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THE PREDICAMENT OF PUBLICNESS IN DIGITAL PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND ITS NORMATIVE RESPONSE

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Abstract: The relentless integration of digital technologies into public governance has yielded substantial gains in efficiency, responsiveness, and administrative reach. Yet beneath these achievements lies a deepening normative concern: is digital public governance becoming more efficient at the cost of becoming less public? This article offers a normative analysis of the predicament of publicness in the age of digital governance, arguing that the core values constitutive of public administration — fairness, accountability, procedural integrity, and democratic responsiveness — are being systematically eroded by three interrelated dynamics: the ascendancy of technological logic that subordinates public values to efficiency metrics; the concentration of data power that creates unprecedented asymmetries between state and citizen; and the proliferation of algorithmic decision-making that fragments responsibility and diminishes administrative judgment. Drawing on the intellectual resources of public administration theory, critical theory, and philosophy of technology, the article traces these predicaments to three deeper structural causes: the overexpansion of instrumental rationality, the institutional lag accompanying technological acceleration, and the dehumanizing tendency inherent in digitally mediated administration. The article then advances four normative pathways for reclaiming publicness: value reorientation through a multi-dimensional evaluative framework, institutional reconstruction that constrains algorithmic power with procedural justice, the cultivation of ethical judgment among public administrators, and the use of digital platforms to expand rather than replace democratic participation. The article concludes that the central challenge of digital public governance is not technical but normative: to ensure that the digital transformation of the state serves, rather than subverts, the public interest.
Keywords: Digital public governance; Publicness; Normative analysis; Algorithmic administration; Public value; Instrumental rationality

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have reshaped the landscape of public governance with remarkable speed and depth. From integrated online service platforms to AI-assisted administrative decision-making, from real-time urban management systems to predictive policy analytics, the digital transformation of the state is no longer a future prospect but a present reality. Governments across the world have embraced digitalization as a means to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, improve service quality, and increase transparency. In China, for instance, the deployment of large language models in government affairs has reached over 320 regions and departments as of mid-2025, with applications spanning intelligent inquiry, document generation, risk early warning, and policy simulation. The promise of digital public governance is undeniable: faster responses, better services, more informed decisions [1].

Yet, as digital technologies penetrate ever deeper into the fabric of public administration, a growing unease has begun to surface. This unease is not primarily about technical performance — whether the systems work as intended — but about something more fundamental. It concerns the normative identity of public administration itself. When a government chatbot handles citizen inquiries, who is responsible for the accuracy and fairness of the responses? When an algorithm flags certain applications for priority processing, what values inform its criteria? When predictive analytics identify "high-risk" neighborhoods for enhanced surveillance, whose interests are being served? These questions point to a deeper anxiety: that in the pursuit of greater efficiency, digital public governance may be inadvertently eroding the very qualities that make administration "public" in the first place [2].

Publicness — the quality of being oriented toward the public interest, accountable to citizens, governed by the rule of law, and animated by democratic values — has long been recognized as the normative foundation of public administration. From the Progressive Era's insistence on a professional civil service serving the common good, to the New Public Administration's call for social equity, to the New Public Service's emphasis on democratic citizenship, the idea that public administration is fundamentally different from private management has been a recurring theme in the field's intellectual history. Publicness is not merely a descriptive label but a normative claim: it denotes a set of values and commitments that distinguish public administration from other forms of organized action [3].

The digital transformation of governance poses a profound challenge to this normative foundation. As administrative processes become increasingly mediated by algorithms, platforms, and data systems, the values that have traditionally defined publicness — fairness, responsiveness, accountability, transparency, participation — risk being supplanted by a narrower set of technical values: speed, efficiency, optimization, standardization. The logic of the machine, with its preference for what is measurable, predictable, and controllable, increasingly overrides the logic of public deliberation, with its tolerance for ambiguity, contestation, and value pluralism. The result is a paradoxical condition: digital public

governance becomes ever more capable of delivering services efficiently while becoming ever less capable of grappling with the normative questions that give public administration its raison d'être [4].

This article offers a normative analysis of this predicament. Its central argument is that the digital transformation of public governance, while bringing undeniable benefits, has generated three interrelated crises of publicness: the subordination of public values to technological efficiency, the entrenchment of data power asymmetries that undermine citizen autonomy, and the fragmentation of administrative responsibility through algorithmic delegation [5]. These crises, I argue, are not incidental byproducts of digitalization but structurally rooted in the instrumental rationality that pervades technological thinking, the institutional lag that characterizes digital transitions, and the dehumanizing tendencies inherent in algorithmically mediated administration [6].

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 clarifies the concept of publicness, distinguishing its three dimensions — the subject of public action, the values that guide it, and the processes through which it is conducted — and situating these within the intellectual tradition of public administration theory. Section 3 diagnoses the threefold predicament of publicness in digital governance, examining in turn the encroachment of technological logic on public values, the erosion of citizen rights through data power asymmetries, and the dissolution of administrative responsibility in algorithmically mediated decision-making. Section 4 traces the deep roots of these predicaments to the overexpansion of instrumental rationality, the institutional lag in the age of technological acceleration, and the dehumanizing effects of digital mediation. Section 5 advances four normative pathways for reclaiming publicness: reconstituting the value framework of digital governance, designing institutions that subject algorithmic power to procedural justice, cultivating ethical judgment among public officials, and leveraging digital platforms to deepen rather than displace democratic participation. The conclusion reflects on the broader stakes of the argument and offers a vision of digital public governance that is not only efficient but genuinely public.

2 THE CONCEPT OF PUBLICNESS AND ITS NORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

2.1 Three Dimensions of Publicness

The concept of publicness is both ancient and contested. In the Western tradition, it traces back to the Roman distinction between res publica (the public thing) and res privata (the private thing), a distinction that marked the boundary between matters of collective concern and matters of individual interest. In Chinese thought, the concept of “gong” carries a similarly fundamental normative weight, denoting what is impartial, collective, and oriented toward the common good, as opposed to “si”, which signifies partiality and self-interest. Despite the diversity of cultural contexts, a core intuition persists: publicness signifies that which belongs to, concerns, or is oriented toward the collective rather than the individual.

For the purposes of this analysis, I distinguish three interrelated dimensions of publicness, each of which is essential to understanding the normative foundations of public administration.

The first dimension is the subject of public action. Publicness, in this sense, concerns the agent or entity that acts in the name of the public. Who is authorized to speak for and act on behalf of the collective? In modern democratic states, the primary answer is government — the ensemble of institutions, officials, and procedures that are formally constituted to exercise public authority. But the subject dimension of publicness also carries normative implications: public actors are expected to represent the public interest rather than private or sectional interests, to exercise their powers in a manner consistent with the rule of law, and to be accountable to the citizens they serve.

The second dimension is the value orientation of public action. Publicness, in this sense, denotes a distinctive set of values that should guide the conduct of public administration. These values include fairness, equity, justice, responsiveness, transparency, accountability, and respect for human dignity. While efficiency and effectiveness are important considerations in public administration, they are not — or should not be — the only values that matter. What distinguishes public administration from private management is precisely its commitment to a broader range of values that reflect the complexity and moral significance of governing collective affairs. As Denhardt and Denhardt have argued, public administrators should be "servants of citizens" rather than "stewards of efficiency."

The third dimension is the process of public action. Publicness, in this sense, concerns the manner in which administrative decisions are made and implemented. A process is "public" to the extent that it is open to scrutiny, allows for participation by affected parties, follows established procedures, and can be held accountable through mechanisms of oversight and review. Procedural publicness is not merely a means to better outcomes but a value in its own right: it embodies the democratic principle that those who are subject to administrative power should have a voice in its exercise and a channel for challenging its abuses.

2.2 Publicness as the Normative Foundation of Public Administration

The significance of publicness for public administration can hardly be overstated. Since Woodrow Wilson's foundational essay on the study of administration, the field has grappled with the question of what makes public administration distinctively "public." The answer has never been simply that public administration is carried out by government agencies; rather, it is that public administration is animated by a distinctive set of normative commitments that differentiate it from other forms of organized action, whether in the private sector or civil society.

The New Public Administration movement of the 1960s and 1970s foregrounded social equity as a core value of public administration, arguing that efficiency alone is an insufficient guide for administrative action. The "Blacksburg

Manifesto" articulated a vision of public administration as a "constitutional" enterprise, grounded in the foundational values of the American constitutional order. The New Public Service, articulated by Denhardt and Denhardt, reasserted the primacy of democratic citizenship and public deliberation over the market-oriented logic of the New Public Management. More recently, the public value framework developed by Mark Moore and others has sought to provide administrators with a language for thinking about the distinctive contribution of public organizations to the common good.

Across these diverse theoretical traditions, a common thread emerges: public administration cannot be reduced to the efficient execution of predefined tasks. It is a moral and political enterprise, charged with the pursuit of values that cannot be captured by any single metric of performance. The "public" in public administration is not merely a descriptor of the sector in which administration takes place but a normative aspiration that should guide administrative thought and action.

It is precisely this normative aspiration that is threatened by the current trajectory of digital transformation. As administrative systems become increasingly automated, data-driven, and algorithmically governed, the values that have traditionally defined publicness risk being marginalized or displaced. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to make digital governance work better in technical terms but to ensure that it remains genuinely public in its orientation, values, and processes [7].

3 THE THREEFOLD PREDICAMENT OF PUBLICNESS IN DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

3.1 The Encroachment of Technological Logic upon Public Values

The first and perhaps most pervasive predicament concerns the subordination of public values to the imperatives of technological efficiency. Digital governance platforms are designed, first and foremost, to optimize performance along measurable dimensions: response time, processing speed, throughput, accuracy rates, user satisfaction scores. These metrics are valuable and should not be dismissed, but their dominance creates a systematic bias in favor of what can be measured and against what cannot.

Consider, for instance, the case of government hotlines and online service platforms. These systems are typically evaluated by indicators such as average response time, first-call resolution rate, and user satisfaction. The pressure to optimize these metrics can lead administrators to prioritize simple, resolvable cases over complex ones that require careful judgment and extended engagement. A quick resolution of a routine inquiry counts as a success; a thorough but time-consuming engagement with a complex grievance does not. The system thus creates incentives for a form of "creaming" — attending to easier cases while neglecting harder ones — that may be efficient in aggregate but is deeply at odds with the public value of equal concern and respect.

A similar dynamic operates in the domain of algorithmic decision support. When algorithms are used to triage cases, flag anomalies, or recommend courses of action, the criteria embedded in these algorithms inevitably reflect certain value choices. An algorithm designed to optimize for speed will systematically deprioritize cases that require careful deliberation, even when such deliberation is warranted by the complexity of the issues at stake. An algorithm trained on historical data will reproduce the biases embedded in that data, potentially perpetuating patterns of discrimination or exclusion that the system was intended to overcome.

The deeper issue is not simply that particular values are neglected but that the very logic of technological optimization tends to crowd out value pluralism. The technological mindset, as philosophers of technology from Jacques Ellul to Andrew Feenberg have observed, is oriented toward efficiency, calculability, and control. It seeks to reduce complex problems to manageable variables and to identify the single best solution according to predefined criteria. This is a powerful and useful mode of thinking, but it is fundamentally at odds with the nature of public administration, which is constantly confronted with incommensurable values, irreducible uncertainties, and the need for context-sensitive judgment.

When technological logic becomes hegemonic in public governance, the result is a narrowing of the administrative imagination. Questions that cannot be operationalized as performance metrics cease to be asked. Values that cannot be quantified cease to be considered. The richness of public life, with its conflicts, ambiguities, and irreducibly normative dimensions, is flattened into a series of technical problems amenable to technical solutions. Publicness, in its full normative sense, is diminished.

3.2 The Asymmetry of Data Power and the Erosion of Citizen Rights

The second predicament concerns the concentration of data power in the hands of the state and the consequent erosion of citizen autonomy and dignity. Digital governance depends on data — vast quantities of data, collected from multiple sources, aggregated, analyzed, and used to inform decisions about the allocation of benefits, the imposition of burdens, and the management of risks. This data-driven approach can improve the accuracy and efficiency of administrative decisions, but it also creates profound asymmetries of power between the state and the citizen.

The first dimension of this asymmetry is informational. The modern digital state possesses an unprecedented capacity to collect, store, and analyze information about its citizens. Every online transaction, every phone call to a government hotline, every application for a benefit or license generates data that can be stored, cross-referenced, and analyzed. Citizens, by contrast, have limited understanding of what data is being collected about them, how it is being used, and what inferences are being drawn from it. This informational asymmetry undermines the possibility of informed consent

and creates conditions in which citizens can be subjected to decisions based on data they do not know about and cannot contest.

The second dimension is analytical. Even if citizens are aware of the data being collected, they typically lack the capacity to understand or challenge the analytical processes through which that data is transformed into decisions. Machine learning algorithms, in particular, can identify patterns and make predictions that are opaque even to their designers. When such algorithms are used to make decisions about eligibility for benefits, risk of recidivism, or likelihood of tax evasion, citizens are subjected to a form of power that is not only asymmetric but inscrutable. They may be denied a benefit or subjected to enhanced scrutiny for reasons that neither they nor anyone else can fully explain.

The third dimension is behavioral. The awareness of being monitored and evaluated can change how citizens behave, inducing a form of anticipatory conformity that undermines authentic self-expression and autonomous action. When citizens know that their online behavior, service interactions, and even physical movements are being tracked and analyzed, they may adjust their conduct to avoid triggering algorithmic flags or generating unfavorable data points. This "chilling effect" is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a political one: it constrains the freedom of citizens to explore, experiment, and dissent, which are essential elements of democratic citizenship.

The cumulative effect of these asymmetries is a transformation of the relationship between state and citizen. The citizen is no longer a participant in governance but a data point to be processed, a risk to be managed, a behavior to be optimized. The administrative encounter, which should be an occasion for the exercise of public judgment in response to individual circumstances, becomes a transaction in which the individual is assessed against standardized criteria by automated systems. The dignity of the citizen as a moral agent — as someone entitled to explanation, justification, and appeal — is eroded.

3.3 Algorithmic Decision-Making and the Dissolution of Administrative Responsibility

The third predicament concerns the fragmentation of responsibility in algorithmically mediated administrative systems. Responsibility is a cornerstone of public administration: officials are expected to act within the bounds of their authority, to exercise judgment in good faith, to be answerable for their decisions, and to accept consequences for their failures. Digital systems, particularly those involving autonomous or semi-autonomous algorithms, create conditions in which responsibility becomes diffuse, ambiguous, and difficult to assign.

The first aspect of this problem is the "many hands" dilemma, which is intensified in digital contexts. When an administrative decision is produced through a chain of actions involving data collectors, system designers, algorithm developers, platform operators, and frontline administrators, it becomes exceedingly difficult to determine who should be held accountable for what. If an algorithm incorrectly denies a benefit to an eligible citizen, is the responsible party the programmer who wrote the code, the manager who approved the system, the operator who failed to override the algorithm, or the official who signed off on the final decision? The diffusion of agency across multiple actors and technical systems creates conditions in which everyone can claim that someone else was responsible, and no one bears the full weight of accountability.

The second aspect is the "black box" problem. Many machine learning algorithms are inherently opaque: even their designers cannot fully explain why they produce particular outputs in particular cases. When such algorithms are used in administrative decision-making, they create a situation in which decisions are made for reasons that cannot be articulated. This is deeply problematic from the perspective of public accountability, which requires that decisions be capable of justification. A decision that cannot be explained cannot be defended; a decision that cannot be defended cannot be subject to meaningful accountability.

The third aspect is the deskilling of administrative judgment. As algorithms take over increasingly complex tasks, frontline administrators may lose the opportunity to exercise and develop their own judgment. When an algorithm recommends a course of action, there is a natural tendency to defer to the algorithm, particularly when administrators are under time pressure, lack confidence in their own expertise, or fear being second-guessed. Over time, this deference can atrophy the very capacities of judgment that are essential to sound administration. The result is a paradoxical condition: the system becomes more dependent on algorithms while simultaneously losing the human capacity to evaluate, challenge, or override algorithmic recommendations.

The dissolution of responsibility is not merely a practical problem but a normative one. Public administration derives its legitimacy, in part, from the principle that administrative decisions are made by accountable officials who can be called to account for their actions. When algorithms mediate or displace human judgment, this principle is undermined. Citizens are subjected to decisions that cannot be explained, made by actors who cannot be identified, through processes that cannot be contested. The chain of accountability that connects administrative action to democratic authorization is broken [8].

4 THE DEEP ROOTS OF THE PREDICAMENT

The three predicaments identified above — the subordination of public values, the entrenchment of data power asymmetries, and the fragmentation of administrative responsibility — are not random or accidental features of digital governance. They are structurally rooted in deeper features of the technological modernization of public administration. Understanding these roots is essential to formulating an adequate normative response.

4.1 The Overexpansion of Instrumental Rationality

The deepest root of the predicament lies in what Max Weber identified as the dominance of instrumental rationality (Zweckrationalität) in modern society. Instrumental rationality is concerned with the efficient achievement of given ends: it asks not whether the ends are worthwhile but how best to achieve them. This mode of rationality has been extraordinarily productive in domains such as science, technology, and economic organization, but its extension to the sphere of public administration carries significant risks.

Weber himself was acutely aware of these risks. He warned that the rationalization of social life, while bringing order and predictability, could also create an "iron cage" in which human beings are trapped by the very systems they have created. The bureaucratic form of organization, which Weber analyzed with unmatched depth, exemplifies this tension: it enables efficient administration but also threatens to suffocate creativity, spontaneity, and moral agency.

Digital governance represents a new and intensifying phase of this rationalization process. Where bureaucracy rationalized through rules and hierarchies, digital governance rationalizes through algorithms and data. The logic is the same: the reduction of complex realities to manageable categories, the replacement of discretionary judgment with standardized procedures, and the prioritization of calculable outcomes over incommensurable values. What is new is the scale and speed with which digital systems can process information and make decisions, and the opacity of the algorithms that mediate administrative action.

The problem, however, is not instrumental rationality per se but its overexpansion — its colonization of spheres of life that ought to be governed by other forms of rationality. Public administration, by its nature, involves not only technical questions of efficiency but also normative questions of justice, fairness, and the common good. These questions cannot be resolved through instrumental reasoning alone; they require practical reasoning (phronesis), which involves deliberation about values, attention to context, and the exercise of judgment. When digital systems are designed and implemented without adequate attention to the normative dimensions of administrative action, instrumental rationality tends to crowd out practical reason, and publicness is diminished.

4.2 The Institutional Lag in the Age of Technological Acceleration

The second root of the predicament lies in the temporal disjuncture between the pace of technological change and the pace of institutional adaptation. Digital technologies evolve at an exponential rate, driven by the dynamics of innovation, competition, and Moore's Law. Institutions, by contrast, evolve slowly, shaped by the logic of precedent, deliberation, and the need for legitimacy and stability. The result is a widening gap between what technology makes possible and what institutions are prepared to govern.

This institutional lag is particularly acute in the domain of normative governance — the rules, principles, and practices that ensure that administrative action respects public values. When a new technology is introduced into public administration, there is typically a period during which it operates without adequate normative guidance. The technology is used because it is efficient, but the questions of how it should be constrained, what values it should serve, and what safeguards should be in place are deferred or neglected.

During this period, the technology can reshape administrative practices in ways that later prove difficult to reverse. Algorithms become embedded in organizational routines, data systems become interconnected, and new dependencies and expectations are created. By the time institutions catch up — by the time laws are passed, standards are developed, and oversight mechanisms are created — the technology has already shaped the landscape in fundamental ways. The normative response is reactive rather than anticipatory, and the room for value-driven design is correspondingly limited.

4.3 The Dehumanization Tendency and the Erosion of Ethical Ground

The third root of the predicament is the dehumanizing tendency inherent in digitally mediated administration. Public administration, at its core, is a human endeavor. It involves encounters between officials and citizens, exercises of judgment in specific contexts, and the application of general rules to particular cases. These activities require qualities that are distinctively human: empathy, discernment, practical wisdom, and the capacity for moral reflection.

Digital systems, by their nature, abstract from the particularities of human experience. They process cases as instances of general categories, respond to inputs according to predefined rules, and optimize outcomes along measurable dimensions. This abstraction is not necessarily problematic — it can enable consistency, impartiality, and efficiency — but it becomes problematic when it displaces the human dimensions of administration entirely.

When citizens interact with automated systems rather than human officials, something important is lost. The administrative encounter becomes transactional rather than relational. The citizen is processed rather than heard. The official's capacity for empathy — for understanding the unique circumstances and needs of the person before them — is not engaged. The system may be more efficient, but it is also more impersonal, more rigid, and less responsive to the nuances of human situations.

Moreover, the digitization of administration can erode the ethical sensibilities of administrators themselves. When decisions are guided by algorithms, administrators have fewer opportunities to exercise moral judgment, to confront ethical dilemmas, and to develop the practical wisdom that comes from experience. Over time, the capacity for ethical discernment — the ability to recognize when a general rule should be set aside in favor of a more context-sensitive response — may atrophy. The system becomes technically proficient but ethically impoverished.

5 NORMATIVE PATHWAYS FOR RECLAIMING PUBLICNESS

The diagnosis offered above is sobering, but it does not warrant despair. The erosion of publicness in digital governance is not an inevitable fate but a contingent outcome that can be challenged and reversed through deliberate normative action. In this section, I outline four pathways for reclaiming publicness in the digital age.

5.1 Value Reorientation: Establishing a Multi-Dimensional Evaluative Framework

The first and most fundamental pathway is to reconstitute the value framework within which digital governance systems are designed, implemented, and evaluated. Current practice tends to privilege a narrow set of performance metrics — speed, efficiency, cost reduction, user satisfaction — while neglecting the broader range of values that define publicness. Reclaiming publicness requires that we broaden the evaluative framework to include values such as fairness, equity, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, and that we treat these values as genuine criteria of success, not mere side constraints.

This reorientation has implications at every stage of the governance cycle. At the design stage, system architects should be required to consider not only whether a proposed system will be efficient but whether it will be fair, whether it will be transparent, and whether it will be accountable. At the implementation stage, performance monitoring should track not only quantitative indicators but also qualitative assessments of how the system affects the distribution of benefits and burdens, the quality of administrative encounters, and the experience of citizens. At the evaluation stage, the success of a digital governance initiative should be assessed not only in terms of efficiency gains but also in terms of its contribution to or detraction from the public values that define good governance.

This is not to suggest that efficiency is unimportant. On the contrary, efficient administration is a public value in its own right: waste, delay, and incompetence harm citizens and undermine trust in government. The point is rather that efficiency should not be the only value, or even the dominant value, in the governance of digital systems. A genuinely public digital governance should be efficient, but it should also be fair, accountable, transparent, and responsive. These values should be pursued simultaneously, and trade-offs between them should be explicitly acknowledged and deliberated rather than ignored or concealed.

5.2 Institutional Reconstruction: Constraining Algorithmic Power through Procedural Justice

The second pathway involves the reconstruction of institutional frameworks to ensure that algorithmic power is exercised within the bounds of procedural justice. The core idea is that the same principles that govern the exercise of administrative discretion in traditional settings — notice, hearing, reason-giving, and review — should also govern the exercise of algorithmic discretion in digital settings.

This requires, first, that citizens be informed when decisions affecting them are made with the assistance of algorithms. Transparency about the use of algorithms is a precondition for meaningful accountability: citizens cannot challenge decisions whose basis they do not understand, and they cannot hold officials accountable for outcomes whose production they cannot trace. The principle of algorithmic transparency should extend beyond mere notification to include meaningful explanation of how algorithms work, what data they use, and what criteria guide their outputs.

Second, citizens should have access to meaningful mechanisms for contesting algorithmic decisions. If an algorithm denies a benefit, flags an application for enhanced scrutiny, or recommends a course of action that adversely affects a citizen, that citizen should have the opportunity to seek an explanation, to present countervailing evidence, and to have the decision reviewed by a human official with the authority to override the algorithm. The right to human review is not merely a procedural safeguard but a recognition of the fundamental dignity of citizens as moral agents who are entitled to be heard.

Third, algorithmic systems should themselves be subject to ongoing oversight and auditing. Because algorithms can embed and perpetuate biases that are not apparent to their designers or operators, independent auditing is essential to ensure that they operate fairly across different groups and contexts. Such auditing should examine not only the technical performance of algorithms but also their distributive effects, their responsiveness to diverse needs, and their consistency with public values.

5.3 Subject Revival: Cultivating Ethical Judgment Among Public Administrators

The third pathway focuses on the human subjects of public administration — the officials who operate within digital systems and who retain, or should retain, the capacity for independent judgment. The dehumanization of administration cannot be countered solely through institutional design; it also requires the cultivation of ethical sensibilities and critical capacities among administrators themselves.

This cultivation begins with education and training. Public administration curricula and professional development programs should include not only technical training in digital tools but also ethical reflection on the values, risks, and dilemmas associated with their use. Administrators should be equipped not merely to operate digital systems but to question them — to recognize when an algorithm is producing unjust outcomes, to challenge the assumptions embedded in a data model, and to exercise the judgment to override automated recommendations when circumstances warrant.

It also requires the creation of organizational cultures that value and reward ethical judgment. Administrators who raise concerns about algorithmic fairness should be supported rather than penalized; those who exercise independent judgment in difficult cases should be recognized rather than criticized for deviating from protocol. The phenomenon of "moral residue" — the psychological burden carried by administrators who are required to implement decisions they

know to be unjust — should be taken seriously, and mechanisms should be created for administrators to voice their concerns without fear of reprisal.

Finally, the revival of ethical judgment requires that administrators be given the space and time to exercise it. The pressure to process cases quickly, to meet performance targets, and to defer to algorithmic recommendations can crowd out the reflective space needed for ethical deliberation. Administrative systems should be designed with slack — with room for pause, reflection, and consultation — so that administrators are not forced to choose between efficiency and conscientiousness.

5.4 Participatory Empowerment: Expanding Rather Than Replacing Democratic Engagement

The fourth pathway concerns the relationship between digital governance and democratic participation. One of the great promises of digital technologies is that they can enable new forms of participation — online consultations, participatory budgeting platforms, citizen feedback systems — that extend democratic engagement beyond the traditional mechanisms of elections and representative institutions. Yet there is a risk that digital governance will replace rather than enhance democratic participation, substituting algorithmic optimization for public deliberation.

Reclaiming publicness requires that we resist this substitution and instead use digital technologies to deepen democratic engagement. This means, first, that decisions about the design and deployment of digital governance systems should themselves be subject to democratic deliberation. Too often, such decisions are made by technical experts and administrative elites, with little input from the citizens who will be affected by them. Opening these decisions to public scrutiny and debate would not only enhance their legitimacy but also bring a wider range of values and perspectives to bear on the design process.

Second, digital platforms should be designed to facilitate genuine participation rather than merely to extract feedback. Many current "participation" platforms are essentially data-collection systems: they gather information from citizens but do not create meaningful opportunities for citizens to shape decisions, challenge assumptions, or engage in deliberation with one another and with officials. A genuinely participatory digital governance would create spaces in which citizens can not only provide input but also deliberate with officials and with one another about the values and trade-offs involved in public decisions.

Third, efforts should be made to ensure that digital participation does not exclude those who lack access to or comfort with digital technologies. The digital divide remains a significant barrier to equitable participation, and the turn to digital governance risks marginalizing those who are already disadvantaged. Measures to bridge this divide — providing public access to digital technologies, offering training and support, and maintaining analog alternatives for those who need them — are essential to ensuring that digital participation is genuinely inclusive.

6 CONCLUSION

Digital public governance stands at a crossroads. On one path lies the continued intensification of the trends analyzed in this article: the dominance of efficiency metrics, the entrenchment of data power asymmetries, and the fragmentation of administrative responsibility. This path leads to a form of governance that is technically capable but normatively impoverished — efficient in its operations but hollow in its publicness. On the other path lies a deliberate reorientation of digital governance toward the values that define publicness: fairness, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and democratic participation.

Choosing the second path requires that we take seriously the normative dimensions of digital transformation. It requires that we recognize the digital transformation of governance is not merely a technical project but a moral and political one, and that we bring to bear the full resources of public administration theory, political philosophy, and ethical reflection in guiding it. It requires that we resist the seductions of technological solutionism — the belief that every problem has a technical solution — and insist instead on the irreducibly normative character of public administration.

The argument of this article has been that the predicament of publicness in digital governance is real but not insurmountable. By diagnosing the sources of the predicament — the overexpansion of instrumental rationality, institutional lag, and the dehumanization of administration — and by advancing normative pathways for addressing it — value reorientation, institutional reconstruction, ethical cultivation, and participatory empowerment — we can work toward a form of digital governance that is not only efficient but genuinely public.

The stakes of this effort could hardly be higher. At a time when trust in public institutions is fragile, when democratic norms are under pressure, and when the pace of technological change shows no signs of slowing, the question of whether digital governance serves or subverts the public interest is one of the most consequential questions of our time. Answering it well requires not only technical expertise but normative clarity, not only innovation but wisdom, not only efficiency but justice. The future of publicness in the digital age depends on our willingness to confront this challenge with the seriousness it deserves.

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