

Opening the Government of Canada

The Federal Bureaucracy in the
Digital Age

..... Amanda Clarke



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Opening Government in the Digital Age

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Wikipedia, the world's first user-generated encyclopedia, is now the fifth most popular website globally (Alexa 2018). Its English language version receives roughly 250 million page views daily (Wikimedia Statistics 2018). The business model of the online commerce giant Amazon rests on the collection, analysis, and publication of the roughly 35 million product reviews that its 6.6 million users have contributed to the site (Leskovec 2013). The alternatively titled “sharing” or “gig” economy – which allows individuals to monetize their labour, household items, parking spaces, cars, and homes – also relies on web-based, crowdsourced user reviews of the items being shared and of those doing the sharing, thus producing peer-to-peer networks of “collaborative consumption” that disrupt established industries by seamlessly linking market demand and supply through low-cost online information exchange (Botsman and Rogers 2010).

Iceland crowdsourced a first draft of its new constitution on the web, political parties have used interactive websites for vote delegation (Meyer 2012), and legislative committees have employed Twitter as a platform for involving citizens in their deliberations.¹ Social movements have turned to online social networking platforms as low-cost, real-time means of recruiting followers, advocating to decision makers, and coordinating protests, thus capitalizing on new logics of collective action enabled by networked information communication technologies (Margetts et al. 2016). These technologies underpinned the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street protests inspired by economic crises in Greece, Iceland, Portugal, and Spain, and the #blacklives-matter movement. In Canada, the web has also provided a low-cost platform for citizen protest and advocacy, as witnessed in the Indigenous rights Idle No More movement, the Maple Spring student protests in Quebec, and a 2011 e-petition on Internet governance that received over 400,000 signatures, leading to direct regulatory change and amounting to the largest political

campaign in Canadian history (OpenMedia, n.d.). Acknowledging the impressive forms of technology-enabled collective action that emerged in the late 2000s and that have continued since, *Time's* 2011 "Person of the Year" was "The Protester."

Five years earlier, in 2006, *Time* recognized the contributions of Internet users to crowdsourced websites and their participation in online social networks (Grossman 2006) by proclaiming the "Person of the Year" as "You," published on the issue's cover with the tagline "Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world!" Since the issue's release in 2006, online social networks have grown immensely. Daily, roughly 500 million tweets are issued (Aslam 2018). In 2016, Facebook reported 1.13 billion active daily users, with just over 1 billion of these users accessing the platform on mobile devices (Facebook Newsroom 2016). Although data on Canadian Internet use are sorely lacking compared with data collected in other jurisdictions, the data available suggest that Canadians are prolific users of the Internet and social media specifically.² Eighty-four percent of Canadian Internet users have a Facebook account, 46 percent have a LinkedIn account, and 42 percent have Twitter accounts (Gruzd, Jacobson, Mai, and Dubois 2018).³ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reports that 76 percent of Canadians receive their news via the web (Newman et al. 2017).

As participation in commercial social media platforms has proliferated, so has participation in online networks of common interest, fuelling phenomena such as "mommy bloggers," whose parenting forums can attract more than 50,000 visitors per day and blend discussions of toddlers' temper tantrums with substantive debate and advocacy on policy issues (Lopez 2009). And, as digital technologies – especially the smartphones that 76 percent of Canadians carry around in their pockets (Catalyst 2016) – have come to punctuate almost every action that an individual takes throughout the day, massive amounts of data are produced, informing on-the-fly data-driven adjustments to service interactions, product designs, and communication strategies.

Much of this data is generated through our interactions with the platforms of a small number of private technology firms – Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Twitter. In turn, these tech firms now wield incredible power in our societies, a contemporary reality that underscores just how quaint and naive was *Time's* 2006 proclamation on the power of the individual, who evidently does not "control the information age," as promised. Instead, rather than the digital age ushering in a democratization of information control, largely

unaccountable private tech firms serve as today's information gatekeepers, shaping what we know through their opaque algorithms and capitalizing on the traces of data left behind as citizens live their lives through these digital platforms (mapping the journey to work, searching for information on a health problem, commenting on a political candidate's profile page, and so on). As they wield their information capital, these firms have come under fire. They are lambasted as hosts of "fake news" that informed the 2016 US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum, as producers of algorithms that reinforce ideological preferences and digital echo chambers, as merchants of advertising that can be micro-targeted along racist lines, and as irresponsible stewards of the personal data their users share with them (Howard 2016; Maheshwari and Stevenson 2017; Owen and Greenspon 2017). In light of these developments, governments, traditionally viewed as comparatively powerful information actors – that is, as organizations relatively well placed to collect and distribute information across a population (Hood 1983; Hood and Margetts 2007) – find themselves scrambling to develop policy responses to regulate private tech firms' newfound information capital, while ultimately remaining dependent on these firms to communicate with the digital citizens whom they serve.

Alongside these shifts in the distribution of information capital, the digital age has introduced notable shifts in organizational management philosophies. The proliferation of new data sources, and our capacity to make in-the-moment, data-driven tweaks to products and services, have raised "agile" methodologies to prominence, supplanting traditional "waterfall" models of service and product design and delivery: that is, long-term, largely internal development cycles in which the experiences of end users are considered only once services and products are largely complete (Clarke 2017; Rasmusson, n.d.). The rise of "prosumers" (consumers of products/services who are also their producers, such as Wikipedia editors), the shift to iterative, agile design cycles, and the potential of big data-driven decision making call organizations to collect and act on data describing the behaviours of their "users" (clients, service users, audiences), and to build a range of new skills into their inventories, including data science and user-centred design (Bason 2010). Thus, organizations considered the success stories of the digital age aggressively recruit workers with these skills into their ranks and prioritize work processes and incentives that drive a culture of continual innovation, drawing on the insights of individuals across a range of functions and throughout the organizational hierarchy. In this way, the digital age not only demands that

organizations produce a range of new digital products and services but also disrupts the management orthodoxy that has traditionally informed the design and delivery of those products and services.

Meanwhile, in Ottawa, a federal public servant has just received the ninth approval required to tweet a link to a press release. She publishes the tweet, but her colleagues do not know it; Twitter is blocked on departmental computers outside the communications office.

The digital age has profoundly disrupted all aspects of human society, altering how we shop, date, work, travel, and produce and consume culture. Particularly relevant to government, the digital age has also transformed how individual citizens access information, use services, and engage with the political issues of the day and how organizations form and subsequently manage their work. Yet, evident in the anecdote of the federal public servant awaiting her ninth tweet approval, the bureaucracies comprising today's governments have proven to be impressively steadfast in their ability to evade the disruptive impacts that digital technologies have had in other sectors and in the daily lives of citizens.

What might be the “disruptive impacts” of digital technologies on the public service? This question has inspired a series of normative digital government theories that have cropped up as of the mid-2000s and that provide the point of departure for this study of Canada's federal bureaucracy and its encounter with the digital age. These theories of digital government are best explained by considering what they oppose: the closed government traditions that to this day shape daily life in our public sector institutions.

Theories of Digital Government: An Attack on Closed Government

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy and the model of Progressive-Era Public Administration (PPA) that followed it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries organized the public service into distinct silos and hierarchies. These structures limited the scope for information and people to move fluidly across the bureaucracy and instituted rigid, standardized, top-down processes that produced circumscribed, low-trust, closed relationships among bureaucrats. These early theories of state management equally narrowed the interfaces by which those outside the bureaucracy engaged with those within it, producing a low-trust, closed government-citizen relationship (Dunleavy and Hood 1994). In the Westminster system in particular, the government-citizen relationship was

limited – in fact, at a philosophical level, rendered properly nonexistent – through the conventions of public servant anonymity and hierarchical ministerial accountability structures (Kernaghan 2010). These conventions cast the elected minister as accountable to citizens via the executive and Parliament and public servants as servants of the Crown, not of the citizenry.

To be sure, the silos and hierarchies of Weber, PPA, and the Westminster system were pursued not as ends in themselves but as instruments that would ensure coordinated, efficient, equitable, and accountable governance. Following this logic and in the name of these principles, early formulations of the modern state prioritized closed government by design. This closing operated at two levels, limiting or denying the open flow of information and collaboration among bureaucrats operating in different siloed units and at different levels of the hierarchy within government and also limiting or denying contact between bureaucrats and citizens outside government.

In contrast, dominant theories of digital government argue that the tenets and practices of closed government are incompatible with the demands of governing in the digital age and that, instead, resilient digital era governments must be open by default (Lathrop and Ruma 2010; Margetts and Dunleavy 2013; Noveck 2009, 2015; O'Reilly 2011). Here it is important to distinguish between the interpretation of open government adopted in the digital government literature of the mid-2000s on and the more narrow interpretation of open government as it was originally conceived when introduced in the 1950s. At this earlier period, open government referred primarily to transparency and accountability achieved via freedom of information regimes (Clarke and Francoli 2014; Yu and Robinson 2012). In this classic view, open government presumes that citizens and the state exist in a low-trust, adversarial relationship, with the public acting as auditor and scrutineer of government decisions and finances.

This classic interpretation of open government lives on, evident in Canada, for instance, in the use of Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) requests by journalists, lobbyists, researchers, and individual citizens to scrutinize government action and expose corruption. However, with the rise of networked digital technologies as defining features of the digital age from the mid-2000s on, a new body of literature and practice has expanded the concept of open government beyond its original narrow, and more adversarial, emphasis on information disclosure and citizen scrutiny. In this case, theories of digital government, and government programs that draw on them, are

premised on the idea that open government demands not only disclosure of information but also more significant transformations to the machinery and culture of government and to the government-citizen relationship. Specifically, digital era open government advocates that the rigidly siloed and hierarchical organizational structures inherited from government's late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century roots be dissolved. In this argument, resilient digital era open governments efficiently and fluidly organize information and people around problems and tasks, not entrenched organizational structures, and defy strictly hierarchical approaches to decision making and authority, favouring instead flatter structures amenable to whole of government systems thinking, bottom-up innovation, iterative and rapid experimentation and learning, and the mass participation of citizens in governing (Bason 2010; Christiansen 2015).

Theories of digital era open government thus replace Weber, PPA, and Westminster narratives of the state with models of social production and organization that have developed alongside the Internet, as reflected in theories of “cognitive surplus” (Shirky 2009, 2010), the democratization of innovation (von Hippel 2005), peer-production (Benkler 2006) “wikinomics” (Tapscott and Williams 2006), and platform thinking (O’Reilly 2011; Raymond 1999). Each of these theories explores how the Internet and related information and communications technologies (ICTs) reduce the costs of information exchange and co-production among large groups of distributed individuals. Applied to government, these theories have spawned a new language of public management that brings concepts from the tech sector into theories of government, as in *Government 2.0* – a riff on *Web 2.0* – and *Open Source Governance*, based on the open-source development model that allows anyone to build on, tweak, or repurpose a product, most famously in open-source software, as in that which underpins the Linux operating system and the web browser Mozilla Firefox.

In applying these concepts to the public sector, authors advancing theories of digital government have been particularly preoccupied with opening the government-citizen relationship, thus creating space for the public to feed into the work of the public service. Technology entrepreneur and writer Tim O’Reilly, credited with creation of the term “Web 2.0,” calls for “government as a platform,” which he describes as “a system that allows people inside and outside government to innovate,” with government acting “as a service provider enabling its user community” (2011, 15). As with other theorists of digital government, O’Reilly relies primarily on private sector examples to

elaborate his model, using the example of the Apple iPhone as a platform that enables users to produce apps in lieu of Apple taking on this task alone, thus greatly augmenting the value and utility of the device. O'Reilly is particularly inspired by the Linux operating system and other open-source success stories, and he uses these examples to argue that governments should abandon the tradition of developing policies and services behind closed doors, releasing them for outside feedback only once they are finished products. Instead, he argues that, operating as platforms, governments should work openly through agile methodologies that allow for continuous feedback and iterative modifications of policies and services based on the experiences of their “users” and for outsiders to tweak and develop these “products” alongside, or in lieu of, governments.

Similarly, Beth Noveck, former deputy chief technology officer for the Obama administration, head of New York University's GovLab, and another key voice animating dominant digital government theories, advocates for a new model of public management inspired by wikis. She dubs this model “Wiki Government,” in which the “closed model of decision making” (2009, 25) that has traditionally defined government bureaucracy is replaced with open and collaborative processes that enable distributed groups of self-selecting citizens to deliver services and inform policies previously managed exclusively by government.

Along the same lines, when describing the second wave of their Digital Era Governance (DEG) model, Helen Margetts and Patrick Dunleavy (2013, 4, 16) describe Facebook groups, multiauthored blogs, and peer-produced goods such as Wikipedia as “alternative organizational forms and ‘ways of producing’” that might set the stage for “open book government” as citizens participate in service delivery and policy development via the web. More prominently than other theories of digital government, the DEG model (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Margetts and Dunleavy 2013; Dunleavy and Margetts 2015) also emphasizes the *internal opening* of government – the dissolution of silos among various actors across the bureaucracy. These internal openings are described as a “recentralization” of government, a trend that Dunleavy and Margetts posit as a defining feature of Digital Era Governance and contrast with the “agencification” of government (i.e., the proliferation of decentralized agencies) that New Public Management ushered in, in particular jurisdictions, in the 1980s and 1990s (especially the United Kingdom – a primary point of reference for British scholars Dunleavy and Margetts in their theory of DEG).

One particular digital era policy instrument enjoys relative prominence in theories of digital government: open data, the release of raw, machine-readable, public sector data sets with accompanying licences that allow for reuse of the data to a range of ends, notably to empower citizens to feed into the work of government (e.g., by developing mobile and web applications that support government services or by using the data in external policy analyses). In other cases, advocates of open data argue that they will enable public servants to make better use of data internally, across the silos of government (Lathrop and Ruma 2010; Noveck 2009; Robinson et al. 2008). In Canada, open government advocate David Eaves has been a central voice on digital government in general, and on open data specifically, using his blog to espouse its potential to disrupt closed government. As he wrote in 2011:

The challenge of the old order and the institutions it fostered is that its organizing principle is built around the management (control) of processes, it's been about the application of the industrial production model to government services. This means it can only move so fast, and because of its strong control orientation, can only allow for so much creativity (and adaption [*sic*]). Open data is about putting the free flow of information at the heart of government – both internally and externally – with the goal of increasing government's metabolism and decentralizing societies' capacity to respond to problems. (Eaves 2011b)

Alongside open data, theories of digital era open government also promote the uptake of new digital policy instruments that, to varying extents, call on the public service to ensure that its operations are more open and responsive to those outside its walls, including crowdsourcing (Grabosky 2013; Lodge and Wegrich 2015), “hackathons” (time-limited events in which web developers produce web or mobile applications that address a social challenge, often using government data), digital citizen engagement (e.g., online deliberative dialogue, real-time collaborative policy development, e-petitions, mobile and web user reviews) (Coleman and Moss 2011; Longo and Kelley 2016; McNutt and Carey 2008; Peters and Abud 2009), A/B testing (controlled experiments that allow government to redesign services based on users' experiences with them), and big data generated from administrative processes and citizens' interactions with the web and related technologies (Clarke and Margetts 2014; Reimsbach-Kounatze 2015).

In sum, whether by challenging the silos and hierarchies that have long underpinned a closed bureaucrat-bureaucrat relationship, or by calling for the uptake of new agile and open policy making and service delivery approaches, the dominant theories of digital government offered to date argue that closed government is entirely incompatible with the demands of governing in the digital age. Authors argue this point with a sense of urgency, warning that governments that do not adapt to a world defined by decentralized production models, rapid and networked information flows, and iterative, user-driven design processes at best miss out on significant opportunities to improve policy making and service delivery and at worst become ever more out of touch with the societies that they serve, propelling existing crises of confidence in the state. This sense of urgency raises two questions that are at the heart of current debates on digital era government and that drive the research and analysis that form this book.

The first of these questions asks simply, in practical terms, are today's bureaucracies capable of adopting the model of open government that has emerged as the preferred paradigm of digital era public administration? The second question asks, at a normative level, is it even desirable for governments to adopt the model of open government for which mainstream digital government theories advocate so urgently? Or, put bluntly, do these theories pass the "smell test" for accountable governance, thus serving as a reliable and comprehensive roadmap for public administrators navigating the digital age? Next, I survey the responses that have been offered to each of these questions thus far before outlining how this book builds on, and challenges, this thinking.

The Resilience of Closed Government in the Digital Age

To date, the bulk of the empirical research dedicated to digital government has focused on answering the first question: are today's bureaucracies capable of implementing the model of digital era open government advocated in theories of digital government? In response to this question, authors have overwhelmingly responded with a no. In practice, governments have not abandoned the deeply entrenched structures, policy and legislative constraints, and cultural attitudes born of their closed government origins despite the emergence of technologies and related social phenomena that in theory can upend these traditions. For example, preliminary empirical research on government's uptake of digital era policy instruments from the early 2010s on finds that bureaucrats struggle to use social media for more networked,

interactive exchanges with the public; suffer from a dearth of coherent and joined-up information management across silos, thus limiting the scope to capitalize on open data and big data; and continue to default to “behind closed doors” command and control approaches despite the availability of technologies that could usher in unprecedented forms of agile, iterative, and participatory policy making and service delivery (Clarke and Francoli 2017; Clarke and Margetts 2014; Craft 2013; Longley and Zimmerman 2011; McNutt 2014; Mergel and Desouza 2013; Noveck 2015; Small 2012). New technologies and commitments to open data, digital citizen engagement, and networked service delivery in most cases have simply been bolted on to existing cultures, legislative and corporate policy regimes, policy styles, and organizational structures tailored to closed government, lacking an accompanying effort to meaningfully confront and amend these legacies. Thus, returning to the public servant invoked at the start of this chapter, in practice bureaucrats are still waiting for the proverbial tweet approval, operating in governments that are as siloed, hierarchical, and closed as those of decades past.

These findings fall in line with earlier research on the first wave of “electronic” or “e-government” (as digital government was dubbed at the time) in the 1990s and early 2000s, in which governments took up websites, computing systems, and early online service delivery mechanisms as part of the “Web 1.0” phase of digital government.⁴ This earlier research found that when public sector bureaucracies integrate information technologies into their operations, existing organizational characteristics, administrative cultures, and established activities are more often reinforced than they are reversed (Danziger et al. 1982; Fountain 2001; Norris and Reddick 2013). These findings sobered enthusiasm for early e-government programs; academics and elected officials dazzled by the Internet’s potential had been quick to presume that ICTs would transform government for the better and, importantly, predicted the same types of “opening” of policy and service delivery that Digital Era Governance, Wiki Government, and government as a platform have advocated as of the mid-2000s. In this first wave of e-government enthusiasm, authors and political leaders dwelled almost fanatically on “the ‘new’ and the ‘modern’ as a way of fulfilling dreams and escaping nightmares” (Margetts 2010, 39), presuming that ICTs would lead to more effective, more democratic, and less costly government. “Computers were supposed to cut paperwork and costs, reduce crime, and give managers and policymakers better information” (Starr 2010, 2) thus transforming government for the better, an expectation not met in practice.

For example, in their review of local-level e-government studies, Donald Norris and Christopher Reddick (2013, 167, 165) explain that “we do not cite empirical works that validate claims made in cyber-optimist writings because, after an extensive review of the e-government literature, we have not been able to find any” and that “e-government has developed incrementally and has not been transformative, as many early writers envisioned.” This conclusion is shared by a broad range of authors who have highlighted the overblown expectations that shaped early predictions on and prescriptions for the role of digital technologies in government, leading to books with titles such as *ICTs, Citizens, and Governance: After the Hype!* (Meijer, Boersma, and Wagenaar 2009) and a consensus that, though “ICT is put forward as an instrument which can be used to achieve different goals of modernization ... for instance a shift towards self-government, market-governance and self-regulation and an empowerment of citizens ... the potential of ICT in order to achieve institutional innovation has not been fully acknowledged” (Meijer and Thaens 2010, 114).

Recalling that, “in each phase [of e-government], early enthusiasms have run up against stubborn and uncomfortable limits” (Starr 2010, 5), digital government skeptics have been quick to remind us that governments are not “born digital,” emerging in the digital age as a *tabula rasa* as in the technology organizations on whose experiences today’s digital government theories draw (Apple, Facebook, Linux, Wikipedia). Rather, these skeptics caution, governments bring to the digital age the legacies of closed government to which they have traditionally defaulted, in many cases despite deliberate efforts to dispense with them. Thus, these critics argue, bureaucrats will struggle to integrate open, networked technologies and approaches into the “home system” of silos and hierarchies deeply entrenched in the public sector (Roberts 2011, 684), and argue that “as organizational forms are increasingly catalysed toward complex networks and computer mediated communication, the traditional hierarchies associated with twentieth-century bureaucracy and the institutional arrangements embedded therein ... may truncate the implementation of networked technologies as parochial attitudes in the public service resist transformation” (McNutt and Carey 2008, 12).

Given these findings, some digital government enthusiasts have already begun to temper their theories to account for the layering effects that ensure that digital efforts to open the bureaucracy remain constrained by Weber’s grip on contemporary public sector institutions. For instance, in two subsequent updates to their DEG model (originally described in 2005), Dunleavy

and Margetts (2013; 2015) adopt a more cautious tone in describing the impact of the digital age on the public sector, noting that their vision of a recentralized, joined-up, open-book government has not proven a *fait accompli*. Instead, Digital Era Governance has been marked in the first instance by the austerity measures of the 2010s and, more fundamentally, by the enduring legacies of Weber and PPA in the machinery of government, policy design processes, and service delivery models. Likewise, reflecting on her work advancing Obama's open government initiative in her role as deputy chief technology officer, the first few pages of Noveck's 2015 follow-up to *Wiki Government* candidly depict the institutional inertia and bureaucratic insularity that can ensure that digital era open government remains as difficult to achieve as – and in certain ways even more difficult than – its pre-digital era variants. Notably, Noveck reaches this sobering conclusion even in a context where there was significant top-down political support for digital era open government reforms; former US President Barack Obama had campaigned on a promise of open government and committed to it in a formal directive on his first day in office (Orszag 2009).

Now, it is at this stage in the history of digital government research that the seasoned public administration scholar is likely to intervene with the remark “well, that was predictable.” The history of public administration from the 1980s on in many ways is a story of governments and their observers attempting, but typically failing, to open the closed governments that Weber, PPA, and in certain jurisdictions (as in Canada) the Westminster system have produced. Advocates of silos and hierarchies are a rare breed (Olsen 2006), and horizontal, joined-up government has long been a pursued but unachieved objective of public service reformers (Bakvis and Juillet 2004; Lindquist 2012; Peters 1998). Public administration scholars, including those in Canada, regularly criticize the excessive red tape, oversight, and risk aversion that theories of digital era open government challenge (Jarvis 2016; Phillips and Levasseur 2004; Savoie 2003). Canadian practitioners, too, get in on the game; annual reports from the Clerk of the Privy Council and previous reform initiatives dating back decades perennially decry the culture of risk aversion, information control, excessive hierarchy, and silos of the public service (Charette 2015; Himelfarb 2005; Lynch 2007; Pitfield 1976). And, where governments meet citizens, dominant reform movements from the 1980s on have equally attempted to open up the work of government to outside participation, albeit as part of varied ideological projects and with differing framings of the citizen's role in governance.

For instance, the 1980s and 1990s saw New Public Management (NPM) open service delivery up to a range of nongovernmental service providers, if only through the low-trust mechanisms of contracting and outsourcing (Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan 2007; Hood 1995; Phillips and Lévassieur 2004). Alongside these providers, individual citizens were also promised a new but limited role in the processes of governing under NPM. Versus being treated merely as passive end users of government services, they were framed as consumers and clients who, armed with government-provided information on the quality of services (e.g., league tables ranking school and hospital performance), could “vote with their feet,” selecting among providers of services as the “invisible hand” rationalizing the market (Needham 2003; Pierre 1995).

Following NPM, and referenced with various prefixes in the literature (“shared,” “new public,” “collaborative”) (Bixler 2014; Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti 1997; Rhodes 1997; Salamon and Elliott 2002; Torfing 2005), network governance has surfaced as a second dominant alternative to closed government in the field of public administration. Network governance picks up and extends NPM’s emphasis on service externalization – the act of transferring all or part of government activities to those outside the bureaucracy (Alford and O’Flynn 2012) – in particular emphasizing how third sector organizations, groups of citizens, and individual citizens can support government services as partners in their delivery. Network governance equally acknowledges the benefits of achieving broad consensus on policies with stakeholders and that an increasingly educated and engaged citizenry can meaningfully inform government policy work. Finally, network governance acknowledges the deficiencies of siloed and overly hierarchical operations within the public service itself, instead advocating system-based, horizontal government that breaks down silos across policy areas, functions, and individual departments and subunits of governments.

Theories of digital government follow on the heels of these predecessors, adding a digital lens to certain NPM tenets (e.g., releasing data on government performance to empower service users and drive better outcomes, and encouraging an ecosystem of nongovernmental service providers) and, more prominently, bringing the tenets of network governance into the digital age by emphasizing service externalization alongside citizen engagement in policy and the benefits of an open bureaucrat-bureaucrat relationship. Like today’s theories of digital government, though, whereas both NPM and network governance have endeavoured to upend Weberian and PPA legacies, each has

been met on implementation with significant challenges and resistance from the bureaucracy, which has proven to be steadfast in its ability to reinforce silos, hierarchies, and closed models of service and policy development. This reflects a larger body of research and theory in the field of public administration that highlights how policy regimes, path-dependent trajectories, and entrenched organizational/institutional characteristics can constrain the scope for change in the public sector, producing resilient status quo defaults in government (Aucoin 1990; Freeman 1985; Hall 1993; Howlett 2003; Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Streeck 1995).⁵

In other words, though the categories of Weberian bureaucracy/PPA, NPM, and network governance are discussed as distinct from each other in the literature, each contends with the shadow of its predecessor, in particular with the silos and hierarchies of Weber and PPA living on as enduring structures of government despite over forty years of public management orthodoxy calling for their upheaval. When it comes to reforming the public service, one never truly gets a “do-over,” and thus previous reform efforts have not served as reset buttons by which the entrenched worldviews, practices, and corporate policy and legislative constraints of the past are easily and comprehensively upended.

Why was this research apparently absent from early theories of digital government, lacking as they initially did sufficient appreciation for the stickiness of institutional legacies that mark all public administration reforms and ensure that Weberian bureaucracy has stood the test of time – and would likely do the same in the face of networked digital technologies? To answer this question, it is instructive to consider the *source* of mainstream theories of digital government.

With few exceptions, these theories and related research emerge from scholars operating outside the traditional field of public administration. This reflects the long-standing marginalization of IT in mainstream public administration research and theory, a trend alive and well today (Margetts 1999; Meijer 2007). For example, a 2013 analysis of the top fifteen ranked public administration journals indicated that only 89 articles of the roughly 3,600 articles published by these journals from 2007 to 2013 even mentioned phenomena related to the digital age, let alone offering substantive discussions of this theme. At a basic level, by ignoring the digital age, the field of public administration proves to be out of touch with and oblivious of the empirical world that it claims to speak to, leading to anomalies such as the fact that, while over 250 million Europeans were members of Facebook in 2013 (Internet

World Stats 2013), according to the pages of the *Journal of European Social Policy* Facebook did not even exist at that time; the word had not been mentioned once in its pages as of 2013.⁶ Even more consequentially, though, because public administration scholars have ignored the proliferation of digital technologies in society, insights from the field have not sufficiently informed theories on the digital age and its likely impact on government. In turn, at a descriptive level, theories of digital era open government have proven to be thin and largely unhelpful in practical terms, lacking an appreciation for the sticky institutional legacies that decades of mainstream public administration research illuminate and that any seasoned public administration scholar would rightfully predict would accompany efforts to dissolve silos and hierarchies and integrate citizens into the processes of governing in the digital age. Most fundamentally, however, the costs of public administration scholars' absence from discussions on digital era government have been felt at the normative level: that is, in determining not the *possibility* of achieving digital era open government as currently envisioned in the literature but the *desirability* of doing so.

Digital Era Open Government: Risky Business?

Although evidence suggests that governments struggle to achieve the model of digital era open government so urgently called for in the literature, one might ask: is this a problem? Is this preferred paradigm of digital era public administration even a worthy pursuit, providing a sound roadmap to good governance in the digital age? With few notable exceptions (often focused on critiquing open data and hackathon/app contests in particular; see Biddle 2014; Clarke and Margetts 2014; Johnson and Robinson 2014; Kitchin 2013; Longo 2011; Morozov 2014; Porway 2013), this question is never posed explicitly in research on digital government. Theories of digital era open government have mostly escaped normative scrutiny, taken for granted as accurate prognoses of the preferred path for digital era public administration. Thus, discussions on digital government begin from the premise that, to be resilient in the digital age, governments must abandon siloed and hierarchical approaches to their work, release data and information, and experiment with agile, iterative, and networked models of policy and service delivery – and quickly, for the pace of change in the digital age demands rapid adaptation and fundamental upheavals of closed government traditions. And when, as noted, research finds that governments are incapable of reversing these traditions, authors lament the risks of government sclerosis, critiquing bureaucrats'

resistance to change, their reliance on traditional policy and service instruments, and their default to ineffective siloed and hierarchical models of organization.

Among practitioners, the normative theory of digital era open government espoused in the literature has equally gained favour as the preferred paradigm of contemporary public administration. It is now rare, if not impossible, to find a public sector renewal agenda that does not place agile design, open data, big data, digital by default service delivery, innovation, experimentation, and open government reforms at the centre of its strategies for bolstering policy capacity and, more generally, for public sector modernization.⁷ The words *digital* and *open* are now sprinkled throughout governance best practices as produced by organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the United Nations.⁸ Some seventy countries have signed the Open Government Partnership created in 2011, and in 2013 the G8 countries signed into effect an Open Data Charter. Far from fringe commentators, theorists of digital era open government speak the *lingua franca* of what has now become the mainstream public management discourse among practitioners the world over.

In some cases, governments have invoked digital government theorists' language and ideas directly. The research that supported the DEG model of Dunleavy and Margetts heavily informed parliamentary scrutiny of government IT management in the United Kingdom, which subsequently fed into the creation of the Government Digital Service, an organization that now has near whole of government jurisdiction over all digital services (and that, in essence, manages the government-citizen interface in the United Kingdom). More overtly, the Government Digital Service and its equivalent in Australia, as well as Canada's recently appointed Chief Information Officer (CIO) Alex Benay, regularly cite O'Reilly's "government as a platform" as their guiding public management philosophy (Benay 2017; Bracken 2012, 2015a; Digital Transformation Agency 2015).

As noted above, Noveck led the open government initiative that Obama signed into being on his first day in office and that arguably defined the core of his administration's public management reform agenda. In Canada, David Eaves directly informed the City of Vancouver's open data initiative and, at the federal level, the open data strategies of the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS), even joining Stockwell Day (then the president of the TBS) at the press conference announcing the initiative. And O'Reilly (2011), Shirky (2009, 2010), and Tapscott and Williams (2006), all technology writers informing

dominant theories of digital government, are directly cited by Canadian federal public servants when discussing the rationale for a series of under-the-radar open government initiatives introduced within the bureaucracy as of 2008. Most recently, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau elected in 2015 has turned to the language and promises of mainstream digital government theories, enthusiastically naming open policy making, open data, data-driven decision making, user engagement on digital services, and experimentation as key features of its governing agenda (Prime Minister's Office 2015a).

Evidently, the tech sector-inspired theories of public administration that have emerged of late offer governments – both political leaders and administrators – an enticing account of the deficiencies of classically siloed and hierarchical approaches to state management and an equally convincing case in favour of digital era open government approaches, instruments, and values. However, by stepping outside the orthodoxy of digital government theories, and again invoking the public administration research missing from this discussion thus far, we have reasons to be more critical of the normative assertion that a wholesale upheaval of Weber, PPA, and core Westminster traditions is an uncomplicated and cost-free solution to the challenges of governing in the digital age. In fact, a traditional public administration lens illuminates a series of practical and ethical conditions ensuring that silos and hierarchies might well live on in today's government not simply because of the bureaucracy's lethargy and unmitigated resistance to change but for entirely legitimate reasons.

For instance, though it has long been fashionable to critique silos and hierarchies as passé and ineffective models of organization, these structures have traditionally played and continue to play important roles in securing coordinated and accountable government. The top-down management of bureaucrats and the parcelling of particular tasks to siloed actors allow for clean lines of accountability within government, rendering it possible to identify and hold to account particular actors responsible for particular tasks (Jarvis 2014a) while facilitating centralized, whole of government management of large-scale government organizations that, absent a central coordination mechanism with top-down authority, might otherwise work at cross-purposes. Joined-up, horizontal, and open (internal) government – that which sees bureaucrats across silos coordinating their activities as one unit – rests in part on centralized, hierarchical centres of control across the machinery of government. This was particularly true for early e-government

programs, a phase in which the Canadian government emerged as a leader specifically because it instituted centrally coordinated control over its websites and online services as opposed to fostering a pluralistic, bottom-up ecosystem of web products (Borins 2007; Roy 2006). Yet theories of digital era open government are silent on the accountability and coordination gaps that can arise when the silos and hierarchies that they critique are dissolved and thus deny their adherents theoretical or practical insights into the new or adapted accountability and coordination mechanisms that could safely usher in the open government models that they propose.

Forays into pluralistic online government-citizen interaction and open policy making raise a raft of potential equity and accountability dilemmas insufficiently accounted for in the dominant theories of digital era open government offered to date. How can we ensure that autonomously governed interactions between government bureaucrats and citizens online are equitable – that is, accessible to all citizens – regardless of official language or citizen ability? The siloed allocation of the “voice” of government to particular actors in the bureaucracy, and the top-down management of these interactions through corporate policies and approvals, have traditionally alleviated the risks of inequity that a decentralized model of government-citizen interaction can invite. Yet the rapid, informal, and personalized forms of communication facilitated by digital technologies are entirely at odds with siloed, hierarchical models of government-citizen interaction, demanding new frameworks of flexible oversight, training, and self-governance that would see public servants empowered to engage with stakeholders, service users, and everyday Canadians online. In practice, what would such a system look like? Existing theories of digital era open government offer little concrete insight that could help us to answer this question.

In Westminster systems such as that in Canada, decentralized, open communication between public servants and the public raises particularly acute concerns given that it can conflict with the traditional public service bargain, which relies on public servant anonymity as a guarantor of public service neutrality and ministerial accountability (Grube 2013; Savoie 2003; Tait 1996). Although this tradition has eroded over the years, in particular among those in the higher ranks of the public service, such as when deputy ministers are called to account in the public forum of parliamentary committees, the model of fluid, decentralized government-citizen interaction that theories of digital era open government call for would effectively thrust a whole range of new players across the bureaucracy and at lower ranks of the

hierarchy into potentially politically contentious public policy debates. This raises crucial but unanswered questions about the training and values and ethics guidelines required to accommodate this expanded government-citizen relationship and to resolve the complex accountability dilemmas that will arise when formerly anonymous public servants engage online with citizens and stakeholders and are held to account for unpopular or failed policy initiatives properly attached to the ministerial master whom they serve. However, instead of addressing these dilemmas head-on, theories of digital government attempt to depoliticize the inherently political context in which public servants operate, naively framing the citizens and stakeholders with which digital era open governments engage as mere “users” of government services or dispassionate, neutral collaborators with whom public officials can interact in strictly benevolent and responsive ways.

This ill-advised act of depoliticization equally ensures that theories of digital era open government do not sufficiently account for the unintended retreat to closed government that their reforms might inspire. This critique draws on research on earlier, analogue era open government (focused on access to government information), which finds that, when the processes of governing are opened to public view, public servants who fear public scrutiny from media, opposition parties, and critical stakeholder and citizen groups can render government more opaque, for instance by refusing to document decisions in written forms that can be accessed by outsiders (see Legault 2015b). Others observe that, as the activities of the state are opened to external view, public servants become overly risk averse, resisting untested, innovative approaches to policies or services as a rule because of the potential for public-facing failure that they invite (Clarke 2016b; Jarvis 2016). As damaging as they can be to citizen trust and government effectiveness, these impulses are a rational response to a competitive culture of permanent campaigning that sees ministers wishing to avoid politically costly public exposé and thus demanding “error-free government” from their public servants (Marland 2016; Marland, Giasson, and Esselment 2017; Savoie 2003, 2013).

Extending this argument, in a rare acknowledgment of the role of digital technologies in contemporary governance by public administration scholars, some authors have argued that the digital age actually exacerbates the risk that efforts to open government to external actors will lead to opaque public administration (Clarke and Francoli 2017). This argument posits that, in exposing the operations of the public sector to greater scrutiny, the digital age’s 24/7 media cycle of which social media are a part propels an existing

trend toward information hoarding and risk aversion (Marland 2016; Savoie 2003, 2013). In other cases, government's uptake of social media is included in blanket criticisms of the communications function in government. Far from supporting a more collaborative, open, responsive model of governance, authors argue that, when governments adopt social media to engage with the public, they inevitably politicize public servants by compelling them to abandon their duties to neutrality through public promotions of the government of the day (see Aucoin 2012). To be sure, these arguments are not based on systematic, holistic, empirical analyses of the actual impact that the digital age has had on the public service or of how the public service uses social media in practice (an empirical gap that this study fills). Nonetheless, these criticisms of social media, and of open government more generally, compel theorists of digital era open government to confront questions about the competitive environment of permanent campaigning in which their reforms would unfold. They must also account for historical patterns suggesting that the adoption of technologies and practices intended to open government might at best be undermined by existing political pressures to avoid public scrutiny and at worst render the public service even less amenable to public engagement and potentially failure-ridden digital era innovations.

Adding another dimension on which the normative bases of digital era open government can be challenged, crowdsourcing and digital service externalization (e.g., achieved through open data and hackathons) raise questions about government's capacity to ensure that services are coordinated, that data generated from nongovernmental actors' service interactions with citizens are fed back into policy processes, and that players in a decentralized ecosystem of service providers satisfy the higher accountability standards that government's high-stakes suite of services and public good considerations necessitate. And, with so much of the literature emphasizing the benefits of leveraging outsiders' digital expertise, for instance through hackathons and open data app contests, the digital era open government literature says little about the need to build in-house digital talent within government. A baseline of that talent is necessary lest the public service render itself entirely dependent on outside firms for technology solutions and a vulnerable blind shopper in procuring such services and policy advice (Clarke 2017). Again, eschewing a discussion of these risks, dominant theories of digital government offered to date have instead tended to presume that governments can only become more efficient, effective, and responsive to citizens' needs by dispensing with their control of public services, an assertion that existing research on failed

service externalization would quickly caution against (Alford and O’Flynn 2012; Phillips 2006; Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2015).

Beyond these specific potential risks of digital era open government, one might argue at a larger level that any theory that calls for urgent and rapid public administration reform warrants at least some skepticism given the high stakes of government failings and, in particular, the costs that certain governments have borne historically by moving too quickly to adopt new and fashionable public management reforms. The prime example here is New Public Management, whose earliest and fastest adherents suffered immense setbacks to policy capacity, service failures, and significant cost overruns (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Hood 1995). Canada is typically framed as the cautious reformer, hesitant to move too quickly or too drastically in any direction of reform (Brock 2000; Halligan 2004), an approach that helped the government to avoid the failings of NPM as other early adopters offered cautionary tales of its deficiencies. Taken to an extreme, a strictly conservative approach to public administration might argue that government systems are designed to resist change, to safeguard against drastic transformations, facilitating instead cautious incremental evolution that protects against the societal costs that can arise when untested approaches to governing are adopted rapidly and without an appreciation for their unintended or unpredictable consequences. In this view, the fact that the public service has managed to avoid disruption in the face of digital technologies upending other sectors might prove to be a virtue, not a weakness. In other words, whereas mainstream digital government advocates decry “parochial attitudes in the public service” that “resist transformation” (McNutt and Carey 2008, 12), a traditional public administration perspective might praise this parochialism and resistance as safeguards of the core values of neutral public administration, equitable treatment of citizens, and vertical accountability for decision making, ensuring that these principles of democratic governance remain constant as the context in which governments operate undergoes rapid and unpredictable changes. Reflecting this view, Obama, under whom significant investments were made in open government and digital service initiatives, nonetheless publicly criticized the idea that the challenges facing the public sector can be easily solved if only governments would quickly adopt the open, agile, and user-centric methods of today’s tech sector success stories. As Obama commented in 2016,

government will never run the way Silicon Valley runs because, by definition, democracy is messy ... If all I was doing was making

a widget or producing an app, and I didn't have to worry about whether poor people could afford the widget, or I didn't have to worry about whether the app had some unintended consequences – setting aside my Syria and Yemen portfolio – then I think those suggestions are terrific ... But the reason I say this is sometimes we get, I think, in the scientific community, the tech community, the entrepreneurial community, the sense of we just have to blow up the system, or create this parallel society and culture because government is inherently wrecked. No, it's not inherently wrecked; it's just government has to care for, for example, veterans who come home. That's not on your balance sheet, that's on our collective balance sheet, because we have a sacred duty to take care of those veterans. And that's hard and it's messy, and we're building up legacy systems that we can't just blow up. (quoted in Etherington 2016)

Following this line of thinking, and applying a traditional public administration lens to the orthodoxy of widely accepted theories of digital era open government, a crucial normative debate thus emerges. Do our dominant theories of digital era open government provide a sufficiently robust roadmap for good governance in the digital age? And, if their prescription of rapid, tech sector-inspired “transformation” is not the answer, then what model of public administration should guide governments as they navigate the demands of governing in the digital age? It is in this debate that this book intervenes and from which its central arguments emerge.

Central Arguments of This Book

In this book, I argue that Canada's current model of closed government does not offer an effective, sustainable, or democratically robust paradigm of public administration suited for the digital age. In arguing this point, I follow mainstream theories of digital era open government proposed thus far; to secure its resilience and democratic legitimacy, the federal public service must become more open internally (challenging strict silos and excessive hierarchy and generating a culture amenable to innovation) and more open externally (engaging with citizens, releasing data and information, and opening service delivery processes to external participation). These openings are necessary for four central reasons, each reflecting specific risks that closed government raises in the digital age. These are the “stakes of the game,” the reasons why scholars, elected officials, public servants, and citizens alike need to put digital

era open government on the agenda as a core priority of public service – and broader democratic – renewal in Canada.

First, closed government perpetuates a lethargic metabolic rate of change in the public service, ensuring that government lacks the internal and external networking capacity, tolerance for iterative learning and innovation, and skill sets essential to keep pace with a rapidly changing external environment. Acknowledging this cost of the status quo, I reject the time-honoured Canadian tradition of conservative, lagged, incremental public management reform, arguing that, whatever its historical virtues, this tradition now raises more clearly identifiable risks than it does discernible benefits.

Second, and in part emerging from the first risk, closed government ushers in policy, program, and operational failures whose costs are felt by citizens, administrators, and elected officials alike. These failures emerge as the bureaucracy is shielded from new data sources, expertise, and production models; restricts opportunities for internal and external collaboration; facilitates an awkward and ineffective uptake of new digital policy instruments (or limits their adoption altogether); and inspires a status quo default anathema to innovation.

Third, I document the human resource costs of closed government, illustrating how siloed and overly hierarchical management models, limited access to technology, and barriers to innovation hinder the recruitment and retention of emerging top talent while ensuring that the existing skills and enthusiasm of public servants are not leveraged.

Fourth, and most crucially, I argue that governments that continue to operate as closed institutions – awkwardly integrating networked technologies into corporate processes and cultures at odds with them, and suffering from the inevitable policy, program, and service failures that this invites – exacerbate existing crises of confidence in the state, suggesting to citizens that government is out of touch, ineffective, irrelevant, and democratically illegitimate. Acknowledging these four costs, I reject a conservative public administration perspective that prioritizes the status quo as the safest path to good governance and instead align with theorists who advocate digital era open government reforms.

Some might take issue with my assertion that digital era public administration demands a transformation from closed government to open government. It is useful to address such critiques up front. First, some will argue that openness is not necessarily a requirement of effective digital era government, noting that certain countries, such as China and Singapore, match

superb digital services with questionable records on government accountability, transparency, and human rights while doing little if anything to meaningfully engage the public or to challenge command and control models of public management.⁹ This is true; however, when we move beyond the narrow question of the quality of a country's digital services, and consider the broader range of functions and activities that underpins legitimate democratic governance, the sustainability of closed government as a model of digital era public administration is more difficult to defend, in particular in jurisdictions, such as Canada, that benefit from strong civil societies and transparent elections and that are thus held to comparatively robust democratic checks and balances.

In this context, facing wicked policy problems that demand collaboration across silos and sectors, limited fiscal resources, growing citizen expectations for responsiveness and innovation, and dwindling levels of citizen trust in the state, closed governments – however impressive they might be at providing stellar digital services – cannot meet the requirements of robust and effective democratic governance, casting doubt on their long-term political viability. Arguably, we saw this scenario play out in the Canadian context when the 2015 federal election saw the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper ousted in part because of its perceived adherence to strict command and control, opaque public management. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party was rewarded on the back of a platform emphasizing collaboration, data-driven decision making, and restoration of a high-trust government-citizen relationship (all tenets of digital era open government).

Second, some will argue that one of the most impressive examples of digital government activity to date is entirely incompatible with the tenets of open government, whether defined classically or by its digital era variant. Here I am referring to large-scale monitoring of citizens' online activities via secretive government surveillance programs – in which Canada, as a member of the Five Eyes Intelligence consortium, is implicated – as uncovered by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. To be sure, though I advocate for digital era open government, my arguments in the empirical chapters that follow equally acknowledge that many closed government activities will endure or even be intensified in the digital age. In some cases, they will undermine the uptake of digital era open government reforms; in others, they will exist in paradoxical tension with them. The normative call for digital era open government does not erase a descriptive reality that sees

closed government endure (however precariously as a long-term strategy for governing).

Third, in confronting potential critiques of my argument in this book up front, I want to underscore that I do not adopt the analogue and more limited view of open government with its primary emphasis on access to information regimes, nor do I advocate an extreme view of open government that would see all government activity open for public access; there are important reasons to create space for private and frank discussions to unfold in government. But more to the point, focusing on digital era open government, I am not primarily preoccupied with freedom of information legislation and reform or engaging in debates on where the line between open and closed should be drawn when dealing with issues such as cabinet confidence exemptions. If you are seeking an extensive exploration of Canada's Access to Information regime, this is not the book to consult.

Here I adopt the broader interpretation of open government that has emerged in the digital age and focuses on challenging siloed and hierarchical work models within the public service and fostering new models of public engagement and co-production and a culture of public service amenable to risk taking, failure, iterative learning, and innovation. These issues intersect in important ways with the ATIP regime, but it is only a small player in the broader analysis and empirical focus of this study. Instead, I look to the larger issue undermining the robustness of both historical and digital era open government reforms (including ATIP): a political culture of permanent campaigning that rewards closed government.

Today's combative political culture rationalizes strict information control, a fear of public-facing failure, and excessive top-down oversight and risk-averse management in government, exacerbating the challenge of instituting a more open, collaborative culture in the federal public service and in many instances undercutting public servants' willingness and ability to experiment with innovative digital tools and approaches that divert from the status quo. I underscore in this study that, though political leadership is not a sufficient condition for digital era open government, it is a necessary condition. Serving as Canada's first digital era prime minister, Harper provided a particularly powerful depiction of the barriers that permanent campaigning, and more specifically a political leadership captured by it, pose to digital era open government; despite having the initial ambition to bring in new standards of government accountability, Harper enacted a public management philosophy anathema to open government from 2006 on, a historical reality undeniably

to blame in part for the bureaucracy's lagged embrace of digital era open government from 2006 to 2015.

Conservative public administration scholars have responded to this permanent campaigning culture and the information-hoarding public service that it cultivates with unrealistic calls for a return to the so-called golden age of the public service, one not burdened with onerous demands for transparency and public engagement. Their solution to the closed government effects of open government reforms is essentially to stop asking for open government or at least to lament the growth of transparency demands imposed on government.¹⁰ Charting a different course in this study, I acknowledge that calls for open government cannot be wished away (we cannot travel back to the public service of the 1950s and 1960s), that these calls *should not* be wished away (since they pave the path to improved governance), but that these calls will fail without concomitant reforms to a political culture that, at present, seriously undermines the bureaucracy's willingness and ability to meet not only the demands of the ATIP regime but also the broader and essential demands of digital era open government. Is this proposed solution ambitious? Yes. Is it nonetheless the only effective means of resolving this challenge? Absolutely.

In this book, I uncover, alongside permanent campaigning effects, other conditions that ensure that today's bureaucracies not only continue to undertake activities that clearly align with closed government (as in secretive online surveillance of citizens) but that also ensure they are ill-equipped to implement digital era open government reforms even when they intend to and however urgent this imperative might be.

The findings reveal that a dearth of digital expertise within the ranks of the public service represents a direct but so far underappreciated barrier to the digital government reforms espoused in the literature. This barrier reflects an emerging preoccupation with digital skills acquisition in government human resource strategies and in part drives a global trend that sees government recruiting tech talent to new elite digital units within the state.

In addition, illustrating that the Canadian experience falls in line with larger global trends documented in recent empirical digital government research, I find that, in the federal bureaucracy, closed government is reinforced in large part by current interpretations and manifestations of Weberian bureaucratic structures (silos and hierarchies) and PPA's framing of the government-citizen relationship as properly circumscribed. And, picking up on important earlier contributions from Brown (2013), Roy (2008),

and Kernaghan (2014a, 2014b), who have brought an appreciation for the peculiarities of the Westminster system to current theories on digital government, I illustrate the mismatch between open government reforms as currently conceived and conventions of ministerial accountability, public servant anonymity, and the traditional public service bargain. But it is here – in exploring the constraints imposed by current manifestations of Weberian, PPA, and Westminster norms – that my argument departs from mainstream thinking on digital era open government thus far.

Rather than arguing that entrenched legacies of closed government should simply be upended, I delve in this study into the dilemmas and trade-offs that a wholesale and rapid upheaval of these traditions would initiate. In doing so, I argue that Canada's current model of closed government is ineffective and ripe for reform, but I advocate a more cautious, holistically designed "opening" than that envisioned by dominant theories of digital government. This opening demands that governments carefully account for the risks that accompany both status quo closed government approaches (lagged adaptation, policy failures, human resource challenges, and breaches of democratic legitimacy) and the costs that accompany departures from closed government, as documented in a rich tradition of public administration research on the unintended costs of public service reforms and given the enduring relevance of core principles of neutral, equitable, accountable public administration. In other words, in this book I support the *direction* of reform advocated in dominant theories of digital era government – from closed to open – but raise and respond to questions (so far ignored) on the means by which this reform should be pursued while respecting the dictates of democratic governance. In particular, recognizing that the literature to date emerges primarily from American scholars and those outside the field of traditional public administration, I add an appreciation for the enduring relevance of values and tenets of the Westminster system to current theories of digital era open government.

To be sure, while critiquing existing theories of digital era open government for their naive and superficial treatments – or their wholesale denials – of the effectiveness, equity, and accountability risks that their reforms might invite, I make it clear that in practice an overzealous adherence to closed government approaches currently raises greater risks for the Government of Canada, not moves toward open government. The traditionalist perspective, preoccupied as it is with the potential risks and costs of open government reforms, dominates the public service to its own detriment. This unquestioned

traditionalism has partly fuelled excessive top-down oversight of operational questions, undermining responsiveness to citizens' needs and stifling bottom-up innovation. The status quo equally rationalizes siloed approaches to information management that mean that data are not always shared or effectively used across various units of government. It can also mean that the time lag between mainstream societal adoption of new technologies and even early experimentation with such technologies in government is depressingly vast. The pendulum between closed and open government has currently swung too far toward closed. However, acknowledging the enduring relevance of traditional principles of public administration as laid down by Weber, PPA, and the original Westminster formulation, I argue equally that a wholesale swing toward an open government that abandons these principles is not the solution.

In sum, though theories of digital era open government have been quick to dispense with the past and eager to adopt tech sector-inspired principles of governance, I offer a defence in this book of the enduring relevance and efficacy of Weberian, PPA, and Westminster principles in the digital age, albeit a defence that acknowledges the need to update how we bring these principles to life in the daily practices of government. At present, excessive reliance on silos and hierarchies, unmitigated risk aversion, and models of policy development and service delivery closed by default must be upended, but in doing so we need to balance reform with an appreciation for the principles of accountability, equitable treatment of citizens, and public service neutrality that historically have underpinned, and continue to underpin, robust democratic governance.¹¹

How can these principles be made consistent with a more open government in the digital age? In which cases will these principles override the impetus for widely promoted digital government reforms? And how quickly and by which specific measures should this project of reform be implemented given the rapid pace of change and uncertainty characterizing the digital age? It is to these questions that the following chapters respond.

Research Design

My arguments in this book draw on five separate data sources compiled and analyzed from 2011 to 2016. The first of these data sources consisted of media reports covering the federal public service, the leadership styles of Prime Ministers Harper and (toward the close of the project) Trudeau, and the key

initiatives and technologies relevant to digital government reforms in Canada at the time of the study (e.g., social media, open data, open government, GCTools, Blueprint 2020, and policy innovation). They were identified using Google Alerts, through manual monitoring of major national newspapers, and by following hashtags on Twitter that track activity within the federal public service, including “#w2p,” “#goc,” “#cpsr,” “#GC2020,” “#policyinnovation,” and “#GCDigital.”

These Twitter conversations also formed part of the second major data source from which the study drew: Government of Canada social media activity. Twitter conversations organized around these hashtags and a series of public servant–led unofficial blogs covering federal public management provided insight into public servants’ perceptions of digital technologies and their implications for governing and provided information on the digital government initiatives that I explore here.¹² In most cases, this information was culled simply by following these hashtags and blogs as sources of data in their own right, but in other cases I worked with the community of public servants engaged in these networks to fact-check and crowdsource information.¹³

More formally, over a two-month period in 2012, I archived and analyzed all Government of Canada departments’ activity on Twitter to categorize the content of tweets and to investigate the types of actors with whom government departments interact on the platform. More details on the methods used to collect and analyze these data are included in [Chapter 3](#).

Government documents served as the third source of data informing the study. In this category, I include official government websites, publications, and reports as well as internal unpublished documents. I identified and collected public documents through automated Google Alerts, on the recommendation of interviewees, through systematic scans of government websites and document repositories, and through references to relevant documents within documents already collected. Several interviewees shared unpublished internal documents (e.g., “decks,” departmental reports, and GCpedia pages¹⁴). I also systematically searched the Government of Canada’s online repository listing already completed Access to Information requests, using terms relevant to the research (e.g., “social media,” “policy innovation,” “Blueprint 2020,” “open data,” and “open government”) to guide the search. This proved to be a more efficient and expedient means of accessing relevant internal documentation and ensured that I did not issue new requests that duplicated those already completed.

The fourth source of data informing this study is composed of in-depth interviews conducted with thirty-one Canadian federal public servants and one external adviser to the federal government between 2012 and 2016 (see the Appendix for an anonymized list of interviewees).¹⁵ In many cases, I conducted follow-up interviews and engaged in subsequent email exchanges to clarify points and follow up on initiatives that had advanced since the initial interviews.¹⁶ To ensure that I accessed a broad range of perspectives within the government (as opposed to interviewing only like-minded individuals or those in particular functional areas), throughout recruitment I balanced snowballing with deliberate efforts to recruit interviewees from functional areas and levels in the hierarchy underrepresented in the sample. To be sure, in doing so, I did not attempt to generate a statistically representative sample; I selected interviewees because of their unique perspectives and knowledge, which meant in some cases that they were entirely unrepresentative of a broader grouping within government, as is the case for elite, key informant interviews (Van Audenhove 2007). In this process, interviewees were deliberately selected from the areas of communications and stakeholder engagement, policy analysis and program delivery, information management, and information technology to ensure that a broad range of functions relevant to digital government informed the study. I also interviewed officials across varying levels of authority – from co-op students to senior executives.

Most of the initiatives by which the federal government has integrated digital technologies into its work are led centrally, from within the Chief Information Officer Branch of the Treasury Board Secretariat. Accordingly, this unit is well represented in the sample of interviewees. I also draw a “view from the centre” through interviews with officials in the Privy Council Office (PCO), in particular those tasked with communications and consultations functions. Capturing the varied experience of line departments adapting to the digital age is necessarily more complicated given the variety of organizational cultures, service and policy remits, and management styles that exist across the federal government. It is not possible to provide an in-depth study of each department and each of its constituent program areas and functional operations in one study. So, in [Chapter 3](#), I focus on the uptake of digital technologies in one department – Employment and Social Development Canada – selected for its large size and varied programs (providing the occasion to explore how the digital age supports horizontal collaboration among actors in large, differentiated bureaucracies) and given that the department manages the lion’s share of the government’s citizen-facing services. The

interview sample thus includes a higher number of interviews with officials in this department than in other line departments. To provide a more varied departmental perspective, I include analyses of other line departments' experiences with digital technologies where they arose in interviews, social media analyses, and documentary reviews.

Most interviews were recorded and transcribed (one was not recorded because of technical difficulties, and in one case the interviewee did not agree to being recorded or quoted). Except for this interviewee, all agreed to be quoted anonymously in the study (save one who requested attribution). In a number of cases, interviewees engaged in the federal government's official digital government initiatives proved to be enthusiasts of open government and networked information sharing. They lived highly public lives as public servants – far from the ideal of anonymity described in the traditional Westminster bargain – and were therefore easy to identify and contact and eager to participate in the research study. Indeed, investigating digital government in the federal bureaucracy during the time period of this research (from 2011 to 2016) was a fascinating study in contrasts, with the Harper government regularly criticized for closing government to the public, as I enjoyed unprecedented access to public servants who openly and frankly discussed their work online.

Seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with officials in the UK government comprised the last source of data for this study. These interviews support analysis of the drivers of the federal government's open government initiative in [Chapter 4](#) and, given the UK government's current role in shaping international digital capacity-building trends, the discussion of digital government units (DGUs) in [Chapter 6](#).

I thematically studied media reports, social media data, government documents, and interview transcriptions. I developed themes both deductively (based on previous literature and the study's guiding theoretical propositions) and inductively as they arose on reviewing the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). The process was iterative and reflexive, relying on a "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice and Ezzy 1999, 258), as individual data sets were analyzed in parallel in a complementary fashion. I revisited documents in light of findings generated in interviews, cross-checked interviewees' statements against those of other respondents, and recoded documents/transcriptions once new themes arose. Following good practice in qualitative case study research, I combined the data sets to triangulate individual findings, "continually checking, questioning, and theoretically

interpreting the findings” (Kvale 1996, 241) to uncover biases, inaccuracies, and misrepresentations (both my own and within the data).

Structure of the Book

From [Chapters 2 to 5](#), I follow a quasi-historical structure, moving from a discussion of the federal bureaucracy as it operated in the pre-digital age and tracking the various initiatives by which the bureaucracy encountered – in some cases clashed with – digital phenomena from the mid-2000s on. In [Chapter 2](#), I detail Canada’s particular brand of Weberian-Westminster closed government, laying a foundation for subsequent chapters by walking through the reforms and enduring constraints ensuring that silos and hierarchies continue to narrow both the bureaucrat-bureaucrat relationship and the relationship that links the federal government to citizens. In [Chapter 3](#), I explore what happens when a closed government integrates social media into its operations. I detail the mismatch between the rapid, networked information exchanges that social media facilitate and the siloed, hierarchical approaches to government-citizen interaction at play in Weberian bureaucracies. I also present a series of coordination and accountability dilemmas that a pluralistic model of open government–citizen interaction raises and that are not easily answered with our existing theories of analogue era or digital era government alike.

Following on departments’ efforts to take up social media, the federal bureaucracy next sought to adjust its operations for the digital age through an official open government initiative, launched in 2011. I analyze this initiative in [Chapter 4](#). In an effort to bring together two disparate literatures addressing the digital age and its impact on government, I investigate the extent to which a political culture of permanent campaigning and the unique styles of individual political leaders shape the potential for digital era open government. In Canada in particular, one might argue that public servants faced what is possibly the least amenable political environment imaginable to engage in the kinds of open government that mainstream theories of digital government promote. The digital age emerged in the wake of the Human Resources Development Canada grants and contributions “boondoggle” and the Sponsorship Scandal, each of which introduced new command and control auditing and top-down oversight mechanisms that constrained the scope for collaboration with nongovernmental actors. These mechanisms also exacerbated an existing reporting burden and a bureaucratic fear of public failure at odds with innovation and experimentation in the public service.

Enter Stephen Harper, a prime minister under whom government communications were tightly controlled, and in some cases (notably in the Economic Action Plan) politicized to serve partisan ends, and under whom mainstream media were denied access to ministers and scientists' ability to speak publicly about their research was limited. Rather than encouraging open public debate on policy decisions, the Harper government twice prorogued Parliament to avoid a vote of nonconfidence and scrutiny of controversial government actions. The Harper government also withheld information on public expenditures, leading to regular criticism from Kevin Page, who occupied the position of parliamentary budget officer that Harper himself had created (Harris 2014; Marland 2016; Martin 2011; Page 2012). With Harper serving as Canada's first digital era prime minister, could we really have expected the public service to embrace a more open, collaborative style of public management in the early phases of social media, crowdsourcing, and the global open data movement? Situating Canada's official open government initiative in its broader political context, in [Chapter 4](#) I argue that the open data, open dialogue, and open information commitments comprising this initiative produced at best an open(ish) government under Harper, at once spurred by a neoliberal interest in open data among Stockwell Day and Tony Clement (presidents of the Treasury Board under whom the open government initiative was instituted) but ultimately marred by a dearth of credible political leadership, the insularity of public servants, and an absence of appropriate skills and accountability and management frameworks to guide mass online public engagement.

In [Chapter 5](#), I shift gears, exposing that the federal public service was not strictly confined in a closed government framework throughout the Harper years. Rather, federal public servants undertook a series of incremental and largely under-the-radar efforts to open the bureaucracy internally from the late 2000s on, challenging the silos and hierarchies that have long been decried as barriers to the effectiveness of government. I highlight an unknown narrative of public service renewal that unfolded under Harper's watch, but I also argue that these efforts were so small scale and incremental that their impact was necessarily minimal. I conclude the chapter by considering the limits of public servant-led management reforms, returning to consider the crucial role of political leadership in efforts to renew the public service for the digital age.

In the last two chapters, I turn from diagnosis to prescription. In [Chapter 6](#), I address a barrier to digital government that has become a top concern of

governments globally: the digital skills gap. The traditional toolkit of IT specialists and policy and program officers alike has not kept pace with the demands of the digital age. I evaluate the contracting, partnership, and recruitment strategies that could help to address this skills gap, focusing on the digital government units that have emerged as the option of choice for digital government reform globally.

Finally, in [Chapter 7](#), I use the book's findings as a springboard to launch five recommendations to guide digital government reform in Canada, integrating into this analysis a discussion of changes instituted under the Liberal government elected in October 2015. In doing so, I provide one of the first scholarly evaluations of the Trudeau government's early record on public management reform. I evaluate how a change in leadership to one that overtly champions the benefits of open government will, as per the findings from this study, serve as a significant driver of digital government capacity building. I also flag the enduring administrative barriers and political dynamics ensuring that open government remains, as it always has, an incomplete project with no guarantee of success. In particular, in this final set of recommendations, I challenge political leaders, public service officials, and citizens alike, calling for a change in political culture that would ensure the imperative to become more open does not lead to the perverse outcome of ever more closed governments impervious to innovation, riddled by fear of public-facing failure, and driven by narrow, partisan media management strategies.

This book is inspired in part by the need to tell Canada's story of second-wave digital government, as has emerged from the mid-2000s on, a substantive, comprehensive account of which has not yet been provided or blended into larger international debates on digital era government.¹⁷ Equally, I have endeavoured to combine the fresh perspective of unconventional theories of digital government inspired by the tech sector with the insights of traditional public administration scholarship. These literatures have developed as two solitudes, yet as I argue in this book each is strengthened by contending with the other.

Digital government theorists must better account for the potential risks of the open government reforms that they call for and the practices and principles that will mitigate these risks in practice. Mainstream public administration research offers this insight to theories of government as a platform, Digital Era Governance, and Wiki Government and to their enthusiasts within the halls of government institutions. For their part, public administration scholars have largely been asleep at the wheel, producing scholarship that

ignores the digital technologies and related societal transformations with which governments and citizens are grappling, a blind spot that, should it persist, will cast doubt on the enduring relevance of the field. In this regard, theories of digital government proposed thus far should open public administration scholars' eyes to the pressures and opportunities that digital era governance raises. Finally, acknowledging the widespread uptake of digital era open government reforms across the globe, I aim to provide practical prescriptive insight that at once asserts the need to reform closed government traditions that have developed from late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century theories of public administration while also respecting the core democratic values that these early theories rightfully branded on the modern welfare state.

The next chapter sets the foundation for this work, detailing how and why closed government has endured as a cornerstone of Canadian public administration despite decades of reforms that have attempted to upend this legacy.

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