Book Review

McGuinness, T. D., & Schank, H. (2021). *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank's (2021) *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology* represents a blueprint for problem-solving in government and nonprofit organizations. The technologist turned public servant (Hana), and the public sector focused tech translator (Tara) introduce existing and future public servants to the notion of "Public Interest Technology" (PIT) – an indispensable tool to produce substantial and lasting impact in the lives of those the public sector aims to serve. At its core, PIT encompasses a remedy of three parts (*design, data, and delivery*) to divorce the public sector from its symbiotic union with inefficiency and ineffectiveness. The triad perspective, however, is not new, nor is it "old wine in a new bottle." Several scholars dedicated their careers to producing empirical evidence highlighting the public sector's challenge with inefficiency and searching for best practices (for optimal results). Nevertheless, PIT's use of a human-centered approach to problem-solving, its employment of real-time data and the agile process to solving the public sector's hardest problems, provide readers with an original compass when responding to public policy problems in *the* digital age. For this reason, *Power to the Public* is a must-read for public servants lacking a suitable tool to make a difference in their practice.

Power to the Public explores a difficult topic in public administration: the sector's legacy of inefficiency and ineffectiveness. The authors address the critical destiny of both public servants and citizens when outdated methods are continually employed to solve public problems. While the public sector does not embrace the private sector's *evolve or die* rationale, the authors contend that its monopoly on many services does not grant the public sector the right to remain obsolete. *Power to the Public* engages readers in fruitful discussions regarding the faulty state of problem solving in the U.S., the significance of PIT, the need to refocus on "*the people*" to design effective policies, as well as the benefits and limitations of technology. McGuinness and Schank not only provide public servants with a new tool to salvage the current state of problem solving in the public sector, but also pave the way for future scholars. In the next paragraphs, potential readers should find a comprehensive review of the chapters of the book, its literary contribution, and promising ideas to delve deeper into the abyss of problem solving.

The first chapter is an insightful piece of scholarship in which McGuinness and Schank provide compelling evidence that the U.S. government, in its current state, is ill-equipped to solve public problems. The authors identify numerous barriers that the government faces at each stage of the problem-solving process, the majority of which are self-imposed, that obstruct the flow of successful solutions. For instance, producers of public goods, whether government employees or contractors, are appraised based on how 'fast' they work rather than on the 'quality' of their products. The authors additionally discuss the government's tradition to solve public problems with monumental efforts; the perpetual failure to prioritize or consider the need of the user; government's longstanding union with bureaucratic *red tape*; and the idea that technology is always the answer, something history has shown to be wrong (Muller, 2018; Behn, 2008; Williams, 2003). Furthermore, McGuinness and Schank expose the government's unsecure practice of contracting public services without appropriate *planning*, i.e. the involvement of personnel cognizant of public services being contracted; constructive *competition*, i.e., to reduce service costs

and to enhance service quality; and *oversight*, i.e., to monitor contractor performance and to reimburse third-parties solely for services rendered (Auger, 1999; Prager, 1994). Consequently, as illustrated through the case study of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the U.S. government not only failed to adequately digitize USCIS's system, but also misappropriated taxpayer dollars to create an app for the benefit of IBM.

In chapter two, McGuinness and Schank make a case for the adaptation of PIT. The authors introduce their three core concepts: *design, data, and delivery*, to assist public servants in their efforts to effectively serve the public. McGuinness and Schank stress the need to *design* solutions with the end-user in mind, and with their input. Several practical case studies are offered, one of which addresses the "DHS-1171 Form," perhaps one of the most 'inhumane forms' ever crafted, due to the pervasive gap between government and its citizens. It becomes evident, upon reading the chapter, that any government project that fails to incorporate the user is missing an irreplaceable piece of the puzzle. Yet, "*the people*" are often removed from "the foreminds of the people building government services." In fact, the gap expands as one ascends the governmental hierarchy. As such, too often, *data* in the public sector is based on the expert opinions of scientists, while ignoring the concerns and functional expertise of "*the people.*" McGuinness and Schank also address the *delivery* of public services, again through illuminating stories, to criticize the government's inability to "start small, learn, improve and scale." The government's misinterpretation of the true meaning of pilot studies is a recurring theme. However, the authors offer a three-part solution to assist public servants in making a significant and lasting impact, albeit incrementally, in the lives of "*the people*" whom the public sector aims to serve.

Chapter three serves as a timely reminder that technology is not always the answer, nor a panacea, when addressing public sector problems. The authors make it abundantly clear that technology is not a silver bullet, and that if it is improperly employed, it can cause damaging effects. Moreover, the authors do an excellent job of enumerating additional factors to consider, in conjunction with technology, to produce substantial and lasting impact. After reading this chapter, it should be clear to public servants that the outcome is the most important factor to bear in mind when solving public problems. This is critical because "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets" (p. 99). And if technology is prioritized or wrongly implemented, it will not deliver desired outcomes. Although our default desire to begin with technological solutions may be hard to overcome in the digital age, the authors illustrate their point with an amusing story in which a staple, rather than the latest new app, was the "high-tech" needed to solve an important public problem.

McGuinness and Schank delve deeper into the idea that *it's not just about technology* in the fourth chapter, which concludes the first half of the book. Simply put, the authors emphasize that technology can never replace good policy design. If we recall Thomas R. Dye's conceptualization of public policy as 'whatever government chooses to do or not to do' (Dye, 1972), this chapter demonstrates that the U.S. government currently solves public problems using *merely* the educated guesses from a "remarkably small circle" of neutral policy experts. The next generation is thus urged to broaden its horizon and to include the most vulnerable of our nation, i.e., those who frequently are the beneficiaries (or victims) of public policies. A prime example transpired during the recent pandemic. Several public-school districts in the U.S. supplied their students with laptops in order to participate in online learning. However, the school districts later realized that merely supplying more technology did not bridge the existing digital divide. The inclusion of students and caregivers was a missing factor in the decision-making process. If affected families had been included, as PIT recommends, the school administrators would have quickly recognized that laptops were neither the *sole* barrier nor the solution. While some students could not attend virtual classes due to a lack of high-speed Internet access, others missed classes as they had been

put in charge of caring for their younger siblings. Therefore, although providing the students with laptops was a step in the right direction, this step neither bridged the digital divide nor subdued technological inequity. The voices of "*the people*" proved to outweigh the educated guesses of policy experts.

Unfortunately, the second half of the book, which focuses on the "evolving structure of PIT," is where the book loses steam. My criticism does not, in any way, diminish the book's contribution to the literature. It merely addresses the sequence of the chapters rather than their content. For example, the fifth chapter could easily have been the first. The detailed account of PIT's history could have preceded the intense debate concerning the barriers the public sector faces along the problem-solving spectrum. In the sixth chapter, the authors provide a demonstration of PIT in practice. This chapter includes important reminders as well as best practices to help public servants navigate the slow process through which PIT manifests change. For instance, the need to obtain support from the top of the hierarchy to successfully implement PIT; the importance of representative bureaucracy; and again, the central theme to prioritize "*the people*," since data (due to its blind spots) can only answer the *what* and not the *why*. These topics, however, could have been included in earlier sections of the book, perhaps after the introduction of the proposed remedy.

Finally, chapter seven ends with a call to action. Public servants are encouraged to employ PIT as a problem-solving tool and to share their positive experiences. The invitation stems from a noteworthy quandary. As the authors stated: "For every 100 stories of government being broken, there are many others of how it is working, but far fewer of them are told" (p. 134). However, before public servants implement PIT, several pressing concerns must be addressed. For example, the lack of a genuine and extensive debate regarding data biases that pose a threat to PIT. Furthermore, the misguided notion that inclusion first occurs at the evaluative stage, when in fact, "*the people*" should be involved in the decision-making process from the outset stage to implementation (i.e., before, during, and after policy implementation).

Notwithstanding the qualities of the book, I detected three topics that I believe were missing. First, a case study documenting an instance where PIT was not properly implemented. In many ways, such an example could avert future public servants from repeating the same mistake, or serve as a reminder that neither PIT, nor technology, is a panacea. Second, since the book primarily focuses on the U.S. government, an important reflection on the similarities and differences in the implementation of PIT by nonprofits and the government would have been helpful to the informed reader. Finally, the authors' outlook on the future relevance of PIT would have greatly benefited their argument for a proposed paradigm shift in the science of problem-solving. In other words, how far or close are we to realizing the promises of PIT? What is its expected lifespan? The next year, century, or decade?

There are two enthusiastic readers whose book recommendations are always a great source of inspiration: Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama. In this case, the 44th Democratic President of the United States, recommended *Power to the Public* to anyone, who just as he, aspire to make a *#change* in the public sector. As such, students of public administration and public policy, policymakers, street-level bureaucrats at the pinnacle of the governmental hierarchy, or those who have recently started their climb, should find *Power to the Public* advantageous in their fight to solve public problems. And, just as Thani Boskailo, an early adopter of PIT, they too will testify, "Everyone was trying to do things this one way, this old way, but here is a new way and we're going to figure it out – we're going to be the ones who solve the [public problems] that people for close to a decade have been trying to figure out, and we're going to make [citizens'] lives easier." Welcome to the new age of problem solving in the digital era!

Kasny Damas
Rutgers University, School of Public Affairs and Administration
E-mail: kd596@sn.rutgers.edu

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