

# Digital Transformation of Public Service Delivery: An Institutional Logics Perspective

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# **Digital Transformation of Public Service Delivery: An Institutional Logics Perspective**

## **Summary:**

Originating in the private sector, digital transformation has been heralded by governments as an inevitable and desirable path for citizens to thrive in the digital age. Digital transformation efforts are increasingly leading to public services being delivered as ‘digital first’ or ‘digital by default’. However, such an approach may have unintended consequences and risk excluding some members of society who are unable or unwilling to interact digitally with government. We use the concept of institutional logics to critically analyse the dominant discourse of digital transformation in the New Zealand public sector. In doing so, we unpack the logic underpinning government digital transformation initiatives that are driving the digital delivery of public services in many countries, including the UK. We identify five organising principles that collectively characterise the digital first institutional logic we observe in the digitalisation of public service delivery: values, norms, assumptions, focus of attention, and view of digital.

**Keywords:** digital transformation, government, institutional logics, public service delivery

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## Introduction

In the last two decades, more governments have begun to accelerate the digitalisation of their operations. This has been prompted by rapid technological innovation, the wider adoption of digital technology in society, and various economic and geopolitical events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The shift toward digitalisation parallels the growing interest in digital transformation in the commercial sector, with governments encouraged to embrace it as an imperative for citizens to thrive in the digital age (Corydon et al., 2016; Eom & Lee, 2022; Gong et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2022). Digitalisation is seen as increasing efficiency and improving service quality while responding to citizens' expectations and empowering them through digital self-services (Haug et al., 2024; Hofmann et al., 2024; Lindgren et al., 2019). The large-scale digitalisation of public services in which digital channels become the primary way that governments deliver services to and interact with their citizens is often termed 'digital first' (Ball et al., 2024) or 'digital by default' (Corydon et al., 2016).

However, such an approach is not without its challenges, with suggestions that digital technology-enabled institutional changes are affecting critical societal outcomes such as social inclusion (Chowdhury & Renaud, 2024; Díaz Andrade & Techatassanasoontorn, 2021; Hofmann et al., 2024; Larsson, 2021; Schou & Pors, 2019). While research on digital transformation has valorised it as an aspiration, its underlying assumptions may not be applicable in all contexts, especially when transferred from the private to public sectors. For example, while private companies may aim for competitive advantage and economic benefits, public organisations typically have other priorities (Danielsen et al., 2022). Unlike commercial goods and services, there are often no alternative providers of public services and citizens must engage with government agencies to fulfil certain needs.

The level of change that digital transformation brings about suggests that it can be viewed as a form of digitally enabled institutional change (Gegenhuber et al., 2022) that requires new practices and alternative institutional arrangements (Berente and Seidel, 2022; Faik et al., 2020). In this paper, we use Gegenhuber et al.'s (2022, p. 2) definition of digital transformation as "the combined effect of utilizing (various) digital technologies in bringing about novel actors (and actor constellations), structures, practices, values, and beliefs that change, threaten, replace or complement existing rules of the game within organizations, ecosystems, industries, or fields" with an emphasis on the societal change associated with changes to public service delivery. Following the recommendation of Hinings et al. (2018), we use an institutional perspective as a lens to study digital transformation. In particular, we draw on the concept of institutional logics, with its emphasis on social, cognitive, and cultural systems, to understand how the digitalisation of public services is leading to changes in the institutional arrangements surrounding government-citizen interactions (Hinings et al., 2018; Gegenhuber et al., 2022). Thus, our overarching research question is: *What is the logic underlying the digital transformation of government services in New Zealand?*

Using qualitative data from publicly available documents and interviews with senior government managers, this paper uses the New Zealand government's experiences with the digitalisation of the delivery of its services to examine and unpack the institutional logic underlying this increasingly prevalent approach. We refer to this institutional logic as the 'digital first' logic. The next section provides the theoretical background for the paper and an outline of the elemental categories we use to characterise the digital first logic. This is

followed by a description of the research methods that were used. The findings are then presented, before being discussed to highlight the paper's contributions.

### **Theoretical Background**

Institutional logics was first introduced as an attempt to highlight powerful institutionalised structures that guide patterns of behaviour in society (Friedland and Alford, 1991). From an institutional logics' perspective, a society as an interinstitutional system, comprises different institutional orders, such as market, bureaucracy, democracy, religion, and family, each with a central logic that constitutes organising principles that shape individual and organisational actions and provide meaning to their experiences (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Lounsbury et al., 2021; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). An institutional logic can be described as a set of material practices and symbolic constructions that simultaneously constrain action and provide sources of agency to transform individuals, organisations and society (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999).

Building on Friedland and Alford's (1991) original emphasis on societal logics, Thornton and Ocasio (2008) propose five principles that provide conceptual underpinnings for understanding institutional logics. These principles are: (1) embedded agency – “interests, identities, values and assumptions of individuals and organizations are embedded within prevailing institutional logics” (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 103); (2) society as an inter-institutional system; (3) the material and cultural foundations of institutions; (4) institutional logics may develop at multiple levels; and (5) historical contingency, in which the influence of institutional orders may differ in their development and importance over time. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) suggest that, due to possible differences in emphasis in study contexts, not all principles have to be incorporated into research that applies the institutional logics perspective.

To theorise mechanisms by which institutional logics shape the actions of individuals and organisations, Thornton and colleagues (Thornton, 2004; Thornton et al., 2012) put forward an analytical framework for empirical analysis. Their two-dimensional framework constitutes institutional orders presented as ideal types (i.e., family, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation) composing most of the key cornerstone institutions in society, each of which is composed of elemental categories representing the cultural symbols and material practices pertaining to that order. Ocasio et al. (2017, p. 511) point out that these ideal types “are not institutional logics, but a particular method for measuring logics” at a societal level. As such, from a theoretical perspective, other ways of representing logics are both possible and desirable. As the second dimension of the framework, the multidimensional and interrelated elemental categories serve as the organising principles of institutional logics (Ocasio et al., 2017). For example, Thornton et al. (2012) specify nine elemental categories: root metaphor, sources of legitimacy, sources of authority, sources of identity, basis of norms, basis of attention, basis of strategy, informal control mechanisms, and economic system. These elemental categories are conceptualised as resources to be strategically used by individuals and organisations to understand their sense of identity, guide their logics of action, and serve as a basis of their motive (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2012).

It is important to note that different studies use different sets of elemental categories to define the organising principles of institutional logics. For example, in relation to information systems research, Berente et al. (2019) define the logics underpinning pluralistic responses to

enterprise system implementation with four elemental categories, including principles, assumptions, identity, and domain. In their study of digital transformation in healthcare, Burton-Jones et al. (2020) define institutional logics by specifying their underlying characteristics with goal, accountability, basis of compliance, accountability mechanism, input, performance metrics, and tensions within logic. Scholars suggest that elemental categories of institutional logics are provisional, thus allowing relevant dimensions to be identified as appropriate to a specific context of an empirical study (Faik et al., 2020; Ocasio et al., 2017). This is the approach we followed in our study. From our data analysis, we identified five elemental categories that we use to characterise the digital first institutional logic. We outline the basis of each of these below. Our reasoning for why each category is significant for this study is discussed in further detail later in the paper.

### *Values*

A fundamental element of institutional logics is the set of core values that characterize and motivate each logic (Ahrens and Ferry, 2022; Baiyere et al., 2020; Kraatz and Flores, 2015; Meyer et al., 2014; Risi et al., 2023). Values are: “beliefs about the things that are worth having, doing, and being” (Kraatz and Flores, 2015, p. 356). Particular values are considered true and good because of the social actions they guide and facilitate (Ahrens and Ferry, 2022). As “macro-framings”, values are translated at the micro level by social actors: “‘pulled down’ to the everyday level of practice ... into local circumstances” (Powell & Colyvas 2008, pp. 278, 285). Actors’ beliefs in particular values may act as a source of legitimacy, providing a moral grounding for actors’ judgments and behaviours (Almandoz et al., 2017; Georgiou and Arenas, 2023; Kraatz et al., 2020). Values are a key influence on agentic choices. Identification with particular values embodied in an institutional logic mean that actors are more likely to align their choices and actions in a particular situation with that logic (Kraatz and Flores, 2015; Risi et al., 2023). There is often a tension or conflict between the values embodied in different logics, presenting a difficult choice to individual and organisational actors as to which values to follow (Meyer et al., 2014; Thornton et al., 2012).

### *Norms*

As a constitutive element of institutional logics, social norms drive behaviour by a “logic of appropriateness” concerning particular actions (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 106; Marquis et al., 2007). They are standards of behaviour (Marquis et al., 2007) or rules with a degree of obligation or binding authority over actors who identify with a particular social group espousing an institutional logic (Almandoz et al., 2017; Georgiou and Arenas, 2023; Meyer, 2017; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Norms “serve as touchstones for legitimating mental models upon which individuals and organizations draw to create common definitions of a situation” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 68). They establish boundaries for individual and organisational behaviour by providing a rationale for accepting normative restrictions (Almandoz et al., 2017; Georgiou and Arenas, 2023).

### *Assumptions*

Social actors’ reasonings and actions are also grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions that are embodied in various institutional logics (Baiyere et al., 2020; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). These assumptions about cause and effect provide evidence for specific means-end relationships (Berente et al., 2019; Berente and Yoo, 2012; Thornton et al., 2012) and suggest

what constitutes appropriate behaviour under a particular institutional logic (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Assumptions may thus act as a point of contradiction or conflict between actors espousing or confronting different institutional logics (Baiyere et al., 2020; Berente and Yoo, 2012).

### *Focus of attention*

Institutional logics structure social actors' cognition and actions by shaping what is appropriate and legitimate, and thus important, in a particular situation. Dominant institutional logics make salient, and direct actors' attention towards, particular aspects or features of the situational context that are consistent with those logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, 2008). In this way, institutional logics shape: "what problems and issues get attended to and what solutions are likely to be considered in decision making" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 90). That is, institutional logics point organisational decision makers towards where to focus in order to succeed in a given situation (Pahnke et al., 2015). Similarly, institutional logics indicate how the positions of key actors in a particular context are valued and understood and the relationships between them defined (Durand et al., 2013; Georgiou and Arenas, 2023; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). As Meyer et al. (2014, p. 863) propose: "They make available ... social identities for the actors involved together with standard vocabularies to account for typical motivations, decisions, and actions."

### *View of digital*

Institutional logics are important filters for individuals to guide how technology is understood and used in digital transformation: "Drawing on the diverse possible logics, ... stakeholder groups can associate different meanings with the digital technologies they have at their disposal" (Oborn et al., 2021, p. 2). Our development of 'view of digital' as an elemental category in institutional logics associated with digital transformation has some resonance with recent work drawing on the concept of 'affordances' (Faraj and Azad, 2012) to provide a theoretical relationship between digital technology and institutional logics (Faik et al., 2020; Hultin and Mähring, 2014; Seidel and Berente, 2013). The action potentials associated with digital technology perceived by individual and organisational actors can be seen as institutionally embedded, arising in relation to the institutional logics available to the actors: "Institutional logics shape digital technology affordances that organizational actors perceive and enact in institutional practice" (Berente and Seidel, 2022, p. 198).

## **Method**

To enable us to understand and analyse the discourse surrounding the digital transformation of public service delivery in New Zealand, we assembled a large corpus of some sixty relevant texts. These included media articles, ministerial speeches and press releases, central government policies and strategies, and government agency briefings, reports and plans. To supplement our documentary evidence, we invited government officials in senior roles directly involved in the digital provision of public services to be interviewed. We completed semi-structured interviews in a flexible manner (Kvale, 2007) with seven senior managers from six different government agencies between March and August 2022. This was a purposive sample (Schreier, 2018) of key informants uniquely positioned to provide an informed perspective on the objectives and expectations of the digital transformation initiatives occurring in their respective government agencies. Cognisant that their senior

positions may have compelled them to present accounts aligned with the government's official position, we encouraged our interviewees to also express their personal views on the consequences of service digitalisation freely – balancing “the interiors of subjects [and] the exteriors of the social worlds in which they participate” (Alvesson, 2003; p. 17).

All interviews were conducted via video conferencing and recorded with participants' consent, resulting in 7.5 hours of recording. To maintain the confidentiality of our participants, we do not identify the interviewees or their agencies. Data analysis progressed with data collection. While conducting the interviews, we produced notes; upon finalising each interview, we debriefed and shared our preliminary impressions – the recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed. The collected documents were also independently read and collectively discussed to assess their relevance. After these preliminary discussions, we engaged in a systematic data analysis of the interview transcripts and documentary evidence.

Our data analysis followed a combination of deductive and inductive inference (Reay & Jones, 2016). When analysing the data, we identified patterns that largely matched some of the elemental categories discussed in the extant literature on institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012): in particular, *values*, *norms*, *assumptions* and *focus of attention*. The next step was to organise the data around these elemental categories as a tentative arrangement. We then proceeded with a fine-grained examination to add dimensionality to our analysis. In doing so, we engaged in an abductive thinking process by constantly contrasting our empirical observations against the already identified elemental categories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). These categories gave us a preliminary understanding of the data and facilitated a more granular analysis from which we developed codes. These codes were then grouped to form dimensions at a higher level of abstraction. Interestingly, this granular analysis revealed data excerpts that did not correspond to any of the patterns that described the elemental categories in the extant literature. These data excerpts were inductively derived and grouped under a new, salient elemental category particularly meaningful to our study, which we called *view of digital*. This collectively executed analytical process allowed us to identify the five elemental categories that we argue underpin and characterise an institutional logic of digital first in the digital transformation of public service delivery.

### Findings

Table 1 is an interpretive template summarising the first order codes and second order dimensions that characterise the five elemental categories we identified in our analysis of the digital first institutional logic. We use these categories to organise our findings.

**Table 1: Interpretive template**

| Categories                | Dimensions                                                     | Codes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Values</i>             | Efficiency                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering services more efficiently</li> <li>• Cost savings</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                            |
|                           | Modernisation                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modernising public services</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                           | Digital nation                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens thriving in a digital age</li> <li>• Becoming a leading digital nation</li> </ul>                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Norms</i>              | Citizens should digitally engage with government               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interacting digitally with government should be the norm</li> <li>• Citizens should be able to use digital public services</li> </ul>                                                                            |
|                           | Government should provide services digitally                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digitally accessible information and services</li> <li>• High-quality digital services are needed to meet citizen needs</li> <li>• Citizens will default to using high quality digital services</li> </ul>       |
| <i>Assumptions</i>        | Digital environment is appropriate for public service delivery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature of digital is ideal for public service delivery</li> <li>• Digital public service delivery is a natural solution to citizens' demand</li> </ul>                                                           |
| <i>Focus of attention</i> | Citizens as digital consumers                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital New Zealanders</li> <li>• Digital citizens are productive members of society</li> <li>• Digital citizens are self-managing</li> <li>• Digital citizens are adaptable in a digital environment</li> </ul> |
|                           | Digital inclusion                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aiming for digital inclusion</li> <li>• Overcoming deficits is a government responsibility</li> </ul>                                                                                                            |
| <i>View of digital</i>    | Affording a better customer experience                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affording seamless public service delivery</li> <li>• Affording self-service at scale</li> <li>• Putting citizens in control of their public service use</li> </ul>                                              |

### *Values*

Efficiency, modernisation, and digital nation are the three intertwined values that underpin the digital first logic. These values guide government strategies, decisions and practices, and serve as ideals in the deployment of digital technologies to transform public services to benefit citizens. Digital technologies are expected to improve efficiency across various public services: “I think, more broadly, there’s certainly an element of efficiency in delivery of those services if you can do them online” (Senior manager, Department E). A senior manager from Department A commented, “Obviously, there’s a cost driver. Moving things online I think is

perceived as being more cost-effective”. The strong connection between efficiency and cost savings (as well as opportunities to improve citizen experience) are reflected in the New Zealand government’s strategy for digital public services: “There is an opportunity to improve customers’ experience of public services, while at the same time reducing cost to serve. This will occur by shifting transaction volumes from higher cost channels to lower cost digital channels that support self-service” (New Zealand Government, 2014).

The government views digital transformation as a means to modernise public services and keep up with changes in the broader service delivery environment: “We need to become a modern public service to embrace the opportunities that digital offers. Technology can help lift the public service’s capability to deliver services that are centred on New Zealanders’ needs.” (New Zealand Government, 2020a). Digital is clearly viewed as good and necessary for New Zealand’s future development and progress. The government is determined to reap the benefits that digital technologies offer to its citizens and economy by thriving in the digital age and becoming one of the world’s most advanced digital nations: “We’re on a path to digital transformation. But to take advantage of what the digital economy has to offer us, as a country, we must act now. There are huge opportunities ahead of us. We have the potential to be a world leading digital nation. To ensure we reach our full potential in the digital age” (New Zealand Government, 2021a).

### *Norms*

The digital first logic exerts a normative outlook that citizens should digitally engage with the government: “There’s more of ... an expectation that people should be able to interact with us digitally” (Senior manager, Department A). This dominant normalised view expects citizens to take the responsibility, in the first instance, to act digitally in their interactions with the government: “In some cases, they may not need a direct channel because we’ve got a digital experience that they just get what they are entitled to and chatbots to engage with, and that’s enough for them” (Senior manager, Department F). Equally importantly, citizens should be able to access various public services digitally, ranging from welfare and employment services to passport and healthcare services, among others: “[That] New Zealanders can access digital employment services is part of the ... delivery roadmap aiming to deliver value with a focus on the foundations for digital services and case management change” (Ministry of Social Development, 2022). Similarly, “Health services are more convenient with ‘virtual’ options available to all New Zealanders through a range of technologies” (Ministry of Health, 2020).

The digital first logic designates a normative vision that the government should provide digital information and services that are high-quality, accessible, easy-to-use and customer-focused: “I’m proud to present the Strategy for a Digital Public Service, which is our call to action for the public service to operate effectively in the digital world and to make it as easy as possible for New Zealanders to engage with us” (New Zealand Government, 2020a). The pan-government sentiment of ‘digital engagement with citizens’ is operationalised by developing high quality digital services that citizens will find irresistible: “Being digital by default means producing digital services that are so compelling and easy to use that those who can do so will” (Inland Revenue, 2015).

### *Assumptions*

The digital first logic assumes that the digital environment is an appropriate and “natural” environment for public service delivery: “The process is easier to consume because you can create the process in a digital environment more naturally, more intuitively than you can on a paper form. So, by definition that interface is better” (Senior manager, Department C). This is because digital is viewed as a powerful platform to streamline public service design and improve public service experiences: “Customer experience design, service design ... and the uptake and engagement of consumers with our services. They liked our services because they were well designed and streamlined. That is important. Any government agency needs – if they want to have digitally enabled business models – to do this well going forward” (Senior manager, Department B). Consequently, citizens reap extended benefits beyond those offered by public services. For example, in the case of healthcare services: “Care is provided closer to where people live, learn, work and play ... Better access to technology removes isolation as people and communities are more connected” (Ministry of Health, 2020).

Another dimension to this assumption is that digital public service delivery is a natural solution to citizens’ demands for convenience: “There’s sort of a balance here of just providing easy services to reflect the broader digital environment that we’re in, as opposed to ... provid[ing] a hub where they’ll come and get everything, and we’ll have this interactive thing ... It’s like well that may be desirable, but on the other hand some research ... shows that in fact citizens just want to get what they need and then get out of the door” (Senior manager, Department D). In addition, the use of digital channels for public service delivery is positioned as responding to citizens’ changing service use behaviours and expectations for adaptable public services: “Use of digital channels has increased massively, while equivalent ‘analogue’ options have declined ... This shift in interaction patterns fundamentally changes the way customers and those who interact with them communicate and transact with us and re-shapes their experience of us as a service organisation” (Inland Revenue, 2022b).

### *Focus of attention*

The digital first logic encourages government agencies and actors engaged in digital transformation to perceive digital consumers as the target and focus of their attention. It conceptualises citizens as ‘digital New Zealanders’ – a somewhat homogenous group, the majority of whom are already routine consumers of digital services in their lives: “This focus reflects the way that most people currently interact with the digital world, and that more and more services and day-to-day activities are going online” (Department of Internal Affairs, 2019). If citizens are digital consumers, then the logic suggests that public services will also be consumed online: “From a consumer point of view, people do their banking online, they do their energy online, they just have a basic expectation of being able to do stuff online, why should health be any different.” (Senior manager, Department B). This focus of attention on digital consumers has consequences for how citizens are characterised and expected to behave. For example, citizens’ confidence with online engagements and full participation online become a precondition for citizens to be considered productive members of society. Careful attention is paid to develop an image of citizens as proactively taking responsibility to self-manage their use of digital public services. Similarly, citizens in the digital age are expected to be open and readily adaptable to digital services initiatives.

The digital first logic also directs government agencies towards where to focus in order to be successful in achieving the digital transformation of public service delivery. If all citizens are to be digital consumers, then the logical focus is on digital inclusion: “Government has important roles to play towards ensuring everyone is digitally included, through funding and delivering services, and putting in strong foundations for ongoing, cohesive action towards a digitally included New Zealand” (Department of Internal Affairs, 2020). The emphasis here is on “treating access to digital technology as a human right” (Department of Internal Affairs, 2022). A focus on digital inclusion leaves no room for non-users of digital services. The prevailing narrative paints a serious deficit image of those who are not digital: “There’s a risk people ... may opt out of the digital world altogether, potentially closing off opportunities such as access to services” (Department of Internal Affairs, 2022). Access to connectivity and digital devices, together with appropriate skills and motivation, are seen as barriers to digital inclusion (New Zealand Government, 2021b) – deficits to be overcome or “opportunities for improvement” (Henderson, 2021) that government has a responsibility to address.

### *View of digital*

In the digital first logic, digital technologies are viewed as catalysts affording the government to offer what they view as a better customer experience: “A way that they’re able to use digital processes or tools as a citizen to make their own lives easier or better” (Senior manager, Department E). In particular, digital technologies can be appropriated to provide seamless and frictionless services that are appealing to citizens: “Digital platforms that integrate seamlessly, enabling clients to easily interact with us, access services and manage their own affairs online (as they are able to)” (Ministry of Social Development, 2022). In addition, digital technologies are integral to enabling the government to provide services at scale by introducing self-service solutions across public services: “Technology is an enabler that allows more opportunities when developing service delivery solutions, such as: anytime access, self-service ...” (New Zealand Government, 2020b). For example, the principle of a self-service solution includes those on welfare benefits who look for employment opportunities: “With digital employment self-service, more people (not just existing clients) will be able to access MSD employment platforms – better supporting them to re-enter or remain in the workforce” (Ministry of Social Development, 2022).

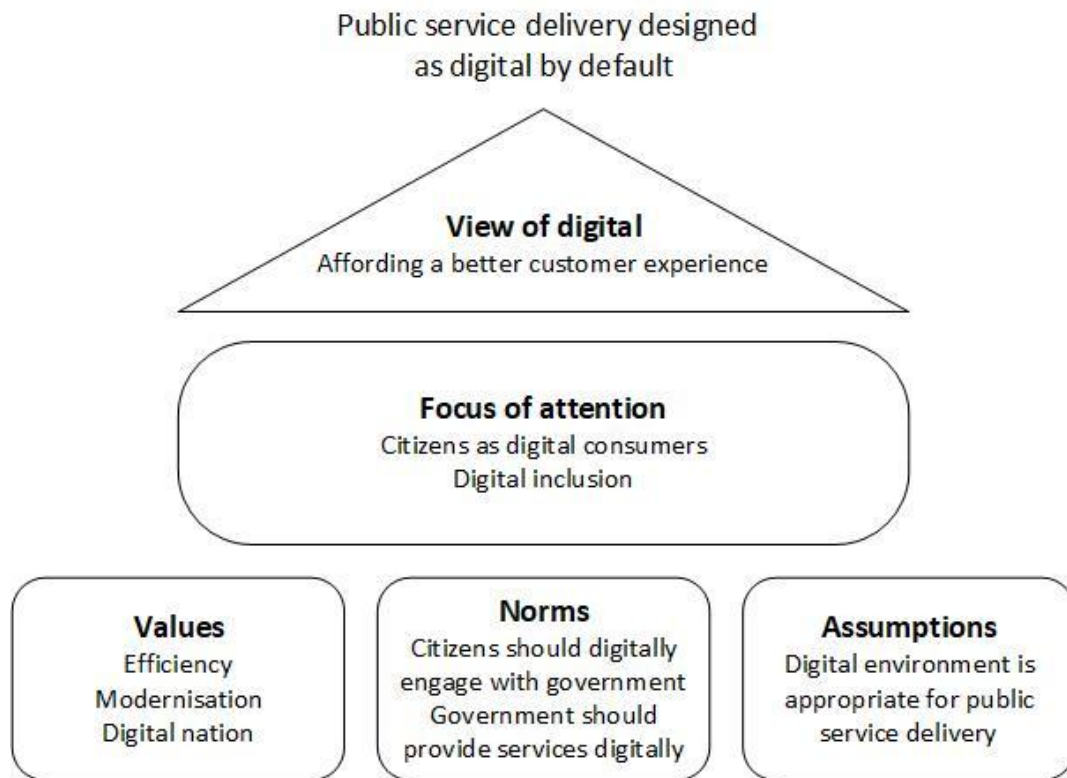
The self-service delivery mechanism enabled by digital technologies means that citizens are in control of how they want to access public services: “Online services are enabling greater self-management for customers. There are more options available to customers to manage their own affairs” (Inland Revenue, 2022a). By offering services online, citizens can also access public services anywhere and anytime: “A digital experience that empowers access to information and services anytime” (Ministry of Social Development, 2024).

## **Discussion**

Our analysis has identified five multidimensional and interrelated elemental categories that collectively characterise a digital first institutional logic we observe at play in the digitalisation of public service delivery: values, norms, assumptions, focus of attention, and view of digital. These five elemental categories serve as the organising principles (Ocasio et al., 2017) of this institutional logic. Figure 1 presents our characterisation of the digital first logic as underpinned by particular values, norms and assumptions, directing attention towards

who and which problems and issues should be focused on, and guiding how digital technology is understood and used in the digital transformation of public service delivery.

Unpacking the digital first institutional logic through its constituent dimensions enables us to understand why many government agencies are defaulting to designing systems to deliver public services for the digitally literate majority who find digital channels convenient while simultaneously withdrawing from more traditional channels of interaction with citizens. Establishing digital channels as the presumed avenue for accessing public services enables service delivery to become the path to achieving digital transformation in government. We observe that the move to online public services is frequently accompanied by digital inclusion initiatives aimed at reducing non-digital users of public services to ever-diminishing numbers, and complemented by a rights-based discourse that sees access to digital services as a human right.



**Figure 1: The digital first institutional logic**

We suggest that the unmediated dominance of a digital first logic has three potential implications for the delivery of public services. First, the technological determinism inherent in causally attributing societal progress to digital transformations encourages an expectation that designing public service delivery as digital first or digital by default is an “inescapable evolutionary necessity” (Gil-Garcia et al. 2014, p. 256). It grants agency to digital technology at the expense of that of individual and collective actors in society. Like all forms of determinism, it is also essentially reductionist, privileging digital technology as the single

factor capable of explaining and addressing the complex social processes surrounding public service delivery (Gil-Garcia et al. 2014).

Second, the prioritising and positioning of individuals as consumers of digital services instead of citizens risks undermining the fundamental relationship or social contract between government and its citizens, in which the latter obtain value from the social and economic outcomes ensuing from the former's activities (Maclean & Titah, 2022). Third, casting digital as the default technological solution to government services creates a deficit model of citizen attributes and behaviour in relation to digital technology. This, in turn, leads to a focus on overcoming such deficits through policies of digital inclusion. While seemingly self-evident, such an approach assumes that everyone is able and willing to be digitally included (Díaz Andrade & Techatassanasoontorn, 2021). It may also preclude and close down alternative possible approaches to achieving social inclusion in public service delivery in a digital age, ones that “recognis[e] that the same barriers that people face in achieving social equality impact on their opportunities and experiences of being online” (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2020, p. 7).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined the dominant institutional logic underpinning the progressive digitalisation of public service delivery. Through a critical analysis of the discourse surrounding digital transformation in government in New Zealand, we identified five salient elemental categories that collectively characterise a digital first institutional logic: values, norms, assumptions, focus of attention, and view of digital. Our findings and discussion articulate how these institutional elements provide cultural and symbolic resources that are drawn on by individuals and organisations involved in digital transformation of government to serve as a basis for motivation and a guide for action. We also outline some possible consequences if digital first remains the dominant institutional logic in the field of public service delivery.

While the geographical and institutional focus of our study is on New Zealand, we believe that the findings are potentially generalisable to other national contexts. The discourse surrounding digital transformation operates on a global basis and digital transformation initiatives are driving the digital delivery of public services in many countries, including the UK. Understanding and addressing the consequences of the digital first logic prevalent in contemporary public service delivery is important for both policymakers and the managers responsible for the successful and equitable implementation of public services. Finally, while we suggest that digital first is the dominant institutional logic underpinning public service delivery in government agencies, it is not necessarily monolithic or overwhelming. Other institutional logics exist within society that articulate alternative understandings of public services and their delivery. The outcomes of individual digital transformation initiatives may thus depend on the contestation between, or even hybridisation of, multiple competing logics.

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