

Information Polity Editorial Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020

You are probably reading this as the global COVID-19 pandemic eases. We are only now becoming aware of the full financial and social extent of its consequences as we experience what is often referred to as the ‘new normal’. Governments around the world have taken unprecedented measures, to different degrees of success, to quell the spread of the virus, with lockdowns and travel restrictions commonplace. New information and communications technologies have played a central role, at many different levels, in responding to the pandemic. At the national policy-making level, a decision about when to implement or ease a lockdown, as well as measuring the extent of the ongoing spread of the virus, has been realized through extensive computerized data modeling. Such processes have highlighted the different ways in which statistics are collected and used, and how to ensure that they are robust enough to act upon. A number of countries have also initiated online dashboards, through which data about deaths associated with the pandemic are published.

A number of technological initiatives have been implemented to enforce lockdowns. Drones have been used to surveil and monitor remote beauty spots, automatic vehicle number plate recognition systems have been used to ensure drivers are not travelling long distances, and thermal imaging software integrated into surveillance camera systems have been deployed to identify citizens showing symptoms of the virus. One of the most prominent technological initiatives has been the design and implantation of ‘contact tracing’ apps. These are designed to operate on citizen’s phones and are intended to recognize and record close proximity to those who have, or may develop in the near future, COVID symptoms. These apps have been controversial for a number of reasons. Firstly, they rely on the mass citizenry downloading and using the app, and also self-isolating when they have come into contact with an effected person. Secondly, there have been technical issues in making these apps work, as they typically rely on the battery hungry Bluetooth interface. Third, have been a number of privacy related issues about the extent of personal information collected and whether to make these systems work this data can be decentralized and stored on the users phone, or whether it has to be collected and stored centrally by a state agency. These controversies highlight a number of interesting features many of which will be familiar to scholars working in the field of government and democracy in the information age. There is the issue of technological hype, and whether the promise and potential of the technological vision can realistically be delivered. There is the issue of trust in governance structures and regimes, and the degree to which public agencies have the legitimate moral authority to impose technological solutions and consequences on citizens. There is a further issue about the human-computer interface, and assumptions about access to and use of mobile phones in society. Also of interest, are increases in the surveillance capacity of the state, and the degree to which policy-transfer takes place between nations grappling with the pandemic. These are just some of the issues that will be of interest to the readership of Information Polity, there are many others.

In this issue of Information Polity we have included a ‘COVID-19’ Report to explore many of the issues discussed above. This multi-authored report presents an overview of technological responses to the

pandemic and highlights similarities and differences in governmental responses across the globe. It draws attention to policy successes and failures and demonstrates unequivocally the centrality of our field of expertise to understanding the design, implementation and consequences of contemporary technological developments.

COVID-19 is having a huge impact on all our activities, although research projects and endeavors are continuing and are result in interesting publications on a variety of topics. Alongside the COVID-19 Report, this issue of Information Polity includes a number of original research articles on public values in e-government, open government data, the adoption and diffusion of e-services, political engagement, the twitter practices of politicians, open data ecosystems and a book review of a book on the intertwined relationship between democracy and surveillance. Many of the key topics of our field are addressed in this diverse set of papers. We hope you enjoy reading them.

We would also like to draw your attention to a new development within the Information Polity editorial team, the creation of the new post of Social Media Editor. Welcome to Keegan McBride, who will be active on social media disseminating news and information relating to the information polity.

For the time being, we hope that you and your families are safe, and that you are prepared for a potential 'second wave' of the pandemic.

Albert Meijer
William Webster
Editors-in-Chief Information Polity

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