

Editorial

Governing Smart Cities: Why Do Academics Need to Study Trendy Concepts?

In this issue of Information Polity we are delighted to present a set of thought-provoking papers on governing smart cities. These papers present a range of theoretical and empirical analyses of new emerging relations between new digital technologies and urban governance. A critical observer might question the choice of subject matter – why is it of interest to read a set of papers focused on a trendy concept like smart cities? Why don't we focus on meaningful theoretical concepts such as socio-technological dynamics, informatization, the information polity or information intermediaries? Why don't we just stick to strong theoretical narratives from disciplines such as political science, information science or organizational science?

Information Polity is not the only journal that presents special issues on contemporary topics. At conferences and in journals, there is an observable trend for researchers to present research about the latest technological developments in their field. As academics in the field of e-government studies, we tend to focus on concepts that are *en vogue*, such as agile government, smart governance, artificial intelligence, blockchain, etc. Considerable effort is spent unpacking and repacking these concepts, often using the analytical tools embedded in different disciplinary approaches. In doing so, it is evident that narrow prescriptive labels are often not especially meaningful and that any new concept or approach needs to be understood and embedded in existing social-scientific theories of governance, democracy and the public sector. A cynic might argue that this energy could better be spent on 'real' academic work and that examining the latest industry terminology or policy jargon is actually a distraction to understanding the real institutional and normative changes occurring in our field.

So why focus on a trendy concept like smart cities? A pragmatic explanation would be that we as academics have to use these concepts to obtain funding for our research. Funding agencies consistently ask for research that is related to current trends and topics, and this often means that proposals need to be connected to the latest hyped concept in the public sector. We understand how this works, but at the same time this is not the reason why we are presenting a special issue on governing the smart city. We cannot be naïve in these dynamics, but we also should not let the logic of the funder determine our research agendas.

There are also a number of good reasons for focusing on emerging concepts like smart city governance. A practical reason is that we can use such terminology as a starting point for a conversation with practitioners, policy-makers and industry. By making reference to the latest policy and service delivery terminology, however trendy, gives us a chance to foster positive conversations with organizational actors. Academic jargon and complex impractical theoretical approaches are typically less attractive to practitioners and consequently less likely to support an ongoing dialogue. If the conversation starts with reference to the latest concept then there is every chance we can connect to their frames and in doing so allow both parties to explore a mutually beneficial relationship.

A more substantive reason is that focusing on contemporary concepts is valuable since it allows academics to shape their meaning – and contest those promoted by industry and management consultants. As academics, we are well placed highlight the normative assumptions, the limitations and consequences, and the cognitive biases that shape a concept. We can also help to re-shape a concept on the basis of a rich understanding of social reality. In practice, these concepts form the language that is used to shape e-government delivery and therefore it is crucial that we engage in the game of shaping the discourse around any new technology.

This special issue aims to achieve this goal by presenting a range of different studies on smart cities, with specific reference to smart city governance. The papers discuss generic issues such as the nature of smart urban governance but also specific topics such as gender and evidence-based decision-making. Combined, we think they succeed in re-shaping the language that is used to discuss smart cities and embed this concept firmly in academic discourse and theory. And this is exactly why we wanted to edit a special issue of *Information Polity* on the trendy topic of smart city governance.

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