



# Center for Technology in Government

## *Highlights: Exploring the Feasibility of A Digital Government Journal*

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### **1. SUMMARY**

The last ten years have been a time of growth and formalization for digital government (DG) research. An emerging community of DG researchers is comprised of scholars from computer and information sciences, as well as the social and behavioral sciences. Questions being addressed by DG researchers cut across almost every domain of public service and every aspect of information management, technology, and infrastructure. In addition, the rising number of collaborative projects, cross-disciplinary studies, and multi-method approaches, and their growing appeal to multiple audiences, demonstrate the breadth and scope of DG research initiatives. This kind of research is non-traditional and is often not well suited to publication in traditional disciplinary journals. Therefore, two main questions were explored by this study. First, to what extent is there a need for a journal which is dedicated to the publication of digital government research? Second, what is the feasibility and desirability of a dedicated journal compared to other publication strategies?

Survey results indicated that DG researchers do experience problems publishing their work in traditional disciplinary journals. More than half of the respondents reported that they often experienced difficulty identifying suitable journals in which to publish their work, encountered reviewers who do not sufficiently understand DG issues, and were forced to disaggregate multidisciplinary research into disciplinary elements in order to be published. As a result, respondents gave roughly equal endorsement to two publishing strategies that they felt would further their own publishing agendas as well as promote the visibility, legitimacy, and influence of DG as a field of research. These strategies included organizing DG special issues in existing disciplinary journals and creating a new journal dedicated to digital government research. The vast majority of respondents said they would submit articles to these sources, would serve as reviewers and editorial board members for a new journal, and would also organize special issues in existing journals. The next sections briefly detail the research study design and key findings.

## **2. METHOD**

For purposes of this study, we defined digital government research as the application of computer and information sciences, as well as the social and behavioral sciences, to the information-related needs, problems, and missions of government agencies and democratic societies. A 62-item survey was created to elicit the publishing experiences, opinions, preferences, and professional characteristics of individuals conducting digital government research. We compiled a purposive sample of digital government researchers from several lists including: (1) authors and co-authors of papers published in the top five academic journals in public administration, public policy, and management information systems between 1999 and 2003; (2) presenters and attendees at the 2003 National Conference on Digital Government Research (dg.o2003); (3) presenters in the e-government cluster at the 2002 and 2003 Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS); and (4) all National Science Foundation (NSF) digital government grantees (both principal investigators and co-investigators). A total of 458 participants were sent the online survey. The survey achieved a 41 percent response rate (n=188) after two contacts.

## **3. CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCHERS**

### **Disciplines and journal associations**

Respondents were asked to list up to four academic journals they considered most important in their research domains – a total of 229 different journals were reported. In addition, we made an attempt to understand how DG researchers identified themselves in academic circles. The following breakdown demonstrates that DG research is a multidisciplinary field.

- 38 percent identified their primary field as Information Science or MIS
- 23 percent identified their primary field as Computer Science or Engineering
- 25 percent identified their primary field as Political or Public Sector Disciplines
- 14 percent identified their primary field as Social Sciences or Humanities

### **Years conducting digital government research**

Survey results confirm that DG research has been ongoing for the last couple of decades. Participants reported that they have conducted digital government research for as long as 25 years. The mean number of years conducting DG research was 5.64 years.

### **Work environment**

The vast majority of the respondents (92 percent) work in a university setting, with others coming from government, the non-profit sector, private sector, and self-employment.

### **Teaching digital government courses**

Over one-third of respondents (35 percent) teach at least one DG-related course and the majority of courses taught are at the graduate level (64 percent). In addition, we asked respondents to list the titles of the DG courses they teach. Most courses combined information technology (IT) with topics on democracy or government, while others combined IT with management and organizational issues.

### **National focus**

Respondents reported conducting DG research in 31 different countries. The top five countries were the United States (150), United Kingdom (15), Germany (10), Netherlands (6), Austria (3), and Finland (3). Approximately one-fifth (19 percent) are conducting their primary DG research outside of the US, mainly in Europe. More than one-quarter (29 percent) conducted research in more than one country.

### **Sources of digital government information**

More than three-quarters of the respondents considered scholarly conferences most useful for staying informed about new DG research (76 percent). More than half considered professional conferences (56 percent), scholarly journals (55 percent), and professional journals (51 percent) useful as well.

## **4. DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PUBLICATION EXPERIENCES**

### **Publication patterns**

The survey asked respondents about their experiences publishing DG research in traditional academic journals. In addition, we asked the extent to which they write specifically for academic or practitioner audiences.

- In the last five years, 86 percent of respondents published at least one DG related academic article, while 68 percent authored or co-authored at least one DG related practitioner paper.
- The mean number of DG academic articles published over the last five years was 4.49 (median = 3.00, range = 0 to 25).
- The mean number of DG related practitioner papers published over the last five years was 3.12 (median = 2.00, range = 0 to 25).
- 61 percent of respondents reported publishing both academic articles and practitioner papers in the last five years.

### **Publishing problems**

Respondents reported various obstacles when trying to publish interdisciplinary DG research in traditional outlets. A majority indicated that they needed to disaggregate multidisciplinary research into disciplinary elements (64 percent), over half experienced difficulty identifying suitable journals (57 percent), and a similar number (52 percent) believed that reviewers in traditional journals do not understand digital government issues.

### **Differences among groups**

Respondents with more years of experience conducting DG research were significantly more likely to have published material for practitioner audiences. Respondents who taught DG courses were significantly more likely to believe that reviewers in traditional journals do not understand DG issues. Similarly, those who published at least one practitioner-oriented paper perceived more difficulty identifying suitable journals in which to publish DG research.

## **5. FUTURE DIGITAL GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING STRATEGIES**

The survey investigated three strategies for publishing DG research: creating a new journal dedicated to DG research, submitting individual DG articles to existing journals, or organizing special DG issues or symposia in existing journals. As individuals, respondents gave roughly equal support to two of these publication strategies: creating a new dedicated DG journal and promoting DG research in existing journals through DG special issues.

### **Willingness to submit digital government articles**

Nearly nine in ten respondents (88 percent) were willing to respond to calls for DG special issues in existing journals. If a new journal were created, again nearly nine in ten (88 percent) were willing to submit their work to it. When asked if they would submit their best work, this figure declined to 76 percent. Although the survey did not ask respondents to indicate their tenure status, the comments suggest there might be such an effect at work. Some respondents said in the comments that they would need to publish their best work in their disciplinary journals in order to attain tenure.

### **Willingness to participate in the operation of a new journal**

Respondents reported that they were very willing to serve as reviewers for a new dedicated journal (81 percent) and about three-quarters (72 percent) would serve on the editorial board. Respondents were slightly less willing to edit a special issue (60 percent), or serve as a topical editor (53 percent). About one in five would be interested in serving as managing editor (19 percent).

### **Differences among groups**

Although the overall patterns of willingness were strongly favorable, there were some interesting differences among groups in their degree of willingness to participate. In general, respondents who taught DG courses were more willing to contribute to a new journal and organize DG special issues in existing journals. In addition, respondents who published at least one practitioner-oriented paper were more willing to contribute to a new journal and organize DG special issues in existing journals. Those who publish both practitioner-oriented papers and academic articles were more willing to contribute to a new journal than people who publish for only one audience or the other. In terms of disciplinary differences, respondents in the political and public sector disciplines were most willing to participate in these different publishing strategies.

## **6. EFFECT OF DIFFERENT STRATEGIES ON THE FIELD OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH**

In terms of the effect that publishing might have on the field of digital government research, respondents rated the three strategies according to their perceived likelihood for promoting visibility, legitimacy, and influence in the larger research community.

### **Visibility**

Special issues in existing journals were seen as most likely to promote the visibility of DG research, but all three publishing strategies were believed to have a positive effect. 87 percent of respondents believed that publishing DG special issues in existing journals would promote the visibility of DG research, 76 percent also endorsed a dedicated journal as a way to promote visibility. More than half (63 percent) believed that publishing individual DG articles in existing journals would also promote DG research visibility.

### **Legitimacy**

Special issues of existing journals and a new dedicated journal were seen as equally strong strategies to promote the legitimacy of DG research. 79 percent of respondents believed publishing DG special issues in existing journals would increase the legitimacy of DG research and 78 percent of respondents believed publishing a dedicated DG journal would also do so. In addition, just over half (59 percent), believed that publishing individual DG articles in existing journals would promote the legitimacy of DG research.

### **Influence**

Special issues in existing journals were seen as most likely to promote the influence of DG research in the larger research community. However, all three strategies were deemed to have a positive effect. Approximately four-fifths of respondents (80 percent) believed that publishing DG special issues in existing journals would promote the influence of DG research. 70 percent thought that the influence of DG research would also be promoted by publishing individual DG articles in existing journals and 64 percent believed a dedicated DG journal would promote the influence of DG research.

## **5. DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF A DEDICATED DIGITAL GOVERNMENT JOURNAL**

### **Journal orientation**

If a DG journal were created, more than four-fifths of respondents preferred it to be targeted toward a research audience (84 percent). At the same time, 62 percent believed a DG journal should also be of value to practitioner audiences.

### **Research-practice connection**

Respondents believed that DG research would benefit from increased dialogue between scholars and practitioners (94 percent). In addition, 84 percent of respondents supported journal-based mechanisms that can create a dialogue such as letters, research notes, or replies to articles.

### **Format and Frequency**

Respondents showed a strong preference for a journal to be offered simultaneously in online and print formats. More than three-quarters (78 percent) favored a quarterly publication cycle.

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