P105 / Critical Approaches to the Digital Transformation of the State (and beyond)

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : sofia wickberg (University of Amsterdam)

Second Chair : Uttara Purandare (University of Amsterdam)

Third Chair : Nayara Albrecht (University of Amsterdam)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Digitalization is and has been changing state authorities, public bureaucracies and public policy-making in several ways in recent decades, to the extent that it seems relevant to speak of a digital transformation. Yet, governments still struggle to tackle some of the long-standing complexities associated with the governance of digital government and the task of digitally enabling their administrations. In parallel, the study of this fundamental transformation of the state, public bureaucracy and services has inspired great research in the social sciences, asking questions about the quality of services and policies, effectiveness, citizen engagement and transparency, but also about fairness, social justice and shifting power dynamics (Datta, 2023; Grøn and Møller, 2024; Schuilenburg and Peeters, 2021; Söderström and Datta, 2020). In a recent article on decolonization and state digitalization, Neha Gupta and Ayona Datta (2026) point to some of the contradictions inherent in state digitalization as well as the ways in which these contradictions tend to benefit and further empower the state. They argue that in the case of India, decolonization has been used as a disguise to shape technology in a way that is simultaneously futuristic and a remaking of its past. In addition to temporality, other contradictions emerge as a state digitalizes. This includes minimizing the role of the state while expanding its reach; devolving responsibilities to the individual while centralizing information and data; and the increasing unevenness of access to rights despite increasing citizen legibility.

This panel build on existing critical scholarship which have long argued that technology is not neutral. But the question then arises is – what is technology infused with? By whom? How does digitalization re-shape power? And why is understanding this important? Answers to these questions depend on context, histories, and the stories states tell themselves and their citizens about digitalization. In this panel we are interested in delving deeper into the contradictions of digitalization. How can public policy balance efficiency and privacy? What are the ways in which digital technologies can be designed and deployed from the ground up? Is centralization a core feature of state digitalization?

Bibliography

Datta Ayona, Neha Gupta, Piecing the ‘Land puzzle’: The invisible labours of India's national land digitalisation initiative, *Political Geography*, 2026, 103686, ISSN 0962-6298, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2026.103686.

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Grøn, Caroline Howard, and Anne Mette Møller. *Public Bureaucracy and Digital Transformation : Structures, Practices and Values.* 1st ed. 2024., Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67864-6.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel aims to further social science research on the digital transformation of the state, public

authorities, bureaucracy, governance structures and policymaking processes, and builds on existing critical scholarship which have long argued that technology is not neutral. This transformation raises many questions that we hope to explore with panel participants: what is technology infused with? By whom? How does digitalization re-shape power? How does technology affect the different stages of policy-making, values, interests, missions and roles? How does political regimes and systems matter? And why is understanding this important? In this panel we are interested in delving deeper into the contradictions of digitalization. How can public policy balance efficiency and privacy? What are the ways in which digital technologies can be designed and deployed from the ground up? Is centralization a core feature of state digitalization?

This panel invites empirical and conceptual papers examining the nature, forms and impact of digital transformation on and of public institutions, actors and activities, and/or the policymaking process. Papers can focus on the local, national, regional, international or transnational level of governance, and be concerned with public or hybrid organisations or with the interactions between state and non-state actors. The panel is methodologically agnostic, and we invite quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods and theoretical work.

Key themes include (but are not limited to):

Conceptual and methodological debates on digital transformation and the role of institutions and actors

Digital transformation of public services, including its impacts on civil servants and citizens

Decolonial and postcolonial approaches to the use of technology in policymaking and governance processes

Regulatory frameworks governing digital transformations; their strengths, weaknesses, and the gaps that persist

The mobilisation and spread of digital interventions across scales and geographies
Resistance to and subversion of the digital transformation of the state

The infusion of AI into digital transformations and its impact on public services

Power-shifts and dependencies resulting from digital transformation