Chapter 6
How Can Technology Advance the Public Administration Discipline in Higher Education?
A Comprehensive Analysis of the U.S. Scenario

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the contribution of technology in the public administration discipline by illustrating how and why public administration and technology are connected. A qualitative thematic analysis conducted using a sample of U.S. public affairs schools/colleges sheds light on the main topics of technology-related courses in the United States academia. The findings seem to confirm the positive interest in integrating technology in the public administration discipline. In particular, the top U.S. public affairs/administration colleges provide a variety of technology-related courses. The main topics covered are cybersecurity, big data, and information technology, among others. Nevertheless, the analysis stresses the importance of considering the dark side of technology tools applied to the public sector. Indeed, the critical theoretical review discusses some major concerns regarding accountability, bias decisions, discrimination, and inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Public administration is both an academic and a professional discipline that concentrates on the public sector and – in particular – on its processes used to carry out public policies and programs. It is considered interdisciplinary because it often uses concepts and theories from law, political science, organizational psychology, sociology, anthropology, business management, international relations, and information systems (Klingner, 2003). Many scholars studied the gap between theory and practice in public admin-

istration (McQuiston and Manoharan, 2020). In particular, some of them defined public administration as a "pracademic" discipline (Posner, 2009) also highlighting how the two dimensions (the academic and the practitioner) are both relevant to the discipline (e.g. see Box, 1999; O'Leary and Vij, 2012; Peters and Pierre, 2003; Streib et *al*., 2001; Welch and Wong, 1998).

Despite "*the most essential expertise of the public administrator is political skill and knowledge that facilitate the melding of technical knowledge with "public" knowledge and judgment in the process of forming public policy*" (Radin et al., 1989), the last decades experienced major changes investing the global scale and required different and more sophisticated approaches to public administration. For example, with the advent of globalization, Internet boom, Big Data, the affirmation of paradigms of the New Public Governance (e.g. see Osborne, 2006), and the public value (e.g. see Benington and Moore, 2010; Moore, 2013; O'Flynn, 2007, Shaw, 2013), the need to invest in technical knowledge became an imperative. In this sense, many academic programs have not included the necessary practical knowledge for the challenges that employees working in the public sector face nowadays (Braga, 2020; Newland, 2000; Ospina and Dodge, 2005; Stivers, 2000). Furthermore, "*technological change is a powerful shaping influence on public administration, but one which is seldom directly addressed by most public administration scholars*" (Pollitt, 2010: 31).

As a discipline, public administration has continually been marked with a "self-imposed" identity crisis (e.g. see Braga, 2020, Hafer, 2016; Rutgers, 1998; Raadschelders, 1999). This crisis "*has been at the center of the discipline since its inception*" (Morgan et *al*., 2010: 626). From the Education point of view, Braga (2020: 285) points out that public administration "*has become less attractive, because academia encourages political science and public policy* […] *and the system is more concerned about teaching policy rather than governing*". Nonetheless, public administration is continually searching for its distinctive identity, by establishing common disciplinary narratives (e.g. see, Haque, 2019; Ni, et *al*., 2017; Ospina and Dodge, 2005; Ospina, 2011; Riccucci, 2010). A part of its identity can be found within the relationship with technology. As highlighted by Hustedt et *al*., (2020), in the current era of digital transformation, technology and public administration need to work together. In this sense, public administration Education needs to support the relationship with technology, because we live in a digital world (Ganapati and Reddic, 2016). Hence, Higher Education systems should contribute to strengthening the relationship between public administration and technology through the provision of IT/technology courses within programs of public affairs/administration schools and colleges.

Accordingly, the proposed chapter investigates the contribution that technology has brought to the public administration discipline. The structure of the chapter is the following: the first paragraph investigates how and why public administration and technology are connected, yet focusing on the long-lasting relationship between public administration and technology. When did public administration and technology found to be extremely linked? The historical analysis will be developed by using public administration paradigms as a point of reference. The second paragraph focuses on technology and public administration in Higher Education. Examples of connections between public administration and technology in education will be illustrated. The third paragraph concentrates on identifying the main topics of technology-related courses in a sample of U.S. colleges and schools. Furthermore, the fourth paragraph will investigate how technology can help to advance the public administration discipline, yet discussing conditions and threats of new technologies applied to the public sector. In particular, the analysis will consider different themes in public administration studies, such as democracy, governance, ethics, and smart cities. The fifth chapter will then highlight the main outcomes that technology advances can bring into the pedagogy in Higher Education programs of public administration.

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