

# A shift in paradigm? Collaborative public administration in the context of national digitalization strategies

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## Abstract

Despite claims of a paradigmatic shift toward the increased role of networks and partnerships as a form of governance—driven and enabled by digital technologies—the relation of “Networked Governance” with the pre-existing paradigms of “Traditional Weberian Public Administration” and “New Public Management” remains relatively unexplored. This research aims at collecting systematic evidence on the dominant paradigms in digitalization reforms in Europe by comparing the doctrines employed in the initial and most recent digitalization strategies across eight European countries: Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom. We challenge the claim that Networked Governance is emerging as the dominant paradigm in the context of the digitalization of the public sector. The findings confirm earlier studies indicating that information and communication technologies tend to reinforce some traditional features of administration and the recentralization of power. Furthermore, we find evidence of the continued importance of key features of “New Public Management” in the digital era.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Collaboration has become one of the buzzwords of our time. The interaction across public sector organizations and between public and private actors is hardly a new phenomenon and has always played a crucial role. However, a growing literature claims that in the past 2 decades, networks and partnerships have gained further significance—both as forms of governance and as paradigms for public sector reform (Osborne, 2010). Digital technologies are seen as both a driver and enabler of this development toward governance within networks. While this claim of transformative change toward collaborative or “Networked Governance” (NG) has gained widespread currency and the respective research is sometimes considered as “a new political science paradigm” (Torfing & Sørensen, 2014, p. 342), the theoretical status and empirical scope of this claim remain contested. In particular, the relation and nexus of NG with pre-existing paradigms of public administration remain relatively unexplored.

It appears unclear whether the paradigmatic shift toward NG is an empirical claim, a normative proclamation or a prescriptive call to arms. There has been a lack of empirical analysis and systematic evidence to substantiate such an assertion, and existing evidence points to a less clear-cut shift or paradigm changes (Elston et al., 2018; Lodge & Gill, 2011; Moynihan, 2008). Furthermore, we need a better understanding of the extent to which digitalization may be a driver and/or an outcome of such a paradigm shift. Despite claims that information and communication technologies (ICT) have triggered broad organizational and cultural changes in public organizations (Castelnovo & Sorrentino, 2018; Dunleavy et al., 2005) and that networks are more prevalent in the information age (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012), the current research on NG insufficiently addresses the importance of networks in the digitalization of government. It is also surprising that the ongoing debates widely ignore earlier studies that have shown that ICT may be enacted to facilitate collaboration but can also contribute to strengthening command and control, and that “a vast increase in the use of networks has changed but not diminished the importance of bureaucracy” (Fountain, 2001, p. 62).

This paper takes up these contradictory views and contributes to the debate with a cross-national analysis of digitalization reforms. In particular, we ask what the dominant paradigm of governance in digitalization reforms is and explore reform strategies and the administrative doctrines that shape them, using the established distinction of three fundamental administrative paradigms: hierarchy (Traditional Weberian Public Administration (TPA)), markets (New Public Management (NPM)) and networks (NG) (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The paper examines the claim of a paradigmatic shift toward more collaboration within networks or whether such paradigms co-exist as competing ideas and “layered realities” (Hartley, 2005; Hyndman et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2020). To this end, we compare doctrines employed in digitalization strategies, as “ideas that win arguments in disputes about how to get organized” (Hood & Jackson, 1991, p. 12). We conduct a qualitative content analysis and code the first significant and most recent digitalization strategies (in 2019) in eight European countries: Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom. By moving beyond single case studies, we can collect systematic evidence on the dominant paradigms in digitalization reforms in Europe across different national conditions.

Our findings challenge the claim that NG is emerging as the dominant paradigm in the context of the digitalization of the public sector. Across the eight countries, we find that digitalization strategies envision the future of the state predominantly as a service provider and protector of citizens rather than a partner within a network of state and non-state actors. Digitalization reforms are driven from the top, with limited involvement of non-state actors. We actually observe

a reassertion of the coordinative role of the center through hierarchy. Although the most recent strategies focus more strongly on collaboration with non-state actors than the initial strategies, in the majority of countries collaboration among public sector actors and organizations remains at the core of the documents.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The three reform paradigms, TPA, NPM and NG are understood as eclectic but “relatively coherent and comprehensive set of norms and ideas about how to govern, organize and lead the public sector” (Torfing et al., 2020, p. 9). They initially tend to consist of vaguely defined, loosely connected and normative ideas but over time come to influence the overall perception of the appropriate way to organize the public sector and serve as an umbrella term used to guide and justify reform measures. Such paradigms are differentiated by their understanding of the role of government, a different perception of actors within and outside government and the relationship between said actors. They can also be captured by a constellation of administrative doctrines, which are regarded as “prescriptions for action in one way rather than another” (Hood & Jackson, 1991, p. 12). We briefly present the main characteristic of these three paradigms in the following paragraph, but we will not discuss them at length as they are well established in the current literature.

### 2.1 | Public sector reform paradigms and collaboration

Bureaucracies are historically based on the traditional theory of public administration, which is widely recognized as the first administrative paradigm. It is characterized by the Weberian logic of a classic neutral acting norm-oriented organization resting upon principles such as authority, division of labor, clear responsibilities, rules, and regulations. Specialization and expertise are the basis for action while pursuing cardinal administrative doctrines that seek to ensure continuity and democratic-bureaucratic accountability. Hierarchy functions as the main coordination mechanism, which requires a clear distinction between rulers and actors, who are primarily seen as subjects (Bardach, 2017; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

The second reform paradigm is the “New Public Management” paradigm, albeit its tenants agree that this is a rather loose term describing a “set of broadly similar administrative doctrines which dominated the bureaucratic reform agenda in many of the OECD group of countries from the late 1970s” (Hood & Jackson, 1991, p. 3). New Public Management emphasizes performance, efficiency, public choice and quality and seeks to improve the public sector by importing business concepts, techniques and values (Cole & Jones, 2005; Hood & Jackson, 1991). Dunleavy et al. (2005) synthesized the three main components of NPM as disaggregation, competition and incentivization.

Following critics of the shortcomings of NPM, a growing body of literature has claimed that an era of governance is emerging, in which networks gain prominence relative to markets and hierarchy as the key coordination mechanisms (Osborne, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The literature has seen a proliferation of labels and concepts attributed to a “post-NPM” paradigm, including integrated governance, joined-up government, holistic governance, new public governance, collaborative public management, and whole-of-government (Christensen & Lægread, 2007; Reiter & Klenk, 2019; Torfing et al., 2020; Wegrich, 2010). We labeled the third

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the three reform paradigms.

Dimensions	Reform paradigm		
	Traditional public administration	New public management	Networked governance
Key concept	Public goods	Public choice	Public value
Role of government	Protector and regulator	Service provider	Network partner
Goal of government	Keep government stable, reliable, and trustworthy	Make government more efficient and “consumer responsive” by injecting business-like methods	Make government more responsive and legitimate by including a wider range of actors in policy-making and implementation
Strategy style	Planning and design style, compliance to rules and control procedures	Power style, getting competitive advantage	Learning style, coping with unpredictability
Role of leadership	Command and control	Delegating and empowering senior managers	Coaching and empowering lower officials
Steering mode	Centralized	Combination of centralized and decentralized	Decentralized
Main coordination mechanisms	Authority exercised through a disciplined hierarchy of impartial officials	Market-type mechanisms such as performance indicators and competitive contracts	Networks of, and partnership between, stakeholders
Type of collaboration	Predominantly internal collaboration (vertical)	Internal and external collaboration (vertical)	External and internal collaboration (horizontal)

Source: Own elaboration based on Hartley (2005), Osborne (2010), Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017).

paradigm “Networked Governance” (Hollstein et al., 2017) to describe governing arrangements in which public policy and service delivery are steered by networks, defined as “structures involving multiple nodes—agencies and organizations—with multiple linkages, ordinarily working on cross-boundary collaborative activities. They constitute one form of collaborative activity for facilitating and operating multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by using single organizations” (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011, p. 266). Although there may be power asymmetries among participants, networks are voluntary and non-hierarchical (Provan & Kenis, 2008). They “engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 2), who may then be conceived as co-producers of public policies and services. This shift in perception of actors means a shift in the management of expectations, as partners, contrary to clients and consumers, expect mutual dependence and demand a rather equal position (Hartley, 2005; Scupola & Zanfei, 2016).

One key distinction between these three paradigms is how collaboration is conceived (see Table 1). We understand collaboration as “activities and ongoing interaction that provide both

structure and meaning to collective action” (Sedgwick, 2017, p. 236). Collaborative processes may include a broad array of activities such as exchanging information, sharing resources or responsibilities, or mutual learning processes. We also consider various forms of citizens’ engagement as a form of collaboration between public sector organizations and civil society. While collaboration is a concept at the core of the “Networked Governance” paradigm, it is not absent in Traditional Public Administration and NPM. However, there are variations in the type of actors involved and how collaborative arrangements are steered (see Table 1). In TPA, the focus lies on collaboration within the public sector and on vertical coordination across different layers of the hierarchy. The main coordination instruments are rules and they are transmitted down the chain of command (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In the NPM paradigm, on the other hand, the focus lies both on internal and external collaboration, particularly private sector actors. New Public Management is further characterized by a tension between central and decentral modes of steering. Although middle managers are provided more autonomy, the focus on competition and incentivization means that coordination is mostly vertical and that the hierarchy exerts strong control over professionals’ output (Bèzes et al., 2013; Newman, 2001). The main coordination instruments are contracts and management instruments such as performance indicators and introducing competition (Jeannot & Bèzes, 2016). By contrast, one of the main propositions of the NG paradigm is that non-state actors are increasingly involved in policy-making and service delivery. This is combined with increased horizontal collaboration among public sector organizations and actors to overcome the silo culture and solve complex problems that span various policy areas (Lægread & Rykkja, 2015; Torfing, 2019). As already mentioned, these networks of actors are horizontal and steered decentrally. Hence, to confirm the emergence of NG we should find evidence of more frequent collaborations with non-state actors in the most recent digitalization strategies, decentral steering of the design and envisaged implementation of the strategies and increased involvement of non-state actors and lower echelons of the hierarchy in steering activities.

The literature debates public management paradigms either in terms of co-existing/competing ideas and “layered realities” (e.g., Hartley, 2005; Hyndman et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2020). Some point out that together with horizontal coordination among networks, vertical integration, and the reassessment of the center of government is another feature of the “post-NPM” era (Lægread & Rykkja, 2015; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). In our view, such features can be described as a revival or a continuation of TPA features, albeit in a modernized version, as argued by the tenants of the “Neo-Weberian State” (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Thus, while we agree that elements of different paradigms may co-exist and (re-)emerge at different stages of the policy process, our objective is to explore the claim that we can observe a shift toward an age in which networks are deemed increasingly relevant for designing policy-making and service delivery (Klijn, 2008; Torfing & Sørensen, 2014). We will investigate empirically whether there is a shift toward decentral steering and collaboration within networks of state and non-state actors or whether the focus of the digitalization strategies lies on vertical coordination within the public sector and central steering from political and administrative leadership.

## 2.2 | Public sector reform paradigms and digitalization

The prior outlined paradigms do capture different doctrines concerning the organization of the state and the relationships between state and non-state actors, but they only implicitly address the alleged transformative changes induced by new information technologies. As digitalization has become an integral component of government work over the last decade, the “crossroads”

between digital government and public administration theory and research have gained relevance but are still underdeveloped (Gil-Garcia et al., 2017; Margetts, 2008; Torfing et al., 2020). It has been argued that “public administration scholarship has to a significant degree neglected technological change” (Andrews, 2019, p. 296) and that a better understanding of the implications of technology is crucial for further progress in public administration theory (Holzer, 2022). On the one hand, a large part of public administration literature assumes that networks are not only more prevalent but also seen as more legitimate in the information age (Chen & Lee, 2018; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; OECD, 2018; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012) but it has barely been backed up by evidence that NG is more predominant than the Traditional Public Administration or NPM. On the other hand, some scholars refute any technological determinism and contend that digitalization may foster the emergence of different types of governance (Fountain, 2001; Nograšek & Vintar, 2014). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017, 7) for instance affirm that digitalization may result in “an e-government that reinforces traditional bureaucratic hierarchies, an e-government that facilitates the NPM, an e-government that is designed to promote networking and wider concepts of governance”. In fact, empirical evidence suggests that ICT tend to strengthen existing organizational patterns and power distributions (Cordella & Tempini, 2015; Fountain, 2001). We will verify these different claims and hence address the questions of whether governments legitimize digitalization with a discourse centered around NG and whether elements of NG are more predominant in the most recent digitalization strategies.

Strategic plans are an increasingly common practice in governments around the world (Bryson et al., 2018) and can be viewed as a distinct “genre” of organizational communication (Cornut et al., 2012). They act as “social templates” that shape and are shaped by social interaction. We understand the relation between both theoretical models and their adoption as partial theories of reform in the form of strategies, and between these partial theories and reform practice, are far from simple and unidirectional. Paradigms and administrative doctrines can be used for purely isomorphic reasons and as window-dressing activities and doctrines might be only very loosely coupled with decisions or actions. Despite these notes of caution, this paper conjectures that administrative doctrines and the underlying paradigms found in digitalization strategies tell us something about the aims, objectives and “imagined futures” (Beckert, 2016) as conceived by reform actors. The notion of performativity in organizational and management theory addresses the power of language as a form of social action and research has drawn attention to such power effects of strategic plans in government (Vaara et al., 2010). Strategic plans formally decided by government can close down options, while simultaneously implying consensus around them. While implementation is a different matter, it does make a difference if technology is intended to be used for reinforcing hierarchical control, increasing efficiency and competition or facilitating cross-boundary coordination.

### 3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

To scrutinize the potential transformation toward collaboration within networks in a digital age, we analyze digitalization strategies in eight countries from different administrative traditions. We examine how strategies depict the goals and role of government and doctrines about the type of organizations, as well as the procedures and methods to choose for steering digitalization strategies, that is, what-type and how-type doctrines according to Hood and Jackson's (1991) classification. As Hood and Jackson's conception of doctrines was very much informed by the NPM paradigm and the authors cautioned that the list was not exhaustive, we created new doctrines

based on a careful process of inductive category formation (Mayring, 2010). We thus propose an updated version of Hood and Jackson's doctrines, which serves as a useful operationalization of the public management paradigms in the age of digitalization.

### 3.1 | Qualitative content analysis of the strategies

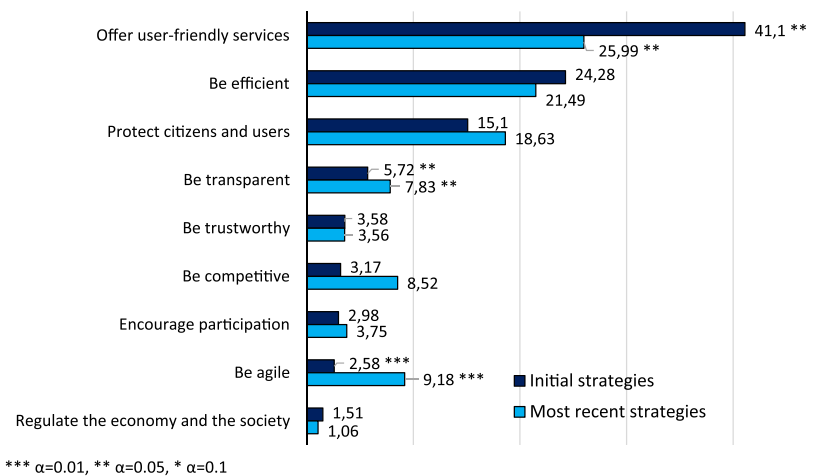
The method selected for analyzing the digitalization strategies was qualitative content analysis following the methodology of inductive category formation. This widely used approach was developed by Mayring (2010) to capture qualitative content through coded text segments (codes) that can then be evaluated quantitatively. We created categories for codes that shed light on the goals of government and digitalization, the steering of government digitalization, derived from doctrines by Hood and Jackson (1991). We further developed an additional category regarding the type of actors involved in collaborative arrangements. In addition to the coding of the documents, a structured questionnaire was sent to academic experts in each country<sup>1</sup> analyzed to gain critical background knowledge about the design of the digitalization strategies that was not covered by the coding. To facilitate the management of the large dataset of documents, we used MAXQDA, a software that enables computer-aided qualitative data and text analysis. After several rounds of coding the documents in the original language and revision of the coding scheme, we agreed on 27 common categories.<sup>2</sup> Coders were provided with a codebook including a definition of each category and examples to ensure a consistent interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The work of each coder was reviewed by an experienced coder and any doubts about the interpretation were discussed and resolved collectively. In total, we include 5649 codes in this analysis of the 16 national digitalization strategies: 3192 for the most recent strategies (in 2019) ( $N_i = 8$ ) and 2457 for the initial strategies ( $N_i = 8$ ). While the number of codes between the two sets of documents was relatively similar, the number of codes used for a single strategy varied from 161 to 1204 codes, depending on the nature and length of the document. We accounted for such differences by normalizing the results. To do so, we first calculated the proportion of codes  $\phi_{i,j}$  for each category within a theme (for instance the 16 categories within the theme "goals of government and digitalization") and each strategy relative to the total number of codes in that strategy for that theme. Herein,  $n_{i,j}$  stands for the absolute numbers of codes per theme in each country.

$$\phi_{i,j} = \frac{n_{i,j}}{\sum_{j=1}^{N_j} n_{i,j}} \quad (1)$$

Second, we built the arithmetic mean  $\bar{\phi}_j$  of the relative frequency of codes per theme or sub-theme  $j$  over all countries and multiplied the calculated numbers by 100.

$$\bar{\phi}_j = \frac{1}{N_i} \sum_{i=1}^{N_i} \phi_{i,j} \quad (2)$$

The difference in means (between the first and the second set of each category) permitted conclusions about the changing relevance of a category over time, indicating overarching trends across strategies. To examine whether these differences in means were statistically significant, we performed one of several hypothesis tests, either a two-sample  $t$ -test, a Welch test or a Wilcoxon rank-sum test, depending on the data distributions and variances. Selection of the appropriate test for each category was based on the Anderson-Darling test for normal distribution and the two-sample  $F$ -test for equality of variances. Significant differences in means are marked in



**FIGURE 1** Dominating goals for government digitalization as expressed in the strategies (share of codes). Source: authors' elaboration. \*\*\* $\alpha = 0.01$ , \*\* $\alpha = 0.05$ , \* $\alpha = 0.1$ .

Figures 1–3 with \*\*\* (highly significant,  $\alpha = 0.01$ ), \*\* (significant,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ), \* (low significant,  $\alpha = 0.1$ ).

### 3.2 | Case selection

To increase the validity and reliability of our results, our case selection aimed to reflect sufficient diversity in administrative traditions and national reform trajectories. It featured two countries from the Continental European (Germany and the Netherlands), one from the Anglo-Saxon (UK), three from the Napoleonic (France, Italy and Spain), one from the Nordic/Scandinavian (Norway) and one from the Central and Eastern European administrative tradition (Estonia) (Painter & Peters, 2010). To compare the strategies over time, we used the countries' most recent strategy issued by the central government and the most relevant strategy adopted at least 10 years before the current one. The initial strategies selected were adopted between the end of the 90s and early 2000s - except for the Estonian strategy that was adopted in 2006 - and the most recent strategies between 2014 and 2018. Documents were broadly consistent in terms of authors, content, and time span covered (see Annex). All selected strategies were political documents that have no legally binding force, hence legal or administrative steps are required for the enactment of the strategy. However, the nature of these documents varied across countries. While some strategies have a mostly symbolic purpose aimed at communicating the policies of the governments, other strategies serve to provide a political impetus to digitalization reforms, and others have a more operational nature. In addition, the strategies slightly differ in scope. Most strategies had a specific focus on the public sector, whereas the first and the second Estonian strategy as well as the second Norwegian and the second Dutch strategies deal with the transition to an overall digital society, which may be reflected in the way the documents promote the involvement of private sector and civil society. In such cases, we coded only the sections that were specifically dedicated to the digitalization of the public sector. Furthermore, the strategies are likely to be biased toward the enacting central authorities, leaving the local level underrepresented, especially in countries with a centralistic Napoleonic tradition. The documents' strategic focal points may also be affected by the type of ministry involved in designing the strategy. For instance, it



is likely that documents issued by a ministry of local government, such as in the more recent Norwegian document and in the initial Dutch strategy, would attach particular importance to collaboration between government tiers. We account for these contextual differences when interpreting the findings. We argue that if we find consistent evidence of a shift or an absence of a shift toward NG across all documents despite their different nature and scope, this will validate our findings of the predominance of a specific paradigm both at the level of “talk” and “decision”, while future research on the strategies’ implementation will need to analyze to what extent this is also true at the level of “action”.

## 4 | EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### 4.1 | Role and goal of government in the digital era

The three public management paradigms under consideration can be distinguished by contrasting core claims on the role and goals of government in the digital era (see Table 1). We identified in the digitalization strategies nine goals that can be attributed to one of the paradigms we trace empirically (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

The cross-national analysis of the goals of digitalization in the strategies shows the predominance of the NPM paradigm. The main goal of the government in NPM is to make government more efficient and “consumer responsive” and government is first and foremost envisioned as a service provider (see Table 1). The main goal of both the initial strategies and most recent strategies is to “offer user-friendly services”.<sup>5</sup> Our definition of the goal “offer user-friendly services” includes designing and delivering user-centered/personalized services, providing integrated or end-to-end services, giving users a choice, and responding to users’ expectations. The emphasis on cost-efficiency is further evidence of the continuous influence of the NPM. The category “be efficient” is the second most frequent goal in the initial strategies and most recent strategies, with about a quarter of the codes. The most recent Spanish strategy clearly illustrates that digital technologies are mostly perceived as a way to boost the productivity of the administration and improve the quality of services. The main strategic objectives are to increase the productivity and efficiency in the internal functioning of the administration, to make the digital channel the preferred choice of citizens and businesses to interact with the administration, and to achieve greater efficiency in the provision of ICT services in the administration.

However, we find that another key goal of the digitalization strategies is the protection of citizens and users (TPA), particularly in the Netherlands and Estonia, but also to a lesser extent in Spain, Norway, and the United Kingdom. This includes ensuring the safety of digital technologies, protecting the privacy of users, being transparent about the use of personal data and protecting fundamental rights. One cornerstone of the most recent Dutch strategy for instance is to protect privacy, democratic rule of law, fundamental rights, equal treatment and trust in public institutions from digital threats such as misinformation, discrimination arising from algorithms, the market power of some digital platforms etc. Most digitalization strategies try to pursue goals associated with both NPM and Traditional Public Administration, although these paradigms are often presented as conflicting in the documents. Many strategies explicitly acknowledge for instance the challenge of providing efficient digital services that require seamless exchanges of data on the one hand and the protection of privacy on the other hand.

However, we find that digitalization strategies pay relatively little attention to goals associated with the NG paradigm. In NG, the government is predominantly envisioned as a partner within a

broader network of actors (see Table 1). It aims to improve the responsiveness and legitimacy of government by including a wider range of actors in policy-making and implementation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The most recent strategies display a stronger focus on the goals of being transparent or encouraging participation, but these remain in the background of the digitalization strategies. While it is unsurprising that these are not the main goals of the strategies, we expected that digitalization would be more strongly perceived as an opportunity to include a broader set of actors in decision-making and to improve transparency about the actions of government. However, we find a strong increase in the goal “be agile” between the initial and the most recent strategies, particularly in the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany. Agility refers to the capacity of the state to innovate, be flexible and adapt in the face of a changed context. Agile leadership and procedures are closely connected to the emergence of NG, as they contribute to changing deep-seated habits of the hierarchical bureaucracy and move to a more experimental, participatory and collaborative culture (Mergel, 2016). The most recent UK strategy for instance states that the administration “will need to be more flexible in the way (they) organize (themselves) to respond more quickly to a changing world - this means having the tools to work effectively across boundaries and ensure that we collaborate to serve the citizen” (Cabinet Office, 2017, 63). The increased share of “be agile” codes in the most recent strategies demonstrates a shift from a purely planning and design style (TPA) and power style (NPM) to a learning style (NG) in the planned implementation of digitalization strategies (see Table 1).

Although we find that the strategies have a strong focus on transparency and agility, the focal points of the strategies are user orientation, cost efficiency and the protection of citizens. It thus appears that the goals of government conveyed in the strategies are related to NPM and a lesser extent to Traditional Public Administration rather than NG. While some of these results, as outlined, can be attributed to dominant shifts in single countries’ strategies (outliers in the data), a more nuanced picture emerges when looking at overarching trends. Contrasting the goals of the strategies over time, statistically, significant changes can only be identified in “offer user-friendly services”, “be transparent”, and “be agile”. Although user orientation remains the most important goal in all of the recent strategies, its frequency decreases (−15.11% points), while transparency and agility, although still relatively infrequent, gain in importance over time (+2.11 and +6.6% points, respectively). This broader set of goals and concerns in the most recent strategies may reflect the increasing complexity of society and differing expectations toward the role of government.

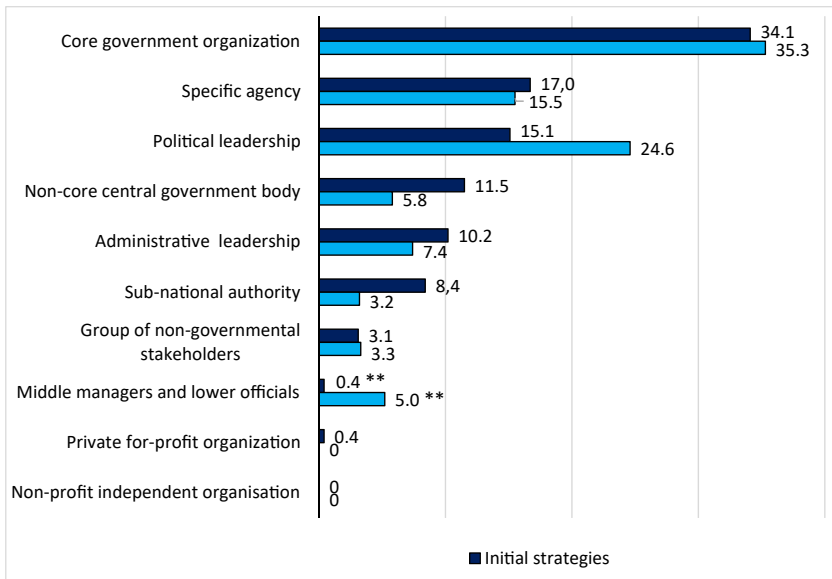
## 4.2 | Doctrines on the steering of government digitalization

To find out which reform paradigms dominate in the digitalization strategies, we also analyzed doctrines on the type of organizations or actors used for the steering of the strategies. While Hood and Jackson (1991) identify four agency types,<sup>6</sup> we inductively identified 10 types of organizations or groups of actors from the state or non-state sector that have a steering role in the planned implementation of digitalization strategies (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

To confirm the hypothesis of the emergence of NG, we should find evidence that networks of non-government stakeholders, private for-profit or non-state organizations are involved in steering the design and/or the planned implementation of digitalization reforms. Additionally, middle managers should be empowered to have increased steering responsibilities in the set of most recent strategies (see Table 1). However, our results show that non-state actors do not play any role in the steering of digitalization strategies in any of the countries we analyzed and that

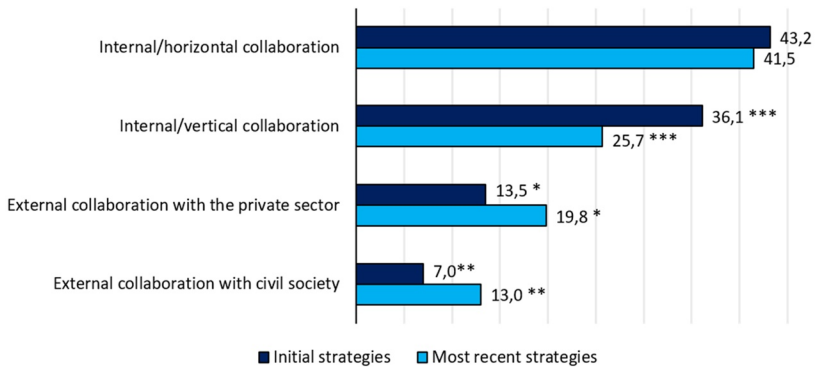
their importance is not growing over time. Nevertheless, we find support for the empowerment of the lower echelons of public administration. Middle managers and lower-ranked officials are increasingly involved in the steering of digitalization strategies over time, albeit to a limited extent (from 0.4% of the codes on steering organizations in the set of initial strategies to 5.0% in the set of most recent strategies).

Our analysis shows that the design and envisioned implementation of the strategies are mostly explicitly steered centrally by core government organizations and political leadership. This is characteristic of both Traditional Public Administration and NPM. The category “core government organizations” includes ministries and units within the ministries, while the category



\*\*\*  $\alpha=0.01$ , \*\*  $\alpha=0.05$ , \*  $\alpha=0.1$

FIGURE 2 Steering actors/organizations in the digitalization strategies (share of codes). Source: authors' own elaboration. \*\*\* $\alpha = 0.01$ , \*\* $\alpha = 0.05$ , \* $\alpha = 0.1$ .



\*\*\*  $\alpha=0.01$ , \*\*  $\alpha=0.05$ , \*  $\alpha=0.1$

FIGURE 3 Most frequent constellation of actors in collaborative arrangements (share of codes). Source: authors' own elaboration. \*\*\* $\alpha = 0.01$ , \*\* $\alpha = 0.05$ , \* $\alpha = 0.1$ .

TABLE 2 Steering modes in the digitalization strategies (share of codes).

	Initial strategies	Most recent strategies
Steer centrally	76,4	79,3
Steer decentrally	23,6	20,7

Source: authors' own elaboration.

“political leadership” includes the head of state or government, the ministers, as well as the cabinets of these ministers. Additionally, our results show that their importance has increased over time and that they represent around 60% of the codes in the most recent strategies. In the most recent strategies, the main steering actors/organizations are political leaders in the Netherlands and Germany, core government organizations in Estonia, France, Spain and the United Kingdom, and specific agencies in Italy and Norway.

We should note that we do not identify a significant roll-back of agentification in the case of digitalization, thus contradicting the claim that we entered a “post-NPM” era. Specialized arms-length executive agencies represent 15.5% of the codes in the set of most recent strategies, which is only a slight decrease from 16.7% of the codes in the set of initial strategies.<sup>8</sup> Countries have experimented with different institutional arrangements over time. For instance, Italy and Norway both use an agency as the main steering organization for coordinating the planned implementation of the most recent strategies, although they relied respectively on a unit within the Presidency of the Council and a sectoral ministry as the main steering organization in the initial strategy (core government organizations). France on the other hand mentions a specialized digital agency for coordinating the planned implementation of the initial strategy but reverted to relying mostly on single ministries for the implementation outlined in the most recent strategy. Again, these results may well reflect country-specific changes; the statistical tests exclusively reveal a significant increase in “middle managers and lower officials” (+4.6% points). In this aspect, NG gains relative importance across all strategies but remains underrepresented compared to other types of governmental actors responsible for steering the design and/or planned implementation of the strategies.

Another indicator of paradigm shift is “how-type doctrines” about the procedures and methods emphasized in the strategies for steering the planned implementation of government digitalization (Hood & Jackson, 1991). We created a doctrine “steer centrally” to designate a mode of steering based on central coordination and support from the top, as well as a command and control approach. The doctrine “steer decentrally” on the other hand refers to a mode of steering in which stakeholders are involved in decision-making and/or given autonomy in the implementation and/or initiate the change. We find that in both sets of strategies, more than three-quarters of the codes refer to a central mode of steering (see Table 2) and that their frequency relative to decentral steering even slightly increases over time but without statistical significance.<sup>9</sup> The second French strategy is the only document in which we find that the mode of steering is mostly decentral, although the number of codes is limited.<sup>10</sup> This result further disproves the hypothesis of the overall emergence of NG.

When looking at the steering instruments as part of the coordination mechanisms used and comparing the predominance of the doctrines “set rules” (TPA) and “use management tools” (NPM), we have further evidence that NPM remains very relevant in the most recent strategies (see Table 1). In all countries except Norway and the UK, the share of codes “use management tools” has increased compared to the initial strategies, although the doctrine “set rules” still represents the majority of the codes in all countries except France (68% of the codes overall). These slight shifts, however, are statistically insignificant.

Hence, we find very limited support for the argument of an overarching shift toward NG when looking at what type of organizations and actors steer the digitalization strategies and the methods used for steering the strategy. Overall, our results confirm the idea that central coordination is a core feature of digital-era government (Dunleavy et al., 2005). The design and envisioned implementation of digitalization reforms are coordinated via hierarchy (TPA) and market (NPM) rather than via networks (NG).

### 4.3 | A strong focus on internal collaboration

In addition to different doctrines on the role of the government, the organizations, procedures and methods used to steer digitalization, the three paradigms we analyze have distinct conceptions of collaboration. In Traditional Public Administration, collaboration is predominantly conceived as internal to the public sector, whereas in NPM collaboration happens both within the public sector and with external actors. Private partners in this case are mostly in a contractual relationship. In NG, the focus lies on collaboration between state and non-state actors and organizations (see Table 1). While this does not mean that internal collaboration is absent from NG, the predominance of collaboration with external actors in digitalization strategies would be an indicator of a shift toward NG. Additionally, we expect the topic of collaboration to be more central in the most recent strategies if NG is indeed rising.

While we would expect that the relevance of the topic of collaboration increased between the initial and the latest strategies, if we had entered a NG era, we cannot conclude that there is a stronger focus on collaboration in the more recent strategies than in the initial strategies. Based on the number of codes used and the questionnaires filled out by academic experts, collaboration is a central concept in all digitalization strategies, except for the initial Estonian strategy and the most recent French strategy. This lack of focus on collaboration may be explained in these cases by the nature of the digitalization strategies, as both documents do not put much emphasis on implementation.

Moreover, the focus of the strategies lies still predominantly on collaboration within the public sector (i.e., internal collaboration) despite a decrease in the share of codes on internal collaboration over time (from 79.3% in the initial strategies to 67.2% in the most recent strategies).<sup>11</sup> These findings apply to all countries except for the most recent Dutch strategy, which focuses equally on internal and external collaboration. While strongly steered by political leadership, the Dutch strategy seeks the involvement and participation of a broad range of actors outside the public sector, for instance with the organization of round tables and dialogs with citizens. Overall, the main type of internal collaboration is horizontal collaboration between government organizations at the same level (e.g., collaboration between ministries, or between local governments). Vertical collaboration, that is, collaboration with other levels of government (for instance region and municipalities or provinces and central government), appears less predominant in the strategies (see Figure 3). This is true in all countries, although some strategies such as the most recent Norwegian and German documents promote more strongly collaboration across levels of government. This further contradicts the claim that we entered a NG era, although there are signs that collaboration with external actors is increasingly perceived as relevant at least on the rhetorical level.

In fact, our results show that the most recent strategies refer more often to external collaboration with the private sector (+6.3% points) and with civil society (+6 points) than the older strategies. The share of codes regarding “external collaboration with the private sector” increased

as a share of the codes for all countries from the initial to the most recent strategy, except in Germany where we observe a sharp decrease in the frequency of this code (−14.0% points). This may be explained by the fact that the initial German strategy put a strong focus on collaboration with the private sector (24% of the codes). Particularly in Germany public-private partnerships have received some public pushback in the last decade, which might explain the reluctance to promote such doctrines in the more recent strategy. In the set of most recent strategies, The Netherlands is the only country where collaboration with the private sector is the most frequent type of actor constellation mentioned (32% of the codes). This may be explained by the fact that the most recent Dutch strategy is not specific to the public sector and includes topics such as the digitalization of businesses.<sup>12</sup> We also find that this category is weak compared to other countries in the Spanish and UK strategies. The UK strategy promotes a reversal of big legacy contracts with private companies and a shift toward open technologies and reusable solutions. This cautious approach toward purchasing solutions from private IT companies may explain why we find a comparatively lower share of collaboration with the private sector. “External collaboration with civil society” refers either to collaboration with non-profit organizations outside the public sector or to collaboration with civil society at large that is not mediated by a specific organization (i.e., citizens or an informal group). The focus on collaboration with civil society increased for all countries from the initial to the most recent strategies (from 13.0% to 19.8% of the codes on the constellation of actors), except for Norway, reflecting the Nordic tradition based on strong ministerial responsibility combined with long-standing citizen trust in government (Greve et al., 2016). This holds promising potential for further analysis of the influence of cultural and political traditions on the formation and outcomes of the strategies; however, this was outside the focus of this paper.

Looking at the broader patterns beyond country singularities, apart from a minor change in internal/horizontal collaboration, all shifts related to collaboration are statistically significant, with the relative decline most pronounced for internal/vertical collaboration. This suggests that the conception of and composition of actors in partnerships has changed most drastically across all strategies. It also shows that we clearly do not see a shift toward a predominance of collaboration with non-state actors in the design and envisioned implementation of the digitalization strategies. Although the most recent strategies increasingly focus on the involvement of actors from the private sector and civil society, more attention is dedicated to collaboration and coordination across organizations at the central government level, and to a lesser extent with other levels of government.

## 5 | CONCLUSION: REAPPRAIZING THE ROLE OF BUREAUCRACY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The purpose of this article was to scrutinize whether we entered a NG paradigm, in which policies and services are co-steered by non-hierarchical networks engaging people across the public, private and civic spheres. To confirm the overall emergence of NG we expected to find evidence of more frequent collaborations with non-state actors in the most recent digitalization strategies, decentral steering of the design and planned implementation of the strategies and increased involvement of non-state actors and lower echelons of the hierarchy in steering activities. Premised on a clear-cut distinction of paradigms as analytical means, our cross-national analysis of digitalization strategies in eight European countries did not show any strong evidence of the overall emergence of NG over time. Although we find that the most recent strategies focus more

strongly on involving non-state actors in the design and the planned implementation of the strategies, these actors are not attributed any steering role and the strategies clearly rely on hierarchy and rules for the governance of digitalization. They also convey a vision of government focused on cost efficiency, customer orientation and the protection of citizens and users, rather than on goals that may be associated with NG, such as transparency and participation. To increase the validity and reliability of our findings across different national contexts, we used a diverse dataset in terms of the countries' administrative traditions and reform trajectories, however, future research should engage in stronger comparative research building on this work (for a more systematic country-comparison underlying this research see Hammerschmid et al., 2019).

Moreover, our results confirm earlier studies indicating that ICT tend to reinforce some traditional features of administration and the recentralization of power, underscoring that reform does not take place along a single dimension (cf. Torfing et al., 2020). Rather than a simple layering and hybridization of the paradigms, we observe the key role of hierarchy as a coordination mechanism. Another interesting finding is that we do not see evidence in the most recent strategies of a reversal of key "New Public Management" patterns such as agentification or performance measurement. The most statistically significant findings suggest that the doctrine of agility is on the rise and that the conception of collaboration, albeit more internal to government, is undergoing critical changes. Hence, further research on the actual implementation of the strategies but also on the performative effect of these strategies would be needed in order to trace developments and contrast our results with existing practices. While we would have expected a shift in discourse at the strategic level if NG was indeed a new governance paradigm, we cannot exclude that networks dominate hierarchy in the implementation of the strategies "at the street level" and in the daily business of public administration. However, it seems that the concept of collaboration as applied in the digitalization strategies reflects a willingness to comply with a range of values and norms since "working in partnership has become almost heretical to question its integrity" (McLaughlin, 2004, p. 103). In this sense, NG could be understood as meeting widely held expectations of "appropriate" behavior on a discursive level rather than serving an immediate instrumental purpose (Dixon & Elston, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2013).

In addition, our findings may capture technological shifts and evolutions rather than shifts in public management paradigms. New strategies, such as those connected with government digitalization, may trigger or reinforce debates around more hierarchical governance modes to deal with uncertainties and the need for more holistic and centralized solutions (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013), but ultimately do not reflect how they are managed and implemented in the longer term. The question as to whether governments employ means of digitalization in a rather sequential manner involving multiple elements of paradigms at different process stages, or whether this could even lead to the emergence of a new digital-era paradigm is beyond this research. However, it serves as a promising starting point for future research on designing and implementing policy for digital transformation.

This considered, we can conclude that our research confirms that NG is an "academic invention" (Lodge & Gill, 2011) and a normative framework describing how public administration should be organized rather than a model capturing the empirical reality. It may be time for research to reappraise the role of bureaucracy in the digital era.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**ENDNOTE**

- <sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our partners at Cardiff University, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Tallinn University of Technology, the University of Bergen and the University of Zaragoza for their support in this work.
- <sup>2</sup> We include only the number of categories and codes presented in this paper. The full analysis includes 61 categories and 8495 codes.
- <sup>3</sup> We use the word “category” in the text to refer to the 27 main ideas that we identified inductively and included in our codebook. We use the word “code” in the text to refer to an instance in which we attached a specific category to a coded segment. For example, 70 codes were used for the category “be inclusive” in the most recent strategies. A coded segment is defined as a full sentence for which at least one code is used. Several codes may be used for the same segment but the same code can be used only once in a coded segment.
- <sup>4</sup> In total we use 711 codes for the initial strategies and 1039 for the most recent ones.
- <sup>5</sup> All our results are displayed in terms of share of codes. This means that the number of codes related to a specific goal may have increased from the initial set of strategies to the most recent set of strategies, but it may have decreased as a share of all the goal codes. This allows for a better comparability of the results, as the length of the strategies affect the number of codes used.
- <sup>6</sup> Classic public bureaucracy, independent public bureaucracy, private for-profit organization, non-profit independent organization.
- <sup>7</sup> In total we use 376 codes for the initial strategies and 454 for the most recent ones.
- <sup>8</sup> While the number of codes for the category “specific agency” is higher than the number of codes for the category “political leadership” in the most recent strategies, the normalized average is lower. This is because the high number of codes for the category of “specific agency” is mostly due to Italy and Norway (54 and 50 codes).
- <sup>9</sup> In total we use 356 codes in the initial strategies and 445 in the most recent ones.
- <sup>10</sup> In the most recent French strategy, we used 19 codes for the steering modes.
- <sup>11</sup> Overall, we use 773 codes on the scope of collaboration in the initial strategies and 987 in the most recent strategies.
- <sup>12</sup> While we coded only the introductions and the sections of the strategy dedicated to the digitalization of the public sector (processes and services), the scope of the strategy may have affected the results.
- <sup>13</sup> No specific focus of the overall digitalization strategy on the public sector but for this research only the section on government digitalization was analyzed.

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## APPENDIX

Country	Name of strategy	Date of adoption	Timespan covered	Focus on PA	Author	URL to access document
Estonia	1. Eesti infoühiskonna arengukava 2013 ( <i>Estonian Information Society Strategy 2013</i> )	2006	2007–2013	No	Ministry of economic affairs and communication	<a href="#">Estonian version: No English version available</a>
	2. Eesti infoühiskonna arengukava 2020 ( <i>Digital Agenda 2020 for Estonia</i> )	2015	2015–2020	No	Government of Estonia	<a href="#">Estonian version: English version</a>
France	1. Plan de développement stratégique de l'administration électronique ( <i>Strategic Plan for the development of electronic PA</i> )	2003	2004–2007	Yes	State secretariat for state reform	Available only upon request to the prime minister archives
	2. Action publique 2022- Notre stratégie pour la transformation de l'action publique ( <i>Public Action 2022. Our strategy for the transformation of public action</i> )	2018	2018–2022	Yes	Interministerial committee for the transformation of the state	<a href="#">French version: No English version available</a>
Germany	1. BundOnline 2005 ( <i>Online Federation 2005</i> )	2001	2002–2005	Yes	Ministry of the interior	<a href="#">German version: No English version available</a>
	2. Digitale Verwaltung 2020—Regierungsprogramm 18. Legislaturperiode ( <i>Digital Public Administration 2020</i> )	2014	2014–2020	Yes	Ministry of the interior	<a href="#">German version: No English version available</a>
Italy	1. Piano di azione per l'e-government ( <i>Action plan for E-government</i> )	2000	10–12 months	Yes	Presidency of the council—department for the civil service	<a href="#">Italian version: No English version available</a>
	2. Strategia per la Crescita Digitale 2014–2020 ( <i>Strategy for Digital Growth</i> )	2015	2014–2020	Yes	Presidency of the council	<a href="#">Italian version: No English version available</a>
Netherlands	1. Actieprogramma Elektronische Overheid ( <i>Electronic Government Action Program</i> )	1998		Yes		<a href="#">Dutch version: No English version available</a>
	2. Nederlandse Digitaliseringsstrategie ( <i>Dutch Digitalization strategy</i> )	2018		No	Ministry of economic affairs and climate policy	<a href="#">Dutch version: English version</a>

(Continues)

(Continued)

Country	Name of strategy	Date of adoption	Timespan covered	Focus on PA	Author	URL to access document
Norway	1. Strategi for IKT i offentlig sektor ( <i>Strategy for ICT in public sector</i> )	2003	2003–2005	Yes	Norwegian ministry of labor and government administration	<a href="#">Norwegian version: No English version available</a>
	2. Digital agenda for Norge — IKT for en enklerehverdag og økt produktivitet ( <i>Digital agenda for Norway—ICT for simpler everyday life and increased productivity</i> )	2016	No <sup>13</sup>		Ministry of local government and modernization	<a href="#">Norwegian version: English version (a summary)</a>
Spain	1. Plan de choque para el impulso de la administración electrónica en España ( <i>Plan for fostering electrifying administration in Spain</i> )	2003		Yes	Ministry of science and technology and ministry of public administrations	<a href="#">Spanish version: No English version available</a>
	2. Plan de transformación digital de la administración general del estados y sus organismos públicos ( <i>Plan for the digital transformation of the general administration of the state and its public bodies</i> )	2015	2015–2020	Yes	Ministry of businesses and public administration	<a href="#">Spanish version: English version</a>
United Kingdom	1. Transformational government enabled by technology	2005	Beyond 2011	Yes	Cabinet office	<a href="#">English version</a>
	2. Government transformation strategy	2017		Yes	Cabinet office	<a href="#">English version</a>

Source: authors' elaboration.