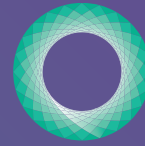


Digital Minilateralism:

How governments cooperate on digital governance



Bennett Institute
for Public Policy
Cambridge



By **Tanya Filer** and **Antonio Weiss**



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Abbreviations

D5	Digital 5
D7	Digital 7
D9	Digital 9*
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (UK)
DGU	Digital Government Unit
DN	Digital Nations*
GDS (UK)	Government Digital Service
GPAI	Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCTF	Pan-Canadian Trust Framework
Red Gealc	Red de Gobierno electrónico de América Latina y el Caribe
UN	United Nations
UN EGDI	United Nations E-Government Development Index
WHO	World Health Organization

* D5, D7, D9 and Digital Nations all refer to the same network at various stages of its growth.

Synopsis

The global reach of the Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the need for policymakers facing similar, and globally entwined, challenges to be able to quickly understand from peers what has worked elsewhere. Yet there is little practical understanding available on how lesson learning and idea sharing pertaining to government technology uptake, use, and governance happens. This policy paper explores the role and value of 'digital minilateralism'. Minilaterals are small, trust-based, knowledge creating and sharing, innovation-oriented networks. Digital minilateralism describes those minilateral networks both committed to digital governance and using 'digital' culture, practices, processes and technologies as tools to advance peer learning, support, and cooperation between governments.

Set against a background of underdeveloped multilateral approaches to cooperative digital governance, we explore digital minilateralism in detail through the case of one digital minilateral network, Digital Nations (DN). The paper outlines the development and growth of the network from its foundation in late 2014 as the D5 through to 2020. We reflect on key characteristics that have emerged from this informal network of digital states, as well as some of the challenges of organisational development that loosely organised, agile networks of digital leaders and policymakers may face.

Beyond internal value to member countries, we argue that the DN is well placed to feed into the broader international system as a beacon, providing shared directions of travel through its informedness, capacity for knowledge transfer, willingness to be a first mover in committing principles to paper, and ability to horizon scan on emerging issues. The DN is not the only international network focused on digital government to exist, and we also identify different network models, their intended objectives and key characteristics. Finally, the paper considers future directions for 'digital minilateralism' in general, and for the DN in particular.

As digital technologies become both increasingly critical to domestic governance and a staple presence in our global interdependence, we believe that leaders should consider engaging digital minilateralism as a method of international cooperation. Already beginning to prove effective, digital minilateralism has a role to play in shaping how individual governments learn, adopt, and govern the use of new and emerging technologies, and how they create common or aligned policy. However, accountability mechanisms and a continued appreciation of differentiated local contexts and political cultures is critical. In the future, digital minilateralism will also have a role to play as countries navigate the possibility of increasingly interoperable and cross-border digital infrastructure and services.

What is Digital Minilateralism?

Minilateralism refers to small, trust-based, knowledge creating and sharing, innovation-oriented networks. Digital minilateralism describes those networks both committed to digital governance and using 'digital' culture, practices, processes & technologies as tools to advance peer learning, support, and cooperation between governments.

Key Findings

- **Already beginning to prove effective, digital minilateralism has a role to play in shaping how individual governments learn, adopt and govern the use of new and emerging technologies, and how they create common or aligned policy.** In the future, it will also have a role to play as countries navigate the possibility of increasingly interoperable or cross-border digital infrastructure and services.
- **National governments should recognise and reinforce the strategic value of digital minilaterals** without stamping out, through over-bureaucratisation, the qualities of trust, open conversation, and ad-hocness in which their value lies.
- **As digital minilateral networks grow and mature, they will need to find mechanisms through which to retain (or adapt) their core principles while scaling across more boundaries.** There is no single 'magic number' for digital minilateralism, but networks must carefully consider their objectives and the range and quantity of countries that can best help them to achieve them.
- **Effective transgovernmental digital cooperation requires new skills from digital leaders and policymakers.** There is increasing recognition that public servants across policy domains require digital 'upskilling'. Yet the skills required of digital professionals in government are also evolving. The skill of forum selection and participation is likely to become increasingly critical within the digital policymakers' toolkit.
- **Minilateralism's dependency on interpersonal relations can be both a strength and a weakness.** Minilateralism thrives on strong personal relationships between participants. In conditions of high turnover, this characteristic can mean a need to build new relationships from the beginning in order to keep the cooperation going, which can take time and limit the pace of change. While turnover can bring in new ideas, and in that sense is to be welcomed, some continuity among participants is advantageous.
- **To demonstrate their value to the global community, digital multilaterals must feed into formal multilateral conversations and arrangements.** Multilaterals, in turn, should welcome the connection, as it allows them to tap into cutting-edge approaches to emergent digital governance issues.

Digital Minilateralism:

How governments cooperate on digital governance

By Tanya Filer and Antonio Weiss*

Introduction

“By minilateralism, I mean a smarter, more targeted approach: We should bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem. Think of this as minilateralism’s magic number.

— Moises Naim, *Foreign Policy*, 2009

On 9 December 2014, five nations—Estonia, Republic of Korea, Israel, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK)—formed the D5, a group that self-identified as “some of the most digitally advanced governments in the world.”¹ The charter that they signed promised that the D5 would “provide a focused forum to share best practice, identify how to improve Participants’ digital services, collaborate on common projects and to support and champion our growing digital economies.”²

On paper, the D5 comprised an unobvious membership group, small in size and comprising neither the most powerful nor the most politically aligned countries. While each member had strengths in digital government when the network was formed, other countries such as Singapore and France could also comfortably have claimed a position as digital leaders, occupying top spots on the UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI), a reputed global benchmarking exercise.³ The D5 countries nonetheless had in common a desire for international cooperation, including promoting their successes, deliberating on failures, and sharing ideas in emergent areas of digital government. They were also unified by a set of baseline shared values that enabled cooperation—each committed in different ways to the spirit of “open government”, as their foundational charter reflected.

The approach that the D5 took to international cooperation is distinctive from the formal “multilateralism” exemplified by universal membership organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) or United Nations (UN) and

the legal rules and binding commitments typically associated with international relations. It bears instead the hallmarks of “minilateralism”; informal, discussion-based, the work of government officials with specific expertise rather than foreign ministries, and premised on individual relationships of trust between members.⁴ These ad hoc, often smaller scale, minilateral networks contrast significantly in composition and character from multilateral arrangements. Their informality, in the words of the global governance expert Stewart M. Patrick, offers “certain advantages, including speed, flexibility, modularity, and possibilities for experimentation.” These qualities sit in contrast to the “gridlock” that scholars increasingly perceive to characterise multilateral approaches to problems requiring global cooperation. Minilateralism has begun to be discussed in relation to policy areas including climate change and foreign policy. Its salience to digital government networks—and the lessons that can be drawn from digital government networks for other policy and expert domains—has not yet been explored.

* We would like to acknowledge the contribution of Ryan Chung, who both assisted in research and developed visualisations for this paper. We also wish to thank our fifteen interviewees who currently or previously participated in Digital Nations.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/d5-london-about-d5-member-countries>

2 The most up-to-date version of the charter from 2019 retains the same language: <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/system/digital-government/improving-digital-services/digital9charter.html>

3 <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2014>

4 <https://academic.oup.com/globalsummitry/article/1/2/115/2362958>

Reimagining International Cooperation: Digital minilateralism

The D5 is best understood as a form of digital minilateralism: a small, cooperative, trust-based, knowledge creating and sharing, innovation-oriented network both committed to digital government and using ‘digital’ – understood as the culture, practices, processes & technologies of the Internet-era – as tools for advancing its agenda.⁵ The term “cooperation” is used deliberately here; it is best understood in distinction to “collaboration”, where responsibility for digital services may be shared. By comparison, “cooperation”, involves knowledge, practices and lessons learned being shared, but responsibility is not. It is primarily in this latter model that digital minilateralism currently operates.

As digital technologies becomes both increasingly critical to domestic governance and a staple presence in our global interdependence, we believe that leaders should consider engaging digital minilateralism as a method of international cooperation.⁶ Already beginning to prove effective, digital minilateralism has a role to play in shaping how individual governments learn, adopt and govern the use of new and emerging technologies, and how they create common or aligned policy. In the future, it will also have a role to play as countries navigate the possibility of increasingly interoperable or cross-border digital infrastructure and services.⁷

The Digital Nations (DN) and other international peer networks must be understood within the context of a relative vacuum of global cooperation pertaining to digital governance within multilateral institutions. Many mechanisms of digital cooperation remain primarily local, national or regional. The UN has made some attempts at better organising global cooperation on issues of digital governance. However, the Secretary-General publicly acknowledges that the “existing digital cooperation architecture has become highly complex and diffused but not necessarily effective, and global discussions and processes are often not inclusive enough.”⁸ Currently, the UN is exploring three potential models for global digital cooperation—a strengthened and enhanced Internet Governance Forum Plus, a distributed co-governance architecture and a digital commons architecture—but has not conclusively committed to any of them.⁹

Partly as a result of the limited and still underdeveloped nature of the multilateral digital governance regime—with informal, peer networks (of varying sizes) overwhelmingly preceding robust multilateral approaches (see Exhibit 6)—digital minilateralism, must be distinguished from minilateralism in other policy domains. In international climate politics, three distinctive rationales have impelled the creation of minilateral

‘climate clubs’: enhancing political dialogue and bargaining; the creation of membership-specific incentives that encourage compliance with climate agreements; and as a tool for legitimating great power cooperation within the existing multilateral climate regime, through clubs formally integrated into the multilateral process.¹⁰ These rationales are only partly analogous to digital minilateralism. Digital governance has thus far evaded becoming the kind of international political battlefield that climate negotiations represents, with international dialogue to date remaining on a far more technocratic, expert-driven level.

For now, members of digital minilaterals do not view their role in relation to international political bargaining power. We anticipate a far greater politicisation of digital governance topics in the near future, but the current abiding rationale behind digital minilaterals, including the DN, continues to focus on peer-learning, nation branding, and digital trade opportunities, with a nod towards global stewardship—or providing a direction of travel for the international community. This paper focuses on the benefits and challenges of digital minilateralism today, particularly as experienced by the current DN member countries. Yet we recognise the growing consciousness of digital governance issues on the international stage, and call, in the conclusion, for greater recognition of the path dependencies that might emerge from minilateralist approaches adopted today.

Outside multilateral fora, international lesson sharing, and varying degrees of cooperation, are not new activities among digital government practitioners. There are specific circumstances that have helped to foster exchange among policymakers and practitioners focused on digital government. First, many leading public servants focused on state digitalisation had come of professional age in an Internet culture emergent in the 1990s predicated on open ways of working, from open-source to open standards. Second, many digital government practitioners, at least associated with the first wave of digital reform in the 2010s, felt a latent frustration with the ways in which their bureaucracies required them to work—premised, not least, on the New Public Management Theories that were popularised in the 1980s—which pushed them further towards proximity with international peers in their domain, sometimes in lieu of closer working relations with colleagues within their home governments.

Despite this precedent of international exchange, the global reach of the Covid-19 pandemic is drawing attention to the need for policymakers facing similar, and globally entwined, challenges to be able quickly

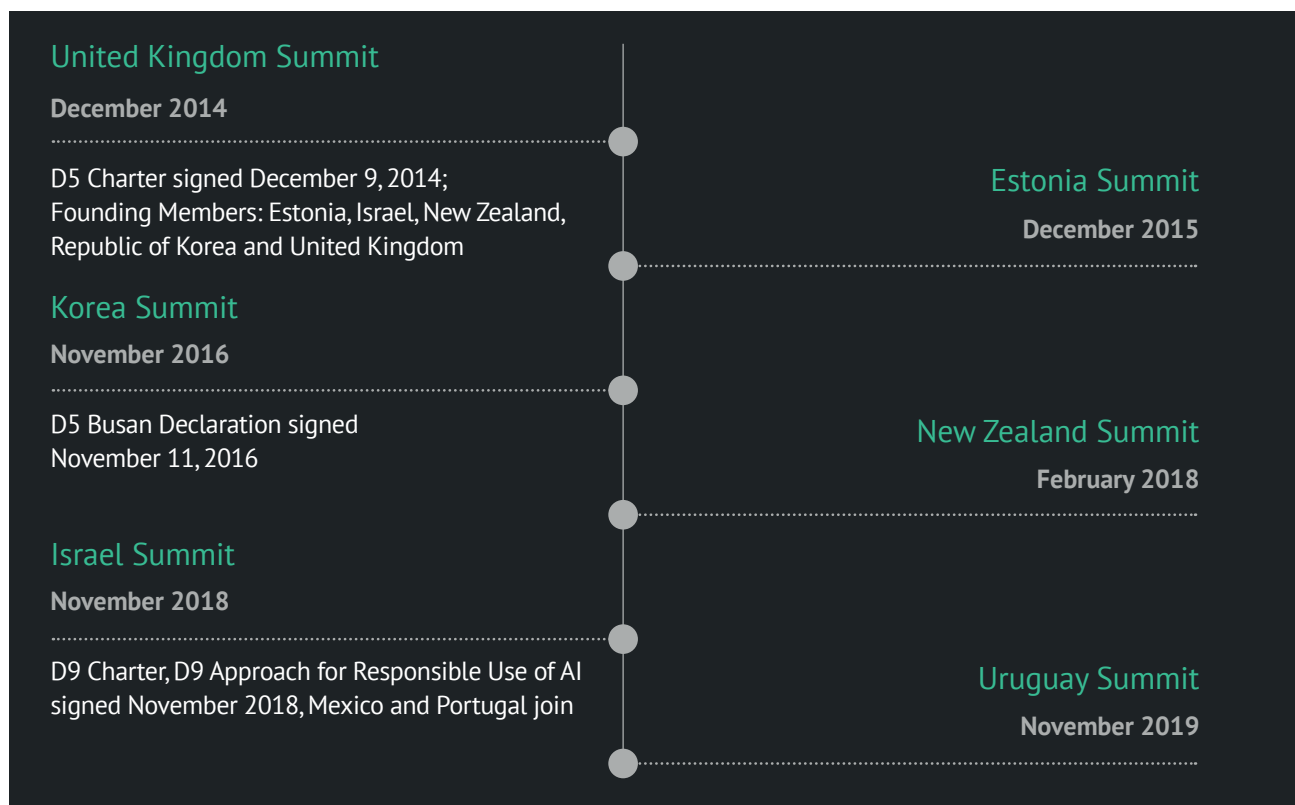
to understand from peers what has worked elsewhere.

Yet there is little practical understanding available of how lesson learning and idea sharing pertaining to government technology uptake, use and governance happens. This policy paper draws on the example of the DN to advance understanding of how digital leaders and policymakers can best develop and use minilateral networks, and of the particular affordances that this approach offers. While many DN participants work in or lead digital government units (DGUs), which are often primarily focused on providing government services digitally, the network as a whole focuses on broader issues of digital governance, where “the design and use of digital government, digital business issues, and digital democracy” become imbricated.¹¹ We thus refer in this paper to both digital government and digital governance.

The paper outlines the development and growth of the D5 from its foundation in late 2014 through to 2020, a period through which the original name changed numerous times in line with expanding membership and now has settled on “Digital Nations”. We reflect on key characteristics that have emerged from this informal network of digital states, as well as some of the challenges of organisational development that loosely organised, agile networks of digital leaders and policymakers may face. The Digital Nations (DN) is not the only international network focused on digital government to exist, and we also identify different network models, their intended objectives and key characteristics. Finally, the paper considers future directions for digital minilateralism in general, and for the DN in particular.

A Brief History of the DN

Exhibit 1. Brief DN timeline, 2014–2019



⁵ Drawn from <https://definitionofdigital.com/>

⁶ The UN describes the twenty-first century as an 'age of digital interdependence'.

⁷ See, for example, the move towards cross-border services in Estonia and Finland, including e-prescriptions, enabled by the connection in 2018 of the data exchange layers between the two countries. <https://www.niis.org/blog/2019/10/2/estonia-and-finland-digital-forerunners-in-cross-border-cooperation>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Working-Paper-197-Falkner.pdf>

¹¹ Burak Erkut, 'From Digital Government to Digital Governance: Are We There Yet?', *Sustainability* 12, no. 3 (2020), <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/3/860>

Foundational Objectives

The UK was the driving force behind the foundation of the original D5. By early 2014, the UK had successfully established GOV.UK—which consolidated some 1,700 government websites into a single domain for many citizen-facing services—and was receiving significant international attention for its efforts. As Emma Gawen, then a Government Digital Service (GDS) civil servant who was instrumental in setting up the D5 recalled: “at the time GDS was garnering a huge amount of interest following the launch of GOV.UK, we were receiving a high number of international guests at GDS, and Francis Maude (Minister for the Cabinet Office) was also frequently discussing the topic with international peers.”

Maude, whose ministerial portfolio included GDS, tasked Liam Maxwell, the then UK Government Chief Technology Officer, with establishing a new international conference of leading digital governments. The UK had two main aims in doing so: first, to showcase its recent digital achievements—both in the public and private sector, to the wider world; and second, a seemingly genuine intent to share with and learn from other countries. As Maude said at the opening conference of the D5: “Where we have expertise—and we do—we want to share it. And where we need to improve, we’re ready and eager to learn. There is so much we can learn from other countries. And there’s so much we can achieve when we cooperate and work together.”

The five founding members of the D5 were, in the words of Jordan Storozuk, the current DN Secretariat, an “admittedly eclectic” group. All the nations involved had pre-existing relationships with the UK Government Digital Service, either from bilateral ministerial state visits on given digital-related topics or even with Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) in place promising state-to-state cooperation. For example, in 2013 the UK signed an MoU with the Republic of Korea on “digital, education, innovation and growth”. Nonetheless, there was an element of serendipity to the initial grouping. Despite sharing allegiance as signatories to the Open Government Partnership, they were chosen based on personal relations to the UK digital government leadership more than on any scientific method. In each case, the political moment at home was also ripe for closer international cooperation on digital governance themes, whereas some other countries that were early invitees took longer to achieve domestic buy-in. In Gawen’s terms:

“The idea of D5 was not to endorse one particular way of ‘being digital’ but to bring together a progressive group who understood the importance of digital services to government, had some maturity in their approach, and had backing at ministerial level. Each has their own strengths and have taken different courses to get there.

The description here of the group being “progressive” is noteworthy. It explains some of the mindset of the original D5 members; that they were breaking from past norms and practices. In this terminology, “progressive” was taken to mean being “digital first”; proactively seeking to use digital technologies to improve public services, and adopting an agile, user-centred and open outlook to their work. In so far as the founding members openly espoused—and, as demonstrated in Exhibit 2—signed up to these values, the description has merit.

The view of the group intentionally holding a variety of strengths and backgrounds was also endorsed by other founding members. Shai-lee Spigelman, formerly CEO of Digital Israel, described how, from the Israeli perspective, there were benefits to the group being “diverse-by-design, each bringing different strengths” and areas of expertise to the table. Graham Floater, a UK participant in the D9 as Director of the International Directorate at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) also found its composition—“made up of different countries, at different levels of development, different places of the world with different histories”—to be “extremely valuable [...] because with diversity generally you get more innovation and that’s what this is all about.”

Minimal Viable Shared Values

Despite the eclecticism of the group, there was some binding glue from the outset. At the first D5 summit the five countries signed up to nine principles of “digital development”. Although the Charter which contained the principles notes that “The Participants acknowledge that Digital Government is evolving, and will update these principles as work together refines them, and in the light of new challenges and opportunities” they were reaffirmed at future summits and remain effectively unchanged.

The Exhibit 2 below sets out the original principles in full.

Exhibit 2. Nine Principles of Digital Development

- 1 User needs - the design of public services for the citizen
- 2 Open standards - technology requires interoperability and so a clear commitment to a credible royalty free open standards policy is needed
- 3 Open source - future Government systems, tradecraft, manuals and standards are created as open source and are shareable between members
- 4 Open markets - in government procurement create true competition for companies regardless of size. Encourage and support a start-up culture and promote economic growth through open markets
- 5 Open government (transparency) - be a member of the Open Government Partnership and pursue open licences to produce and consume open data
- 6 Connectivity - enable an online population through comprehensive and high quality digital infrastructure
- 7 Teach children to code - commitment to offer children the opportunity to learn to code and build the next generation of skills
- 8 Assisted digital - a commitment to support all its citizens to access digital services
- 9 Commitment to share and learn - all members commit to work together to help solve each other's issues wherever they can

The nine principles are relatively broad-ranging, and each is open to varying forms of interpretation and implementation. In product design, a minimum viable product (MVP) refers to a product with a baseline of features to enable use and feedback by customers. An analogy can be drawn between these principles and the MVP model. They sidestep any direct mention of democracy, for example, while emphasising instead a set of minimum viable shared values to enable initial cooperation. This approach to consensus-building was deliberate, and perceived by many members to be the most constructive approach to working towards common goals for the network.

Three further specific characteristics of the D5 are important to highlight. The first is an emphasis on openness and transparency. All founding D5 member states were also signatories of the Open Government Partnership, a transnational movement seeking to promote “accountable, responsible and inclusive governance”. This focus on open standards, open source, and open markets set D5 apart from other digital groupings. The second characteristic concerns who attended the D5 summits. Three distinct tiers of attendees were welcomed by the D5: Ministerial-level, “Lead-level” (for example, government Chief Digital Officers or Chief Information Officers), and “Practitioner-level” (a combination of the “expert” on-the-ground teams doing actual digital service development, and those who facilitate the international coordination

across their subject areas, known as the “Sherpas”). Most other digital groupings do not cut across these levels of participation, focusing either on practitioners or senior policymakers, which may result in siloing. The third salient characteristic is the network's relative informality. The Charter is explicitly “non-binding” and the issue of non-compliance with any principles by any member is to be “settled amicably ... without any reference to any third party or international tribunal.”

Summits and Key Activities

The DN holds two in-person meetings each year: the Officials Meeting (at the leader and practitioner levels, who are broadly referred to as officials), and the Ministerial Summit (divided into overlapping ministerial, leader, and practitioner levels depending on the agenda). In addition, monthly meetings and calls take place at the Practitioner-level. The Sherpas meet to share information, ideas and advance the overall annual agenda; experts also meet within thematic working groups (see Box 1). In 2020, the thematic groups covered artificial intelligence, data, and digital identity, with a nascent group addressing greening government and information technology. Each year a new chair, which also takes on the role of host nation—from the existing membership—is agreed and the specific themes and agenda are developed by the host nation in discussion with the other members.

Exhibit 3. Summits

2014 United Kingdom Summit

Theme(s)

- Teaching children to code
- Connectivity
- Open markets

Relevant Documents

- D5 Charter

2015 Estonia Summit

Theme(s)

- Better procurement for public sector IT solutions
- Ensuring digital trust
- User needs-based service design
- IT talent management in the public sector

Relevant Documents

- N/A

2016 Korea Summit

Theme(s)

- Leading digital innovation

Relevant Documents

- Busan Declaration

2017 New Zealand Summit

Theme(s)

- 'e kōre e taea e te whenu kotahi te whāriki te raranga' (one strand alone will not weave a tapestry, particular focus on digital rights)

Relevant Documents

- D7 Charter

2018 Israel Summit

Theme(s)

- Ethical artificial intelligence
- Digital rights
- Digital identity

Relevant Documents

- D9 Charter
- D9 Approach for responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI)

2019 Uruguay Summit

Theme(s)

- Data 360°

Relevant Documents

- N/A

Exhibit 4. Departmental Liaison to Digital Nations

Canada: Minister of Digital Government

Estonia: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications

Israel: Digital Israel, Ministry of Social Equality

Mexico: National Digital Strategy Unit, Office of the President

New Zealand: Department of Internal Affairs

Portugal: Administrative Modernization Agency (AMA)

Republic of Korea: Ministry of the Interior and Safety

United Kingdom: Initially Government Digital Service (GDS) and Cabinet Office, now Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

Uruguay: Office of the Presidency of the Republic

Several of the summits have resulted in charters or declarations being signed, such as the AI Ethical Framework agreed at the 2018 summit. Whilst a broad spectrum of digital issues have been covered, one notable omission is cyber-security. This is largely due to responsibility for cyber-security sitting outside of many of the ministries within which the main government digital units sit.¹²

An organisational complexity is that digital units sometimes move between government departments—

and thus change relations within the D5. For example, in 2015 DCMS took on responsibility for D5 engagement in the UK, divorcing the D5 from GDS in the process. The impact has been that some UK stakeholders from GDS feel that UK engagement has consequently focused more on the concerns of DCMS—the digital economy—than of GDS—digital services. The impact of shifts in responsibility for DN is most clearly felt when lead officials who previously attended the DN no longer attend as a result of machinery of government changes. This was

the case in the UK in 2015. The consequence is that interpersonal relationships, which are so key to the success of minilateralism, need to be re-formed.

Similarly, where DGUs lie in the machinery of government can impact their ability to engage with the D5; some countries have required the external support of other ministries and departments in order to become members. As Exhibit 4 demonstrates, the departmental liaison for the DN for member nations varies between sitting within central government units or within other, typically long established departments. To a great extent, this positioning depends upon where the DGU sits, with DN liaison being the responsibility of the DGU in most member countries. While it is not possible to mandate where DGUs sit within governments, from a minilateralism perspective, continuity of place and personnel would appear best. And so while the network sidesteps some of the hierarchies of conventional top-down multilateralism,

its functioning is still, then, often intimately entangled with domestic bureaucratic processes.

The DN also faces a further challenge of trust-based international networks organised around individual relationship building: the turnover of personnel within government departments. In recent years a large number of key individuals from founding members have moved out of government, and newer member countries have also experienced change. Since 2016, only three people who were involved in the DN since the outset remain. As Spigelman notes, “intimacy is related to people and people change...[and so] it’s hard because you lose the intimacy.” As a result, as Rikke Zeberg, Director-General of the Danish Agency of Digitisation describes, “You have to get to know each other and re-form trust.” There is also a premium on good knowledge management to ensure continuity when pursuing cooperative agendas in environments of high turnover.

Box 1. Thematic Working Groups

Some of the most tangible work within the DN takes place within “thematic working groups”. Several of the key outputs from the network over the last few years have been products of expert-led work in thematic groups, including the Data360 declaration. These working groups address specific themes in a level of detail enabled by expert participation. The ambition is not policy homogeneity across member states, but the sharing of ideas and the creation of conditions for closer collaboration in the future.

The case of the digital identity working group is instructive. Ofer Ishai (Israel) leads the thematic working group. He describes how the ten member countries have “separate conceptions” of digital identity, with a relatively clear divide between an Anglo-Saxon conception of identity, entwined with privacy and choice, and other countries including Estonia, Portugal, Israel and Denmark, more focused on electronic identification (eID) for all. This difference creates constraints (for example, the group recognised that they were not in a position to write their own shared standards) but does not preclude a highly productive working relationship, nor the discussion of potential interoperability between different models of digital identity. The objective is not to produce ‘cookie cutter’ technology and policy transfers, but to enable fine-grained discussion and to study the potential for concrete collaboration at the level of products and services across difference.

The group recognises that if they are to move beyond discussion into more joined up ways of working, mutual trust among participants will be necessary but insufficient alone. Governments of member countries will also need the trust of each others’ citizens. To this end, the working group sees value in models such as the Pan-Canadian Trust framework (PCTF), a set of auditable business, technical, and legal rules that apply to the identification, authentication, and authorisation of accessing resources across organisations. As Ishai recognises, there would be a need for further resources, liability structures and legislative approval to move towards testing identity systems for interoperability, whether at the whole-group, sub-group, or bilateral level. The thematic working group model nonetheless provides the structure in which to have critical conversations and to build towards, in the words of Ishai, “mutual consent” among members despite differences in political culture.

¹² For example, in the UK, cyber-security is the responsibility of the National Cyber Security Centre and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which has its own “Five Eyes” international knowledge sharing grouping with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and the United States.

An Expanded Membership

Since 2014, the original D5 has grown in membership. Canada and Uruguay joined the original founding members at the New Zealand Summit in February 2018 when the “D7 Charter” (almost exactly the same as the original “D5 Charter”) was signed. Later that same year in November, the Charter was updated to the “D9” as both Portugal and Mexico joined. And with Demark joining at the 2019 summit in Montevideo, Uruguay, the “D9” was renamed the “DN” (DN).

Whilst the original D5 has never had a stated aim for the size of its membership, as Spigelman explains, “Global recognition requires growing—five is not enough to have the right global impact.” With only a handful of countries, the capacity to act was also limited. Participants found that with so few members, if one or two countries were unable to attend a summit—for example in an election year—progress became difficult, with fewer ideas to share. The opportunity for expansion was set at the Korea Summit in 2016 when the “Busan Declaration” was signed, which committed the D5 to be “open to expansion to additional countries that have a track record of excellence in digital government and are committed to meeting the D5 principles to advance global digital government.” To be admitted, a prospective member state required a proposer and seconder country, and had to demonstrate “a track record of excellence in digital government.” While initially this excellence was understood in terms of high performance in global rankings, more recently the members have been open to a broader range of indicators of success and commitment.

A further motivation for growth was efficiency in acquiring knowledge at the individual country level. As José Clastornik, Executive Director of AGESIC, the National Agency for e-Government and Information Society, who led Uruguay’s entry into the DN, describes, “the logic of coming together is also a growth logic—

sharing knowledge decreases the necessary investment for each individual country in developing their own knowledge, for example surrounding AI.” Reflecting on Uruguay, a country of 3.4 million, Clastornik notes how “being small can sometimes be an advantage [...] making projects more manageable. But there are situations in which volume generates savings.” This logic of knowledge aggregation was a foundational motivation for Uruguay’s participation in the DN, and was also on the minds of other participants as they sought to grow the network and further pool collective knowledge over rapidly advancing technology developments.

Despite agreeing on the desirability of growth over the past few years, in recent months the group has chosen to pause further expansion as it reflects on its next steps. As one digital leader describes, “we have not grown gradually, doubling in size in two years.” That pace of change can be challenging for a network so heavily dependent on building relationships. Seong Ju Park, Deputy Director of the Digital Government Cooperation Division has represented South Korea at the DN since 2016. She is one of several participants to describe her DN colleagues as “friends [...] we hang out outside the meeting rooms as well and those relationships actually help to make decisions as a group. We have discussions inside but after the meeting, during the coffee break just having a chat we come up with better solutions.” They also regularly share ideas on WhatsApp. Those kinds of interpersonal relations take time to develop. As the network expands, becoming more diverse geographically and culturally, “the common ground gets smaller and smaller.” While all of our interviewees viewed the recent expanded membership as advantageous and necessary, there is consensus that strengthening new relations within the network is now of critical importance.

Exhibit 5. Key Joys and Challenges of Growth

Joys	<p>Increased diversity, inclusivity and geographic variety.</p>	<p>Capacity to make progress “with 5, if someone can’t show up it’s hard to make progress.” (Spigelman)</p>	<p>Richer policy content production in working groups, with dissenting voices strengthening proposals. (Storozuk)</p>	<p>Richer network of personal connections for leads and Sherpas, increasing access to ideas and professional growth.</p>	<p>Global recognition and impact, especially for “small and medium powers” – opportunity to become a ‘lighthouse’ organisation.</p>
Challenges	<p>Reaching consensus. Easier to take directional issues together in consensus when small and familiar. A broader set of perspectives and ideas may require more negotiation.</p>	<p>Logistics of remote work across multiple time-zones. Working across an increased range of time-zones means inevitably some members will be able to participate less.</p>	<p>Balancing need for greater organisational capacity with desire to avoid bureaucratisation.</p>	<p>Possible need for more formal governance structure.</p>	<p>Budgetary considerations, including moving beyond financial volunteerism by individual member countries.</p>

Decisions Ahead

The network today has proved its effectiveness in a number of ways. At the level of products, there have been instances of practical sharing, including code sharing from the Estonian X-road and Gov.uk Notify.¹³ At the level of policy, several participants describe how discussion at the DN has shaped policymaking or helped to stimulate a policy focus on emerging technology issues back home. South Korea, for example, gathered experts to discuss the responsible use of AI ahead of the 2018 summit on that topic—not otherwise an area on which they had planned to work. Following the summit, that domestic conversation continued. In Canada, responsible AI principles defined at the Israel Summit have been directly embedded in Government of Canada policy, within a directive on automated decision-making that all government departments need to follow.¹⁴ Vendors selling to government must also follow the provisions. The principles have also come to inform international policy, with Canada's leading role in the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence leading to their uptake also within that international forum. While the impact of the DN on the domestic stage is likely to be mediated by the power of the digital government unit within the national machinery of government—which is not uniform among the members—these examples suggest that the DN has already started to have tangible policy effect at multiple levels of governance. Participants at every level also note individual professional benefits of peer-learning and close-knit relations with international peers in their field.

Beyond products and policy, the network has also proved effective in its positioning as a leadership network for deliberation at the forefront, on topics not being discussed in the same level of detail elsewhere. There is recognition, as Mark Levene, Lead of Intergovernmental Relations and Networks in the Office of the Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada describes, that political waves in each individual country can “either increase their capacity to be a vocal participant or decrease it.” Yet even with changes of administration, almost every member country has remained highly engaged, including those countries that joined at the outset, six years ago. Some of the DN participants feel their countries may have less to learn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) E-leaders, for example, because its inclusivity means a lot of member countries are less digitally advanced. There is also ongoing demand, with countries continuing to seek membership in the DN—and wanting to be seen to join. This demand suggests that the work of the network is positively perceived on the international stage. It also indicates that membership has a valuable signalling effect, providing an image of digital leadership that may serve to confirm—or in certain cases provide a counterbalancing narrative to—a country's position in the major global digital rankings, including the UN E-Government Development Index.

With this record behind it, and with its newly expanded membership, the DN now finds itself at a juncture. It has three key sets of decisions to make in order to determine its future direction, both in relation to what the network offers to its members and to the wider world.

1. Organisational Development without Bureaucratisation

The question of growth is accompanied by a set of considerations regarding the objectives and *raison d'être* of the network over the next few years.

When the D5 was founded, many digital leaders in government described the loneliness of the task at hand.¹⁵ DGUs in many countries that are members of the DN began as “challengers” to the status quo. They both operated and described themselves as outliers within large bureaucracies whose policymakers were unfamiliar with, and sometimes disinterested in, the new working methods that they sought to import into the machinery of government.¹⁶ Beyond the methodological clash, many digital government practitioners came to their roles directly from the private sector, and experienced culture shock in the transition to government. Small breakthroughs were won through hard graft, and burnout within digital teams was prevalent. A feeling of isolation can stagnate new leaders of organisations. Meeting like-minded individuals with similar experiences in other governments became critical to progress.

¹³ For instance, Canada's “GC Notify” uses some of GOV.UK Notify's code and the country has also used some of Estonia's X-road data service platform code.

¹⁴ <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=32592>

¹⁵ Tom Loosemore (interviewee), “Digital Government: The New Global Alliance?”, Tech States, accessed 8 April 2019, <https://play.acast.com/s/techstates/tech-states-digital-government-the-new-global-alli>

¹⁶ Andrew Greenway et al., *Digital Transformation at Scale: Why the Strategy Is Delivery* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2018).

Five years on, digital roles and methods are far more commonplace across public sector organisations in the DN member countries. The sense of isolation at home has not entirely dissipated for every participant, but the impetus behind the gatherings has, to an extent, moved on. At the outset, the sharing of lessons, challenges, and failures, as well as confidence-building, were key drivers of participation for digital government leads developing programmes and units whose work had not been defined or tried before. As Spigelman describes, “When you build a strategy from scratch you don’t always know where you’re going, what are the next challenges, where you need to focus.” Having access to a group facing similar challenges was empowering and instructive: “When [...] 4 out of the 7 are all struggling with data and AI I can a) see that’s where everyone is going and consider whether we want to do so or not and b) see the challenges and obstacles and be smart when I’m doing this and see where I should go.” DN has enabled its participants to access nascent evidence bases, developing programmes with greater conviction based on learnings from approaches taken elsewhere. Country leads identify access to discussing emergent issues for which no guidance is yet available, including digital inclusion and ethics of data use and sharing, as a key driver and benefit of participation.

For several DN participants, the value of the network is absolutely determined by its intimacy, informality, and trust-based relations. Yet today, there is a growing aspiration among some members for the network both to continue to provide a supportive peer-learning environment and to attain further international influence, as digital government itself rises up the international governance agenda. While there is no interest in mirroring the structures and working practices of multilateral organisations focused on digital development, such as the OECD, there is recognition that to effectuate that shift will require both an expansion of membership and new organisational and governance structures in order for the group to operate at scale effectively and to expand the kinds of activities it undertakes. Tentative steps into joint policy writing, thus far focused on data and AI, are likely to be further galvanised. Yet, with no joint budget or framework or centralised leadership, there is an awareness among members that progress is often made, as one participant describes, only “slowly and in an unstructured way.”

A practical reality determines this pace of change. Work for the D5 is an extra, voluntary activity on the already busy policymaker agenda. Progress made at

summits, and monthly meetings, can be difficult to maintain during the rest of the year, with the thrum of regular daily activity that characterises life in a DGU. The question that the DN now confronts is whether and how it can retain the assets of intimacy, trust and informality that have characterised its work to date, while also undertaking the internal development to produce more concrete outputs and to grow in recognition on the global stage.

2. Minilateral Resource Sharing

A downside of informality can be a lack of clear organisational lines of duty. Member countries currently rotate as chairs, supplying resources for that year on an ad-hoc and voluntary basis. The chair country is decided only about a year in advance, giving a relatively short lead-in time. Until 2018 key staff members in Digital Government Units often, in effect, performed two jobs at once when their country assumed chairing responsibilities, organising meetings, logistics, and content for DN summits alongside their regular ‘day job’. The steep learning curve, with no local institutional memory of running these international events, sometimes caused logistical strains.

In 2018, soon after joining the DN, Canada proposed and volunteered to fund a secretariat. The secretariat currently comprises one full-time staff member (the current post-holder is Jordan Storozuk, a Canadian), funded and hosted by the Canadian Government, but working for all member countries on an equal basis.

Storozuk has a broad portfolio, but there is unanimous agreement that her role has brought “coherence and governance to the organisation,” from coordinating monthly meetings across time-zones to constructing a resource commons for the DN, in which all of their documentary history is collated. As the network grows, the importance of clear mechanisms of storing, sharing and distributing knowledge becomes paramount. As Seong-Ju describes, the secretariat “helps keep countries on track. We have been having more discussions, things are more organised and we have all the information more readily available. Even with a personnel change there are records of what was happening before.”

Yet the secretariat also crystallises the broader tension between the desire to retain the asset of informality and the ambition to undertake more activity, from the publication of more White papers to the possibility of developing shared technology products.

There is recognition that the secretariat is both an asset and precariously placed, dependent on continued support from the Canadian government. There is also an anxiety shared by several participants that concretising or expanding the secretariat might alter the personality of the group, pushing it further towards the kind of bureaucratisation that every Lead and Sherpa, as digital professionals navigating the machinery of government, has experience resisting.

The voluntary funding of the secretariat further points towards the broader challenge for international 'minilaterals' of resource-sharing across jurisdictions without a joint operational budget, framework, or centralised leadership. Long-term operational planning is challenging when dependent upon the financial volunteerism of single member-states. While other member countries have expressed interest in contributing, trans-governmental budgeting is operationally complex for a non-legal entity to implement.

The difficulties of resource sharing are also evident in the development of the DN website.

Israel, as chair, began to develop a website for the group. Uruguay eventually launched a DN website, www.leadingdigitalgovs.org, in 2019, during its chairmanship. Responsibility for editorship now lies with the Secretariat. As a non-Uruguayan citizen, Storozuk faces a number of operational challenges in undertaking this role. For high-level changes to be enacted, for example, Storozuk must send a request to a DN liaison in Canada, which is then forwarded to the relevant department—an intermediated process that can stall the pace of change.

3. Avoiding Runaway Technocracy

The bureaucratic challenges to collective web development also have implications for accountability.

The 'virtual visibility' that an up-to-date website can create has been touted as a key accountability mechanism for intergovernmental networks. As the political scientist and leading thinker on minilateralism Anne-Marie Slaughter described two decades ago, when government networks "go virtual," they also "become more real" by identifying the members of a network and linking them in the public eye.¹⁷ A website offers internal and external accountability features: "For network members, a common Web site serves as a clearinghouse for the

dissemination of information and the coordination of activities; for those outside the network, the Web site creates a public face."¹⁸ The DN website is relatively hard to find, and only irregularly updated (Denmark, the newest member, is not yet listed). Member country pages are better populated but ad-hoc, with some offering far more detail than others. Thus, the difficulties of resource-sharing have implications on the group's capacity for openness. Given early indications that DN discussions actively shape policy in some member countries, a website populated only scantily risks leaving the network susceptible to charges of "runaway technocracy", in which experts make decisions outside the realm of democratic oversight.

Given the DN's tentative interest in growing membership numbers and influence, this potential charge of technocratic elitism is significant.

Slaughter typologises intergovernmental networks into three groups, of which the DN clearly represents a "spontaneous transgovernmental network". Networks in this group, "generate compilations of best practices codes of conduct, and templates" which in the Internet age have "played a far greater role in triggering policy convergence in various issue areas than more deliberate and coercive attempts." With regards to the DN, one need only look at the extent of code and best practice sharing between member nations—particularly of the UK's GOV.UK Notify and Estonia's X-road data layer service—for evidence of policy convergence. Prioritising openness and accountability, including through an easily searchable and up-to-date external website, should be an imperative of all digital minilateral groups, including the DN.

¹⁷ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Virtual Visibility", *Foreign Policy*, no. 84 (December 2000).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Alternatives to the DN

The invite-only DN is not the only organisation that seeks to bring together the digital functions of governments. Countries have their own engagements - in the UK GDS hosts delegations from two countries - in the UK GDS hosts delegations from two countries - a week to learn about its methods, for instance - and are often members of other organisations. Each is

different in nature, and relevant to the concerns of this paper, each facilitates a slightly different policy intent. Exhibit 6 summarises these alternatives to the DN—some that take the form of annual events and others that are networks in their own right—and their core characteristics.

Exhibit 6. Where do digital government leaders and practitioners convene?
Six key examples

Digital Nations	DGx Singapore	OECD E-Leaders	GovInsider Live	OneTeam Gov	HKS/Public Digital
<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 countries <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summits rotate between member countries <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tight knit • Membership by invitation • Thematic focuses • Bound by broad shared principles <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2014 	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine during the inaugural meeting (Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America), since diversified <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singapore <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance by invitation • Recent focus on smart cities <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2016 	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37 countries <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OECD Headquarters in Paris, France <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly inclusive and large-scale • Focus on sharing good practice <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2008 	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 countries, 1,027 attendees <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singapore <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International, with strong Asia regional focus • Public and private sector represented • Outshoot of GovInsider media company <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019 	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK, Sweden, Canada, Norway, Finland, New Zealand <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primarily UK-based events, occasional events in other countries including Norway and Canada <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has community principles and codes of conduct • Emphasises working in open and practical action • Diversity and inclusion • Citizen-focused • Practitioner led <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2017 	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International attendees with diverse roles and backgrounds (i.e. Ministers of State for Digital Government, Chief Digital Officers, Chief Technology Officers, etc.) <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvard Kennedy School, United States <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on open discussion • Produces publications • University-private sector collaboration <p>Year Founded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018

DGx Singapore, founded in 2016, similarly is an invite-only gathering, but the membership is arguably less like-minded. Participants in both DGx and DN describe the former as a good forum for accessing new ideas, but note that conversations are more guarded given the range of participant countries, which includes China and Russia. The OECD E-leaders network, with 37 participating nations, is probably the most established grouping, and significantly more formal in nature to the DN, with talks and events mainly focused at a ministerial or non-practitioner level. For the more advanced digital governments, the primary benefit is the opportunity to share what they have learnt with governments that are less digitally advanced. Various other fora, including the regional RED GEALC (in Latin America) and Nordic cooperation on e-government, also exist. Public Digital, a consultancy, runs a relatively informal annual event with the Harvard Kennedy School. This international gathering is primarily focused on practitioner-level discussion of digital government and the challenges of digital reform that they encounter, and is characterised by a broad range of participants, engaging, as its co-host David Eaves describes, “different approaches and methodologies in vastly different contexts.”¹⁹

This plethora of opportunities is a sign of a thriving field. However, as Levene notes, “we get a lot of requests and invites so we need to target what we go to and why.” For busy policymakers and digital leaders, this is a real consideration. 200 digital agencies reportedly visited Denmark in 2019 alone. As we set out in Exhibit 6, whilst there are no “better or worse” fora, it is apparent that different networks meet different policy and professional objectives for participants. It is therefore imperative for those considering where to spend their time on the international circuit to reflect on these objectives first, and to use these ambitions as their guide regarding which fora they would do best to dedicate resources to engaging with.

Conclusion

The DN, in 2020, is neither the biggest digital government network, nor, arguably, the most globally reputed. But evaluating its success against those criteria would be wrongfooted. Its objectives are different, and its achievements should be measured as such. Participants at every level of the DN describe their experience, and the value of membership derived for their countries, in overwhelmingly positive terms. For many, it is their preferred forum because it allows them to have critical conversations with peers facing similar challenges, and with broadly outlined shared values. The value of a relatively informal ‘talking shop’ where there is genuine trust and honesty should not be underestimated in the context of innovation, where there is no set path. The question now, as the DN moves into a new era of size, maturity and organisational development is whether it is ready for evolution, and what that evolution should point towards—both for the network and its role in the world. To a great extent, this future scenario depends upon how participants envisage the role of their home countries in an increasingly digital world. It serves as a reminder that many key stakeholders within the DN have become accidental emissaries, not only turning their hand to a form of diplomacy for the first time but creating digital unilateralism—a new brand of it.

One longer run possibility is that the DN achieves increasing domestic leverage within its member countries, as the perception of digital government as fairly peripheral to global affairs begins to shift. Beyond quickening the pace of the digital transformation of services, the global reach of the Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the criticality of digital technologies for the management of complex, international crises, and—crystallised most evidently through the challenges of developing and implementing digitally enhanced contact tracing strategies—the importance of learning from the experience of others. As Seong-Ju describes

“In the future digital governments might just be the new form of government, which means the discussions we’ll be having will be more relevant to different ministries [...] it will cover the entire government and how it works. Naturally then [the DN] will play a bigger part domestically and in the international community.

¹⁹ <https://medium.com/digitalhks/introduction-the-2019-digital-services-convening-e5c3a368a1dd>

Under these circumstances, a further stage of reinvention for the network would be needed.

Beyond the DN, there is growing realisation within policy contexts that lesson learning requires the cultural sensitivity to decode the difficulties of technology transfer between different social, political, and economic contexts. International peer networks may also have a role to play in helping to develop that awareness of difference. As such, the kind of focused, agile, peer-led digital government network that the DN represents will become increasingly important for developing processes and implementing technologies that help nations to confront global, existential risks. Providing appropriate accountability checks are in place, the approach should be welcomed.

The “Magic Number” of Digital Minilateralism

A decade ago, Moises Naim described minilateralism’s “magic number” as constituting the “smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.”

Other countries, he argued, could then follow their lead in terms of norms, practices, and declarations—an aspiration for some DN participants, and one that is already beginning to be lived out through the uptake of the responsible AI principles in the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI). The DN is well placed to serve as a beacon for others to follow in terms of digital strategy, in so far as it deliberately confronts emergent themes often little parsed elsewhere, discusses them in depth, and to date has produced thoughtful white papers and principles that are both sufficiently clear to avoid misinterpretation yet sufficiently capacious to allow for local implementation across different political cultures.

Nonetheless, a global leadership role is only plausible if the network continues to regard context as key.

Digital reform agendas can be susceptible to an overly-technocratic imagination, with policymakers and consultants sometimes perceiving one ‘right’ transposable method of digitalisation drawn from other countries or sectors.²⁰ A “shared orthodoxy”,

in the words of Amanda Clarke—focused on “agile” methodology, openness, user-centric design and diversified procurement—prevails across many digital government units internationally, yet arguably has achieved mixed scorecards.²¹ Apparently generic technological ‘fixes’ and digital policies map poorly onto the variation in political, socio-economic, demographic and cultural contexts in which citizens live and public sectors make decisions. Given the relative newness of most government digital agendas, we also have only short-run evidence of what has worked in any one place, let alone once transposed to different policy settings.²² This is one reason why code sharing between DN member nations can thus be seen as both positive evidence of tangible benefits of membership, but should also be viewed with caution. The role of the DN cannot consequently be to offer policy or product prescriptions that intentionally or otherwise attempt to efface difference or impose universalism. We perceive the most useful global role for the DN to be as a ‘lighthouse’ in the specific sense of providing shared directions of travel through its informedness, capacity for knowledge transfer, willingness to be a first mover in committing principles to paper, and ability to horizon scan on emerging issues.

To best serve this function, the DN—and digital ‘minilaterals’ more broadly—cannot sit in opposition to multilateral approaches. There is already internal recognition within the DN of their interdependence. Following publication of the UN report on “The Age of Digital Interdependence,” eight virtual Roundtable groups were convened to discuss how best to advance its recommendations. Although attending in their capacity as individual national governments, almost every member country of the DN took part. The UN Secretary-General has announced his intention to appoint an Envoy on Technology in 2021, to serve as “an advocate and focal point for digital cooperation.”²³ If the DN is to serve as a beacon, continuing to feed into this broader yet slower paced conversation, including in dialogue with the appointed Envoy, will be one mechanism through which to demonstrate its value to the global community.

²⁰ Anita Say Chan, *Networking Peripheries: Technological Futures and the Myth of Digital Universalism* (MIT Press, 2014).

²¹ Amanda Clarke, ‘Digital Government Units: Origins, Orthodoxy and Critical Considerations for Public Management Theory and Practice’, *International Public Management Journal*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2019.1686447>.

²² Richard Pope, ‘Digital Service Standards and Platforms’, 26 November 2018, <https://medium.com/digitalhks/digital-service-standards-and-platforms-c11e060cacd>

²³ Tanya Filer, ‘Humbling the Numbers’, *Signals*, Public Digital, Winter 2019 (International Development) (2019): 32–41, <https://public.digital/signals/humbling-the-numbers/>

According to Naim, the magic number of minilateralism—at which impact is high within a network and other countries view the grouping as path setting—will “vary greatly depending on the problem.”

The DN shows that in areas of government innovation and transformation, problems are not static. Having tried on for size three numbers—D5, 7, and 9— DN members recognise that a singular magic number may not hold all the answers. But they do recognise the advantages of their nimbleness when compared to larger, more formalised networks for advancing discussions and agreements relating to new and emerging policy areas. The DN, as an early example of digital minilateralism, shows the strength of mini-networks in an age that has typically prioritised economies of scale. In the future, a purposefulness to the existence, governance and degree of structure and formality of digital ‘minilaterals’ will help to steer their development in a meaningful direction. The challenge for national governments will be to recognise and reinforce the strategic value of this kind of arrangement without stamping out, through over-bureaucratisation, the qualities of trust, open conversation, and ad-hocness in which their value lies. Digital minilateralists may also have to learn to be diplomats at home to keep it that way.

Lessons Learned

The experience of the DN from its initial formulation as the D5 when founded in 2014 through to its expansion to ten members in 2020 poses several lessons for consideration by policymakers and digital government practitioners as they seek to cooperate internationally.

1. Minilateralism represents a novel, valuable and effective approach to international cooperation in the digital sphere

As international peer networks focused on other policy domains have also shown, values and interest-led groupings can be effective fora for knowledge sharing, development and transfer in transgovernmental settings. More established, multilateral organisations tend to be characterised by formality, binding mechanisms and detailed joining criteria. There have been some very recent proposals for undertaking digital cooperation through multilateralism, including the UN Secretary-General’s Digital Cooperation Roadmap, published in 2020. Yet the more diverse, informal approach espoused by minilateral groupings can also deliver benefits in the digital sphere. The

support that this kind of environment offers may be particularly valuable in relation to emerging policy topics pertaining to digital and emerging technologies, where policymakers and practitioners are continuing to feel their way.

2. ‘Tacit knowledge’ of digital government—derived from behaviours and work activities—can be made explicit and successfully disseminated and transferred.

The case of the DN helps to understand how knowledge—and specifically technology and innovation-related knowledge—is shared and disseminated both virtually and in person across borders. At the outset, the D5 resembled a “community of practice” which built and exchanged knowledge. Yet as the network has expanded in reach and membership, it has had to contend with many of the challenges of growth faced by such communities; in particular, how tacit knowledge—derived from behaviours and work activities—can be shared and advanced. The role of focused practitioner-led working groups should not be underestimated in carrying out this work. Trusted relationships between participants are also critical for facilitating transgovernmental learning in areas of emergent knowledge, where best practices in any individual context still often remain uncertain and unproven. Opportunities to further trust must therefore be prioritised.

3. Minilateralism’s dependency on interpersonal relations can be both a strength and a weakness.

Minilateralism thrives on strong personal relationships between participants. In conditions of high turnover, this characteristic can mean a need to build new relationships from the beginning in order to keep the cooperation going, which can take time and limit the pace of change. While turnover can bring in new ideas, and in that sense is to be welcomed, some continuity among participants is advantageous. Minilateral groupings that operate at different levels may be at an advantage in that there are varied contact points for each country, which diminishes the chance of any one country losing all of its key relationships to the network at once (albeit this is harder to avoid in countries with whole-scale replacement of the administration following an election). In turn, this continuity enables trust-based relations, and the work they enable, to develop, and the build-up of some collective ‘network’ memory among participants of what has and has not worked.

4. As digital minilateral networks grow and mature, they will need to find mechanisms through which to retain (or adapt) their core principles while scaling across more boundaries.

There is no singular ‘magic number’ for digital minilateralism, but networks must carefully consider their objectives and the range and quantity of countries that can best help them to achieve them.

One of those objectives may be the coordinated aggregation of knowledge on emergent digital topics, a particular advantage both for smaller and poorer countries that could otherwise struggle to stay at the forefront, and for frontrunners, looking for peers from whom to learn. If minilateral networks originally established as voluntary, “minimum viable” propositions extend their membership and influence—as the DN is contending with—challenges of scale need to be met. Whether their original founding principles and ambitions are still appropriate must be consistently reviewed. More prosaically, longer-term financing arrangements should be put in place to ensure stability and appropriate resourcing as they reach a new phase of maturity.

5. Effective transgovernmental digital cooperation requires new skills from digital leaders and policymakers

There is increasing recognition that public servants across policy domains require digital ‘upskilling’.

Yet the skills required of digital professionals in government are also shifting. The skill of forum selection and participation is likely to become increasingly critical within the digital policymakers’ toolkit. Given the different strengths and objectives of current digital government networks, many countries may benefit from adopting a portfolio approach towards network membership. Yet membership typically involves an investment of time and resources. Smaller countries, or those with less capacity in digital government, may need to take a more targeted approach. They should carefully consider desired outcomes for participation before choosing the network(s) in which to invest time and resources. As countries decide upon where to participate, they should also remember that membership can be a differentiated experience for different members, enabling members to meet distinctive objectives, from lesson learning to nation branding, within a common space.

6. Domestic as well as international diplomacy still needs to be fostered

International cooperation is a complex affair.

Representatives of nations within minilaterals may not always represent the full agenda of the nations from which they are attending. Domestic administrative politics, such as where a DGU sits within the machinery of government, can put a political premium on such representation. Yet forms of minilateralism that encourage participation at different levels of national administrations and across departmental boundaries can also bring unexpected intranational benefits of collaboration. Members of minilateral groups should practice the good disciplines of openness and knowledge-sharing as much on the domestic stage as on the international.

