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# A shift towards collaboration? Evidence from national digitalisation strategies

Maike Rackwitz, Enora Palaric

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to better understand the paradigm shift towards 'networked governance' in digitalisation discourse. Little is known about the link between digitalisation reforms and the main reform paradigms in public management studies. By analysing French and German national digitalisation strategies over time, we find that neo-Weberian, new public management, and networked governance discourses co-exist within the digital era, although networked governance rhetoric is increasingly influential. However, a closer examination reveals that this shift in discourse is unrelated to the increased integration of non-state actors in actual decision-making and service delivery.

**Keywords:** Reform paradigms; national digitalisation strategies; comparative discourse analysis; France; Germany


**Ein Plädoyer für eine kooperative(re) Verwaltung? Eine Diskursanalyse nationaler Digitalisierungsstrategien**

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag wird der postulierte Paradigmenwechsel hin zur ‚Networked Governance' im Digitalisierungsdiskurs untersucht. Es gibt nur wenig empirisches Wissen über die Verbindung zwischen Digitalisierungsreformen und den wichtigsten Reformparadigmen in der Public-Management-Forschung. Durch die vergleichende Analyse von ‚frühen' und aktuellen nationalen Digitalisierungsstrategien Frankreichs und Deutschlands stellen wir fest, dass Neo-Weberianische, New-Public-Management- und Networked-Governance-Diskurse im digitalen Zeitalter nebeneinander bestehen, obwohl wir einen zunehmenden Einfluss der Rhetorik der Networked Governance beobachten. Eine genaue Untersuchung der Strategien zeigt jedoch, dass diese Diskursverschiebung in keinem Zusammenhang mit der zunehmenden Integration nichtstaatlicher Akteure in die tatsächliche Entscheidungsfindung und Dienstleistungserbringung steht.

**Schlagworte:** Reformparadigmen; nationale Digitalisierungsstrategien; vergleichende Diskursanalyse; Frankreich; Deutschland

## 1 Introduction

Collaboration to achieve desired outcomes is largely discourse-determinative currently, especially in public sector innovation and e-government research (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Although interaction between public-public and public-private actors is hardly new, networks and partnerships are increasingly perceived as effective, legitimate governance for the digital transformation age (Osborne, 2010). One criticism of this paradigm shift is anchored in traditional public administration theory, characterised by the Weberian logic of neutral bureaucracy principles such as the hierarchy of authority, division of labour, clear responsibilities, and rules and regulations. Collaboration with non-state stakeholders contravenes cardinal administrative doctrines aiming at democratic bureaucratic accountability. Difficulties arise around participation when this 'inviolable' hierarchical boundary is challenged by dissolving authority relations through power-sharing across units or with non-state actors, placing citizens and entrepreneurs on an equal footing with bureaucratic experts. The relationship of 'networked governance' (NG), a paradigm for public-sector governance and innovation, with more traditional public governance doctrines remains relatively unexplored. Instead, academics and practitioners emphasise mutually positive collaboration effects, such as inter-organisational exchange and external stakeholder involvement (collective intelligence), public-sector digitalisation (Nograšek & Vintar, 2014), and broad public-sector innovation (de Vries & Tummers, 2018).

This paper empirically explores the relationship between new paradigms or NG approaches and more traditional doctrines by analysing how such doctrines are reflected in policymaking around digitalisation. First, we link digital-era governance concepts to collaborative governance, differentiating various coordination mechanisms in public management literature. Second, we conduct a comparative discourse analysis of two European countries with different administrative traditions and state structures (Germany and France). By coding the countries' first significant and most recent strategic documents on digitalisation, we identify potential shifts in dominant reform paradigms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This approach is guided by the following sub-questions: What role does rhetoric play in legitimating national digitalisation strategies? How is collaboration conceived, and how has this conception changed over time?

Our analysis addresses the core research question: Is there significant evidence of a paradigm shift from new public management (NPM) to NG in digitalisation discourse, or do these concepts co-exist as competing ideas and 'layered realities' (Hartley, 2005; Hyndman, 2018; Torfing et al., 2020)? We aim to provide empirically grounded insights into whether public governance is fundamentally changing in the digital era. We build on Hammerschmid et al.'s approach (forthcoming), which traces a possible paradigm shift by coding five EU countries' national digitalisation strategies and support a detailed discourse analysis of two countries to uncover rhetorical nuances.

## 2      Public sector reform paradigms and collaboration

We define collaboration as a relationship between organisational actors to achieve distinct objectives — most notably in formulating government policies or delivering public services — for which different means can be distinguished by scope, formality, and intensity. Although the three reform paradigms below serve as normative models or partial theories, they are typologies differentiating core doctrines of certain public sector reforms and their public-sector collaboration implications (Hammerschmid et al., forthcoming). We outline each paradigm.

The NPM model emphasises performance, public choice, and quality and seeks to improve the public sector by importing business concepts, techniques, and values (Hood, 1991). Dunleavy et al. (2006) synthesised the three main NPM components: disaggregation, competition, and incentivisation. NPM reforms have attracted strong criticism that such fragmentation has created a reduced sense of public-sector accountability and coordination, impairing the capacity to respond to new challenges and malignancies (Christensen & Laegreid, 2007). Many researchers have accordingly claimed that 'new public management is dead' (Dunleavy et al., 2005). This view has ushered in a 'post-NPM' governance era in which networks replace markets and hierarchies as key coordination mechanisms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This paper uses 'NG' to describe governing arrangements in which public policy and service delivery are steered by networks. These can be defined as 'structures involving multiple nodes – agencies and organisations – with multiple linkages typically working on cross-boundary collaborative activities' (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011, p. 266).

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) have identified another reform model: the neo-Weberian state (NWS), which reaffirms the state's role, administrative law, and distinct public sector rules and culture. Despite preserving the core aspects of Weberian bureaucracy, reforms seek to professionalise the civil service, orient public services more towards citizens' needs and better consider constituents' views.

We investigate whether digitalisation strategies include neo-Weberian rhetoric aimed at improving public service responsiveness towards citizens through 'the creation of a professional culture of quality and service' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 118) and hierarchical coordination rather than market-based mechanisms.

A review of the literature found a lack of comparative empirical work to test the hypothesis of cross-national convergence towards increasing collaboration through market-type networks and/or hierarchy coordination mechanisms. We compare digitalisation strategies across several administrative traditions over at least 10 years to understand whether collaboration is a growing topic of digitalisation reform and the collaboration mechanisms proposed.

This analysis enabled us to address an important debate in public administration research: Have we entered a 'post-NPM' reform era (Christensen & Laegreid, 2007), or do the three reform paradigms co-exist as competing ideas and 'layered realities' in the public discourse on digitalisation (Hyndman et al., 2018)?

## 3        Analytical framework: Linking research strands

Although most studies assume that networks are more prevalent in the information age (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012; Uppström & Lönn, 2017), there is little evidence to support this assumption.

The Digital Era Governance (DEG) framework of Margetts and Dunleavy et al. (2005; 2013) is frequently applied to understand changes in digital administrative reform contexts (Greve, 2015). These authors observe 'digital-era changes inside the government, responding to the advent of the social web, cloud computing, app development, and many other recent phenomena [move] advanced industrial societies further towards an online civilisation' (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013, p. 1).

We adopt a more holistic understanding of DEG and do not presume the loss or pre-dominance of a specific paradigm in digitalisation reform. Following Pollitt and Bouckaert, we posit that digitalisation may foster different governance types — 'an e-government that reinforces traditional bureaucratic hierarchies, …facilitates the NPM, …designed to promote networking and wider concepts of governance' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 7). According to Lodge and Gill (2011), DEG primarily refers to the potential impact of e-government sol-utions, a concept that combines emerging e-government models (Tassabehji et al., 2016). Moon (2002) further identifies several e-government stages that mirror the degree of technical finesse and interaction with stakeholders. E-government strives to challenge the limits of time and space, 'that information, communication, and transaction processes between politics, administration, citizens, and economy can be accomplished from any place, at any time and with any medium in a fast, simple, secure, and cost-effective manner' (Hansen, 2010, p. 11).

Accordingly, this paper contends that in our present digital era, information technology-based changes can potentially lead to a 'wide range of cognitive behavioural, organisational, political, and cultural changes' (Dunleavy et al., 2005, p. 468). However, we presume neither the breadth nor direction of these changes. This approach eschews a mere digitalisation focus on emerging e-government when 'technology applications are predetermined, in-stitutionalised and routinised so that it is no longer prefixed with "electronic" but principally just government' (Tassabehij et al., 2016, p. 223). We exclude discussions of disruptive IT-based government models, such as 'government as a platform', 'smart states', 'direct tech-nocracy', and 'nudging', whereby democracy, supposedly horizontal, collaborative, and grassroots, is rendered 'free from any hierarchy' and a form of government is established to 'liquidate' supposedly antiquated institutions and intervening regulatory forces (Brown et al., 2017). Such futuristic concepts would render any prominent administrative reform paradigms obsolete.

Examining how collaboration is conceptually framed in national digitalisation strategies, raises the question of which reform paradigm elements appear in digital era governance rhetoric (see *Table 1*).

Although implementation is essential for sustainable change, government policy papers (such as digitalisation strategies) act as guiding frameworks, orientations, or important im-petuses for policy change. Institutional theory indicates that discourse legitimates new ideas and organisational forms eventually 'taken for granted' in a given field (Green & Li, 2011). This viewpoint notes the discursive constitution of political reality (Vaara et al., 2015) and the power of discourse to diffuse knowledge and innovations in the public sector. Governmental

*Table 1:* Characteristics of the three reform paradigms within the digital era

| Reform paradigm | Core claim and focus | Main coordination mechanisms | Type of collaboration |
|---|---|---|---|
| New Public Management | Make government more efficient and 'consumer responsive' by injecting business-like methods <br><br> Focus on intra-organisational management | Market-type mechanisms such as performance indicators and competitive contracts | Internal and external <br><br> Vertical and horizontal |
| Neo-Weberian-state | Modernise the state apparatus so that it becomes more professional, efficient and responsive to citizens. <br><br> Focus on the specific role and culture of the state | Authority exercised through a disciplined hierarchy of impartial officials | Internal <br><br> Vertical |
| Networked Governance | Make government more effective and legitimate by including a wider range of actors in policymaking and implementation. <br><br> Focus on inter-organisational governance | Networks of, and partnership between, stakeholders | External <br><br> Horizontal |

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Margetts and Dunleavy (2013), Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), and Osborne (2006).

actors are subject to isomorphic pressures and perceive largely diffused ideas as modern and legitimate (Beckert, 2010). They further diffuse these ideas through translation into discourse and practices (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Moreover, governmental actors have the resources to dominate the discourse on public-sector digitalisation. Despite conflicting discourse, digitalisation strategies act as reference documents, which help identify the most legitimately perceived paradigms, as well as discursive legitimation strategies for change within public sector organisations (Hyndman et al., 2018). Thus, our analysis focuses on claims regarding the challenges, goals, institutional frameworks, and instruments of strategic documents to identify the extent to which collaboration is perceived as legitimate in public-sector digitalisation.

The effectiveness and outcomes of administrative collaborative behaviour, while important, are outside the scope of our research. Instead, we focus on the government's deployment of rhetorical legitimation within these strategies.

## 4      Method and data

For the core analysis, we combine theoretical literature and empirical cases based on a cross-country comparison of cultural and historical characteristics and administrative traditions.

### Selection of data sources

Discourse analysis uses interpretative procedures while striving to contextualise texts into higher-level discussions and power constellations (Keller, 2011). Discourse analysis begins with defining the object of analysis or ideal type—we outline such discourses in Section 2.

Discourses are often expressed in codified constitutional requirements, laws, or statutory guidelines, encompassing formal rules and informal norms. Therefore, we use central governments' digitalisation strategies to reveal potential divergences and dynamics in the narratives of collaboration in the digitalisation context.

The selection criteria were chosen to increase comparability and informative value. We concluded that strategies strictly relate to public administration digitalisation, rather than address the country's overall digitalisation. Additionally, the documents should refer to the general public sector realm and not to a specific public service. Ideally, such documents should be issued by the central government and not by a specific ministry or agency. They should be part of an overall digitalisation strategy that does not focus on specific innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) (e. g., documents only addressing Artificial Intelligence). To reveal dynamics over time, we chose the most recent relevant strategies adopted in France and Germany, compared with strategies adopted at least 10 years earlier.

### Questionnaire

To provide sufficient background information on the strategies, we completed a questionnaire to better understand the context of the strategy elaboration, its goals, and the institutional framework and instruments designed for its implementation. It asked: How is (internal/external) collaboration perceived? Which strategies foster/hamper collaboration? Which actors are involved or addressed, and how has this changed over time, if at all? We also considered additional terms, such as 'coordination, cooperation', 'joined-up governance', 'network governance', and 'co-production'. For the empirical analysis, we considered claims regarding the goals, elaboration, and implementation of the documents to link our findings to major reform discourses.

### Case selection

To substantiate our claims, we investigated national variance by considering various 'starting points' for Europe's different public sectors. We selected two countries: France and Germany. Despite their similarities, these countries represent different ways to collaborate inside and outside the state. Comparative studies classify both as NWS and late NPM adopters (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In federal Germany, power is shared between central and local govern-

ments. Conversely, France is a traditionally centralised state that recently implemented piecemeal decentralisation reforms, resulting in very complex relationships across government levels. Although both countries could be considered neo-corporatist, France has a traditionally stronger direct dialogue with citizens, because social dialogue with corporations is not as broadly accepted as in Germany. Regarding digital affairs, both countries could be classified as 'medium performers' from a European perspective (DESI, 2018); however, Germany has relatively few e-government users (39 % of the population, 25th in the EU).

Next, we present key facts for each country and a short history of national digitalisation reforms. Our analysis covers the 10 years leading up to 2017, thereby including developments from the introduction to the replacement of the four discussed strategies (see *Table 2* for the strategies' key characteristics). French and German native speakers conducted the research.

*Table 2:* Key characteristics of selected strategies

| Country | Name of strategy | Date of adoption | Timespan covered | Author |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **France** | 1. Plan de développement stratégique de l'administration électronique (*Strategic Plan for the development of electronic PA*) | 2003 | 2004 – 2007 | State Secretariat for State Reform |
| | 2. Action publique 2022- Notre stratégie pour la transformation de l'action publique (*Public Action 2022. Our strategy for the transformation of public action*) | 2018 | 2018 – 2022 | Interministerial Committee for the transformation of the state |
| **Germany** | 1. BundOnline 2005 (*Online Federation 2005*) | 2001 | 2002 – 2005 | Ministry of the Interior |
| | 2. Digitale Verwaltung 2020 (*Digital Public Administration 2020*) | 2014 | 2014 – 2020 | Ministry of the Interior |

*Source:* Authors' own illustration.

## France

Traditionally, France has pursued distinctive thinking and rhetoric about administrative reforms, particularly regarding decentralisation and modernisation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). France's agenda has been dominated by decentralisation and deconcentration reforms since the early 1980 s. Although local governments have gained more competency and autonomy, new coordination challenges have emerged. France is now characterised by high 'institutional density', competence overlaps, and competition between different institutional players (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014).

Another important trend of French administrative reforms since the mid-1990 s was inspired by the NPM movement, although selectively so (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), focusing more on overhauling management practices than on privatisation and agencification (Bezes & Jeannot, 2016). A 2001 budget reform known as 'LOLF' standardised performance man-

agement in the French public administration. Similarly, the 2008 economic crisis led to a series of reforms, such as the launch of the General Review of Public Policies (RGPP)[1]. Under this programme, many state organisations were merged to cut costs and address coordination challenges arising from deconcentration. As a 'moderniser', France maintains the core features of Weberian bureaucracy while adapting NPM-inspired reform ideas to fit the national context (Cole & Glyn, 2005).

Public sector digitalisation has been a key area of reform since France's first national digitalisation strategy was published in 1998 (*Programme d'action gouvernemental pour la société d'information*, PAGSI). Digitalisation is strongly linked to state reform in France, with numerous initiatives to reduce the administrative burden. Since 2010, we have noted the increasingly influential idea of the 'state as a platform' (Gouvernement, 2022), driven by policymakers and top officials of the State Directorate for Digitalisation and ICT (DINSIC), who are also digital economy entrepreneurs (Pezziardi & Verdier, 2017). Several initiatives encourage collaborative innovation to build an 'agile state', particularly the incubator of 'state startups' beta.gouv.fr and the API publication api.gouv.fr of existing online services. There is a growing debate among top French officials, most notably within the Council of State (Conseil d'État, 2017), about the future of public services and the state's role in an era of 'platform economy'. Some argue for an 'uberisation of public services', to adapt to the competition between digital and existing public services. However, we question the extent to which such initiatives in the upper state administration have affected the traditionally weak degree of innovation across public sector organisations in France, as measured by the Innobarometer platform (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, there is no evidence of increasing collaboration or co-production among citizens, and French officials perceive previous transparency and democratic participation reforms to have been ineffective (Bezes & Jeannot, 2016).

Germany

Germany has implemented diverse administrative reform packages in recent decades (Wollmann, 2017). Some academics see a capacity for renewal (Hammerschmid & Oprisor, 2016; Hood & Lodge, 2005) in Germany, a 'laggard' reluctant to introduce structural innovations (OECD, 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In the 'lean state' (*Schlanker Staat*) and then the 'activating and enabling state' discourse of the early 1990 s, Germany's NPM movement, *Neues Steuerungsmodell* (NSM), was established as a counter-model to classical (Weberian) control. Similar to France, NPM reforms were only selectively adopted, partly because of Germany's system of 'cooperative federalism' (Grasse, 2011). In this system cooperation between different levels of government is essential, and decision-making and reforms become more complex or less manageable. Other fundamental barriers to radical reform include cross-departmental autonomy, institutional veto actors, and the lack of central mechanisms to drive reforms (Hood & Lodge, 2005).

Several European digitalisation indices (DESI, eGovernment Benchmark) highlight German reluctance to reform. Although recently improved, Germany's ranking is mediocre on international digitalisation benchmarks (eGovernment MONITOR 2018, 2018), likely due to a long-term structural deficit in administrative digitialisation (Fromm et al., 2015; Nationaler Normenkontrollrat, 2018). Furthermore, digitalisation advocates recognise the need to catch

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1    Révision générale des politiques publiques.

up, considering the development and evolution of a national digitalisation strategy important. The 'BundOnline' implementation plan (*BundOnline 2005*), drafted in 2000, was followed by the government's 'Digital Administration 2020' (*Digitale Verwaltung*) in 2014 (Hammerschmid & Oprisor, 2016). The Online Access Act (*Onlinezugangsgesetz* (OZG)), envisaged as transformative, was adopted in 2017 to become legally binding in 2022. Furthermore, resources from a new stimulus package and demand for online services under COVID-19 are being considered to promote the German public sector's digital transformation.

Given that our focus is strategic documents issued between 2001 and 2018 (date of adoption), many of these recent developments are less relevant for our specific research purpose. However, highlighting how these tendencies are reflected in documents' narrative, and identifying which elements of reform paradigms are used in their rhetoric will inform the current debate. While none of the four selected strategies is legally binding, requiring legal or administrative steps for enactment, they serve as critical vision documents in providing direction and driving policy change.

# 5 National strategies and reform paradigms: A shift in argumentation and justification?

In this section, we first analyse the compatibility of each strategy's rhetorical elements with the outlined reform paradigms, focusing on the years surrounding the date of adoption and their timespan (see *Table 2*). We then examine changes over time. Finally, the results are juxtaposed and discussed in a cross-country comparison.

## French strategies: Plan stratégique de l'administration électronique 2004–2007 and Programme concerté de développement de l'administration numérique territoriale 2018–2020

### History and formulation of the documents

France adopted its first digitalisation strategy early on. Lionel Jospin's left-wing government launched its Government Action Programme for the Information Society[2] in 1997, under Jacques Chirac's right-wing presidency.[3] Despite the launch in 2000 of a single portal website 'service-public.fr', electronic public administration use remained limited, due to low digital skills and limited access to computers and the Internet. This explains why, during his successful 2002 presidential campaign, Chirac insisted on reducing the 'digital divide' and preserving 'human interactions' (JDN, 2019) with civil servants, rather than digitalising public services. He launched the RE/SO 2007 programme for a digital republic in the information society (*Pour une RÉpublique numérique dans la SOciété de l'information*) in November 2002. Despite focusing on infrastructure and IT skills, the government aimed to build an electronic administration by creating the Agency for the Development of the Elec-

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2    Programme d'action gouvernemental pour la société de l'information (PAGSI).
3    'Cohabitation' – where the French president does not have a parliamentary majority and appoints a government from the opposition – is unusual in the French Fifth Republic.

tronic Administration (ADAE), which consulted with stakeholders. With several ministries, the government prepared the Strategy for the Development of the Electronic Administration 2004–2007 (PSAE). This strategy proposed 140 measures to make all administrative proceedings available by telephone or online by 2006. This goal was ambitious, as only 15% of these services were available telephonically or online in 2004 (Sénat, 2004). The Senate's 2004 report highlighted the paradox: although only 30% of the population used the Internet weekly, uptake of digital public services was high (Sénat, 2004).

Since the Electronic Administration (ADELE) programme, every French president has launched his own digitalisation strategy. However, remarkable continuity persists despite political changes. The Joint Development Programme of Local Digital Public Administration for 2018–2020 (*Programme de développement concerté de l'administration numérique territoriale:* DCANT), adopted under President Emmanuel Macron, is an expansion of the first DCANT strategy, adopted under President François Hollande for 2015–2017. The 2018–2020 DCANT strategy reflects priorities outlined by the National Conference of Local Governments (*Conférence Nationale des Territoires-CNET*), where local and central governments, the parliament, and other public sector organisations have gathered every semester since July 2017 to discuss common initiatives. Although the central government adopted an overarching strategy to reform the state sector (*Action Publique 2022*), including initiatives to digitalise public administration, the DCANT strategy aims to improve digitalisation synergies across all levels of government.

Challenges and goals

The 2004 ADELE strategy, 'Strategy 1f'[4], mentions the public sector's digitalisation challenges, the development of accessible, user-friendly digital public services, internal coordination and interoperability within the administration, the construction of digital archives, and budgetary challenges linked to essential information technology (IT) investments, equipment, and software for public administration. The document focuses on data protection and IT security. Unlike ADELE, the most recent Strategy (2f) does not emphasise digitalisation challenges. Instead, it notes the nation's solidarity and cohesion (i.e., ensuring the same level of digital public services across local governments); the construction of easily accessible, safe, and entirely digital public services; and the need to protect fundamental rights and freedoms in digital administrative processes.

The goals stated in Strategy 1f relate to the NWS paradigm with some NPM features. 'Trust' and 'security'/'data protection' are two key objectives. Attention to users' needs and modernising administrative processes are two other broad objectives related to the NWS and NPM paradigms. Some goals relate more specifically to NPM, particularly improving efficiency using performance measurement and performance contracts or quality charters. Contracting out to the private sector for IT equipment and software design is a strategy (NPM) feature, although the document mentions the need to preserve the independence and continuity of public services, as well as the security of the public administration (NWS).

Conversely, Strategy 2f mostly promotes goals related to NG. The core aim is to create a 'platform republic' by sharing resources including data across government levels through co-production and collaborative governance. Collaboration, though central to the strategy, mostly

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4   To simplify, the initial strategies will be hereinafter substituted by Strategy 1 f/Strategy 1 g and the most recent ones by Strategy 2 f/Strategy 2 g.

implies vertical and horizontal collaboration between state actors. Strategy 2f aims to create partnerships with non-state actors and promotes the hiring of private-sector entrepreneurs on short missions of general interest (statute of 'entrepreneur d'intérêt général'). However, 'platform republic' is understood as creating synergies, sharing resources and knowledge, and ensuring interoperability and information exchange across administrations at different government levels. This contrasts with the concept of 'government as a platform' (O'Reilly, 2010) that originally inspired the French government, which conceives governments as open platforms that allow innovation. Besides the NG paradigm, we found features of the NWS and NPM models. The strategy reaffirms the role of the state as a regulator, guardian of fundamental rights and freedoms, and public services provider (NWS) and promotes the cost efficiency of public services and the rationalisation of resources (NPM).

Although different paradigms co-exist in the discourse on France's digitalisation goals, we did notice a discourse shift. In 2004, paradigms focused mostly on NWS with some features of NPM. More recently, discourse is predominantly NG, alongside a change in method rather than an overhaul of state centrality. Behind the rhetoric of co-production, Strategy 2f aims primarily to better coordinate and improve synergies across government levels; it does not open decision-making processes or service delivery to non-state actors.

## Institutional framework and instruments

Regarding envisioned implementation, Strategies 1f and 2f differ in the type of institutional framework and instruments planned for monitoring and evaluation. Strategy 1f mixes elements of the three reform paradigms but uses hierarchy and market-based mechanisms as coordinating devices (NWS and NPM models). The main institutional framework to implement the first strategy is 'concertation', a formal, structured consultation process with stakeholders. The strategy aims to build different working groups with other administrations to coordinate implementation measures. This remains a hierarchical process, as the central government retains its decision-making power and disregards non-state actors (NWS). Furthermore, monitoring and evaluating activities are centralised, and criteria to evaluate the strategy are predefined within it (NWS). However, the process is coordinated by the ADAE (NPM), whose financial, technical, and material support to other public institutions is defined via contract (NPM). Although the strategy mentions a draft law (NWS), the planned implementation relies mostly on soft instruments such as partnership agreements between central and local organisations (NPM). Some instruments relate to the NG paradigm but are not central to strategy implementation. The document promotes user-satisfaction surveys and the experimentation of initiatives by local governments and users, particularly the selection of 100 citizen volunteers to test the 'mon-service-public.fr' portal.

With Strategy 2f, however, networks and collaboration are central to the planned implementation process. The strategy's governance is shared among stakeholders. The state coordinates, but participation in strategic initiatives is voluntary. The programme should be monitored and regularly updated following discussions within the National Partnership Committee. The strategy focuses more on communication and stakeholder information than on top-down constraining initiatives. No evaluation activities were planned in this document. Such a loose institutional implementation framework is a corollary of the concepts of the 'agile state' and collaboration, as they imply an adaptation of goals to changing contexts and a flat hierarchy.

The difference between Strategies 1f and 2f may be partially explained by a paradigm shift from NPM and NWS to NG over time. However, the results may be biased by the strategies' various scopes: While Strategy 1f focused mostly on the central level administration, implying a hierarchical implementation process and mere inter-ministerial coordination, Strategy 2f aims to organise synergies between central and local governments. As the central government is not authorised to enforce digitalisation projects within local administrations, it relies on collaboration, incentives, and knowledge/resource sharing rather than top-down decision-making.

Terms associated with 'collaboration'

When analysing the language used to describe collaboration and collaborative arrangements in the two strategies, we observe a broader diversity of words in Strategy 2f (24 categories of words) than in Strategy 1f (14 categories of words).[5] The 2004 strategy predominantly mentioned 'pool'/'pooling' resources (32), indicating the influence of cost-efficiency (NPM). Other words reflect market-based mechanisms, particularly 'PPPs' (6), 'contractualisation' (3), and 'agreements' (2). The authors used 'group/working group' 20 times and 'consultation' and 'consulted' 18 times (concertation), referring to the top-down consultation and monitoring process adopted to implement the strategy (NWS). Finally, 'exchanging' (28) information and data across administrations was prevalent throughout the document.

The most frequently-used word groups in 2f are 'share' (34), and 'common' (13), referring to low (sharing knowledge and resources, NG/NWS/NPM) and high (sharing decision-making and governance, NG) degrees of collaboration. The strategy makes frequent use of 'consultation' and 'consulted' (concertation), demonstrating that traditional consultative processes with stakeholders co-exist with collaborative decision-making. Finally, the new concept of 'platform' (9) is central to the new strategy, showing the NG paradigm's influence.

The difference in the word choice to express collaboration indicates a shift from a mix of NPM and NWS in the first strategy to NG in the second. While 'public-private partnerships', 'contractualisation', and 'partnership agreements' (NPM) have disappeared in the newest strategy, words reflecting the NG paradigm such as 'platform' or 'co-construction' have appeared. Moreover, the shift from 'pool'/'pooling' to 'share'/'sharing' may reflect a shift from the idea of vertical and horizontal integration (NWS) to that of sharing knowledge, resources, and power within a network (NG).

In summary, we observed a temporal shift from a predominantly NWS paradigm with important NPM features to the NG paradigm. Despite the NG paradigm's emergence in the most recent strategy, the three paradigms coexist as layered realities in the discourse on France's digitalisation. Furthermore, the shift in coordination mechanisms from predominantly hierarchical or market-based mechanisms to networks remains largely internal. The most recent strategy uses NG language (e.g., 'co-construction', 'platform'), but users and other non-state actors are relatively absent from both strategies. The discourse regarding non-state actors has not significantly evolved from 2004 to 2018; non-state actors are mostly described as public service users (NWS) rather than as co-producers. This may reflect the second strategy's goal of creating synergies across government levels and not with external actors. Nevertheless, in traditionally centralised France, this trend marks an evolution towards

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5    The difference in the number of words related to collaboration (159 for the first strategy and 121 for the second strategy) is not meaningful, as the number of pages in the two documents varies significantly.

less hierarchical implementation of digitalisation initiatives. Central and local governments can co-design a digitalisation strategy and bottom-up innovation and experimentation are strongly promoted. Such attention to creating synergies between central and local governments, as well as among local governments could reflect the coordination failures that emerged following the different waves of decentralisation and deconcentration reform. However, this study does not assess the extent to which the co-design of public policies within a network of different government levels goes beyond digitalisation policies. We hypothesise that NG is more predominant in digitalisation than in more traditional and sovereign areas of public administration, where governance innovations may be less pervasive.

## German strategies: BundOnline 2005 and Digitale Verwaltung 2020

### History and formulation of the documents

Even as commercial Internet use burgeoned in Germany during the late 1990 s, the public sector remained reluctant. The 'Cabinet Schröder I', Germany's first 'Red-Green' coalition, launched a project group named 'BundOnline 2005' in 2000, intended as an e-government counterpart to e-commerce. Unlike his predecessor, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was strongly committed to accelerated digitalisation, and he specifically promoted the creation of a federal intranet, emphasising increased information access, which he considered indispensable for political opinion-making.

More than a decade later, digitalisation and e-government had become the main priorities on the government's reform agenda. Efficient, user-friendly, and powerful administrative collaborations, accompanied by a general public-sector downsizing, emerged as ever-present necessities. Despite changing party coalitions under Chancellor Merkel, government remained relatively stable. The corresponding Coalition Agreement 'Shaping Germany's Future' stated, 'We want a "digital Germany" that is responsive to citizens' needs. To this end, we intend to launch the programme "Digital Public Administration 2020" (Digitale Verwaltung 2020) to set out binding standards for nationwide digitalisation of public administration' (Große Koalition, 2013). Covering 2014–2020, the Federal Cabinet's 'Digitale Verwaltung 2020' was mainly intended to implement the e-government law passed in 2013 and comply with the 2013 G8 Open Data Charta (BMI, 2014; COCOPS, 2016). Its predecessor 'BundOnline 2005' covered 2002–2005. For both documents, their formulation processes remained exclusive, based on interviews and surveys in consultation with experts and individual departments.

### Challenges and goals

The main issues identified in both German strategies are inefficiency, lack of coordination, and isolated digital solutions—all of which had led to insufficient digital public services and dissatisfied users. These challenges exacerbated in Strategy 2 g by demographic changes, a continual depletion of resources, a novel pace of innovation, and increasingly complex tasks that required an intelligent digitalisation without media discontinuity and within process chains. Strategy 1 g presents a clear concern about international competitiveness and increasing Germany's attractiveness as a business location. In contrast, Strategy 2 g highlights

societal challenges resulting *from* new technologies and refocuses on the public sector's attractiveness as an employer.

In Strategy 1 g, the promoted goals cannot be assigned directly to a certain paradigm. A strong reliance on NPM approaches can be observed; however, some familiar NWS elements are included and may also determine the strategic focus. An assessment of the market segments is necessary to determine needs, before the conceptual phase of the strategy (NPM). In the strategy's foreground are modernisation, bureaucracy reduction (NPM), and authorities as large leading organisations (NWS). Additionally, strong service orientations, analogous to private industry, are intended to manage e-business processes efficiently, following demand, development, and trends in industry (NPM). These primarily focus on confidentiality, integrity, and authenticity in communication and information provision—aspects that ought to strengthen the state (NWS) and simultaneously concentrate on the customer as a communication partner. Although collaboration among ministries is promoted, the end-user is neither understood as an important impetus nor given opportunities to participate. Rather, an exclusive circle with strong leadership expertise is assumed (NWS/NPM).

Overall, Strategy 2 g seems deliberately dominated by the NG theme, as the wider concept of collaboration underlies the entire strategy as key to successful IT implementation. Nevertheless, NWS and NPM elements are also apparent. Citizen and employee empowerment and well-being are central themes throughout the document (NG), and both groups are portrayed as relevant assets (NPM) for efficient and improved service (NPM/NWS). Conversely, strong authoritarian leadership is deemed essential to achieving goals (NWS). In the long term, however, when using ICT to establish public service delivery, collaborative business processes remain crucial (NG), while a focus on 'business' (NPM) persists.

Activating a heterogeneous group of stakeholders (internal and external) by setting up various measures to enable direct feedback, ultimately reflects NG elements. However, this alleged involvement only allows the expression of opinions, while decision-making is exclusively maintained by the sovereign authority—in this case, a consortium of the central government and individual departments (NWS/NPM). Accessibility (inter alia in compliance with Open Data criteria) might be paramount in Strategy 2 g (NG); however, this intention primarily enables information transfer and does not automatically include multiple actors in the process (NWS). Increased competitiveness is considered desirable (NPM) but is not described in detail.

### Institutional framework and instruments

Regarding the extent to which the institutional framework and instruments used for the strategies relate to the reform paradigms, different strands can be observed in Strategy 1 g, which urges enhanced centralised coordination and recognition of problems resulting from a lack of directive competence. Accordingly, stricter regulations are demanded, and collaboration between stakeholders must follow certain rules and procedures (NWS). The proposed steering instance relies on top-down measures, and it proclaims guidelines and recommendations while emphasising the decision-making powers of the individual departments in service provision. It also encourages the consideration of outsourcing or external advice in areas with limited in-house expertise (NPM). To assess the extent to which NG elements can be found at a subordinate level, more detailed information about the actual implementation process in the individual departments is necessary. NWS elements are prominent in the

monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. Even though the initiative's final evaluation was made publicly accessible, the monitoring and evaluation processes were executed by a dependent governmental coordination body.

Strategy 2 g leans towards NG; nonetheless, other reform elements are plentiful. In the foreground is a coordinated economic approach based on cross-departmental solutions (NPM). For planned implementation, targeted control and monitoring are executed by an exclusive circle with high expertise (NWS), while various IT-based measures are proposed to convey transparency and trustworthiness and enable the expression of wishes and opinions (NG). While the strategy primarily makes recommendations (NPM), it continues to emphasise compliance with current jurisprudence. It also highlights the limited scope of action within the law, which hinders accelerated digitalisation and requires necessary legal adjustments. Moreover, the strategy has defined several standards that are mandatory for all federal levels (NWS), including several actors in the negotiation process, from both federal and state levels (NG). The relevance of the local level as a primary implementation arena is acknowledged and, it is repeatedly named alongside the federal and state governments (NG). The strategy stresses the autonomous responsibility of each department to address citizens and companies in as user-friendly a manner as possible (NPM). Nevertheless, the prioritised topics remain focused on NG-related aspects. Additionally, as in Strategy 1 g, more detailed information about implementation in individual departments is necessary to assess the extent to which NG elements can be found at a subordinated level.

The framework and instruments for monitoring and evaluating cannot be related to a single reform paradigm and differ by phase. The respective project managing departments oversee the implementation of milestones monitoring. They then supply the necessary information to the central dependent steering instance (NWS), which subsequently makes parts of it available to the public online (NG) for project financial control. Moreover, all users (citizens, businesses, and municipalities) are asked to provide feedback based on the periodically distributed information, thereby 'participating' in the evaluation process (NG/NWS). The strategy also mandates the determination and reporting on the implementation status of the E-Government Act in 2016, 2018, and 2020 regarding the projects mentioned. This regular evaluation corresponds to performance measurement, which can be regarded as an NPM approach.

Terms associated with 'collaboration'

Within the context of quantitative textual elements, two aspects in line with the French case appear which allow conclusions about the thematic prioritisation of the strategies: the shifts in word frequencies and the changing diversity of terms associated with collaboration. In Strategy 1 g, 10 terms are used 99 times; in Strategy 2 g, 18 terms are mentioned 164 times. Terms such as networked/network, sharing/division of labour, collaboration, or interplay do not appear in Strategy 1 g, which suggests a much more intertwined and heterogeneous mix of actors (NG). The number of terms such as co-operation/co-operative, joint, or participation/participants/participate more than triples in Strategy 2 g, while coordination/coordinate and interoperability/interoperable decrease slightly (NG/NWS). Particularly notable in Strategy 2 g is the six-fold decline in the mention of science as an external partner, as well as the threefold increase in 'citizen'. Furthermore, the economy is included half as often. All of these

changes illustrate a shift in relevance from elite to more basic democratic expertise (NG), while the public domain seems to replace the private as a standard-setting instance (NWS).

No pronounced administrative 'party political line' was announced during this period despite changes in Germany's governing parties. The constitutional state did not face radical challenges due to the limited realisation of reform ideas or any common federal party line. Major content-related shifts appear in both strategies' priorities. In Strategy 1 g, the departments are primarily understood as a collective, whereas the individual employee is also emphasised in Strategy 2 g. Not only are users' high-quality requirements new, but so are those of employees. The awareness that a healthy climate leads to efficiency and better work outcomes is also new. The public sector realises the need to raise its attractiveness as an employer, while the notion of competitiveness diminishes. In Strategy 2 g, a clear holistic approach is thus chosen to create a fundamental cultural change (NWS/NG). The theme of inclusiveness is not only mentioned but dominates Strategy 2 g. Additionally, many terms are associated with the concept of collaboration (NG).

Furthermore, similar to Strategy 1 g, there is a strong association with regulations (NWS), yet existing legislation is considered to be somewhat insufficient. In Strategy 2 g, a direct promise appears to expand potential influence opportunities for all stakeholders (NG), but the actual steering and decision-making power remains–as in Strategy 1 g–with the central authorities. The central government thus still holds the reins (NWS).

The technical and organisational approaches remain essentially the same, and Strategy 1 g proclaims the intention to involve all federal levels as well. Strikingly, however, the perception of the external actor as a customer has shifted; contributors are now considered to be an important impetus for further public service improvement (NG). Digitalisation is understood as indispensable in both documents; however, in the more recent one, it can only be realised through collaborative business processes involving well-respected and satisfied users and employees (via a so-called community approach; NPM/NG).

In summary, the formulation of the first and second strategies seems primarily oriented towards current socially legitimate trends. Different rhetorical elements of reform co-exist in both documents. In the first, a mix of NPM and NWS elements set the agenda. Conversely, NG dominates in Strategy 2 g, while still adhering to elements of 'earlier' reform, suggesting a fundamental narrative shift from NPM to NG. However, the planned measures to be implemented, manifest neo-Weberian reform elements. Neither strategy fundamentally questions the construct state in its structure and power of disposition–according to the NG idea, this would enable the horizontal involvement of heterogeneous actors in policymaking and implementation. However, considering the strength of German municipal autonomy, these implications could create a biased impression; both documents were issued and expounded by the central government, excluding other federal levels, and thus, permit little conclusion about local reform tendencies.

## Conclusions and future research agendas

In both countries, we observe a shift from a discourse predominantly influenced by the NWS and NPM paradigms in the first strategies to a prevailing NG paradigm in the second. Al-

though NG was absent from the first two strategies and permeated the discourse in the second ones, we can hardly claim that the traditional Weberian administration (albeit modernised) and the NPM are dead. Accordingly, our analysis suggests that the three paradigms co-exist as 'layered realities' or hybrids in the governance of the digital age. While this may not be surprising and confirms previous analyses (Hartley, 2005; Hyndman, 2018; Torfing et al., 2020), it puts the purpose and meaning of NG as a prevalent reform into perspective.

Weberian public administration is not supplanted by NPM or NG and remains highly relevant. In the French and German digitalisation strategies, the state reaffirms its central role as a regulator and protector of fundamental rights in digital era governance, particularly in the key areas of security and data protection. Furthermore, NG rhetoric does not appear synonymous with the increased inclusion of non-state actors in the decision-making process or service delivery. In Germany, despite a rhetorical shift to enhanced inclusiveness, the federal government failed to facilitate open decision-making. Public administration remains sceptical of structural changes beyond rhetorical pledges. Much has been written, little has been done. In Germany, questions remain about which sovereign tasks are suitable for collaboration, to what extent 'open' governmental and administrative action are compatible with public secrecy (*Amtsgeheimnis*), and what the relationship between the often-praised collective intelligence and political leadership should be (Wewer, 2013). In France, the rhetoric has shifted towards NG, but networks foster internal collaboration across levels of government, rather than co-decision or co-production with external stakeholders. Furthermore, compared to Germany, the principle of 'open government' appears to be more broadly accepted. The focus is on the future of public services in a platform economy, where governments need to compete with and adapt to private-sector collaborative services.

In summary, while the two countries differ in certain respects, we find an overall shift in policy talk toward NG, likely reflecting new norms and values. This shift in rhetoric, however, does not necessarily reflect the actual implementation of digitalisation policies, for which elements of NPM and NWS continue to be envisaged. These findings complement Hammerschmid et al. (forthcoming) in that a closer analysis of two strategies' rhetoric reveals a reinforcement of the NG paradigm at the discursive level. However, the means of implementation promote more traditional features of administration and a recentralisation of power, manifesting the NG paradigm in the digital era as a normative proclamation with less 'immediate instrumental purpose' (20). This, as indicated, applies irrespective of cultural or political tradition.

Our analysis also indicates a need for research on the link between collaboration and digitalisation. We considered collaboration both as an input and an outcome of the digitalisation process, and our questionnaire did not distinguish between the two. Further work is needed to clarify the extent to which public-sector collaboration is facilitated by digitalisation and/or to what extent digitalisation requires increased collaboration among state and/or non-state actors.

Furthermore, beyond the discourse in digitalisation strategies, we need to understand to what extent the public sector's digitalisation implementation process is a collaborative one. Another interesting research question is how novel collaborative approaches co-exist with hierarchical or market-based mechanisms in service delivery. Does the persistence of NWS and NPM hinder establishing truly collaborative governance, or are these paradigms complementary through their discrete purposes? This is an important point and a key limitation of

the study–we still know relatively little about the actual changes in public governance practice in the digital era.

Accordingly, it is imperative to expand the limited corpus to future digitalisation strategies and also consider their implementation dynamics. Although the current strategies emphasise the benefits of cooperation for ICT matters, collaborative governance in the literature has already been ascribed to a post-euphoric phase (Straßheim, 2013), not least because the dynamics of collaboration often remain a 'black box' (Diaz-Kope et al., 2015). Regarding both intra- and inter-sectoral relations, struggles faced by stakeholders during the collaboration process–such as power asymmetries, micro-politics, inefficiencies, and unintended side effects–remain insufficiently debated. Therefore, it is unclear how the narrative of national policy documents will change in the course of practising collaborative governance approaches.

Reflecting on this, the analysis suggests that the digital age may provide its own 'twist' on the coevolution of existing paradigms. If, for example, the normative requirement for NG remains and in practice 'code is the new law', then the hierarchical paradigm also has external dimensions at its core, as service users and private organisations must comply with the ever-increasing codified set of rules when collaborating with government. As such, it is precisely these tendencies that should be the object of future research.

## Funding

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