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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The digital era and public sector reforms: Transformation or new tools for competing values?

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Abstract

This article considers the tools and management approaches associated with the “digital-era” public sector reform, which many observers suggest has supplanted or should supplant previous reforms such as those associated with the New Public Management. This article levers and adapts the Competing Values Framework to categorize various public service reform movements—Traditional Public Administration, New Public Management, Public Value Management, and New Public Governance—and associated value systems and cultures. It argues that not only do these prior reform movements persist as values and repertoires in public service systems, but they are also each variously receiving oxygen from “digital” as the latest wave of technological innovation affecting societies, markets, and governments. It calls for more systematic empirical work to gauge how digital tools have been affecting the mix and balance of values and repertoires associated with these reform movements in different parts of public service systems in Canada and beyond.

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Sommaire

Cet article se penche sur les outils et les méthodes de gestion associés à la réforme du secteur public à « l'ère numérique », qui, selon les dires de nombreux observateurs, a supplanté ou devrait supplanter les réformes antérieures comme celles associées à la nouvelle gestion publique. Cet article tire parti du Cadre des Valeurs en Concurrence et l'adapte pour répertorier divers mouvements de réforme de la fonction publique — l'administration publique traditionnelle, la nouvelle gestion publique, la gestion de la valeur publique et la nouvelle gouvernance publique — ainsi que les systèmes de valeurs et cultures associés. Nous soutenons que non seulement ces mouvements de réforme antérieurs persistent en tant que valeurs et répertoires dans les systèmes de la fonction publique, mais qu'ils reçoivent aussi chacun de façon variable l'oxygène du « numérique » comme la dernière vague d'innovation technologique affectant les sociétés, les marchés et les gouvernements. Cela nécessite des travaux empiriques plus systématiques afin de mesurer comment les outils numériques ont affecté la combinaison et l'équilibre des valeurs et des répertoires associés à ces mouvements de réforme dans différents systèmes de la fonction publique au Canada et au-delà.

INTRODUCTION

“Digital” is washing through governments and their public service institutions. Many governments have instituted digital service agencies, established open data platforms, adopted social media channels, created innovation labs, and proclaimed commitment to “open government” (e.g., Clarke et al., 2017; Clarke, 2019; Lindquist & Buttazzoni, 2021). Digital reform can occur via top-down initiatives but also emerge indirectly, in a bottom-up way by staff conversant with or willing to explore new digital tools. The myriad of digital tools—such as social media, collaboration software, data analytic and visualization software, a bewildering array of apps and APIs, and much more—and new ways of doing private and public business have been disrupting the sectors that governments track and regulate, as well as governance and politics. Along with these tools have come new sensibilities and calls for the public sector to work in different ways, with advocates inside and outside government providing new agendas, language and narratives for governments and public service leaders, most notably using the banners of “platform government” and “agile” (Mergel et al., 2021; O'Reilly, 2010; Pope, 2019). What “digital-era governance” or “digital” often means to practitioners and

observers depends very much on the specific digital tools at hand and the function of government under consideration.

Many observers argue that “digital” has supplanted prior reform movements—indeed, over fifteen years ago a much-cited manifesto declared “the NPM is dead” and then exclaimed “Long live Digital-Era government!” (Dunleavy et al., 2006). It continues to be common to find articles and books that itemize the deficiencies of NPM reforms and initiatives, discussing them in the past tense, while pointing to other approaches for reforming public administration. However, if NPM precepts and values, however contradictory (Hood & Peters, 2004), continue to be a point of reference since the early 2000s, did they really disappear? Moreover, are “digital-era” ideas and tools inconsistent with the bundle of approaches associated with the New Public Management? Could the opposite be true, that digital-era technological advances might finally allow for fuller realization of elements of NPM models? Could the same question be asked about how digital tools and approaches might further other more recent reform movements, such as Public Value Management (PVM) and New Public Governance (NPG), which call for more idiosyncratic, network-based approaches to addressing sector and community challenges? Finally, what about the oldest reform movement—now referred to as “traditional public administration” (TPA)—which removed patronage and brought merit and budget systems into government over a century ago, and went through additional transformation with the expansions of government programming in the wake of World War II and then the 1960s and 1970s?

This article suggests that we take a closer look at the tools and management approaches associated with “digital” and consider it less as a reform movement and more as a manifestation of the latest wave of technological change affecting our societies, markets, and governments. It also suggests that all of the public sector reform movements mentioned above are alive and well, variously receiving oxygen from the latest wave of technological innovation in the digital era. Drawing on Lindquist (2010) and Lindquist and Marcy (2016), this article levers and adapts the Competing Values Framework (Quinn, 1988) to categorize various public service reform movements and associated values and then argues that they persist as values and repertoires in public service systems, that all of these values have their place even if in tension or inconsistent with the others, that different balances can be found in different parts of public service systems, and that digital tools and approaches can further the ambitions of all these reform movements. Indeed, even if “digital” is transforming government, this article suggests that it might be better to see it as the latest wave of technological change and not as a coherent reform movement: it is furthering diverse and often competing values, leading to new balances simultaneously across government. More systematic empirical work is needed to better gauge how public service systems in Canada and elsewhere have been evolving.

This article has four parts. The first reviews the contributions of several authors who compared and contrasted reform movements and approaches to public administration, namely the Traditional Public Administration, New Public Management, Public Value Management, New Public Governance, and Digital Government approaches. The second part introduces the Competing Values Framework (CVF) as a way to make sense of different underpinning values and approaches to public sector reform, and to show how the mix necessarily persists in public organizations and the broader systems of which they are a part. In doing so, it draws attention to the Public Sector Leadership movement largely driven from governments. With this foundation, the third part considers how digital tools and approaches influence all of the reform or functional streams of public service systems, arguing these will manifest themselves differently in different governance systems. The conclusion considers the implications for

discussing new reform movements and improving our game as scholars and observers about analyzing reform initiatives and their consequences in different governance and public service systems.

This article argues that these reform movements and analytic perspectives have had different narratives, values, contradictions, and limitations, and that the digital era tools and approaches are infusing each with different possibilities, opportunities, and downsides. While advocates will continue to debate which reform model is more relevant or predominant (and, indeed, in which parts of public services system), what follows suggests that each contributes towards improving how public service institutions work and, collectively, are better understood with a competing values perspective. The CVF helps us to develop a more balanced view of the complexity of reforms and the basis for evaluating progress and debates about reform over longer periods. These exploratory findings have implications for understanding the state of contemporary governance and public sector reform, how we think about the history and prospects for reform, our discourse and analysis of reform movements, and suggests that scholars predict in more nuanced ways how well reforms will work.

THE UNDEAD: TRADITIONAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT, PUBLIC VALUE MANAGEMENT

Much of our literature focuses on the aspirations, principles, logic, contradictions, and outcomes of several reform movements over recent decades. However, the NPM was not the first public sector reform movement: “traditional public administration” (TPA) was the outgrowth of a reform movement comprised of several waves, with the first arising from the Progressive Era (Gulick & Urwick, 1937; Hodgetts et al., 1972; Roberts, 1996; Hood, 2000). Its progenitors sought to supplant a “pre-bureaucratic” model that relied on patronage systems that privileged responsiveness, loyalty, rewarding followers of winning governments with political and bureaucratic appointments, and which deemphasized other values such as efficiency, effectiveness, and serving in the public interest. The resulting reform—often now taken for granted—evolved into professional, merit-based, expert, and relatively transparent public service and budget systems, which emerged after sustained, hard-fought battles in many jurisdictions. However, after decades of growth in programs and an evolving society, TPA increasingly came to be seen as “big government.” It came in for mounting criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s as many governments and observers began to believe that public-sector bureaucracies had become closed systems and unresponsive to political leaders and efforts to control their growth (French, 1980; Lindquist, 2000).

It was in this context that “managerialism” and subsequent NPM aspirations and principles emerged, inviting comparisons with “traditional public administration” (TPA) (Dwivedi & Gow, 1999; Kernaghan et al., 2000; Stoker, 2006). Kernaghan et al. (2000) *The New Public Organization* was part of a wave of writing which contrasted the values and repertoires of traditional public bureaucracy (TPA) with new approaches to public sector management, as captured by Hood’s “managerialism” (Hood, 1990, 1991), Osborne and Gaebler’s (1992) “reinventing government,” Barzelay and Armajani (1992) “breaking through bureaucracy,” and others who later coined the term the “New Public Management” (e.g., Aucoin, 1996; Boston et al., 1996; Barzelay, 2001; Hood, 1995).¹ These calls for a new approach to public sector management and the leadership of public service institutions emerged against the backdrop of significant government deficits and the apparent inability of many governments to change how programs and public service institutions

worked. This not only led to substantial program reviews and embracing of new policy approaches, but also calls for a new public service culture and leadership.

Dunleavy et al. (2006) provided a useful roll-up of the many initiatives associated with the catch-all NPM label under the broad categories of *disaggregation*, *competition*, and *incentivization* (see Table 1 below).² A quick review of Table 1 shows that the NPM label was not very coherent and could mean very different things to different observers. Kernaghan et al. (2000) delineated several values associated with the traditional bureaucratic model and set out how they could move towards more creative, dynamic, flexible, and less bureaucratic approaches to delivering public services associated with NPM or what they called the New Public Organization. These were converted into several spectrums, with the opposite end reflecting behaviours more associated with private sector values and practices. Moving from left to right along them depicted the directions and values espoused by NPM advocates. However, Kernaghan et al. (2000) also recognized that the extent to which public organizations could move away from traditional bureaucracies had a lot to do with their respective mandates and the nature of their work and clients and would vary by organization.

As NPM's contradictions and mixed success became apparent, observers soon began to contrast its values, principles and approaches to the next reform waves taking shape. Stoker (2006) adroitly contrasted TPA and NPM with Public Value Management (PVM), building off the contributions of Moore (1995).³ He outlined how the PVM perspective differed from TPA

TABLE 1 Key components of the New Public Management

Disaggregation	Competition	Incentivization
Purchaser-provider separation	Quasi-markets	Re-specifying property rights
Agencification	Voucher schemes	Light touch regulation
Decoupling policy systems	Outsourcing	Capital market involvement in projects
Growth of quasi-government agencies	Compulsory market testing	Privatizing asset ownership
Separating out micro-local agencies	Intra-government contraction	Anti-rent-seeking measures
Chunking up privatized industries	Public/private sectoral Polarization	De-privileging professions
Corporatization and strong single organization management	Product market Liberalization	Performance-related pay
De-professionalization	Deregulation	PFI (private finance initiative)
Competition by comparison	Consumer-tagged financing	Public-private partnerships
Improved performance measurement	User control	Unified rate of return & discounting
League tables (agency performance)		Development of charging technologies
		Valuing public sector equity
		Mandatory efficiency dividends

and NPM approaches with its focus on tailored, workable solutions, often leveraging resources and insights from all sectors, and engaging users and potential service providers (from the for-profit, non-profit, and public sectors) in deliberating on, designing, delivering, and monitoring public services. PVM stands in contrast to TPA, with the latter's tendency to favour government-centric analysis and decision-making about possibilities and solutions, and its reliance on delivery through the public service or public organizations. PVM also stands in contrast to the NPM, calling for managers to be more inclusive, entrepreneurial, and open with stakeholders, while NPM relies more on procurement and market approaches, which tend to cut out engagement with potential providers and beneficiaries of the services. Accordingly, O'Flynn (2007) suggested that PVM can be seen as "post-bureaucratic and post-competitive" (p. 353). In my view, PVM dovetails with the calls from New Public Governance (NPG) advocates for more policy and service design based on engagement and delivery with networked collaborations including non-profits, community organizations, and other actors (Osborne, 2010; Torfing et al., 2020; Ch. 8).⁴ Like Canada's alternative service delivery (ASD) movement of the 1990s, PVM and NPG suggest that "public value" can be achieved in idiosyncratic ways, which may vary by service, levels of government, and community.

The most recent candidate as a public sector reform movement has proceed under the label of digital-era government or governance (DEG). Much has been written on the arrival and prospects for digitally enabled government (see Clarke, 2019; Fountain, 2001; Torfing et al., 2020; Ch. 6, but the clarion call came from Dunleavy et al. (2006) with its provocative title "New Public Management Is Dead—Long Live Digital-Era Governance." Indeed, the article's significant contribution was to identify the components of DEG under the broad themes of *reintegration*, *needs-based holism*, and *digitization processes* (see Table 2). Partly a critical reporting on what transpired under the UK Blair government, the authors offered a prescient view of the possibilities for how government might lever a variety of digital tools in manifold ways, a precursor to a wave of writing on government in the digital era. It was not

TABLE 2 Key components of digital-era governance

Reintegration	Needs-Based Holism	Digitization Processes
Rollback of agencification	Client-based and needs-	Electronic service delivery
Joined-up government	based reorganization	New forms of automated processes—zero touch technologies
Re-governmentalization	One-stop provision	Radical disintermediation
Reinstating central processes	Interactive and "ask-once" information provision	Active channel streaming (requiring or incenting moving to digital channels)
Radically squeezing production costs	Data warehousing	Facilitating isocratic administration (supporting self-administration) Facilitating co-production
Reengineering back-office functions	End-to-end service reengineering	Moving to open-book government
Procurement concentration and specialization	Agile government processes	
Network simplification		

simply a stock-take of the specific digital tools and instruments but also a sweeping view of the new possibilities of digital tools for delivering government services, interacting with citizens, and monitor and control activities.

The literature on digital governance since proliferated along with the language of “agile” approaches challenging government (see Roy, 2013; Clarke, 2019; Mergel et al., 2021; Ramon et al., 2018).⁵ Just four years after their seminal contribution, Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) provided an interesting update and stock-take, reflecting on the rapidly evolving field of digital technology (e.g., the social web, cloud computing, apps development, etc.) for their arguments. Acknowledging the significant austerity arising from the Global Financial Crisis, and walking back their previously more strident language that the “NPM is dead” in reaction to criticism, they nevertheless argued that NPM was “past its peak” and not advancing intellectually (pp. 5-6). However, recognizing that NPM reform language persisted and remained a touchstone for governments and public service leaders, they set out three scenarios for the extended take up of DEG approaches.⁶ Dunleavy and Margetts recognized that elected and top public service leaders might not have the gumption or wherewithal to transform how governments work and deliver services. Governments—even when adopting digital tools—were continuing to rely on NPM initiatives like contracting, outsourcing, and privatization to control costs (p. 26), leading to more fragmentation and less coordinated government services. In their view, governments were not fully taking up the opportunity to transform how government works and connects with those it serves.

Public sector reform movements: “Coming and going” or “persisting and rejuvenating”

Many public sector reform movements—Traditional Public Administration, New Public Management, Public Value Management, New Public Governance, and now Digital-Era Government—have swept public sectors over the decades, usually “named” by scholars well after governments initiated the changes and built momentum. Addressing different circumstances, and guided by distinctive objectives, principles, and implementation strategies, one can think of these as “cosmologies,” privileging certain goals and values, managerial approaches, and stakeholders (Lindquist & Paquet, 2000). Reform initiatives can introduce new values into governance and public service systems, but usually fail to erase, and indeed dovetail with or layer onto, what went before. Each reform movement has varying degrees of value coherence and differs in the extent to which the initiatives associated with them are driven from the center of government and are aligned in practice.⁷ Many of these values and initiatives are institutionalized with statutes, repertoires, and even internal and external agents whose remit is to monitor and report on the extent to which governments and public service leaders uphold those values and responsibilities. The underlying values persist in public service systems. New initiatives or circumstances tend to pull out, privilege, and lever many of these enduring values and objectives, giving them “oxygen” even if wrapped in new brands (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011).

The authors reviewed above, writing at different times and contrasting different reform traditions or cosmologies, did not see governments as taken fully over by any one, despite advocates and elected or public service leaders relying heavily on the rhetoric of newer traditions. These observers were realistic (or perhaps frustrated or resigned) about the likelihood that older approaches would persist and the latest push for reform would lead to a

mix of the old and new. They realized that reform initiatives often do not achieve the promise held out for them by advocates and progenitors, whether through inertia, resistance, and insufficient commitment of implementation to meet and overcome on-the-ground realities. Kernaghan et al. (2000) suggested that departments and agencies would embrace reforms in varying degrees; Stoker (2006) indicated that the values and practices associated with the reform traditions will be at play in varying degrees in public service institutions; and Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) offered scenarios, one suggesting that digital technology might further some NPM tendencies. If we should anticipate different mixes of values and reform traditions persisting in our public service systems, how might we better think about them for the purposes of analysis?

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM, COMPETING VALUES, AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS

This matter of competing values and evolving circumstances was anticipated many years ago in Selznick's (1957) seminal book *Leadership in Administration*. His compelling description of institutional leadership was rooted in the view that organizations are infused with multiple and competing values, and that their leaders needed to defend, further, balance, and invent new values in response to shifting external and internal needs. Modern public service systems are even more complex, working in challenging governance environments, comprising hundreds of organizations with differing degrees of centrality and distinct authorities and values, and working at different levels of aggregation (e.g., governments, public service, central agencies, core departments or ministries, programs, a variety of agencies and public entities, etc.). The lesson from Selznick is that analyzing the extent to which any reform movement can change such complex systems requires recognizing those myriad and often contradictory values, and not just those of the reform movements observers seek to promote, critique, or analyze. What follows shows how the Competing Values Framework, adapted for the public sector, might not only usefully serve to foster understanding reform initiatives and prospects for success, but also the great variety of values always at play in public sector organizations and systems.

The Competing Values Framework (CVF) was first developed in Quinn (1988) and elaborated with several colleagues (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Cameron, Quinn, DeGraff, et al., 2006; Quinn et al., 2011) for teaching in business schools, but public administration scholars have employed it for different purposes. Norman (2008) used it to characterize the evolving role of central agencies as agents of reform in New Zealand's public sector. Talbot (2008) tapped it to elucidate how "public value" was not just about public managers furthering public value in the public interest per se, but working at the intersection of self-interest, public interest, and procedural interest. Lindquist (2010) invoked CVF to show how the sprawling Australian Public Service Blueprint reforms announced by the Rudd government in Australia would pull the Australian public service in distinctly different directions. Finally, Lindquist and Marcy (2016) suggested the CVF would be useful for analyzing the different competency mixes leaders might need to address challenges in public sector contexts. Drawing on Lindquist (2010), the argument developed here is fourfold: that the CVF is useful for analyzing reform; that a given reform initiative often contains objectives and values which may be in tension and even inconsistent with each other; that designing, implementing, and appraising reforms should consider previous reforms and values embedded in public service systems; and that we should reconsider whether DEG is a reform movement, even if it is transforming government.

Quinn (1988) described the origins and rationale for the Competing Values Framework, developed to analyze leadership in private sector organizations. Lindquist and Marcy (2016) provide an overview of its underlying logic, published in successive books (Quinn et al., 2011; Cameron & Quinn, 2016a; Cameron et al., 2016) tailored for different levels of leaders (executives, middle managers, and new managers learning about the fundamentals of leadership and management). Quinn (1988) enumerated an extensive list of values and competencies essential for furthering organizations’ goals and clustered them into categories of values and competencies, which either run together or sit in juxtaposition or tension with others. These in turn were grouped according to whether they were internally or externally focused, and whether they focused on stability and control or flexibility and discretion (see Figure 1). From this Quinn identified four quadrants describing distinct organizational cultures (or “moralities”) associated with the value clusters (hierarchy, clan, market/performance, and adhocracy) and accompanying leadership orientations (controlling, collaborative, competing, and creative) (see Figure 2). Quinn and his colleagues have long argued that all these values and competences can be found and, indeed, are needed in some measure to further organizational goals and ensure high performance. Lindquist and Marcy (2016) further point out that different parts of organizations can have programs and divisions with distinctive cultures and more fidelity to some values than others, especially pertinent when analyzing large public sector organizations.

This article argues that most of the many public administration reform movements and values have analogues with the quadrants in Figure 1. Reform movements take up and pull on particular values or competencies, usually under new labels and with distinctive mixes, but the underlying values and objectives are typically not new. For example, the NPM picked up the

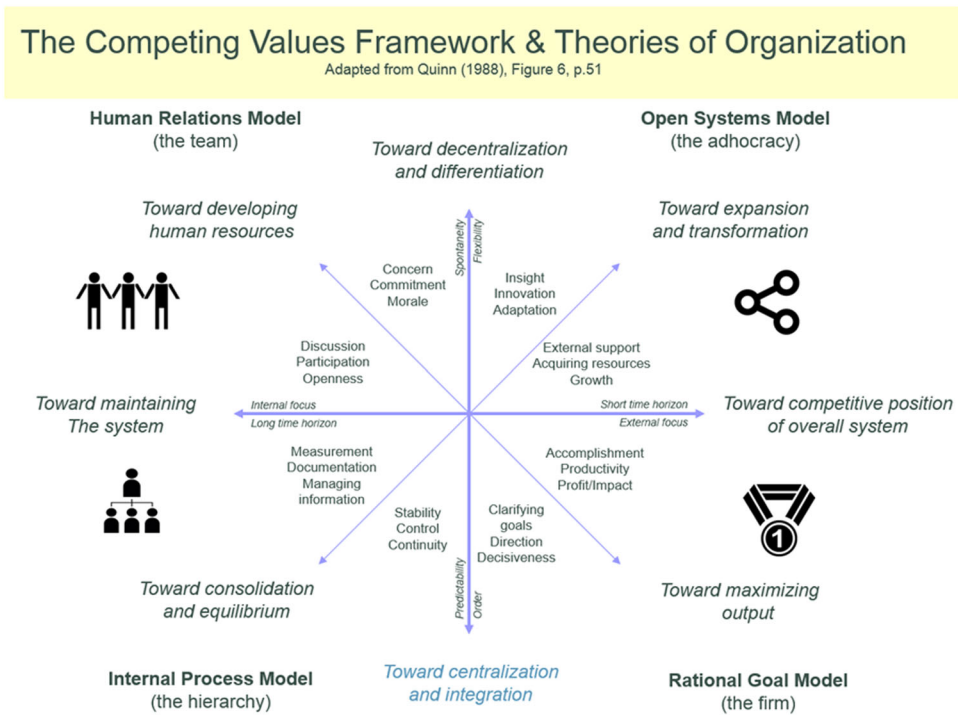


FIGURE 1 The competing values framework & theories of organization

The Competing Worldviews and Theories on Leadership, Culture, Effectiveness

Adapted from Cameron and Quinn (2006), Figure 3.2, p.46

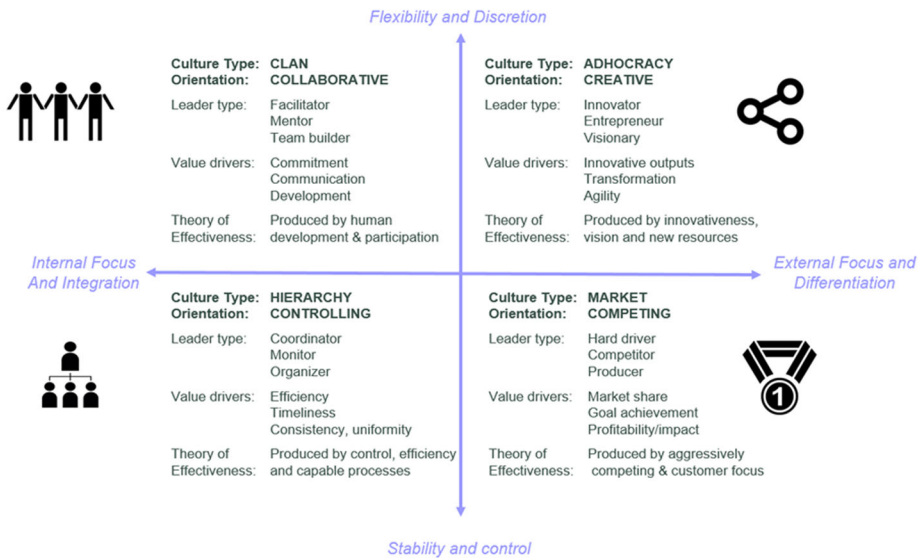


FIGURE 2 The competing worldviews and theories on leadership, culture, effectiveness

values associated with the market or “perform” quadrant focusing on achieving outputs and outcomes. Another example is the “open systems” quadrant can be associated with entities and techniques associated with the PVM and NPG approaches. The emphasis on leadership and motivation of public servants of the 1990s and 2000s led to reforms within public service institutions consistent with the clan quadrant (PSL), even if it was not accompanied by a coherent literature among scholars similar to that which developed for NPM, NPG, PVM and DEG.⁸ Finally, many readers will be surprised that DEG does not appear in Figure 2. Digital advocates usually invoke rhetoric consistent with the adhocracy quadrant, and indeed, most entities fostering digital services, behavioural insights, open government, and various policy, services, and innovation labs certainly have “adhocracy” cultures (Lindquist & Buttazzoni, 2021). This will be discussed more fully in the third section of this article.

The Competing Values Framework helps capture the complexity of public service systems and the significant challenges of effecting change and reform. First, it calls for realism in what can be achieved with a given reform initiative: even if announced reforms have the support of political and public service leaders, and do change elements of some departments and programs, the intrinsic complexity and scale of public service systems militate against reforms gaining traction or having significant effects. Second, it suggests that leaders and reform movements focusing only on certain values and objectives do so at the institution's peril because all of the values identified in Figure 3 are material to well-performing public organizations—ignoring other values or not having a plan for how new priorities will be balanced with other important values may lead to breakdowns. This suggests that governments, opposition parties, various interests, and experts and academic observers should monitor the quality of different functions of government and not just the specific value they care about, and

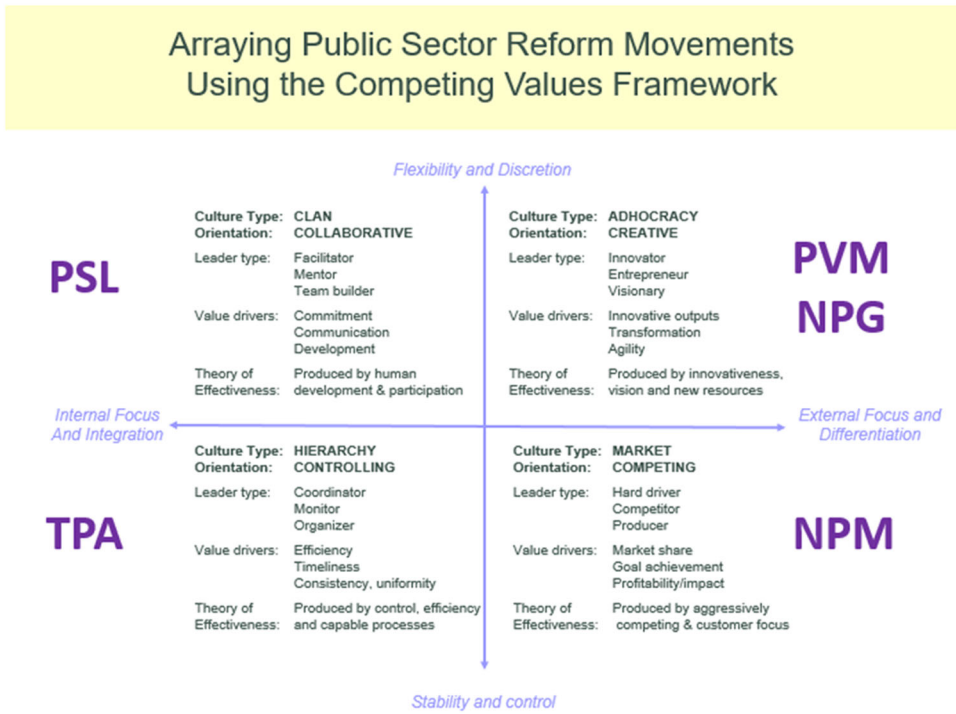


FIGURE 3 Arraying public sector reform movements using the competing values framework

not act surprised two or three years later when a given reform does not achieve all its advocates claimed it would accomplish. Third, since reform initiatives can range from being narrow to comprehensive in nature, the CVF suggests that the more comprehensive proposed or announced reform, the more likely that reform will be intrinsically complex, containing tensions among its various components, reflecting the complexity of the institution and the goals and objectives it seeks to further. Fourth, and related, if government-driven reform initiatives typically mean that public service leaders will not have the luxury of relinquishing previous responsibilities and reporting obligations, they must work to strike new balances within their organizations, but how they will do so varies depending on the core mission of the organizations they lead (Clark & Swain, 2005).

Finally, even if reforms do take root, leaders should presume they will be succeeded by another round of reforms a few months or years later as governments and top public service leaders come and go. This is not an argument for not launching or implementing reforms, but rather, for recognizing they will become part of the larger mix of values and initiatives that newer reform packages seek to overcome. Leaders and observers should resist the temptation to pronounce a reform movement “dead” and instead seek to understand the extent to which they persist. They should also make good-faith efforts to predict the extent to which reform initiatives can change how public organizations work, thereby reducing cynicism when they fail to realize their potential. On the other hand, CVF-inspired thinking suggests that many reforms take time to develop roots and become insinuated in the larger public service system, often nurtured by lower-level custodians.

EXPLORING HOW “DIGITAL” AFFECTS PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: A COMPETING VALUES PERSPECTIVE

Many observers might presume that the new tools, practices and expectations associated with digital-era government fall within the “adhocracy” quadrant, given its focus on innovation, change and even “disruption.” However, we must distinguish between the diverse array of available digital tools and the management approaches advocated by digital enthusiasts that involve rapid cycles of experimentation and innovation, such as “agile” methods (Mergel et al., 2021) along with the slower forms of investigation of user experience with ethnography and various forms of engagement (Bason, 2010). Such approaches, which seek to inform policy and change culture, have an uphill struggle in public service systems foundationally predicated on the values associated with hierarchy and control.

With respect to digital tools, Pollitt (2010) wisely suggested that technology has more fundamental, manifold and other indirect and important effects on society and organizations. Interestingly, Quinn (1988) and in his later publications with colleagues did not explicitly highlight technology—even though tasks and technology are core concepts in organization studies (e.g., Scott, 2002)—and the arrival of the internet, desktop computers, and local area networks were in full swing. Freeman and Louçã (2001) provide a framework for understanding how several technological revolutions intersect with science, the economy, infrastructure, politics, institutions, and culture to produce their effects. While they have little to say about government and public administration per se, they essentially argue that threshold in technology intersect with these other levels of analysis to affect how societies, economies, and organizations in different sectors work.

For public organizations, we can anticipate that any technological revolution—such as the digital era, but it is only the latest—will have widespread impacts on the myriad of inputs, outputs, partners, internal and external partners and stakeholders, clients, coordinators, and regulators, making the task environment of entire organizations or constituent units (here, a division or program area). What follows uses the CVF framework to explore how digital tools and social technologies might further the competencies and values associated with *all* of the quadrants and associated reform movements.

Furthering innovation, adhocracy, and cross-boundary collaboration

This quadrant, aligned with the Public Value Management and New Public Governance movements, tends to focus on creating idiosyncratic approaches to policy and service-delivery designs and systems, which vary according to the needs of the stakeholders in question and what other partners can contribute. The competencies and values here involve furthering innovation and creativity, and anticipating and adapting to external change. Complementing these competencies are supporting structures and leadership styles at the apex and middle of organizations which promote flexibility, adaptation, and the assembling of pertinent expertise, and recognizing the importance of skills in negotiating with partners and working across boundaries. Such capabilities have previously been developed and long sought after in government (i.e., think of creating task forces, special units, etc.), but the digital tools and social technologies further them in several ways. First, it is much easier for leaders to communicate across boundaries using e-mail and other digital platforms to support generating ideas and collaboration. Second, entrepreneurial leaders and the putative partners can more easily access

and monitor innovations and exemplars in other jurisdictions and organizations. Third, governments can establish innovation labs and rely on crowdsourcing and hackathons to explore different approaches, generate promising options, and test new ideas. Fourth, in doing so, the leaders may be creating special-purpose partnerships and alternative service delivery arrangements to pilot or experiment with new approaches. Finally, digital tools and approaches can facilitate rapid learning and adjustment with means like internet-of-things sensors or monitoring social media, obtaining quick feedback to inform rapid learning and adjustment for recalibrating designs.

Furthering staff well-being, development and collaboration

Public service leaders have always sought to develop their staff, but digital tools provide new ways to inform, develop, and test staff. These include providing access to learning resources developed either by the organization or central agencies, or externally, rather than relying on in-person course delivery. Public servants have long been asked to work better horizontally or in a “citizen-focused” way (e.g., NPM, NPG movements) with initiatives over the years like one-stop shopping (from the 1990s and earlier!). For governments and public servants, digital tools have made it easier to meet the specific needs of communities and citizens by working across organizations and sometimes levels of government (e.g., single digital platforms, sharing administrative data, etc.). Here the focus is less about these external initiatives (see the adhocracy quadrant) and more about creating the necessary expectations, incentives, culture, competency frameworks, and platforms *inside* public organizations. The CVF has long seen motivating teams, fostering collaboration, and engaging staff as critical—but this is inherently more difficult in public service context with vertical accountabilities, budgets appropriated for specific programs, and the pull of ministerial priorities. Digital networking technologies can further collaborative and horizontal initiatives, including creating purpose-built designed physical spaces for meetings, interactive table-top computer displays to explore data and other information, collaborative whiteboards, multiple-screen computer screen displays, and allowing for crowdsourcing and other forms of engagement to generate ideas and move initiatives along. Advances in digital tools have been fostering mobility and more distributed work and team arrangements with collaboration software tools and high-quality video displays, though digital experts seeking to move projects forward inside government have found it frustrating to deal with inherently conservative public-sector workplaces. While take-up of such tools dramatically accelerated with the pandemic, with governments rapidly rethinking how work could proceed on a distributed basis courtesy of digital tools, the rising costs of office space and desire for flexible work arrangements suggest new balances will be struck in the future (Roy, 2022; this issue).

Furthering hierarchy, rules, and control

Advocates for digital government and governance usually emphasize collaboration, innovation, and open government, but the paradox is that digital tools give governments and public service leaders the tools for monitoring and increasing control (Clarke, 2019, 2020). These are the hallmarks of top-down, vertically organized public service systems associated with Traditional

Public Administration (TPA). Digital tools enhance the ability of public organizations to collect and sift through data to monitor the performance and activities in all public organizations, ranging from financial management, managerially critical data, and real-time and ex post e-mail communications in email, internet, web site, and social media traffic. An abiding problem has been that governments generate too much data in the digital era, but new data analytics software and artificial intelligence can assist with monitoring and analyzing that data. The upside is that central agencies and corporate services groups in departments and agencies can better monitor and coordinate budgets and projects, obtain better data on citizen needs and preferences, and adopt new digitally enhanced ways to deliver services, what has been called the Neo-Weberian State (Drechsler & Kattel, 2009; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The downside is that top executives and key functions (e.g., surveillance, audit, security, performance trackers) have greatly enhanced ability to monitor and track staff (in real-time and ex post), which might lessen risk-taking and innovation. While advocates of digital government often call for increased government transparency and suggest that increased accountability will obtain (if the right data and information is posted for external audiences), they often overlook the darker side. Digital tools might buttress and enhance the traditional top-down, hierarchical repertoires and tendencies in public organizations, furthering conventional TPA values. This does not necessarily imply that hierarchies will grow unbounded: digital tools can further efficiency control and monitoring by a government, and oversight might shift towards considering quality rather than rule-following. Likewise, departments and agencies may be able to reduce building costs and distribute staff and offices in a capital region or elsewhere in the jurisdiction, leading to more de-concentrated hierarchies, tighter connections to field offices and front-line work, and more informed views on client and citizen needs.

Furthering performance, service delivery, and implementation

Many of the NPM strategies of the 1990s were inspired by state-of-the-art business practices and approaches to service, but remain salient to this day for governments, despite the mixed success of NPM initiatives. Some examples include: developing a client and customer orientation; introducing rating systems and public reporting to show whether the services delivered met intended goals; smoothing the path for interactions with service providers; taking advantage of different providers to deliver services which could be more response to recipients (e.g., for-profit, non-profit, partnerships, other governments, etc.); using pricing mechanisms and charging fees to cover costs and provide funds to invest in better service; tracking and measuring performance; and fostering continuous learning. Indeed, digital tools and technologies are providing new ways to support and track performance-related initiatives. Consider these possibilities: better monitoring of the progress of partners and regulating with internet-of-things sensors; improving the ability of government and outsiders to monitor and analyze outcomes of interventions from a horizontal perspective using data on the impact of multiple pertinent outputs or outcomes; using drones and imaging to monitor adherence to regulations “in the field”; accounting for multi-department, multi-level government, and multi-sector involvement for addressing horizontal challenges; permitting governments to develop open data platforms and apps which can make government more transparent; using behavioural economics to test different ways to deliver services on digital and other platforms; and investing in apps and platforms. Many of these initiatives rely on access to big data and the ability to analyze and share that data, and

never have more visual and other tools been available to government for these purposes. The ability to link data sets from relevant programs and services inside, across, and outside government (and often across several levels of government) means that reporting can be more sophisticated and better focused on outcomes, though constrained by legacy information technology platforms and old data-governance policy regimes.

Technological thresholds: Tipping the balance for values and reform movements

Many digital government advocates inside and outside government might think that all digitally enabled work should fall into the “adhocracy” or innovation quadrant of the Competing Values Framework. This section suggests that the possibilities presented by digital technologies and their effects are *sui generis*: they can also further the values associated with the Hierarchy, Performance, and Clan quadrants, and, respectively, the various aspirations of TPA, NPM, NPG and PSL movements. Figure 4 provides a summary of this high-level survey of the effects of digital tools for CVF’s different value and competency clusters. This reach of digital-era tools is congruent with the Clarke et al. (2017) survey of where digital tools might have their effects in government. Several implications arise from this exploration.

First, to the extent that different reform movements emphasized certain values, and that many of those values are considered important elements of well-performing organizations of all kinds, the arrival of digital tools have not erased older reform movements and indeed have been giving new, often potent, means for furthering those values. The corollary is that the ideas and reforms associated with those movements remain very much alive and may experience

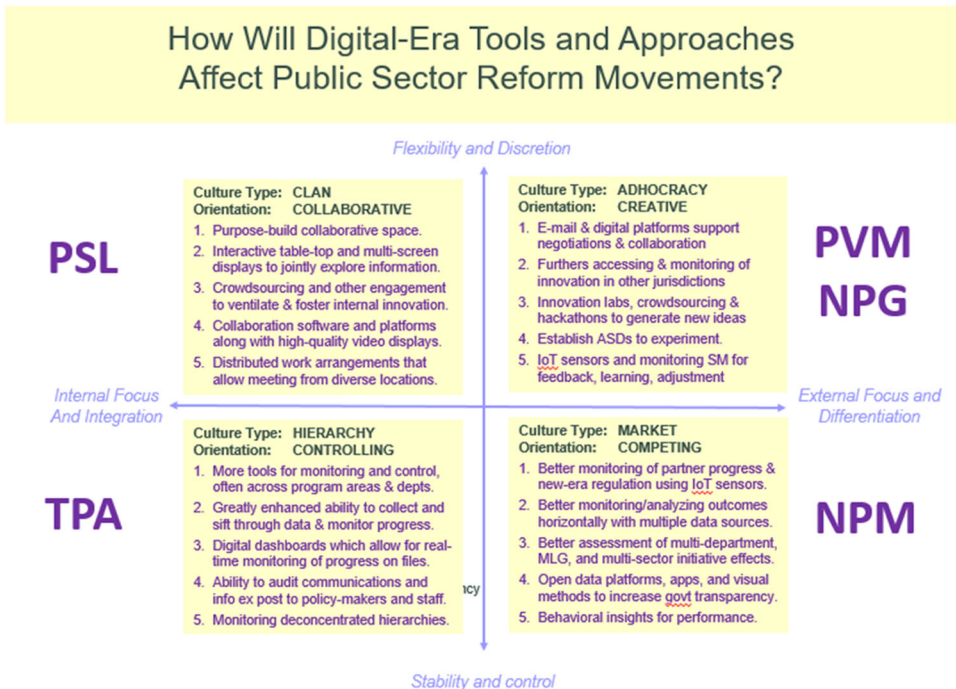


FIGURE 4 How will digital-era tools and approaches affect public sector reform movements?

resurgence, whether showcased in the latest promulgated reforms and rhetoric or developing steam under the radar and day-to-day practice.

Second, some organizations and specific functions may have been “first movers” or more sophisticated adopters of various digital tools. If so, there is an important implication: regardless of whether those organizations or functions, and the values they represent, are the beacons or flagship of reform efforts, they may be, in effect, “winning the race,” tipping the balance among the competing values and altering the character of the public sector or culture of particular organizations. In these unsettled times, special concern should be directed to the levers of control which may accrue to more centralized government associated with the Traditional Public Administration value cluster, especially when power is further concentrated in the hands of elected leaders in democratic societies with digital tools with less fidelity to fundamental democratic principles. It also reminds us to critically appraise claims of strong commitments to “open government” when so much remains inaccessible and opaque to the public and close observers, despite often enhanced internal access to resources and communication.

Finally, this analysis has suggested that digital tools and management approaches work *across* the competency clusters and reform movements and sweep *across* public service systems. The pace of technological change in the digital era may be the fastest in history, but sweeping technological change is certainly not a new phenomenon. As flagged by Tushman and Anderson (1986) and Freeman and Louçã (2001), there have been previous waves of dramatic advances in technology, which played out over decades, and which led to transformations of societies, markets, politics, institutions, culture, and public administration. Even if in Quinn (1988), and later work with his colleagues, did not explicitly factor in technology as a variable, we can surmise that technology over time affects how tasks associated with different value clusters are carried out in private and public organizations alike, and, most critically, affect the balances leaders and their organizations struck among those competing values when dealing with particular programs and instruments⁹ or performing certain functions.

Pollitt, (2008, 2010) has argued that the public administration literature pays insufficient attention to technology and time. My argument is that the adoption of diverse digital tools has been moving public service systems to new thresholds and balances in a varied and distributed manner, simultaneously producing new possibilities for all programs and functions embraced by the CVF quadrants, but such technology-driven change is not a new phenomenon. Likewise, it is not surprising that top-down initiatives associated with “digital” and accompanying “adhocracy” culture sometimes have great success, but often encounter resistance or “dynamic conservatism” (Schon, 1970), more often making progress in fits and starts, often leaving advocates frustrated (e.g. Craft et al., 2022). Moreover, some initiatives, and often the least publicized ones, have been taking public services in less public and desirable directions such as excessive surveillance of staff and citizens, and increasing inequality for some citizens with insufficient access to digital services (Fountain, 2001; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Figure 5 seeks to capture this by pointing to various technological advances that have swept societies and economies and by asking at what levels and in what directions is the CVF “playing field” for public organizations is tipping. Too often our attention, analysis, and debate focuses on specific initiatives, when far broader waves of change need to be understood and assessed at different levels of granularity.

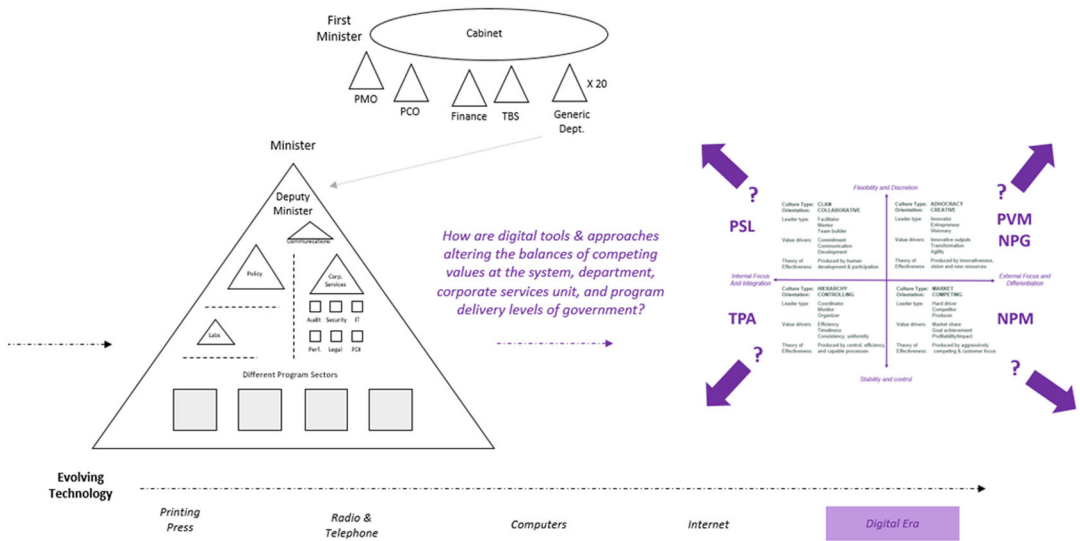


FIGURE 5 Where might new competing values balances get struck in public service systems?

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SCHOLARSHIP

This article has sought to compare and contrast different reform movements in public administration leveraging the Competing Values Framework. It has also suggested that digital-era tools and social technologies also further or accelerate the values and practices of Traditional Public Administration, Public Value Management, New Public Governance, and the public service-developed Public Sector Leadership reform movement. All of these values will remain latent, alive, and operationalized in public service systems.

This review has implications for scholarly analysis of public service reform initiatives. Our reflex as scholars is to express skepticism about the next public service reform initiative, its chances for success, and internal contradictions in the proposed programs of action, an important function in any democratic society. However, the CVF reminds us that public organizations are sites for a host of competing values, which get favoured or take on varying importance depending on contemporary political and governance challenges. Pointing out contradictions and predicting that any given reform (particularly larger multi-faceted initiatives) will not fully succeed is like “shooting fish in a barrel.” Far more interesting questions to ask include: In what ways and to what extent do new reform initiatives build on previous reforms? What is the state of play and levels of performance in those domains? What are the chances for success of certain elements of the reforms, and how far they might move the yardsticks? Where are they most likely to take root in certain departments and agencies (or specific parts of those entities)? Other questions involve exploring what at first appear to be intractable conflicts in values and reform aspirations, embracing the inherent contradictions, and ascertaining whether these can be crucibles, perhaps leavened by new technologies, for achieving new balances (Martin, 2007; Quinn, 2004). Exploring such questions requires a mix of design, predictive and implementation orientations, informed by the considerable knowledge we have developed

on public organizations and reform. As result, we should be well-positioned to venture more considered views on the trade-offs in the designs of reforms as specifically announced, the prospects and likely outcomes of reforms, and how far they will likely move the yardsticks, and not simply engage in ex post criticism when reforms do not or partially succeed, typically ignoring where progress was made. This might also lead to more productive, granular discussions about whether the appropriate leadership styles, capacities, cultures, and resources are available to implement reforms.

These reflections and analysis have been largely theoretical, comparing and categorizing different stylizations of public sector reform movements. However, the analysis points to important research questions and lays the groundwork for systematic empirical research. We need more granular empirical research on how public organizations have been evolving, the take-up of digital tools by public organizations and functions, and assessments of which reform values have been furthered in the digital era, and whether by design or not, if desirable balances have emerged. Getting a better handle on this state of affairs will be important because many values and aspirations associated with previous reform movements are variously latent, pulled forward by government priorities or crises, or enabled by new technologies. There are constituencies for change within public organizations (Kelman, 2005), likely embedded due to previous reforms and the functions and values they further. We need more research on how these reform constituencies are engaged, activated, or further the values they represent or care about. We need to move beyond contemporary discourse about which old or emerging “movement” holds sway at the macro or system-wide level and find out where things really stand in different organizations and functions in our public service systems.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a useful review of this literature, see “New Public Management,” Ch. 4 in Torfing et al. (2020), pp. 54–73.
- ² Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) argued that NPM was “a strongly developed and coherent theory of managerial change based on importing into the public sector central concepts from (relatively) modern business practices and public choice-influenced theory” (p. 469) with a host of “second-order” components. However, many observers saw these components as inconsistent with each other, even if part of the larger NPM paradigm or family of initiatives.
- ³ PVM attracted growing interest in many jurisdictions, particularly Australia, where those principles have long anchored the curricula of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG). The ideas, though, were consistent with the alternative service delivery or ASD movement in Canada (Ford & Zussman, 1997). The Canadian government’s approach was more pragmatic, less theoretically driven, and did not embrace the structural NPM reforms associated with the UK and NZ, which had far more concerted privatization, creation of special-purpose agencies, and corporatization of public sector entities.
- ⁴ A somewhat contentious implication of the PVM approach is that public managers, not just elected leaders, are directly involved in this process (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007).
- ⁵ Consider, for example, the following journals: *Government Information Quarterly*, *Data & Policy*, *Electronic Government*, *International Journal of Electronic Governance*, *International Journal of Public Administration in the Digital Age*, and *eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, along with myriad publications on digital-era governance in many mainstream public administration journals.

- ⁶ These scenarios were: NPM remains alive and well, even strengthened by austerity, with IT take-up at the agency or program level; governments fall behind the private sector in ever-increasing gaps, with the capabilities of governments continuing to slide and a focus on cost reductions; and massive investment in the waterfront of digital technologies as a means for reducing costs and meeting public expectations.
- ⁷ I thank Jonathan Craft for succinctly drawing out these points.
- ⁸ One reform movement this article cannot fully deal with corresponds to the upper left-hand quadrant of the Competing Values Framework, emphasizing collaboration, motivation, and engagement. A tentative answer is that the challenges spawning NPM reforms also led to a close look at public service leadership with a view to changing internal public service cultures. For example, Osborne & Gabler's (1992) "reinventing government" was a call for more entrepreneurial and risk-taking by public sector leaders. For some this was about bringing "management" into the field of public administration (e.g., Behn, 1991). More recent literature considers the leadership required to further PVM and NPG initiatives (e.g., 't Hart and Tummers, 2019, Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015), but Mau (2020) sees the literature as emergent, still a sub-field of public administration in Canada and elsewhere, especially when contrasted to the vast literature on leadership in the for-profit and non-profit sectors. On the other hand, public sector leadership has been of great concern to governments and public service leaders which is why considerable resources have been invested in public service colleges and professional development since the early 1990s, and why the PSL acronym has been left in the upper-left quadrant of Figure 3.
- ⁹ Many programs rely on "policy instruments" to achieve objectives. The digital era has not simply involved adopting new digital policy instruments (Hood & Margetts, 2007): in many cases, what were once "analogue" instruments have become digitalized in whole or in part. Still, Hood's (1986) original insight about tools variously being "effectors" and "detectors" takes on even greater contemporary salience when one realizes that every tool—if it has been digitalized in some measure—has increased its potency as "detectors" in the digital era.

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