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Editorial 18(2): Governing Digital Transformation in an Era of AI, Participation, and Democratic Accountability

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The articles collected in this issue of JeDEM – eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government offer a timely and multifaceted examination of one of the defining challenges of our time: how societies can harness digital transformation while preserving democratic values, accountability, inclusion, and public trust. Across diverse geographical contexts and methodological approaches, the contributions explore artificial intelligence, open government data, digital participation, public sector innovation, institutional trust, higher education governance, and the unintended consequences of digitalization. Together, they reveal a central insight: technological advancement alone does not produce better governance. Rather, democratic outcomes emerge from the interaction between technology, institutions, governance arrangements, and citizens. This overarching theme is visible throughout all eight contributions in this issue.

Several articles focus on the governance challenges associated with artificial intelligence and data-driven transformation. André Afonso Silva introduces the concept of institutional consciousness and the Model for Mapping Institutional Consciousness (MMIC), arguing that effective AI governance requires more than compliance with legal frameworks. Institutional capacity, organisational culture, and reflexive awareness are essential for translating governance principles into practice. This focus on organisational readiness resonates strongly with contemporary debates about responsible AI deployment and the governance capacities required to manage increasingly autonomous technologies. Similarly, Carlos Jiménez-Cid and J. Ignacio Criado examine chatbot adoption in the public sector and demonstrate that chatbots should be understood not merely as technological tools but as socio-technical governance arrangements. Their findings highlight challenges related to accountability, transparency, organisational preparedness, and public values. Together, these articles remind us that the success of AI applications depends as much on institutions as on algorithms. Dhita Widya Putri and colleagues investigate AI adoption in ASEAN higher education and identify a striking asymmetry between the rapid proliferation of AI policy initiatives and the limited empirical evidence available to evaluate them. Their Policy-Governance-Informatics (PGI) framework makes an important theoretical contribution by conceptualising AI adoption as an

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interdependent governance system rather than a purely educational or technological issue. Particularly compelling is their proposition that outcomes are determined by the weakest governance layer within the system, whether policy, governance, or technological infrastructure. This perspective offers valuable insights not only for higher education but also for digital governance more broadly

A second group of articles explores participation and democratic engagement in digital environments. Ganjar Widhiyoga and colleagues investigate youth digital activism in Indonesia and Malaysia, demonstrating that online engagement often struggles to translate into sustained civic or political action. Their identification of an "action gap" highlights an increasingly important characteristic of platform-mediated participation. Digital visibility may generate awareness, but awareness alone does not necessarily produce democratic influence. Questions of trust and legitimacy are further addressed by Oluwatosin Adebayo, whose analysis of internet shutdowns in Sub-Saharan Africa reveals complex relationships between digital access, information flows, and institutional trust. The study suggests that attempts to control information ecosystems may inadvertently undermine confidence in public institutions, reinforcing concerns about the long-term democratic costs of digital repression. A related but more critical perspective is offered by Wimmy Haliim, who analyses digital bureaucracy and public participation in Indonesia. His study highlights a paradox that is increasingly visible across many digital societies: technologies introduced to promote participation can simultaneously reinforce existing power asymmetries. Through a comprehensive review of governance reforms, digital platforms, and participatory mechanisms, the article demonstrates how digital transformation may strengthen elite influence when institutional safeguards are weak. Rather than viewing digitalisation as inherently democratising, Haliim argues that technologies often amplify pre-existing institutional characteristics. As a result, meaningful democratic transformation requires addressing underlying governance structures rather than relying on technological innovation alone.

The governance of data and transparency forms a second important theme of this issue. Two contributions broaden the discussion by examining digital governance in specific institutional and societal contexts. Ievgen Bilyk critically examines international open data benchmarks and exposes the limitations of existing measurement frameworks. By showing how indicators shape perceptions of success, the article raises fundamental questions about what we actually measure when assessing digital government performance. Closely related, Ratsuda Sakolkittinapakul and Sotarat Thammaboosadee propose the Transparency Assessment Maturity in Open Government Data (TAM-OGD) framework, arguing that data publication alone is insufficient unless accompanied by accountability mechanisms, meaningful accessibility, and citizen engagement. Both contributions challenge governments to move beyond compliance-oriented notions of openness and toward a broader understanding of public value creation.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue point toward several broader lessons for digital governance research and practice. *First, institutions matter.* Whether discussing artificial intelligence, open data, digital participation, chatbots, higher education, or public administration, the articles consistently demonstrate that technological innovations are embedded within organisational, political, and social contexts. Digital transformation succeeds where supporting institutions are

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capable, trusted, and adaptive. *Second, participation remains both a promise and a challenge.* Digital technologies create unprecedented opportunities for engagement, but they do not automatically produce inclusion, empowerment, or political influence. Several articles reveal persistent gaps between formal opportunities for participation and actual democratic outcomes. *Third, transparency cannot be reduced to information availability.* Open data, digital services, and online participation mechanisms create value only when citizens can access, understand, and use them. Transparency therefore depends not merely on disclosure but also on institutional accountability and meaningful public engagement. *Finally, the issue highlights the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches to digital governance.* Understanding the societal implications of AI, data, and digital platforms requires moving beyond technological perspectives and engaging with insights from public administration, political science, sociology, communication studies, education, and governance research.

At a time when governments around the world are accelerating digital transformation efforts, the articles in this issue provide a valuable reminder that technology is neither inherently democratic nor inherently undemocratic. Its effects depend on the institutional arrangements, power structures, governance mechanisms, and civic capacities that surround it. The future of digital government will therefore be shaped not simply by technological innovation, but by our collective ability to ensure that innovation serves public values, democratic accountability, transparency, and inclusion.

We hope that the contributions in this issue stimulate further debate and research on these critical questions and help advance our understanding of how digital technologies can be governed in ways that strengthen democracy rather than merely transform administration.

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