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Digitalization and Intergovernmental Cooperation in Canada

Introduction

The social transformation spurred by digitalization has altered understandings of the role of government as well as expectations for how its institutions serve citizens. Digital technology crosses national and international borders, fundamentally challenging the divisional traditions of federalism in Canada, and opening up the possibility for intergovernmental cooperation on a scale not seen before. A primary function of the government is its ability to provide necessary services to its citizens, and in considering the role of digitalization in service delivery, the question arises: can digital service delivery facilitate intergovernmental cooperation in Canada? In this paper, I will explore theoretical approaches to the digitalization of service delivery, along with examples of digital implementations across the country to argue that, while digitalization theoretically presents many opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation, in practical application, cooperation is thwarted by pre-existing tensions that are integrated into the digital space. Understanding both the potential for intergovernmental cooperation, and Canada's current shortcomings in the digital realm, provides insights into the development and adaptability of models of government that are sustainable and relevant in the future.

Social Digital Transformation

The increased integration of digital technologies and services in the private sector has fundamentally transformed societal expectations and priorities when it comes to service delivery. This transformation within the private sector translates into the public space, by creating a certain digital culture by which government service delivery operations must abide by to ensure citizens are satisfied (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). Digital technologies resonate far deeper than an influx of computers and cellphones, as they encompass the cultural and societal changes

stemming from the amplification of the speed, reach, and accessibility of human communication and interaction (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). Digital revolutions within the banking and retail sector have resulted in the use of apps, websites, and telecommunication, to deliver a product to customers that is faster, more convenient, and can be accessible at any time and location the user wishes (Nielsen and Jordanoski, 2020; Roy, 2017). This has created a ripple effect on the expectations of service delivery within the public sector, as society has become accustomed to convenient and instantaneous service in the private sector. As such, there is increasing pressure on governments to adapt and cater to this new digital culture.

By altering the expectations of users, digitalization has also changed the relationship between individuals and institutions. The role of intermediaries within businesses, media, and other organizations has been diminished within the digital environment (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). When online shopping, individuals do not need to interact with sales associates. Users can book trips, and virtually tour houses without the need for travel agents or realtors. Taxi companies that used to be the intermediary between drivers and riders have since been replaced by apps such as Uber, that connect drivers directly with riders, in an easier, and efficient model (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). This alteration of the way labour and industry have been organized has fundamentally changed user's patterns of behaviour when consuming services. Digitalization has made people less interested in who and what they are interacting with, and more focused on the product they are seeking. This translates into the realm of public service delivery, as when using digital services, citizens are uninterested in which level of government they are interacting with. The department or level of government that is providing the service is non-consequential to the user (Champagne et.al., 2023). Highly departmentalized government

services that were developed in the pre-digital era, must now restructure their methods and approaches to cater to the new expectations of users.

These digital transformations guide how digital service delivery should be carried out by the government. The nature of these pressures and expectations suggest that digitalization would facilitate intergovernmental cooperation. The logistical coordination required to deliver faster and more efficient products, as well as the rising disinterest in compartmentalization all point to a potential breakdown of the bureaucratic departmentalization that has traditionally categorized Canadian federalism.

Theoretical Expectations

Exploring the potential of technology within the realm of service delivery highlights the theoretical ability for digitalization to facilitate increased intergovernmental cooperation. Technology can make cooperation between officials from various levels of government easier, and bureaucratic red tape can reduce when traditional process are digitalized. Additionally, in order to cater to the digital transformation of society induced by the private sector, when designing modes of service delivery, governments must alter their perception of their relationship with citizens to reflect private sector perspectives more closely. Citizens must be viewed as ‘customers’, and governments must develop a customer centered model that prioritizes the user experience (Nielson and Jordanoski, 2020; Policy Options, 2021; Roy, 2017). Technology provides the opportunity for revolutionized models of service delivery in Canada that promote intergovernmental cooperation and horizontal power structures.

Increased Cooperation

In understanding how digitalization can facilitate cooperation, two main factors should be considered. The first is the advent of the ‘one-stop shop model’, and the second is the creation of new methods of storing and sharing data. A one-stop shop is a centralized multi-channel and multi-jurisdictional point of access for delivering e-government services and information. While traditional service delivery models have sought to provide services through each ministry or department (Flumian et.al., 2007), digital platforms provide the possibility that multiple government access points can be combined into one place so that citizens can access multiple services by interacting with only one interface (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017; Scholta et.al., 2019). Additionally, the elimination of geographical and physical barriers means that digital technology makes it easier for various agencies to communicate even if they are located across the country, increasing collaboration and communication (Scholta et.al., 2019). The one-stop shop model is an example of how government service delivery is no longer constrained by traditional structures, as digitalization produces new networks and processes (Smith, 2008). This is a customer centered model, because it reduces processing time, eliminates the duplication of effort, and reduces confusion for the user (Scholta et.al., 2019). The one-stop-shop is just one model that displays how digitalization encourages public officials to work together and develop integrated offerings, highlighting the potential for fundamentally changing how the public sector functions (West, 2004).

Another reason that digitalization facilitates cooperation between governments is because of its ability to store and share data. Systems of filling out papers and forms, and physically filing them is not only time consuming for all parties involved, but also creates many logistical barriers. Filing and organizing papers takes a lot of physical space, and the information on these physical forms and papers cannot be easily shared between cross-national agencies, and

government levels. Digitalization provides new methods of data sharing and storage. It provides the possibility of intergovernmental databases that house information that can be accessed and shared between various agencies (Scholta et.al., 2019). This is especially relevant in the realm of service delivery because citizens are often required to fill multiple forms and provide various documents to access services. Digitalization benefits the customer focused approach, because by ensuring that once a citizen fills out a form, the information gets shared into the database, it eliminates the need for repeatedly providing information. Databases, and intergovernmental sharing, make these already tedious aspects of service delivery more efficient for users (Scholta et.al., 2019).

Integrated user interfaces, and the parallel data sharing capabilities display that digitalization provides an easy path to move into horizontal structures of service delivery. Digital technologies provide new horizontal opportunities that were not previously available, allowing for unprecedented levels of communication and cooperation between parties. Technology enables government to government interactions to occur faster, easier, and at a larger scale, (Milakovich, 2022).

Overcoming Bureaucratic Categorization

Another benefit of digitalization is that it makes it easier to overcome the traditionally categorical delegation of tasks within Canadian federalism. The capabilities of technology allow governance models in the digital context to override jurisdictional rigidity for institutional flexibility. Additionally, the focus on viewing the public as a customer, places a greater emphasis on providing a seamless product rather than bureaucratic departmentalization (Nielson and Jordanoski, 2020). Digital platforms can not only spur, but also necessitate a transformation in how our traditional models of governance work. The flexibility and ever-changing capacity of

digital spaces mean that traditional governance institutions and practices may be ineffective and counterproductive in the digital realm. As such, federalism, and governance as we know it in Canada cannot simply be translated to an online space, but rather reconstructed to adapt to the digital transformation (Gomez et.al., 2022).

Digitalization represents a shift in governance models, where in order to produce improved outcomes, institutional flexibility overrides traditional rigidity (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). This approach allows policy issues to inform governance structures, rather than the other way around. Approaches to solving policy issues using digital technologies alleviates certain constraints coming from sluggish administrative procedure. Institutions in the pre-digital era could afford to change more slowly, due to the slower rates of communication and information-processing capacity that were generally accepted in society. However, it is increasingly necessary to have a governance model that allows for responsible risk-taking, and has the capacity to adapt to new priorities, stakeholders, and public expectations (Cargnello and Flumian, 2017). Digitalization forwards a movement to increasingly dispersed power, as digital technologies override geographical boundaries, making it easier for the public to access and share information, and communicate with government officials and agencies. In the face of this increasingly dispersed power, our current Westminster system that emphasizes centralized concentration of power, and highly compartmentalized and hierarchical organization, is challenged (Institute on Governance, 2017). The confrontation between digitalization and the Westminster system has the potential to push traditional models to shift towards cooperation. Governance models must go beyond simply making service available online, instead creating a fundamental change in structures, processes, and cultures (Flumian et.al., 2007). This necessary transformation provides many opportunities for cooperation.

Customer-First Approach

In order to keep up with the transforming pressures, governments must, as the private sector did, adopt a ‘customer first’ perspective (Institute on Governance, 2017). The adoption of this approach can facilitate intergovernmental cooperation by allowing for the implementation of other private sector cultural shifts within government service delivery. Traditional public service delivery is based on hierarchy and distinct demarcation of authority between elected officials, public servants, and citizens. The public plays a passive role and has little involvement in governance, as determinations of public interest are made within the confines of the executive and legislative branches. The rules and standards of service delivery are determined by departmental and agency capacity and structures (Roy, 2017). The adoption of a customer centered framework erases these traditional demarcations, instead placing a greater emphasis on providing a seamless product and experience (Institute on Governance, 2017). Placing customers at the center of public service delivery instills more of a business ethos within the public service, and reconfigures priorities and values (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005; Roy, 2017). Citizen centering reinforces that the government exists to serve citizens and shifts debates from who should run which services and products, to how the product should run for citizens (Policy Options, 2004). Implementing market principles, grants public managers and supervisors permission to focus on outcomes measured on performance rather than the process (Roy, 2017). In this way, digitalization relieves some of the bureaucratic rigidity and traditional departmentalization.

The Canadian Case

Reviewing scholarly work on the topic of digitalization and service delivery, makes it evident that there is much support for the idea that digitalization is a catalyst for intergovernmental cooperation. By providing unprecedented ease in communication and coordination methods, digital platforms remove barriers for cooperation, and invent new methods for cooperation. Additionally, the dynamic and broad nature of digital technologies essentially forces governments to become more flexible and adaptive. While these literature suggestions shed positive light, it is important to identify them for what they are: theory. Much of the scholarly work relies on hypothetical models and well researched forecasting, with little real world data to support the propositions. The next portion of this paper analyzes some concrete examples of digital service delivery within the Canadian context. Exploration of these examples displays that while theoretical understandings of digital governance champion horizontal management and customer first approaches that override traditional federalist structures, the real-world implementation of digitalization in Canada does not reflect these ideas. Instead, digitalization becomes another platform upon which existing federalist tensions are transferred onto.

Covid-19 Contact Tracing Apps

The first example is in relation to the development and implementation of Covid-19 contact tracing apps across the nation. The advantages of digital technology are invaluable during times of crisis management in which fast, accessible, and adaptable strategies and tools need to be rolled out. This is especially the case during public health outbreaks, where early response is critical for controlling outbreak and minimizing risk (Hansen and Cyr, 2020). Canada's response regarding Covid-19 tracing apps proved how existing governmental tensions negated the benefits of digital technologies and simply furthered intergovernmental conflict.

Healthcare is an especially tricky topic in the conversation of cooperation, as provinces have constitutional control over the provision of healthcare services and measures and have historically sought to maintain their power and assert their sovereignty within this realm (Braën, 2004). Provincial dissatisfaction and regional competition, mean that co-operation and collaboration is not the first avenue consulted, even in times of national crisis. In the early stages of the Pandemic, Alberta was the first province to launch its own contact tracing app, and many provinces including Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick were reported to be testing their own versions (Scassa, 2020). Even Ottawa, a municipality, was reported to have plans of developing its own city-wide contact tracing app. Much of these apps were being created without consultation of one another, meaning they were incompatible or unconnected. This posed issues for citizens who lived and worked in separate provinces, or who routinely traveled across provinces for school or work, as it meant that they would have to download multiple incompatible apps (Scassa 2020). Additionally, if the apps were not able to share data with each other, and people continued to move between provinces, the tracing capabilities of these apps would be severely diminished, thus undermining public health goals. It was only after Ontario premier Doug Ford called on the government, that a national strategy began to be developed (Herhalt, 2020; Scassa, 2020). However, even when a national app was developed, only eight provinces and one territory agreed to use it, and Alberta continued with its own app (Government of Canada, 2023).

In comparison to other countries such as South Korea that adopted centralized, coordinated, techno-driven approaches that leveraged smart technology, Canada was decentralized, uncoordinated, and slow in their response (Hansen and Cyr, 2020). We see how deep rooted provincial animosities, and continual hesitancy from the federal government to

encroach on provincial sovereignty, impeded digital service delivery collaboration. The fragmented response displays how mobilizing digitalization in Canada is challenging and can negate the benefits of technology, by prioritizing traditional federalist processes over user experiences.

Identity Service Delivery

The second example relates to the realm of identity service delivery, and identity management. The reality of federalism is extremely evident in the fragmentation of identity management across provincial and federal governments. Passports and social insurance numbers are federally generated and separate from provincial drivers' licenses and health cards, and challenges arise when citizens try to engage with processes such as renewal or replacement. Each government has independently sought to upgrade their identity systems, however, despite many studies and inquiries displaying a need for a national system, no meaningful effort has been made towards integration (Roy, 2017). For each piece of identity, citizens must have separate online interactions and transactions with the corresponding agency. This becomes a more pronounced challenge considering that the private sector has leveraged cross platform and cross device solutions especially in the realm of banking, making citizens accustomed to integrated identity management tools. The failure to provide integrated digital services reflects the traditional tedious nature of identity management which has been a consistent source of complaint among many citizens (Roy, 2017). In an average Canadian city such as Halifax, co-location of government entities are rare. The city has various Service Canada locations as well as separate Access Nova Scotia, and Halifax Municipal centers, meaning individuals need to visit multiple buildings for various registrations and renewals (Roy, 2017). It would be assumed that this problem would be solved through the digitalization of these services, given the

capabilities of online tools, and the ease with which integration can be achieved. However, we see that existing issues have simply been translated into the digital space. Digital technologies provide an excellent opportunity to address these concerns by creating an accessible and integrated interface. Identity management would be ideal field in which to implement a one-stop-shop model, however, rather than making the experience seamless for the customer, digitalization efforts have reflected the fragmentation of existing physical systems. Digitalization provides opportunities to take intergovernmental cooperation to a further level, however, it is evident that federal and provincial governments are not ready to embrace the interconnected capabilities available with digital technology that will produce a true customer centric experience.

Explaining The Lack of Cooperation

The reality is that digitalization of service delivery in Canada does not live up to the theoretical expectations of intergovernmental cooperation. Exploration of why this may be the case displays that a disinterest in prioritizing intergovernmental cooperation, and deeply entrenched governmental tensions prevent governments from reaching true collaborative potential. Seeking to understand this disinterest and entrenchment of norms, we see that the role of citizens is an important factor, and that within the Canadian context, there is the potential that literature overestimates how much citizens want integration and cooperation.

Lack of Interest

The disinterest in prioritizing intergovernmental cooperation was evident with the Covid-19 tracing apps. Even during a time of national crisis, the first reaction of governments was to work within their jurisdiction, rather than seek out co-operative measures from the start.

Increased cooperation is not something governments actively seek. This translates into the digital realm in the form of unclear goals and a lack of commitment to do the heavy transformative work. This is evident from the inception of digital government strategies in Canada. The Government Online (GOL) initiative was the first significant e-government project undertaken in the late 90s. It pledged to provide integrated online services to Canadians in the span of five-years. This goal was unrealized, and subsequent review of the GOL by the Auditor General underlined a lack of meaningful efforts to join provinces with the federal government, and an absence of a comprehensive accountability mechanism that could track and ensure progress. Furthermore, a combination of unrealistic expectations with no clear objectives and performance frameworks doomed the project from the start (Auditor general of Canada, 2003; Anttiroiko, 2008; Roy, 2017). This initiative displayed a lack of commitment to implementing the necessary structures required to create meaningful transformation, and a nonchalant approach to implementing digital reforms.

Entrenched Tensions

Another prevalent issue is the entrenched governmental tensions within the Canadian system that make digital cooperation challenging. The Westminster Parliamentary system in Canada prioritizes individual ministries and encourages vertical forms of government through ministers. This develops a bureaucratic culture of departmentalization and silo structures (Anttiroiko, 2008; Flumian et.al., 2007), that is fundamentally at odds with the horizontal structure that digitalization favours. Due to the hierarchical structure of the Westminster system, ministers are allotted power for which they must account for through procedure and process. Their sphere of authority is jurisdictionally set (Institute on Governance, 2017). As such, they may be hesitant to support digital intergovernmental initiatives, as they will have less control

over decision making and accountability mechanisms (Flumian et.al., 2007). While as explored earlier, the confrontation between digitalization and the Westminster system can theoretically incite a transformation towards a new model of governance that prioritizes cooperation, ultimately, vertical models of government are so entrenched within the Canadian system, that it overrides the potential for transformation.

The Role of Citizenship

In understanding where this disinterest and deeply entrenched tensions may come from, another explanation seeks to deviate from the emphasis placed on a customer-first approach to assert that perhaps government officials and even citizens are willing to sacrifice some efficiency in order to maintain a level of regional jurisdictional autonomy (Cote et.al., 2009). As this paper has reviewed, seamless service delivery requires high levels of coordination, which implies the alignment of various standards, policy, governance, and accountability structures. The more integrated service delivery becomes, the less space there is for individual governments to differ, experiment and innovate, and many may interpret this as an erosion of regional autonomy. A drawback of the customer-first approach is that it makes Canadian citizens synonymous with clients in the private sector, which overlooks the additional responsibilities, duties, and interests associated with citizenry that make the relationship to public service unique (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005). This client centred approach, assumes that federalism is a means to an end, with the end being efficiency. In this way, it becomes a responsibility of federalist structures to reorganize in order to delivery service as efficiently as possible (Cote et.al., 2009). Taking into account this nuanced role that citizens play, highlights a key factor that may prevent the anticipated levels of intergovernmental cooperation in Canada. It highlights that citizens are not only interested in the efficiency and product of service delivery, but they are also interested in the

way that the government delivers this good. Citizens are not just concerned with private goods and ends, but they also have a vested stake and a concern for the collective (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005). Thus, the priority shifts from solely revolving around efficiency to incorporating ideas of strengthening institutions and structures of federalism (Cote et.al., 2009). Canada is one of the most decentralized nations, and repeated studies have shown that Canadians have a longstanding preference for this decentralized federalism that features strong Provincial autonomy (Confederation of Tomorrow, 2021; Breton and Parkin, 2021). This is not to say that citizens in Canada are favourable of the current digital complacency and lack of streamlined digital services, but perhaps the levels of theoretically expected cooperation are not realistic standards within the Canadian context due to the characteristics of the citizenry and governance structures.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is evident through literature review that digitalization provides immense opportunity for intergovernmental cooperation, however, much of this potential goes unrealized due to the nature of federalism in Canada. We see that digitalization removes existing barriers and provides extensive avenues for communication and collaboration between agencies and government officials. Additionally, the broad scope of digital technologies makes it easier to overcome traditional departmentalization that is so prevalent in Canadian governance. Despite these potential benefits, in real world examples we continually see a lack of commitment in digital intergovernmental projects, and the extension of existing parliamentary tensions into the digital realm. Canada has repeatedly failed to take advantage of the cooperation possibilities granted by digitalization. Recognizing and understanding this is important because as we move

into an increasingly digital world, an inability to adapt to the digital realm only harms Canada's ability to govern and stay connected with its citizens. Understanding how we can transform our models of governance in the digital realm, in accordance with Canadian understandings of federalism and autonomy allows us to ensure that our system stays relevant and effective in a dynamic world.

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