

'Farewell to single point solution' - Be an active player in digital transformation or become grand in absence

Society is in a continuous transformation: from a local industrial economy to a global digital one. As a result, a new economic landscape is beginning to emerge in which a relatively few large, concentrated (and sometimes disruptive) players will provide infrastructure, platforms, and services that support many fragmented, niche players. In the first article of this series, examples like Google and Airbnb were used to illustrate the global scale, speed and impact of digital transformation. But where is the government in this story? Can or should government take a leading role, a regulating role or maybe (also) an executing role?

This transformation has a huge impact on our society and also government. However, government has demonstrated not always to be able to be part of this transformation, in service dimension, content dimension and time dimension.

Service dimension:

Digitization gives the opportunity to customize towards a society that is increasingly individualizing. Nowadays, government still often uses the 'white mans'-letter to approach all individuals. The most important driving force behind this approach is the principle of equality, which entails communicating and treating all citizens in the same way.

In essence this is a respectable starting point when living in a traditional society that is not challenged with digitalization, innovation and continuous change. In changing society, this equality principle actually makes all citizens unequal. Sometimes it can even have the opposite effect. For example, if non-informed unhappy citizens opinion are valued equally with those of scientists or experts. The fact that all individuals have the equal right to say what they think does not necessarily equal the value of what they say. The Brexit referendum for example showed the power of (incomplete and alternative) 'facts' on both sides, the indigestible effect of overwhelming amounts of information, manipulation and the power of media. This results in threats to the sovereign position of a trustworthy, stable and transparent service delivery of government.

In the Netherlands, the first step in a digital service dimension is already been taken. All correspondence of the government is digital available in one government-account each citizen has. These are only the digital PDF-versions of the formal hardcopy-mailings.

However, this doesn't tackle another problem in the service dimension of the government: too complex legislation and regulations for (some of) the target groups to even use the specific government service. Example given, people who live in poverty cannot find their ways in the (equally) complex regulations for each individual.

Content dimension:

Government is driven from a single point solution reflex. Single point, because it is operating solitary and opportunities further in the chain aren't (substantially) explored. For the past decades, governments acted as problem solvers, aiming to tackle society's most pressing issues by applying policies, rules and fiscal instruments. Whilst not denying the added value of these traditional interventions, in today's era of technical & social innovations, fiscal constraints, political gridlock and shifting of societal problems, some say we can no longer turn to government alone. There is a need for a more open-minded and innovative approach to our increasingly complex societal challenges. How can government use more 'brain'power upfront in the policy solution making process? It's important that insights from other players on the field then government itself are known and

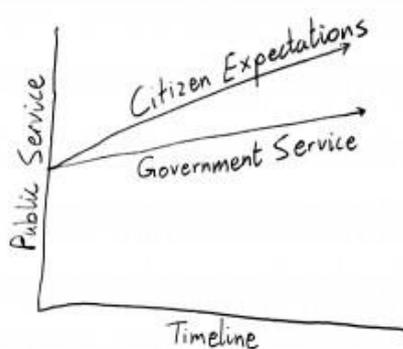
considered, or even out-of-the-box ideas from individuals find their ways in the policy making process. To combine the 'brain'power of the government itself with the 'brain'power of other players in society can make a huge impact in creating adequate solutions.

Time dimension:

Large organizations, like the government, are not agile enough to adapt fast enough to this transformation. Maybe because traditionally the government consists of risk-averse organisations which are judged by public opinion for a transparent, accountable and effective use of tax-payers money. As a result, Government involves itself consequently too late in discussions regarding digitization, upcoming technology and the (for example ethical) societal discussion that emerge simultaneously. In fact, government takes a reactive position, partly due to traditional procedures, bureaucracy and systems that are not designed to fit in the digital era, resulting in governments' absence during the first (and critical) stage of new developments and related discussions. The moment when governments has thought through its (desired) position in the discussion, the discussion has already moved on and government is 'confronted' with a new one. Meanwhile, citizens observed the absence of their government on the crucial moments. Obviously this does not contribute to a trustworthy and confident government. They want government to guide and guard them, if necessary, in this digital world. Also they expect that societal challenges in general are solved quickly, and the use of the opportunities of this digital world can help with that. Let's take the effect of online reviews as an example. When people want to purchase something online, they will check for instance TripAdvisor for travel or restaurants, and tweakers.net for IT products these will provide a good insight in the quality and satisfaction of other users, resulting in a smaller chance on a bad bargain and a pressure for making good quality products.

Required action

Government has to take action overcoming challenges in each of the three dimensions to avoid becoming redundant player in the digital transformation. Government should be a more central player in the digital transformation by adopting a leading, inspiring and/or facilitating role, otherwise they face the risk of be known for its reluctance and inertia. By saying goodbye to the single-point-solution, and participating in a multiple-point-solution, social issues will be resolved quicker and better, resulting in a more appreciated government



(Source B. Eggers)

Government should change/innovate to new (business-) models and adjust certain chains and systems. In the next article we will answer the question on the most effective roles of the government, and how cooperation with citizens and private sector companies can be organized.

