



Innovation in the public sector: Towards an open and collaborative approach

International Review of
Administrative Sciences

2018, Vol. 84(2) 209–213

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DOI: 10.1177/0020852318761797

journals.sagepub.com/home/ras



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Abstract

Innovation in the public sector is high on the agenda of politicians, civil servants and societal organizations. This attention in practice is mirrored in an increasing number of scholarly articles. In this introduction to the special issue on public sector innovation, we discuss how the scholarly perspectives on innovation have changed. Previously, it was assumed that innovation could be organized within organizations: if your organization had the necessary resources, innovation could happen. Nowadays, innovation in the public sector is seen as an open process of collaboration between stakeholders across various organizations. This change towards open and collaborative approaches has consequences for studies on innovation, for instance, it becomes important to analyse how to activate stakeholders to join the innovation process. Next to this, scholars interested in innovation should connect their research with other literature streams, such as those focused on network governance, leadership and design thinking. In such ways, innovation scholars can develop research that is relevant to society.

Keywords

co-creation, innovation, open innovation, public administration, special issue

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The call for public sector innovation

Innovation in the public sector is high on the agenda of public managers and politicians, as well as companies, societal organizations and citizens. Innovation is needed to address grand societal challenges, such as transforming our energy system to become less dependent on fossil resources, and when thinking about the question of how to deal with the increasing ageing of the population, or the possibilities and threats that are related to the introduction of new technologies. Such societal challenges question our established practices substantially. Governments are trying to tackle such issues by seeking collaboration with other stakeholders, such as companies, citizens and societal organizations (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

The attention to innovation in the daily practice of public administration is mirrored in an increased number of scholarly articles on the topic of innovation (for an overview, see De Vries et al., 2016). This special issue also expresses this increased attention. In the following, we first introduce the topic of public sector innovation. Thereafter, we describe a future research agenda for scholars interested in studying innovation in the public sector.

Talking about innovation

Innovation – such as a completely new product or new way of looking at an old problem – constitutes a radical discontinuity with the past (Brown and Osborne, 2012). This radical discontinuity is the main difference between innovation and improvement. Relevant types of innovation are: (1) process innovations (think of the development of a one-stop shop by a municipality or various technological innovations); (2) product or service innovations (such as a new passport); (3) governance innovations (such as giving citizens more autonomy when choosing which hospital to go to); and (4) conceptual innovations (such as looking at someone's ability to work, not his/her disability).

When discussing innovation, we see that the scholarly perspective that we used to understand these processes has changed considerably. Originally, Joseph Schumpeter (1942), the founding father of innovation theory, linked innovation to invention and entrepreneurship – think, for instance, of the invention of assemblage techniques by Henry Ford. However, in order to get inventions implemented and adopted, such inventions had to be 'sold'. Hence, successful innovation depended on entrepreneurship, stressing the individual qualities of the inventor/entrepreneur. Later on, in the 1960s, innovation was seen as a systematic approach that could be organized and programmed: if you had the necessary resources (people, budget and knowledge) at one location, innovation could happen. Organizations, therefore, set up specific research and development units (Drucker, 1985). More recently, scholars started talking about the emergence of so-called 'milieux of innovation' (Bekkers et al., 2011; Castells, 1996). This approach stresses the importance of the fact that innovation does not only take place in specific organizations. Organizations should be willing to share vital

resources (like ideas, knowledge, funds and people) across organizational boundaries. Innovation in these ‘milieux’ is seen as a process of collaboration and co-creation between stakeholders in order to address societal challenges (Voorberg et al., 2015). That is why, in the innovation literature, one talks about ‘open innovation’, in contrast to the rather one-sided and closed approach of the previous two approaches (Meijer and Bolivar, 2016; Mergel and Desouza, 2013).

An emerging research agenda

This change towards a more open and collaborative approach of innovation in the public sector has consequences for the practice and theory of innovation studies in public administration. First, relevant stakeholders should be activated to join the innovation process (Hartley, 2005). This issue is highly related to ideas about network governance, the role of social capital and trust within this network (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2015), and the role of leadership, which is necessary to link people, resources and ideas (Lewis et al., this issue). Related to this, the role of citizens changes; it is increasingly necessary that they become active contributors to solving societal challenges. However, a productive co-creative relationship between the government and citizens depends on the willingness of the government and citizens to embark together on the public sector innovation journey (Voorberg et al., 2015). We can map what kinds of collaboration configurations are possible. We derive four combinations based on the following dimensions: (1) a high versus a low degree of willingness at the government side; and (2) a high versus a low degree of willingness at the citizen side. This is shown in Table 1. It would be interesting to analyse to what extent different governance traditions impact the major configurations in use, and how they can be changed via policy interventions, leadership or other measures.

Second, the fact that public sector organizations have to collaborate with other stakeholders in networks forces us to link to different bodies of knowledge. Quite a lot is known about the innovation capacity of an individual organization and the different involved actions levels (individual, organizational, environment) (De Vries et al., 2016), but the innovation capacity of the ‘focal’ organization has to be linked within the innovation capacity of the network in which this organization is operating. An intriguing question is how to understand the interplay between the innovation qualities of the focal organization and the network. Hence, innovation studies can be linked to bodies of knowledge on network governance. Given the

Table 1. Four configurations of collaboration between citizens and the government.

		<i>Citizen participation: degree of willingness</i>	
		High	Low
<i>Government participation: degree of willingness</i>	High	I: Let’s dance	II: Flogging a dead horse
	Low	III: Lone ranger	IV: Wasteland

importance of leadership, it is also interesting to see how different types of leadership, exercised at different levels, influence the innovation capacity of policy networks and sectors. Concepts such as network governance leadership (Tummers and Knies, 2016) and innovation leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010) can be applied when studying public sector innovation.

Third, given the fact that public sector innovation is becoming more collaborative, the notion of the values of different stakeholders becomes important (Moore and Hartley, 2008). The trade-offs between these values also imply that it is important to address public sector innovation not only from a multi-stakeholder perspective, but also from a multi-value perspective. In doing so, public sector innovation can also be related to the issue of how to increase legitimacy and trust in government. Innovation not only refers to values like efficiency and effectiveness, but also relates to responsiveness, trust and, thus, the appropriateness of the innovations that are being pursued (March and Olsen, 2010). An interesting challenge is how to make these values explicit and how to create a shared understanding about the values that are at stake and have to be balanced. This also reflects a general challenge for the discipline of public administration: how to translate empirical research and theoretical concepts into instruments and approaches that really facilitate public managers, policymakers, social entrepreneurs and citizens to make public innovation work. This implies a plea for a design-oriented public administration that links evidence-based research to guide thinking.

The articles in this special issue reflect various future research areas. Lember, Kattel and Tõnurist are among the first to introduce the concept of technological capacity in order to understand how technology influences administrations. Furthermore, Hartley and Rusham study links between innovation and inter-organizational learning. They build a theory about how inter-organizational learning underpins innovation. Related to this, Van Acker and Bouckaert show that for public sector innovations to survive, it is important that organizations develop a culture where feedback, learning and accountability are present. De Vries, Tummers and Bekkers focus more on leadership within public organizations. They show that leaders might have distorted views on the support for innovations. Leaders may think that the organization is quite positive about an innovation, while this is not necessarily the case. Leaders should be aware of this potential bias. Lewis, Ricard and Klijn also highlight the importance of leadership. Using surveys from senior administrators in three cities, they show that leadership has a stronger effect than innovation drivers and external networking on innovation capacity. We hope that this special issue stimulates scholars to think about innovation in new ways, moving towards an open and collaborative approach.

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