digital transformation (Osborne, 2010). One decisive criticism of this so-called paradigm shift is firmly anchored in the traditional theory of public administration, which is characterised by the Weberian logic of a classic neutral acting bureaucracy based on principles such as hierarchy of authority, division of labor, clear responsibilities and rules and regulations. The concept of collaboration contravenes some cardinal administrative precepts that seek to ensure democratic-bureaucratic accountability. Difficulties arise in the area of participation when the 'inviolable' hierarchical boundary is challenged by dissolving authority relations in favor of a shared power across units and with non-state stakeholders by involving citizens and entrepreneurs on an equal footing with bureaucratic experts. However, academics and practitioners do not tire to emphasise the mutually positive effects of internal and external collaboration—interorganisational exchange and the involvement of external stakeholders (collective intelligence)—as well as public sector digitalisation (Juell-Skielse, et al., 2017) and public sector innovation in a broader sense (e.g. Meijer, 2015; de Vries & Tummers, 2018). While Networked Governance has received considerable attention as a paradigm for public sector governance and innovation, its nexus with more traditional, but pivotal paradigms of public administration remains relatively unexplored. This paper seeks to analyse how such paradigms are reflected in the actual digitalisation policy making and strategising. We first link the concepts of Digital Era Governance and Collaborative Governance, differentiating between the different types of coordination mechanisms identified by the public management literature. Second, we conduct a comparative discourse analysis of two European countries with different administration traditions (DE, FR). By coding the countries' first significant and the most recent strategic documents dealing with digitalisation, we identify potential shifts of dominant reform paradigms (Osborne, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) with respect to collaboration. All steps are guided by the following subquestions: What role does the rhetoric on collaboration play in legitimating national digitalisation strategies? How is collaboration conceived, how has this changed over time? To contribute to answering the core research question: Is there significant evidence that supports the theoretical argument of a paradigmatic shift from New Public Management to Networked Governance or do these concepts co-exist in the discourse on digitalisation as competing ideas and "layered realities" (Hartley 2005, Pestoff 2010, Hyndman et al. 2018)? In both countries under analysis, we find that the Neo-Weberian, New Public Management and Networked Governance discourses each occur in the 'Digital Era Governance', although we observe an increasing influence of the 'Networked Governance rhetoric'. Taking a closer look at the strategies however, it appears that this shift in discourse is not ultimately connected with an enhanced integration of non-state actors in decision-making and service delivery. The analytical results of this paper embedded in a larger EU funded H2020 research project (www.tropico-project.eu) will be supplemented by the analysis of further EU countries in the upcoming months.

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