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Governance on a bumpy road from enfant terrible to mature paradigm

Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing

Introduction

There is good reason to take stock of the tribulations and achievements of the governance perspective, which seems to have exerted a steadily growing influence on a broad range of social science disciplines as well as on practical endeavours to govern society and the economy. For more than a quarter of a century, researchers and practitioners have used a ‘governance’ lens to analyse the complex processes through which collective goals are formulated, adjusted and achieved. During this short time-span, governance research has travelled a bumpy road from enfant terrible to a relatively mature paradigm that allows us to study new ways of governing, new institutional arenas and new types of actors.

Today, the term ‘governance’ is a ubiquitous but notoriously slippery term to which many different meanings have been attached (Bevir, 2012). Nevertheless, the past three decades have seen a gradual gravitation of governance researchers towards a common understanding of the need to study the complex processes through which a plethora of public and private actors interact to define problems, set goals, design solutions and implement them in practice. From this common point of departure, governance researchers have branched out in different directions, often by adding prefixes to the notion of governance that create new conceptual constellations such as ‘regulatory governance’ (Levy-Faur, 2011), ‘democratic governance’ (Bevir, 2010a), ‘participatory governance’ (Grote and Gbikpi, 2002) and ‘multi-level governance’ (Bache and Flinders, 2004). The diversification and specialization of governance research bears witness to the growing maturity of the governance paradigm which today enjoys mainstream status, having come a long way from the initial dislocation of the classical institutionalist preoccupation with government, its legal basis, its political and bureaucratic organization, and its means of governing.

At first, the new focus on governance disrupted the classical focus on the formal institutions of government that establish a clear chain of command based on delegation and control of sovereign power from voters to parliamentary assemblies, from parliaments to government officials, and from government to public administrators. Arguably, governance is a complex, decentred, fluid and potentially chaotic process that involves different public and private actors operating in formal and informal settings that are subject to ongoing processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization (Scharpf, 1993; Mayntz, 1993; March and Olsen, 1995; Rhodes, 1997). Hence, governance research expands the number of relevant actors, arenas and levels, and highlights the informal processes through which policies are crafted, regulatory frameworks are created and public services are produced and delivered. No wonder that researchers favouring a unicentric model of democratic government have persistently criticized the new governance perspective for being an inaccurate description of reality (Marinetti, 2003) and for undermining the classical model of accountable party government (Mair, 2006). Criticism of the emerging governance perspective was

fierce and often relied on the three classical forms of denial, namely: that governance is a marginal phenomenon; that even if it is a significant phenomenon, it is by no means new; and that if it is new, it has dangerous implications. This harsh critique forced governance researchers on the defensive and gave rise to unfruitful debates about whether government was giving way to governance, or whether governance was simply another tool that governments could use when governing. For quite some time, heated debates between government and governance researchers prevented a thorough investigation of the theoretical and empirical consequences of studying governing processes through a governance lens.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of scholars embraced the idea that the formal institutions of government are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to governing society and the economy. Researchers in North America (Hecl, 1978; Rhodes, 1997; Agranoff and McGuire, 1999) and Europe (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992, Kooiman, 1993; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997) agreed that policymaking and socioeconomic regulation are often more complex and less formal than the chain of government, commonly associated with the British Westminster model, led us to believe. In the beginning, however, 'governance' was merely a new analytical perspective promising a fuller and richer picture of how governing processes are unfolding in our increasingly complex, dynamic and multi-layered societies where no actor has all the knowledge and resources required to solve complex policy problems singlehandedly (Kooiman, 1993). Conceptual and theoretical rigour was limited and the empirical studies conducted mostly consisted of descriptive case studies of interactive governance processes taking place in decentred and loosely coupled networks or deploying a new set of allegedly 'soft' governance techniques. However, gradually, governance research developed into a more mature paradigm based on conceptual clarity, a broad range of shared theories and methods, and empirical investigation both of the scope conditions and the societal impacts of governance processes based on multi-actor collaboration (Bogason and Zølner, 2007; Sørensen and Torfing, 2014; Ansell and Torfing, 2016). Today, focusing on formal and informal governance processes has become the new normal. Several handbooks on governance have been published (Enderlein, Wälti and Zürn, 2010; Bevir, 2010b; Ansell and Torfing, 2016) and scientific conferences are devoted to the study of governance. However, as we shall see, there are still numerous unresolved issues in the growing field of governance research.

The intense debate among proponents and critics of the governance perspective can, among other things, be ascribed to the lack of a precise definition. Definitional imprecision is common in new areas of research, but in this case, the problem was exacerbated by the double meaning of 'governance'. Hence, the concept of 'governance' was used both as a *generic term* referring to the attempt to steer society and the economy through competing modes of hierarchical, market-based and networked governance; and as an *oppositional concept* referring to a specific type of pluricentric governance that differed from traditional forms of unicentric governance based on command and control, and from multicentric governance based on supply and demand (Kersbergen and Waarden, 2004; Offe, 2009). This double meaning of governance has caused considerable confusion about what the governance perspective actually entails. Does it prompt an analysis of different modes of governance and the contingent choice between them, or does it point to an emerging reality in which interactive governance, defined as the complex processes through which a plurality of public and

private actors interact in order to formulate, promote and realize common objectives, is the rule rather than the exception? If one selects the second option, additional confusion arises as to whether interactive governance only refers to governance networks formed by interdependent public and private actors struggling to solve complex problems, or more broadly to collaborative governance processes such as joined-up governance, multi-level governance, governance of quasi-markets, and public-private partnerships (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004: 167; Torfing et al., 2012: 15). Finally, extensive uncertainty and disagreement have reigned among researchers about the role of the state in governance processes (Pierre, 2000). While some have claimed that the state is being hollowed out by the displacement of political power upwards, downwards and outwards (Milward and Provan, 1993; Rhodes, 1996), others claim that the role of the state is not diminishing but is, rather, being transformed by the emerging reality of interactive governance that requires it to act as an initiator, facilitator and sponsor of collaborative forms of governance (Peters and Pierre, 2000; Jessop, 2002; Torfing et al., 2012).

The conceptual confusion that initially surrounded the new governance perspective prevented a sound and sober debate about the relative importance of traditional forms of government and new forms of governance, and about whether there was evidence of a shift from the former towards the latter. Some researchers stubbornly insisted that there was nothing new under the sun and that government was still in full control (Christiansen and Togeby, 2006). Others claimed that we were witnessing a wholesale shift from government to governance (Rhodes, 1997), thus invoking an image of a unified past in which there was only 'government', and an equally unified future in which 'interactive governance' was the only game in town.

The early confusion surrounding the meaning of governance, and the empirical manifestations of interactive governance, gave rise to an unproductive polarisation between proponents and critics of governance. For its proponents, the notion of governance tended to serve as a magical concept denoting everything good (Peters and Pierre, 2004; Pollitt, and Hupe, 2011), while for its critics the door was left wide open for accusing the governance perspective of all sorts of evil and mischief (Bang, 2003). Conceptual imprecisions allowed governance researchers to portray governance as a magical antidote to all the problems associated with bureaucratic top-down government, but it also allowed critics to claim that governance subjected civil society to alienating systemic logics and replaced the search for social identity and meaning with a restless hunt for efficiency propagated by the governing elites.

Despite this initial turbulence, the governance perspective is currently en route to becoming a mature, productive and highly influential paradigm with a solid foundation in a wide range of research fields, and extensive impact in a variety of policy areas (Ansell and Torfing, 2016; Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2016). A new conceptual framework is emerging, new research themes are being added, old ones are being reformulated, and empirical research on different forms of governance is enhancing our understanding of how our increasingly complex, fragmented and multi-layered societies are governed (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Marcussen and Torfing, 2007; Bevir, 2009). Among other things, empirical research has pointed to the changing roles that public and private actors are playing in interactive governance (Edelenbos, 2005; Torfing et al., 2012; Agger et al., 2015), explored the

dynamic processes through which interactive governance is scaled upwards and downwards (Ansell and Torfing, 2018), and analysed the conditions for the success and failure of public governance (Bovens, Hart and Peters, 2011).

In what follows, we will first present some of the main achievements of the governance perspective, and then identify some new themes that are currently rising to the top of the governance agenda, with a view to consolidating and furthering the governance paradigm.

Key achievements

The first generations of governance research not only helped to clarify the concept of governance, but also developed the concept of metagovernance (Jessop, 2002; Kooiman, 2003) and provided a thorough understanding of how interactive forms of governance contribute to advancing the effectiveness and democratic quality of modern governance (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). The concept of metagovernance is important because it takes us beyond the false choice between ‘governance without government’ (Rhodes, 1996) and the idea that governance is merely a manipulative version of the sovereign rule of government (Bevir, 2011). Hence, the concept of metagovernance draws attention to the many different ways in which government agencies seek to influence interactive governance processes without reverting too much to classical forms of hierarchical command and control (Jessop, 2002; Kooiman, 2003; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Meuleman, 2008; Torfing et al., 2012). Metagovernance is required because interactive governance arenas seldom emerge spontaneously when needed; they may give rise to destructive conflicts that threaten compromise formation; and they may spin out of control and produce solutions that run counter to the overall objective of democratically elected governments. In order to influence the process and outcomes of interactive governance arenas without hampering their capacity for self-regulation, metagovernance combines hard and soft governance instruments in the form of sticks, carrots and sermons. It also combines hands-off tools such as institutional design and political, juridical and discursive framing with hands-on tools such as process management, direct participation and conversation (Bell and Hindmoore, 2009; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009). The exercise of metagovernance allows governments to slacken the reins and reap the fruits of interactive governance without losing the ability to steer and influence public governance. Instead of viewing the relationship between government and governance as a zero sum game, metagovernance enables us to see how government may benefit from facilitating interactive governance, and vice versa.

Another important achievement is the insight that interactive forms of governance can simultaneously contribute to making public governance more effective and democratic (Torfing et al., 2012: 122ff; Sørensen, 2016). This insight challenges the widespread assumption that there is an inherent trade-off between effectiveness and democracy in public governance (Dahl, 1994). The argument is that the exchange of resources, ideas and knowledge between relevant and affected actors in interactive governance arenas not only tends to qualify public policy-making, thus making it more effective, but also provides citizens and private stakeholders with additional channels for democratic influence, enhances democratic deliberation among them, and builds democratic ownership over new solutions

(Dryzek, 2007; Warren, 2009; Skelcher and Torfing, 2010). Empirical research on interactive governance has both provided valuable insights into the potential drivers and barriers for interactive governance in terms of enhancing effective and democratic governance (Damgaard and Torfing, 2010), and identified strategies for realizing its positive potential while avoiding pitfalls (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009).

Finally, we have witnessed a growing appreciation of the diversity of theoretical perspectives that can help us to capture different aspects of governance (Bevir, 2010b; Ansell and Torfing, 2016). Theoretical perspectives on interactive governance differ in terms of whether they see social and political action as driven by rational calculations or by norms, values and identities shaped by the institutional context for governance. They also differ in terms of whether they see governance as an essentially conflict-ridden endeavor that involves antagonistic power struggles, or whether they believe that resource interdependency, the development of trust, and the manipulation of the incentive structure facilitate deliberation, compromise formation and consensual decision-making (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). While most early studies of governance were empirical in nature, and focused on discovering and describing new ways of governing and being governed, governance researchers' new theoretical self-awareness enables them to evaluate the explanatory power of different theories and test theoretically supported hypotheses.

Emerging agendas and future paths

In recent years, three new and important themes denoting different modes of governance have risen to the top of the governance debate: collaborative innovation, political meta-governance and co-creation. A surging interest in public innovation among researchers and public authorities has inspired the development of the concept of 'collaborative innovation' which explores the innovative potential of interactive forms of governance (Bommert, 2010; Ansell and Gash, 2012; Borins, 2014; Torfing, 2016). This exploration takes its point of departure in the assumption that while hierarchy is important for prioritising public innovation and allocating resources, and competition may motivate actors to innovate in public policy and services, collaboration between relevant and affected social and political actors tends to improve the definition of problems, generate a greater richness of ideas, stimulate mutual learning, build joint ownership, facilitate coordinated implementation, and diffuse innovative solutions to new contexts (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013). Collaboration in networks and partnerships may spur innovation in public services and policies, especially if it is supported by the right kind of institutional design and new forms of innovation leadership (Torfing, 2016). Although a tension might arise between 'collaboration' that thrives on similarity and 'innovation' that presupposes diversity, that tension tends to disappear if we define collaboration as the constructive management of difference in order to find new and bold solutions to common problems (Gray, 1989). When successful, collaborative innovation may help to solve wicked and unruly problems and enable the public sector to escape the cross-pressure between growing citizen expectations and fiscal constraints.

Another emerging theme is political metagovernance, which aims to conceptualise and understand what political leadership entails in the context of interactive governance (Koppenjan, Kars and Voort, 2013; Sørensen and Torfing, 2016a). This debate emerged from a critique of the concept of metagovernance for being overly managerial and technocratic (Fawcett et al., forthcoming), for overlooking the political aspects of metagovernance, and for failing to appreciate the important role of politicians in metagovernance. In response, we have proposed a distinction between administrative and political metagovernance in order to identify those metagovernance tasks that presuppose the kind of democratic legitimacy that only elected politicians have (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016b). Whereas the concept of political metagovernance helps us to understand how elected politicians can influence political decisions in the world of governance, the concept of interactive political leadership allows us to appreciate how politicians can strengthen their political leadership by engaging in collaborative forms of governance (Sørensen, 2016). By defining policy problems and creating political solutions in close dialogue with critical followers such as assertive citizens and other relevant stakeholders, elected politicians may be able to succeed in bridging the gap between the increasingly technocratic policy-making process and the increasingly alienated population.

Finally, there is a growing interest in co-creation as a particular form of interactive governance (Osborne, Radnor and Stokosch, 2016; Voorberg, Bekkers, Tummers, 2015). Co-creation, defined as processes through which relevant and affected actors work together in a shared effort to create and implement solutions to shared problems, inspires a shift in focus in public governance from the efficient exploitation of scarce public resources to the mobilisation of additional public and private resources. As such, co-creation extends the ambition of the governance paradigm from that of making public governance more effective, democratic and innovative, to mobilising broad segments of the population in public value creation. The production of public value is the key task of the public sector, but public actors are not alone in producing public value. A broad range of private actors such as citizens, civil society organizations, private firms, etc. can also contribute to public value production and help to provide additional resources and ideas that can improve public governance. In principle, both public and private actors can initiate co-creation, but the former will often possess more of the competences and resources that are required to support co-creation processes. Whereas there has been a growing focus on how public administrators co-create solutions with other actors in order to leverage their ideas and resources, there has been less focus on co-created policy-making involving elected politicians. Although there seems to be great potential for politicians to benefit from co-creation, the problem is how to combine their role as representatives of the people with their continuous dialogue with societal actors that are not representative of the general population. However, the development of some form of hybrid democracy that combines traditional forms of representative democracy with new forms of participatory and deliberative democracy might solve the problem.

To illustrate the points raised above, let us briefly consider experiences from a recent study of new forms of governance in Gentofte Municipality in Denmark (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016b). Like many other local municipalities, Gentofte is facing a growing number of wicked and unruly problems that call for innovative solutions. To enhance the capacity for developing and implementing innovative solutions, the elected councillors decided to form a new type of Task Committee in which politicians,

citizens and local stakeholders work together to reframe the problems at hand and find new and bold solutions. The Task Committees are vehicles of collaborative policy innovation which enable the municipality to break policy deadlocks and find solutions to complex problems such as traffic safety, integration of refugees, school reform etc. The Task Committees are established by, and report to, the City Council, which exercises political metagovernance by carefully formulating the mandate that governs the formation, operation and impact of the Task Committees that, in turn, help to strengthen the political leadership of the elected politicians. The Task Committees are part of a strategic effort by the municipality to mobilize the knowledge, ideas and resources of local citizens and stakeholders. After many years with strong and dedicated efforts to make public administration more efficient through rationalization, budget cuts and the contracting out of services, it seems clear that a further consolidation and development of the welfare state is predicated on the mobilization of local resources through co-production and co-creation. Consequently, the municipality aims to transform itself from an authority and service provider into an arena for co-creation.

In the light of the early achievements and recent developments in the field, it seems fair to conclude that the governance perspective has developed from an ‘enfant terrible’ into a robust social science paradigm that can analyse, inform and guide concrete governance practices in an ongoing effort to improve the way society and the economy are governed. Governance, with all its meanings and ramifications, is here to stay and researchers from all over the world will continue to deepen our understanding of complex governance processes and critically explore their implications.

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