

NIGHTMARE OF THE IMAGINARIES

A Critique of Socio-technical Imaginaries Commonly Applied to
Governance

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“In order to seek truth, it is necessary once in the course of our life, to doubt, as far as possible, of all things.”

René Descartes

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Introduction

This essay aims to analyse and debunk several technology-related concepts commonly discussed in papers, reports and speeches by academics, consultancies, politicians and governmental bodies. Each reflects a presumption about how technology, the internet in particular, and technology-enabled social and political processes might affect the practice of governing. It concludes that taken as a whole they represent an alarming drift toward the creation of a state machinery that could monitor and manipulate the behaviour of citizens — the risks of the creation of such an all-seeing (“panoptic”) state set out in a paper by Bannister (2005) have increased rather than been mitigated.

The discussion here characterises the concepts as “socio-technical imaginaries”, a term introduced by Jasanoff & Kim (2009) to describe ideas that link the socio-political environment with technology. Socio-technical imaginaries start as a description of potentially attainable futures, turn into a prescription of futures that ought to be attained, then become received wisdom about the present day. They are speculation that takes root through reuse and endorsement by authoritative figures, becoming an asserted present reality on the basis of little or no evidence. Once imaginaries become widely accepted and used, they may shape trajectories of research and innovation, steering technological progress as well as public and private expenditure (noted by Bannister & Connolly, 2020 and Rieder, 2018). Little attention has been paid to the cumulative effect of these imaginaries on governance, though many clues are provided in the book on surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff (2019).

Imaginaries can rarely if ever live up to the expectations of them, by their very nature. However, when they do not, the common response is to blame faulty execution rather than accept evidence that it was a flawed concept in the first place. Consequently, the reaction is to try again, consuming even more effort — with of course little possibility of a different outcome. In a political context, stopping such processes is very difficult. For example, a monograph by Waller & Weerakkody (2016) describes how “digital government” has been going round in circles for decades, and Bannister & Connolly (2020) unpick the prediction failures in academic literature relating to it.

The concepts covered in this paper are:

1. Public Sector Innovation
2. Digital Transformation of Government
3. Co-creation & Co-production of Public Services
4. Crowdsourcing / Wisdom of Crowds
5. Collaborative Governance
6. Customer/Citizen Centricity
7. Once-only Principle
8. Personalisation
9. Big Data
10. Nudge (Behavioural Insights)
11. Platform Government/GaaP
12. Online Participation

Four questions are posed to critique each concept:

1. What is the received wisdom?
2. What does that really mean?
3. What is the problem / what has gone wrong?
4. What to do better / what should it be?

This analysis reveals that each of these phenomena is rooted in either or both of two premises.

1. Public sector bodies are comparable to private sector commercial companies, and therefore concepts, business models, practices and processes can transfer directly from one to the other.
2. Bureaucratic, paternalist, monolithic government has failed to produce effective policies for the present era and therefore should be replaced by collaborative, participative, network governance. In particular, that citizens are collectively better capable of specifying or developing public policies and procedures than existing institutions.

Both are false. Paradoxically, it is likely that few people would say they believe either of these premises when they are expressed in the terms used here, yet the same people will quite probably remain in thrall to imaginaries that derive from and depend on them, perhaps excited by the use of technology. Both imply a rejection of the importance of political choice-making that lies at the core of governing — choices on who benefits and who is burdened by policies and by how much, how minority interests are recognised, how priorities and resources are assigned across society as a whole. In a democratic governance system with separation of powers across institutions, they downplay the critical interplay between the institutions and between them and external stakeholders in the development and implementation of public policy. Much academic work on the imaginaries completely ignores politics, the role of state institutions, and the fundamentals of democracy.

Direct effects of adopting these premises include language creep, where terminology is transferred from the private to public sector without consideration of its meaning in the new context (e.g. “services”) or indeed lack of meaning (e.g. “customer”). Metaphors or analogies are taken across and used as prescriptive models (e.g. “Government as a Platform”). Some language has taken root, particularly “services” and “customer”. This creates an image of government as a retailer, offering goods and services to people who can choose whether or what to buy. In fact, the people are experiencing statutory procedures of entitlement such as healthcare or a payment subject to certain conditions, or of obligation like paying a tax. The inappropriate model of retail public administration and retail politics can only lead to disappointment and disillusionment with the governance system.

A paper by Selbst et al. (2019) sets out reasons for the failure of transfers of technology-based processes: too narrow a view of the receiving context, confusing or harmful attempts to repurpose an unsuitable process, not taking account of fairness, equality, transparency and so on essential to public administration, not understanding the impact of technology on people’s behaviour, or simply using technology for its own sake when there may be a better way. These reasons provide a basis for explaining many of the problems with the imaginaries.

Discussion

Each of the imaginaries is discussed briefly below, and in the annex more detail on each is tabulated against the four questions. Some people, especially those who trade on the concepts in one way or another, might be tempted to dismiss much of the discussion as sweeping and overly sceptical generalisations. To be fair, it is possible to find examples where impact of the concepts has been positive — everything has a use for something. However, the point here is that a single idea has taken hold as a general solution to a real or imagined problem and hyped well beyond any utility it may have — nothing is applicable to everything. The overall pattern is one of appealing but ill-

defined and often little-understood notions grabbing the imagination of politicians and others as offering a response to an alleged sense of dissatisfaction in the public with some aspect of governance.

The antidotes to these ideas (covered in the last section of each annex) nearly always involve stepping back and looking at the real roles of government, the institutions within the governance system, and of politics in society. The key is to understand how these actually work, then consider whether the “problem” that each imaginary purports to solve actually exists. If it does, then see what approaches to solving it would work, inspecting them closely for negative implications for society and good governance.

“Public Sector Innovation” (PSI, Annex A1) embraces all the imaginaries to some extent and the critique of it holds for them too. It falls into the trap of taking a narrow, distorted view of governance rather than appreciating the true role and functioning of government and the public sector in a system of governance, as described clearly and concisely by Jocelyn Bourgon (2019). She draws attention to “public innovation” — the novel, risky and large-scale interventions that only governments can, and do, make to change society — rather than PSI which in most cases concerns minor changes to front-end operations. Proponents of PSI rarely if ever refer to the core function of government, i.e. developing policy (making decisions on controlling the allocation of resources in society and providing a set of rules and institutions setting out ‘who gets what, where, when, and how’ in society), designing a policy intervention through instrument choice, implementing it and administering it under the Rule of Law. They seldom acknowledge that public sector bodies are established and operate through definition in constitutional or administrative law – they are not autonomous managerial entities. Failure to understand these fundamentals leads to trivial interventions or major systemic distortions by applying business-orientated methods to a public function. Consequently, few projects employing the advocated bottom-up approaches achieve substantive change.

“Digital transformation of government” (Annex A2) is a specific instance of the above, that has adopted a very narrow model of web sites and transactions taken from commerce to overlay on to public administration. Since this only addresses the provision of information about policy instruments and the transactional element of some of them (like form-filling and payments for benefit claims or taxes), it represents a trivial add-on to the front-end interaction aspects of a small number of policy implementations. While often useful, through saving people time, this transforms nothing, as described by Waller & Weerakkody (2016). Moreover, when the model is applied inappropriately, where reality is too complex, the outcome can be bad. More ambitious efforts to introduce technology on a large scale into administrative operations, in an attempt to fulfil the promise of transformation, are frequently encountering significant problems as technology-driven organisational change programmes again fail to understand the nature of the entities involved.

“Co-creation and co-production of public services”, “Crowdsourcing”, and “Collaborative governance” (Annexes A3, A4, A5) embody propositions about groups of actors from different sectors collaborating to influence, make or implement public policy, or manage public programmes or assets, in contrast to this being done solely by governmental actors. There is an implication that information and communication technology is the new element to facilitate this. The frequent assertion that a single state bureaucracy has or once had a monopoly is only true in very exceptional times and places: multiple sectors are often present in governance or administrative processes in some way, as illustrated in a paper by Waller (2017). But the focus on bottom-up processes and governance as a solution to purported policy or implementation failures ignores the role of politics, institutions and law. Consequently, in raising the significant risks of bias towards the articulate and well-resourced, and of excluding some stakeholders from decision making, these are unlikely to work sustainably in reality. Further, they undermine the role of constitutionally-determined

democratic processes — “hollowing out the state”. In this context the “wisdom of crowds” metaphor for decision making is taking this process to extremes and can only work in very limited conditions (see Annex A4).

“Customer/Citizen Centricity”, the “Once-only Principle” (aka OOP, “Tell Us Once”), and “Personalisation” (Annexes A6, A7, A8) all focus on the experience of an individual who interacts with public administrative processes, almost always with an internet-based interface in mind. First, the individuals are not “customers” in the commercial sense of having a choice to buy and a choice of what to buy. They are engaging in legislatively defined exercises of obligation or entitlement that must satisfy equality before the law for everyone, as explained by Tuck et al. (2011). Second, centring the design of policy or processes on that individual experience ignores the point that the transaction they are taking part in is one component of a policy instrument, and there will be many other stakeholders and instruments, often more important, involved in the policy outcome it supports. While offering convenience, simplicity and helpfulness, OOP and personalisation involve the collection, storage and association with an individual identifier of personal data, to be used across different administrative processes. Challenges tend to be discussed technically in terms of interoperability and electronic identities, and how their absence has made government-wide implementations difficult to construct. However, deeper issues lie in the legality, transparency and accountability of a progressive construction by the state of detailed data on citizens that begins to be used to predict their circumstances (e.g. potential need for other administrative processes).

The jury is still out on “Big data” and “Nudge (Behavioural insights)” (Annexes A9, A10). Both rely on faith in the ability of a particular science to be relevant to public policy development and administration. Big data has taken hold as a vague notion that huge sets of data collected via the internet from people and objects can be examined using data science’s analytic techniques to produce useful insights. Nudges depend on predicting via behavioural science how a small change in administrative instruments might result in people acting in a different way (implying “for the better” as judged by a state institution). Despite great hype, both have yet to realise significant deployment or impact, especially while demonstrating a proper legal basis, transparency and accountability, and mitigating against bias, manipulation and infringement of personal rights.

“Government as a Platform (GaaP)” (Annex A11) is an illustration of a metaphor out of control. The only usage that has real meaning is as shorthand for an architecture for government IT that supports a range of administrative systems and processes through shared application programming interfaces (APIs) and components, and common standards and datasets (a platform in computing jargon). That in itself is challenging to achieve across a whole government that has a multitude of live operational administrative systems built differently across time, supporting administrative laws that may define data items in different ways, among other problems of funding, ownership and accountability. However, due to its resonance with the posterchildren of the internet age that are “platform” businesses, the metaphor has been extended to apply to the wider functions of governing and “government” itself. Once those ideas are examined through the lenses of policy development and instruments, such propositions become meaningless and confusing.

“Online participation” in governance (Annex A12), often labelled e-participation or e-democracy, has been an ambition for the internet for over two decades. Whereas the role of social media in politics, especially campaigning, fundraising and elections, has become established both positively and negatively, a sustainable role for online discussion in relation to policy development or the operation of public services remains elusive. It turns out that the internet tools created so far are poor at enabling the degree of deliberation and reflection necessary for effective engagement in governance processes and are liable to interference by malicious actors. It seems that political problems cannot be easily solved by exchanges in electronic media. One problem is that what people say openly or spontaneously, what they think they think, and what they really feel aren’t necessarily the same.

Conclusion

As a whole package, these imaginaries represent a nightmare for liberal, representative democracy. Some may enable the “panoptic” state, others may undermine existing institutions to open a void for it to step into. Many have the likelihood of creating or reinforcing inequality of opportunity, outcome or influence. But their grip is hard to loosen. The notions that they are inevitable or that issues will be resolved in due course by technology itself need to be challenged by surfacing the human, social and political dimensions and actively addressing them.

They already have created — to a massive extent illustrated by copious academic literature — Rieder's (2018) distortion to research and innovation, diverting technological progress as well as public and private expenditure to dead-end purposes and wasting public resources on badly thought through practices.

More strategically and importantly, while failing to achieve their overt ambitions, several of the practices generated in pursuit of these imaginaries also contribute incrementally and surreptitiously to a public data ecosystem – the collection of personal data by the state. The urge to try to gather more data seems irresistible. The start of the 2020s sees chatbots, machine learning and algorithmic decision-making gain ground as the latest transferees from the commercial sector to governance. There are plans for the placement or use in people’s homes and public places by public bodies of personal behavioural data gathering devices like “smart speakers” and sensors — the “Internet of Things”. The book by Zuboff (2019) explains (page 242) how mobile phones quietly and constantly supply location data on their owners to apps — something that some responses to the Covid-19 pandemic has made more evident.

As each is an attempt to reproduce in the public sector a practice developed in the private sector (particularly the “tech” sector), one must table the hypothesis that in aggregate they are constructing a state version of the “surveillance economy” described by Zuboff wherein the ability to track and predict individual behaviour becomes very valuable. Policies, systems and processes developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 — dubbed the “coronopticon” by *The Economist* (UK edition, 28 March 2020) — had an understandable justification for monitoring individuals, but some of these practices may subsequently remain in place. Such an outcome can undermine the legitimacy of the state by opening a gap between a controlling institution and the rest of us, now rendered as objects not citizens, destroying the principles of democracy.

The wider implications of these practices therefore warrant deeper study and greater public exposure. For academics, forecasters and practitioners, there are two recent pieces of advice. Bannister & Connolly (2020) say that those “with limited (or an absence of) knowledge of politics or political science should consult with a range of people who are familiar with this area including practitioners and scholars”. Selbst et al. (2019) advise that “considering the social context when designing technical solutions will lead to better—and more fair—sociotechnical systems”. Helpfully, those papers provide suggestions for practical steps. Also, the works by Bourgon (2019), Crowley et al. (2020), and Howlett (2019b) provide guidance on practical alternatives to the imaginaries, bringing back the realisation of any good intentions buried within them into the realm of public policy development, implementation and administration.

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Annex

The following tables consider these questions for each of the concepts discussed in this paper.

1. What is the received wisdom?
2. What does that really mean?
3. What is the problem / what has gone wrong?
4. What to do better / what should it be?

A1 - Public Sector Innovation

A2 - Digital Transformation of Government

A3 - Co-creation & Co-production of Public Services

A4 - Crowdsourcing / Wisdom of Crowds

A5 - Collaborative Governance

A6 - Customer/Citizen Centricity

A7 - Once-only Principle

A8 - Personalisation

A9- -Big Data

A10 - Nudge (Behavioural Insights)

A11 - Platform Government/GaaP

A12- -Online Participation

A1 - Public Sector Innovation

Public Sector Innovation	
The received wisdom	There are many organisations owing their existence to this vaguely-defined discipline. Their common claim is that a bottom-up approach is required to find innovative solutions to public policy or operational problems by brainstorming design at the interface of the public sector and those it deals with. They will frequently explain their mission along the lines that innovation in a public sector setting is more difficult than in a private sector one because it is operating under constraints, controls, and a hostile, short-termist political environment. As it is risk averse, these special forms of intervention are needed, led by courageous public managers, to make change happen.
What that really means	While a wide range of innovation tools and processes have been developed, most use group dynamics in “labs” and “workshops” to create point solutions to narrowly defined problems out of the public administrative context within which they sit i.e. the legal, policy and political aspects. Outputs therefore seldom take root, and blame is laid on the resistance of institutions. Conversely, the tools and processes can work if the contextual aspects are incorporated.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	All of the reasons for failure listed by Selbst et al. (2019) are in evidence. The most significant is the failure to recognise the difference between the public sector (as organisations) and public policy as social interventions — “public innovation” as Bourgon (2019) puts it. She says, “Despite the need for public innovation, public servants (when asked to discuss the challenges they face in innovation labs and workshops) tend to present a narrow perspective, rarely going beyond the boundary of their respective units. While recent public sector reforms have encouraged a drive for efficiency and productivity, they have also generated a narrow and sometimes distorted view of the scale of the role of government in society. For the most part, the focus has been introspective, giving special attention to the modernisation of public sector systems and practices as well as the service delivery functions of government.” Public servants work within the legal and political framework that defines public sector organisations – it is seldom within their ability to innovate unilaterally. Even when they work, studies suggest that the results of such processes can be biased to the needs of the articulate and lack accountability.
What to do better / what should it be	High impact public sector innovation is found in policy design and instrument selection, not the administrative front end. The discipline needs to shift its focus to how the institutions of the state create new ways to solve social, economic and environmental problems, recognising the specific geographical, cultural and political context within which they work. Governments can do things no other actor can, taking on risks and raising resources on a scale not available to others.

A2 - Digital Transformation of Government

Digital Transformation of Government	
The received wisdom	A common narrative is that the public demands that governments and the public sector follow commercial (especially internet-based) firms in transforming the way they work by using digital technologies in order to become more customer friendly, responsive to changing pressures, and efficient. An extension is to use digital technologies to increase participation and thus enhance democracy. The major technology companies are seen as role models. The policy, political, structural and legal basis of public administration is seen as a hindrance.
What that really means	The greater part of the focus and literature has been on the use of web sites and online transactions i.e. providing information on public administrative processes and carrying out transactional elements of policy instruments. Larger scale “transformation” projects resemble office automation projects of decades ago and many struggle through being technology-driven. Similarly, internet discussion is seen as a substantive means to address and resolve public policy questions.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	No reference is made by the technology community to the core function of government, i.e. developing policy, designing policy through instrument choice, implementing it and administering it under the Rule of Law. Failure to understand this core function leads to trivial interventions or major systemic distortions by applying a commercial model to a public policy activity. Applying simplistic web models to complex policy instruments (driven perhaps by ‘Digital by Default’ mandates) can have serious consequences (e.g. the UK's Universal Credit policy). Little has been achieved in practice in realising any “transformation of government”, however that is defined, despite a huge volume of writing and spending on the topic. Online participation in policy matters typically lacks context, understanding, or substance, and seldom connects to mainstream policy debate (but social media have had many effects on electoral politics in particular, for better or worse) — see Annex A12..
What to do better / what should it be	A better approach is to bring the consideration of the role of technology into the policy design and legislative phase and explore how instruments can be enhanced through technology. Aspects of implementation and Rule-of-Law administration must be properly taken into account at that stage- Waller & Weerakkody (2016). Studies of the subject “need to differentiate between evidence and hope” - Barcevičius et al. (2019). See also Annex A12 on participation.

A3 - Co-creation & Co-production of Public Services

Co-creation & Co-production of Public Services	
The received wisdom	A common narrative is that governments can no longer find and deliver solutions to social problems on their own but need to work with citizens and other organisations to develop (co-create) and operate (co-produce, though the words are used interchangeably) those solutions (“services”) to meet “user needs” i.e. the demands of the beneficiary of the “service”.
What that really means	This is dressing up as “new” and prescriptive/normative what has almost always been the case, that policy outcomes are achieved by a system of actors, laws and processes such as scrutiny, accountability and redress. By focussing on interactions between “users”, their requirements, and related stakeholders, it ignores the broader policy and public administrative perspective and the essential role for government as facilitator or designer.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	Muddled terminology leads to a lack of a solid foundation for research and practice. In particular, the means to achieve a policy outcome is muddled up with a “service process” – advocates try to apply very simple commercial “service” models to something that is a totally different and complicated system. So they fail to describe reality and then make up more concepts to try to extend their models to fit better. But that can’t work because the starting point is wrong - Waller (2017). See also Howlett (2019a).
What to do better / what should it be	A descriptive systems modelling approach is useful for designing policy and its implementation, but it remains the role of government to ensure that systems drawing on public resources meet the essential criteria for them.

A4 - Crowdsourcing / Wisdom of Crowds

Crowdsourcing / Wisdom of Crowds	
The received wisdom	This is one particular form of digital/social participation that purports to be a “democratisation of public decision-making processes” – Certomà et al. (2020) – where a group of participants is invited to address a particular issue and reach a conclusion based on their collective knowledge being greater than any single institution’s.
What that really means	The essence is that if you ask enough people, their answers will cover sufficient angles of a problem that by some consensus or averaging process, a good conclusion will emerge.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>This is another case of positing that a collective of citizens can do better than the machinery of the state in solving a problem. It bypasses established governance systems, implying their inadequacy and thus weakening them. It can thus be anti-democratic. “Local urban initiatives suggest the need to question this technology-optimistic imaginary” - Certomà et al. (2020).</p> <p>The distinctions between opinion, experience, learned and tested knowledge, and evidence are often lost in crude approaches. A crowd can become a mob — its actions may not be in the interests of those outside it (or even itself).</p> <p>“Wisdom of Crowds” is a popularly-used quasi-synonym that originally reflected a statistical phenomenon that the average of many independent guesses of a particular value were more likely to be close to the actual value than any single guess.</p> <p>Jaron Lanier argues that crowd wisdom is best suited for problems that involve optimization, but ill-suited for problems that require creativity or innovation. In the online article Digital Maoism, Lanier argues that the collective is more likely to be smart only when the goodness of an answer can be evaluated by a simple result (such as a single numeric value).</p>
What to do better / what should it be	There have been reported cases of crowdsourcing producing similar results to experts in the field – so it may work as long as you ask the right people the right question (the equivalence of validity of knowledge does not hold in a random or self-selecting group). It should however not substitute for constitutionally determined, democratic, accountable decision making.

A5 - Collaborative Governance

Collaborative Governance	
The received wisdom	The proposition is that networks of actors from different sectors collaborate to make or implement public policy, or manage public programmes or assets. Outcomes will then be better through the engagement of multiple actors than via more authoritarian or bureaucratic methods. Information and communications technology is a significant facilitator in the creation and functioning of such networks.
What that really means	If we take 'governing' to mean what governments do, that is, determining how resources are allocated in society and providing a set of rules for the conduct of society, then 'governance' is the mode of coordination of actors in the governing process. Collaborative governance proposes a horizontal or network arrangement rather than vertical or hierarchical one. However, this raises challenges for democratic processes, accountability, and conflict resolution. This is neatly covered by Michael Howlett in Crowley et al. (2020), page xi.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	Again, Michael Howlett nails it (<i>op cit</i> page xii). "Such an arrangement may well be preferable in certain areas of state activity such as education or health care which require a great deal of social support and activity if training and wellness goals are to be achieved. However, when adherents of the governance approach reject structured state-controlled hierarchical arrangements, <i>a priori</i> , in favour of more plurilateral or society-driven ones, the governance approach to policymaking contributes to the hollowing out of the state and to the promotion of governing processes that are unsuited to many sectors and areas of policy activity. Such arrangements [it can be argued] fail to deal with many basic aspects of policy-making behaviour so that proponents of governance reforms generate prescriptions and plans that are often infeasible if not downright damaging to the attainment of policy goals."
What to do better / what should it be	There are parallels in this with the critique Co-creation and Co-production. Networks of multi-sector actors are essential in the implementation of many public policies and programmes, but are not the starting point for their design. Actors have different capabilities and relationships that need to be taken into account. The practice of policy and programme design must embrace the huge variety of instruments and structural forms available to find the one best suited to the intended outcome, as opposed to assuming that form in advance, and determine the appropriate role of technology within that design.

A6 - Customer/Citizen Centricity

Customer/Citizen Centricity	
The received wisdom	The dominant narrative is that the people that public servants deal with should be referred to as customers – with the implication that they be treated like a business treats its customers, perhaps in contrast to the reputed unpleasantness of dealing with an “impersonal bureaucracy”. Extending that, particularly in relation to online transactions and web sites, the idea that “services” should be designed to be “customer/citizen-centric” has taken root.
What that really means	“Customer” here is a label for the people that public servants are dealing with. They are exercising either a statutory obligation or statutory entitlement, so they are not “customers” in the commercial sense of having a choice to buy and a choice of what to buy. They are engaging in legislatively defined processes that must satisfy equality before the law for everyone. The transaction they are taking part in is one component of a policy instrument, and there will be many other stakeholders, often more important, in the policy outcome it supports.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>This is a consequence of the dominance of New Public Management that brought “business” and “customer services” models into the public sector during the late 20th century. Language has taken hold without clear thinking about the difference between business and public administration. While “customer” and “service” may have motivational value as metaphors, the meaning of neither term can transfer - Waller & Weerakkody (2016). The political effects may appear to be positive (“we are doing something for you”) but the negative side is the reinforcement of retail, transactional politics (whose promises can never be fulfilled). “Rebranding the citizen as a customer alters the relationship between the State and the users of those services” - Tuck et al. (2011).</p> <p>Further, orienting (centring) design around people executing administrative processes puts the emphasis on the transactional element of policy instruments rather than appreciating the wide range of policy goals and stakeholders that are most likely surrounding any interaction, an example of not recognising the full context.</p> <p>A strategic downside is the creation of exclusion while superficially claiming a beneficial focus on citizens. “The central paradox of public sector use of customer service is troubling and may be intractable. Enhanced customer service is likely to exacerbate political inequalities even as it improves some aspects of service production and delivery. I argue that service models may produce improvements in the operational performance of agencies, but those improvements do not replace political outcomes that render some customers much less powerful than others; indeed, they obscure such outcomes. Without political change, these “market segments”—the poor and the politically weak—will continue to be poorly served.” – Fountain (2001)</p>
What to do better / what should it be	There is a strong case for stopping using these terms and recognising the policy and political dimensions of public administration; focussing on good policy design, equity in administration, and a public service behaviour standard that emphasises courtesy, respect, responsiveness and helpfulness in all dealings with members of the public.

A7 - Once-only Principle

Once-only Principle	
The received wisdom	The EU-funded SCOOP4C project https://scoop4c.eu/ sums up the idea. “The once-only principle (OOP) aims at eliminating the administrative burden when citizens are required to provide the same information again and again to public administrations. Instead, public administrations should have the means to re-use information already supplied by citizens in a transparent and secure way. When the once-only principle is widely applied, it significantly reduces the administrative burden on citizens. Also, citizens gain better control over their information when it is provided to public administrations only once. Moreover, it helps public administrations work faster, more transparently and efficiently.”
What that really means	The idea presumes that someone is “telling government” or “public administration” like it were a legal person or a company, rather than a variety of organisations that may have different constitutional or legal bases for their operation. The formulation “should have the means to re-use information” prejudices a long list of social, democratic, legal and political values that are more important than “efficiency”.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>The way the OOP it is understood is far too simple as it does not take into account the real nature of how governments and public administrations actually work. “Government” or “public administration” is not a singular entity. It has many constitutionally distinct entities at different levels and geographies. OOP is very complicated, technically, legally and administratively. The idea has been around a long time but not much happened.</p> <p>Data is mostly collected for the administration of one particular law. Depending on national values and laws, it may not be presumed to be available for the administration of another law. Specific data sharing gateways may need to be included in legislation. Parliaments may generally oppose or support such sharing. Data specifications may also differ according to the administrative requirements of each law.</p> <p>The phrase “provide information once to many government services” (or something similar) is misleading and risks failure, loss of trust, breach of privacy, unlawful actions, or other problems in implementation. For trust, the Rule of Law must be followed, with accountability and redress.</p> <p>OOP runs the risk of sliding unnoticed into a public sector data economy open to abuse.</p>
What to do better / what should it be	Workable implementations are likely to be single purpose or policy domain specific (UK cases are) not general purpose – administrative legislation and governance may be manageable then. In a government-wide or general-purpose case, challenges arise in defining the system or systems in focus, the constitutional, policy and legal context, and setting detail in administrative law — determining who is responsible & accountable, and how redress is managed.

A8 - Personalisation

Personalisation	
The received wisdom	The idea is that government and public administrative information and transactions are presented in a way customised to the circumstances of an individual, typically via a web site built around a profile of the “needs” of the individual. Convenience, relevance and proactive notification of important information are cited as benefits.
What that really means	To achieve this almost certainly needs an online account and thus a personal login, plus a personal identifier to associate a variety of sources of transactions and data to a profile in the account. By implication there is an element of prediction of what is relevant to the account holder, and an integration or retention of his or her data supporting transactions. Other implications include the sharing of data across administrative processes and the collection of past and current activity data to feed predictions of the relevance of related processes. The use or otherwise of the predicted material becomes part of the activity profile. All this and tracking data enables the construction of an integrated profile of behaviour and personal characteristics.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>This representation of “personalisation” is the complete opposite of the relationship a citizen has with a public service or other professional such as a doctor (e.g. presenting symptoms for a diagnosis that is by its nature personalised) or lawyer, who are bound by professional codes of conduct on confidentiality. Government-run health advice tools or other assessment and advice processes may circumvent these if linked to other data from the subject e.g. in an account - Zuboff (2019) page 255.</p> <p>Data collected for one process may not be readily usable in another as the laws may use different definitions, or quality or format may vary. There also needs to be a common identifier across processes – possible where there is a national ID system. It therefore links to the debate about electronic ID as well as privacy and the legal basis for sharing and combining data in such a system. Issues of national ID, eID, a login ID for a government portal, and common identifier (e.g. national insurance number) get mixed up (see https://ntouk.wordpress.com/2019/08/21/improving-identity-assurance-and-trust/).</p> <p>There is seldom an open debate about all these dimensions and the broader implications or even legality. In the human realm, to personalise something for you someone has to know you, and this opens up issues around a surveillance state, predictive state, and controlling state (see https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexspence/boris-johnson-dominic-cummings-voter-data).</p> <p>See also https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/24/facebook-and-the-perils-of-a-personalized-choice-architecture/ .</p>
What to do better / what should it be	Firstly, it must be clearly stated what the immediate and longer term implications are in relation to the assimilation and use by the state of personal information. There must be a clear and specific legal basis. On registration for any such system, users must be given understandable descriptions of what will happen as a result, and options to control data collection and usage.

A9- -Big Data

Big Data	
The received wisdom	The claim is that vast stores of data now collected through people using the internet (and from objects attached to it) can be used to improve government decision making and administrative performance through the application of advanced data analytic techniques.
What that really means	The implication is that policy makers can gain new insights into e.g. social issues that enable them to design better policy interventions, and that administrative bodies can use data-based understanding of their environment to improve the effectiveness of their processes. Although statistical and econometric analysis has been used for decades to support policy making, there is as yet little evidence that the analysis of large internet-generated datasets – a complicated task full of traps – has achieved much in these areas.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>First, the concept is vague: “In recent years, the term Big Data has emerged as a major buzzword, widely used by both public and private actors. A precise definition, however, remains elusive, as various stakeholders have offered different views – pointing, for instance, to the volume, velocity, and variety of data produced, new and improved ways to collect, store, process, and analyse those data, or profound changes in how people think, work, and live” - Rieder (2018).</p> <p>Second, it is flawed: “Despite great potential, high hopes and big promises, the actual impact of big data on the public sector is not always as transformative as the literature would suggest ... we ascribe this predicament to an overly strong emphasis ... on technical-rational factors at the expense of political decision- making factors.” - Vydra & Klievink (2019).</p> <p>Third, it is hard: a big data set requires careful preparation and analysis to avoid biases and false assumptions creeping in. The UK government’s Policy Lab report issues it have seen in its projects relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partial data, for example not having data on people who are not digitally active, biasing the sample • the time-consuming challenge of cleaning up data, in a political context where time is often of the essence • the lack of data interoperability, where different localities/organisations capture different metrics. <p>(https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/17/lab-long-read-human-centred-policy-blending-big-data-and-thick-data-in-national-policy/)</p> <p>Fourth, the implications in terms of the assembly and analysis of personal data by the state, alongside the use of decision and prediction algorithms, is an important and relevant concern.</p>
What to do better / what should it be	The proposition should be studied rigorously by appropriate professional bodies such as government statisticians to establish a grounded and transparent approach to how alternative sources of data and new data science methods can support governance e.g. the Big Data project at the UK Office for National Statistics.

A10 - Nudge (Behavioural Insights)

Nudge (Behavioural Insights)	
The received wisdom	<p>The UK Local Government Association describes the proposition (https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/behavioural-insights/what-are-behavioural-insights):</p> <p>“Behavioural insights have been used across public services to generate low cost interventions to improve service outcomes. The approach is based on the idea that interventions aimed at encouraging people to make better choices for themselves and society will be more successful if they are based on insights from behavioural science.”</p> <p>The proponents of nudge theory, Thaler & Sunstein (2008) tell us that “A nudge, as we will use the term, is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid.”</p>
What that really means	<p>Officials and/or politicians make changes to (statutory) administrative procedures in order to change the behaviour of targeted individuals in ways that they view to be desirable. The legal basis, transparency and accountability of those changes may or may not be robust. Lacking these, the practice could be regarded as manipulative.</p>
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>Nudging has been criticised as a short-term and politically motivated intervention, lacking a legal basis, accountability or oversight. Some critics question whether nudges are compatible with the Rule of Law. It has been remarked that nudging is also a euphemism for psychological manipulation as practiced in social engineering (Wikipedia). It also may appear as a political device for doing something supposedly with good policy intent but avoiding blame if people suffer for not doing what is “good for them”, as opposed to openly legislating.</p> <p>Cass Sunstein has responded to critiques at length, making the case in favour of nudging against charges that nudges diminish autonomy, threaten dignity, violate liberties, or reduce welfare. He further defended nudge theory by arguing that choice architecture is inevitable and that some form of paternalism (“make better choices for themselves” in the LGA’s definition) cannot be avoided. Ethicists have debated nudge theory rigorously. Some charge nudges for being manipulative, while others question their scientific credibility.</p>
What to do better / what should it be	<p>Many reported nudges are relatively low-level such as writing letters in a particular way or sending text messages. Others proposed are more significant e.g. in relation to claiming benefits or healthcare. In all cases care should be taken to ensure appropriate legal basis, transparency, political accountability, equality before the law, and so on. Behavioural science/research, in so far as it is valid, could positively be used in assessing the effectiveness of policy design/instrument options prior to such proper processes.</p>

A11 - Platform Government/GaaP

Platform Government/GaaP	
The received wisdom	<p>Tim O'Reilly is generally credited with introducing the term. "This is the right way to frame the question of Government 2.0. How does government become an open platform that allows people inside and outside government to innovate? How do you design a system in which all of the outcomes aren't specified beforehand, but instead evolve through interactions between government and its citizens, as a service provider enabling its user community? This chapter focuses primarily on the application of platform thinking to government technology projects. But it is worth noting that the idea of government as a platform applies to every aspect of the government's role in society. For example, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which committed the United States to building an interstate highway system, was a triumph of platform thinking, a key investment in facilities that had a huge economic and social multiplier effect." – Tim O'Reilly in Lathrop & Ruma (2010), Ch 2.</p> <p>Numerous variants of this have been produced, spanning complete alternatives to current government operations to the purely technical.</p>
What that really means	<p>Once you look closely, the only coherent meaning is actually just as shorthand for an architecture for government IT: "the whole ecosystem of shared APIs and components, open-standards and canonical datasets, as well as the services built on top of them and governance processes that (hopefully) keep the wider system safe and accountable" - Pope (2019). Everything else is incoherent.</p>
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>O'Reilly was ostensibly talking about technology but seems to have confused the issue by using "platform" in the sense of a commercial business model as a metaphor or analogy for too many things at once. The construct "Government as a" doesn't convey clear meaning. Examining his text from the point of view of policy instruments and public administration causes it to unravel. It reduces government to a resource provider rather than a regulator – a neoliberal tendency. Unfortunately, trying to argue (as some have seemed to) that it is about the whole of a nation's public administrative affairs drags it into the realms of nonsense and confusion.</p>
What to do better / what should it be	<p>The "platform" or "enterprise architecture" approach to government IT is not new. It is viable, but has often been problematic due to existing operational systems that support live statutory processes being hard to re-engineer, alongside issues of governance, funding, separate political accountability of the systems. While it may be achievable in a subset of administration e.g. taxation, its wider extension may be problematic from the point of view of combining data legally, and creating an infrastructure that is over-engineered or too static for the constant flux of legislative processes. The term itself is best dropped due to the confusion it causes, never mind its inherent lack of meaning.</p>

A12- -Online Participation

Online Participation	
The received wisdom	Whether it is technology-enabled policy innovation, consultation, discussion, wisdom of crowds, building services on platforms, co-creating, co-producing, deciding budget allocations, collaborating, service design, voting, or whatever, technology-enabled citizen participation is portrayed as the answer to many ills allegedly suffered by governments today.
What that really means	In practice this usually turns out to be some form of internet-based contribution of opinion or evidence from selected or self-selected participants, moderated or not, interacting with each other or not. It is rare to find one fundamentally new process that has become institutionalised as robust governance practice - Bannister & Connolly (2020). Technology has enhanced some existing ones like consultation. On the other hand, political messaging on social media has become big in many ways. Nefarious actors have found many ways to make mischief with democratic processes. Internet voting in public elections remains a highly controversial and rare practice.
What is the problem / what has gone wrong	<p>A vast amount of academic and public sector time and money has been spent trying to find something that works sustainably. Some things, like initiatives asking for public ideas about policy problems, only get tried once, after finding them expensive and largely useless. The internet doesn't seem to help much beyond being another broadcast medium, with feedback mechanisms often used offensively or criminally. Researchers now consider that the internet is a poor medium for the degree of deliberation and reflection necessary for effective engagement in governance processes. It seems that political problems cannot be solved by reactive exchanges in electronic media, or inputs based on little knowledge of complicated matters. One angle is that what people say, what they think they think, and what they really feel aren't necessarily the same</p> <p>https://www.themandarin.com.au/125765-australia-relationship-country-secrets-lies/ . See also Kahneman (2011).</p> <p>Unfortunately, the capability of malicious actors has seemed greater than or equal to governments' ability to defend their legitimate processes.</p>
What to do better / what should it be	There is a need here to get back to the basics of how people participate in and engage with political issues and politicians, and how deliberation can be done in depth and usefully without outside interference. Citizens' Assemblies are getting promoted now, but are they another hyped "solution"?