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Book Review

Lips, Miriam (2019) *"Digital Government: Management Public Sector Reform in the Digital Era"*, Routledge Masters in Public Management, Routledge: London.

Once you have eliminated edited compilations and recycled PhD dissertations, there is only a modest number of books on e-government available in print and many of these are either now quite dated and/or unsuitable as classroom texts. For this reason alone, this book by Miriam Lips, Professor of Digital Government at Victoria University in Wellington, is to be welcomed. Professor Lips defines her target audience as people who are not familiar with digital government and in particular students of public administration and public management. The book is in the format of a textbook, each chapter starting with learning objectives and key points and each addressing a different dimension of digital government, a term which the author uses to encompass, *inter alia*, e-government, e-democracy and e-governance.

Digital government is today such a diverse field that a challenge faced by any author taking it on in a single volume is that he or she cannot possibly be an authority on everything. Choices have to be made and chapters written in areas that are not the author's primary field of expertise. In setting out her stall, Professor Lips has chosen well, but she is clearly more comfortable in certain areas than in others. In the Introduction Professor Lips complains, rightly, about people with a background in information systems (IS) who write about digital government without having an adequate understanding of either government or public administration (PA). What she does not acknowledge is that the converse, though less often complained about, is also true, i.e. people from a PA background writing about digital government often do so without having an adequate knowledge or understanding of IS or of the IS literature. Unsurprisingly perhaps, a lack of familiarity with the broader IS literature causes the author some problems including a failure to realise that, at times, 'insights' claimed in the digital government literature have been common knowledge in the IS literature for decades. Digital government is, after all, a sub-field of IS as well as of PA.

Throughout the book, Professor Lips inclines to the optimistic and perhaps nowhere more so than in her early claim that:

> "*. . . over time we likely will see a development where digital government becomes a fully integrated part of government*." (p. 8)

As a consequence, she believes that the study of digital government will eventually be folded into the study of public administration and management. We can only hope that she is right.

Part I, the Introduction, is followed by a further ten chapters divided into four further parts. In the Introduction, Professor Lips lays out the objectives of the book with admirable clarity, though having told us that the book is not about theory, it is trifle disconcerting to find that this is the title of part II. The latter opens by considering three views of technology, technological determinism, social determinism and mutual shaping, before dismissing the first two and focusing on the third. However, she soon gets into muddier waters when she turns to the topic of data. She questions the idea that data can ever be objective (as they need humans to detect and interpret) a subject that is a real can of philosophical worms and takes us down the twisty road of Berkeleyan metaphysics – a detour that might have been better avoided. Professor Lips appears to be of the *"if a tree falls in a forest and there is nobody there to*

hear it does not make a sound" school of thought. Others may beg to differ. Other aspects of this chapter are also problematic. For example, the discussion of knowledge management (KM) is thin and defines knowledge as "actionable information" not a definition with which many scholars of KM would agree. These are deep as well as muddy waters and it would have been better had the many assertions in this section been qualified with a few caveats. The other main message of this chapter, that data and its use in government is a messy and complex matter, is more to the point.

Those who like lists will find much to please them throughout the book. Chapter three provides a list of eleven perspectives on digital government. The scope of the author's erudition is impressive, but in such a vast field one cannot read everybody and there are places where important commentators and perspectives are overlooked. For example, two perspectives missing from the aforementioned list are the regulatory state and e-governance, though the latter is discussed later on in chapter ten. Having briefly considered Dunleavy et al's concept of Digital Era Governance (DEG), the author proposes an alternative perspective of complex public management identifying a number of its features. Professor Lips writes well, but is prone to lapsing into that jargon laden style much beloved of some writers in the PA world, but one that is likely to put off many of the practitioners at whom this book is aimed (for some examples, see below). The economist Robert Skidelsky refers to this as the vice of abstraction of messy reality. The target audience, especially if they are undergraduates, is much more likely to find the case studies, such as the description and discussion of the SmartGate system in Box 3.3, more engaging and informative.

In part III the author turns to public sector reform. As she observes, there has been a number of reform movements (for want of a better term) that have used different strategies and that have had different characteristics and implications. Professor Lips skilfully traces several important developments from New Public Management through the emergence of the Web, mobile government, integration, portals and so on and provides an impressive list of barriers that have slowed up or even stopped reform though surprisingly, one of the most important factors, power displacement, is absent. Perhaps this is not surprising as power and its implications have been largely overlooked in the digital government literature in recent decades.

In a book like this, one good case example can be worth a dozen pages of abstract or theoretical verbiage – especially in a book designed for the classroom. In box 4.2, for example, Professor Lips illustrates citizen centricity using the example of the birth of a child in New Zealand. This system has enormously simplified what had been heretofore a paper intensive, bureaucratic maze. This example illustrates an important aspect of digital government, namely that transformative change is more often achieved by incremental and occasionally stumbling steps rather than by headline grabbing breakthroughs. Transformation is a journey, not a jump.

The book is at its best when the author is on territory where she is comfortable such as institutional structures, surveillance and transparency. One of the big potential benefits claimed for digital government is improved transparency and the related concept of open government. Transparency is more complicated than it seems and it is heartening to see many of these complications acknowledged here, though some are overlooked (for example the dampening effect of transparency on critical voices). Nonetheless, it is hard to disagree with the author's observation that:

> *"These ten shortcomings demonstrate that the transparency ideal is based on a misconceived truth or certainty: namely that understanding goes hand in hand with looking and seeing."* (p. 114)

Open government is about something broader and, as the author rightly notes, openness and open data are not the same thing though they are often treated as if they were. In both areas there are controversies. For example, Prof Lips cites approvingly the OpenGovData principles which include that data must be

licence free. However, as Mashael Khayyat and I have argued elsewhere (Khayyat & Bannister, 2015), licencing is a complicated issue. Not all public data can or should be CC0 compliant.

In chapter six, Professor Lips turns her attention to two current flavours of the month, big data and smart government. Writing about big data, the author tries hard to keep her equilibrium and not get carried away, not always successfully. The claim, on page 132 that this chapter will enable the reader to "*Develop a comprehensive smart strategy*" is over the top ("comprehensive" is a word best avoided in academic writing). There is another "comprehensive" view, this time of 14 interrelated dimensions (drawn from Gil-Garcia, Pardo and Nam) on pages 153–154. How does the author know that such lists are comprehensive? Big data is, as the author points out, still a concept without an agreed definition and her discussion of big data and the issues surrounding it, both positive and negative, is well done. As noted above, Professor Lips leans towards the positive. The smart city of Sondgo, described in Box 6.2, seems to be presented approvingly as a way of the future, but Songo is, for all its smartness, vaguely creepy. The most interesting part of the chapter is the discussion of Nissenbaum's (2011) concept of "contextual integrity" and the author's proposed updating of this to reflect ten years of technological developments since Nissenbaum first proposed it.

Chapter seven is the weakest in the book. The title says that it is about participatory democracy, but in practice it is mostly about community self-help rather than about any of the technology fuelled challenges facing contemporary democracy. To be fair, Professor Lips makes it clear that the chapter does not discuss core issues like politics. There are no or almost no references to politicians, representatives, parliaments, local councils, political parties, lobby groups, voting and so on. Instead the chapter goes over familiar ground repeating tired tropes that have been swirling around in the literature for many years without, in my view, going anywhere new or interesting. Perhaps the most critical omission is the absence of any meaningful engagement with the increasingly negative impact of technology on democracy and how we might deploy technology to defend it. Addressing this problem is far more urgent and important than improving local e-participation. Part of the problem is that the author relies quite heavily on two/three contributors to this field, Loader & Mercea (2012a, 2012b) and Noveck (2009, 2015). On page 178, the author cites Loader and Mercea as claiming that:

"Networked social media will facilitate mass collaboration of citizens and government agencies".

If you believe that, you will believe anything. Much of the chapter is about enabling and encouraging public involvement in better public administration. We can all say 'amen' to that, but this is just "Fix my Street" writ large. Those familiar with this literature will quickly recognise the vocabulary: 'networked', 'citizen centric', 'engaged', 'participative', 'ecology', etc.. Even the examples in the boxes are all case of useful, but relatively marginal impacts on democracy as such.

A general, and inevitable problem in a book like this, is that sometimes the discussion rests on quite a narrow base of references/knowledge. This is particularly visible in chapter eight where a large part of the discussion is grounded in work done in New Zealand which, no more than any other country, is typical only of itself. One wonders, for example, if the attitudes of New Zealanders to government control of their data is the same as, say, citizen of Ukraine, the USA or Hong Kong? Writing of surveillance and privacy, Professor Lips uses the Chinese social scoring mechanism in one of the boxed examples (8.2) and does so uncritically. In general the more dystopian risks of this type of surveillance are discounted on the grounds that there is little empirical evidence of them happening. This conclusion seems to be based on a paper of which she is a co-author written in 2009. Would she reach the same conclusions today? Maybe it is a reflection on me rather than Professor Lips, but I found her apparent lack of concern about the risks of surveillance worrying.

Privacy and trust are both complicated topics and the author handles them well in the limited space she has to work with. Security presents a different kind of challenge as it requires a good knowledge of the technological issues involved. Blockchain, for example, is another current flavour of the month and is being promoted as the answer to all sorts of problems including privacy, protection from identity theft and anything else that we may be worried about. As a technology, blockchain is, however, extremely complicated and one cannot help but wonder how good the author's grasp of this technology, including its limitations, is. Like big data, it is important when writing of these things to be careful not to get carried away by the hype.

Chapter nine discusses digital citizenship and in particular the problem of digital exclusion. Professor Lips argues that digital inclusion/exclusion is not a binary phenomenon, but rather a continuum and that it needs to be understood as such. She proposes six issues of relevance: access, abilities, skills, knowledge, trust and usage and three areas of focus: technology divides, divides around data and divides around service (though recent international reports on basic literacy problems, including in so-called 'advanced' countries like the United States, suggest that this may be the single largest source of exclusion). The author discusses, in turn, each of each of the 18 crossover points between these two lists. There are curious moments such as the fact that people do not seem to want to use social media to interact with government (Loader and Mercea please note). The denouement on p241, that different governments in different parts of the world operate within different contexts and therefore need to meet different citizen expectations is, if not exactly a surprise, an important one. Professor Lips concludes with a list of "rights" some of which are reasonable, but a few of which are just plain silly. You cannot have a *right* to Internet Knowledge and Skills; you might have a right to training in these things, but it is up to you to master them. And is the author seriously suggesting that everybody has a right to be an expert statistician – even if they have difficulties with basic arithmetic? Other proposed rights are not as clear cut as they seem – for example the 'right' to transparency of the public decision making process or to the (re-)use of public data. More muddy waters.

In the penultimate chapter, Professor Lips turns her attention to the knotty problem of digital government strategy. As in other chapters, this chapter leans heavily on a small number of sources and, perhaps given the nature of the subject, suffers somewhat more from the kind of word salad writing all too often found in the social sciences. For example, on p 249, the author defines one of her key terms, 'digital government strategy', as:

> "*. . . a contextual digital government strategy, emphasising the socio-technical phenomenon of digital government.*"

Well, yes. While there are many messages in this chapter, the key one is that digital strategy should never be left to the nerds. This is true, though it is something that has been well known in the IS literature for decades. Likewise the discovery by Crosby, Bryson and Stone (2010) that success in major projects requires sponsors and champions is something that any undergraduate student of project management could have told them at the time. The problem of leadership is discussed, but only cursorily and using the work of the same three authors. Suffice it to say, there are other (and arguably more insightful) perspectives on leadership to be found in other literatures. The chapter includes a useful comparison of the difference between New Public Governance and its precursors, New Public Management and Public Administration, thought surprisingly, DEG is not included despite having been discussed earlier. Some of the problems Professor Lips identifies, such as those arising from the absence of institutional knowledge when public projects are outsourced to the private sector are not unique to digital government, but are of critical importance. A parallel problem is governments *losing* institutional knowledge and control of their own systems (for an excellent case study of this phenomenon see Cordella & Willcocks, 2012).

The concluding chapter is less happy. It seems rushed and in places the FOG index[1] climbs into the stratosphere as the author channels her inner Sir Humphrey.[2] For example, on page 272 she writes:

> *"This digital governance system approach focuses attention not only on the institutional aspects and democratic relationships that enable and constrain digital government reform with a plural and pluralistic system, but also on the critical involvements of both government organizations and citizen to co-produce context-relative, digital government phenomena;"*

This type of impenetrable prose was filleted by Ernest Gowers in his *Plain Words* over 60 years ago and is inappropriate for a teaching text. Hopefully, when the second edition emerges, the author will have had time to re-think some of these passages. Curiously, Professor Lips chooses the last chapter to provide a short history of digital government reforms, something one would have thought more useful to have located earlier on in the book. Towards the end, the book seems to run out of steam, as if the author was not quite sure how to finish. Maybe this is the reason that the prose is so dense, but it would have been good to have something crisper and punchier at the denouement.

While this is a book written for students, not scholars, most scholars will find much of interest in it to ponder and much to debate. Many of Professor Lips' views and perspectives are not ones I would necessary share, but if we were all *ad idem*, life would be dull indeed. Nonetheless, this is a book that is possibly unique in its range and scope of material and for that reason alone should be on the shelf of any academic interested in digital (or to use a term I still prefer) e-government. It is a work of great scholarship and breath. For younger scholars provides a sweeping overview of the field and for more senior scholars, plenty of provocative ideas and material to think about.

Fellow Emeritus, Frank Bannister, Trinity College Dublin, e-mail: FBNNISTR@tcd.ie

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[1] https://www.readabilityformulas.com/gunning-fog-readability-formula.php.

[2] As in Sir Humphrey Appleby, the prolix civil servant in the BBC comedy series, *Yes, Minister*.