

Digital

The DTA is missing in action, adrift

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Contributor
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Now before people @me, I have long advocated for a far-reaching agenda for a 'digital transformation' institution. More on that shortly, but we are way off track.

Even at this most perilous time, when digital services and technologies are the very means – and in many instances, the only means – by which we remain connected, work and access services, the DTA is directionless.

A google and news search on the DTA, reveals all sorts of tenders; the handing out of contracts like confetti; the explosion of consultants; endless updates on digital identity; information about itself; an entry on Wikipedia; and an embarrassing confusion with [Bunnings](#).

And while the country is in the midst of the ravages of the COVID pandemic, it would seem that the DTA's crowning glory has been the COVIDSafe app debacle. Helped along by a bevy of consulting firms.



Crossroads: Where are we going?

The whole COVIDSafe episode has been blighted by the lack of transparency regarding the app's design, the lack of an operating model, and an entrenched reluctance to engage with industry experts.

However, this is far more than the failure of an app. And the fact that many in Canberra still think of this only as an app, demonstrates just how without purpose the DTA has become.

This is a serious policy failure of digital resilience. Fragile trust squandered.

Hot on the heels of the COVIDSafe debacle, has been the urgent need for a trusted vaccine digital certificate, and it is a good thing that people are being given the choice to use their Google or Apple wallets.

But people shouldn't need a MyGovAu account to get a digital vaccination certificate on their phone. This is inserting MyGovAu as a mechanism of control. People should be given the choice to have their digital vaccination certificate securely delivered via other means.

In any case, as Senator Rex Patrick [recently demonstrated](#), the certificate itself even if downloaded via MyGovAu, can be fraudulently tampered with.

These credentials will quickly become the means to access everyday services and the authority mechanism for movement.

Under pressure to deliver, the problem I see emerging, is insufficient thought given to the operating model of the vaccine certificate and the ecosystem in which it will operate – as occurred with the COVIDSafe app.

This will lead to all sorts of in-use problems, scammers, and unintended constraints on civil liberties. The DTA cannot handball this to Services Australia.

The COVID-cert will run head-on into the ['House of Cards'](#) \$450 million 6-year long digital identity project.

Key questions have never really been asked or answered: for what purpose and what is the problem to be addressed? Where is the digital identity business case?

In the digital era, the digital identity audit will perhaps be one of the ANAO's most important investigations.

The DTA also seems to have not much to say about artificial intelligence, algorithms, and ethics – whether from a government servicing perspective or from the perspective of national capability.

There is zero mention of any of these in the Digital Transformation Strategy Refresh. Just let that sink in.

Perhaps most telling, the DTA remains mute in the midst of the storm of research identifying real societal and technical risks with these technologies. They mount no defence because there isn't one.

And while Senator Hume is of the view that artificial intelligence in Australia should not be regulated, the "do nothing" strategy is both a cop out and ineffectual. This sets Australia up to be an ignorant slave to global corporations.

The genie is out of the bottle. AI has been compared to nuclear power – it can be both incredibly beneficial to society and a weapon of war. We ignore it at our peril

But alarm bells are being sounded. The Australian Human Rights Commission brilliant report on [Human Rights and Technology](#) has called for urgent action: it is so concerned that it has called for a halt on the use of facial recognition and algorithms in decision-making by government.

AI is perhaps the government's most serious policy abyss across all policy areas.

Elsewhere, Royal Commissions into Aged Care and Disability Abuse reveal a landscape of sickening policy and service delivery failures.

The Royal Commission into Veteran Suicides will be haunting for the country as we face the truth of the impact of the machinery of warfare and the servicing machinery of government.

So lacking in purpose is the DTA, that it appears the Royal Commissions are not on its agenda. Perhaps this has been directed politically.

The DTA should be concerned about the systemic issues arising from the Royal Commissions.

Should it not investigate if new areas of digital policy need to be formulated in response?

Examine if there are systemic and doctrinal issues arising from whole-of-government digital services, platforms, and architectures? Consider if the rise of artificial intelligence and algorithms presents unmanageable ethical and legal issues across disability, aged care, and veterans?

Digital transformation is about far more than cloud services, apps, and off-the-shelf software. We have attempted to automate the human out of the loop. My family and many others have experienced the devastating consequences of this.

So pressing are these issues, that the DTA must not be left to wither without purpose. And nor can we continue to admire the problem.

As an institution, the DTA needs to be fundamentally re-constituted, and given an economic and social standing and resilience beyond the hobby and happenstance of an interested Minister.

So here's what I said five years ago in submissions to the [Murray Financial Systems Inquiry](#).

I described the establishment of a "Digital Transformation Commission", a statutory institution, similar to reconstruction commissions set up following man-made or natural disasters. Intended to be enduring beyond a political whim.

I believed then – and even more so now – that what is needed is a bold, ambitious coherent system-wide strategy led by the world's best, experts in their field, deep systems thinkers, with a long view.

Before any new chief executive is appointed – and hopefully this role is not militarised – a far more fundamental question must be examined. What is its purpose?

Marie Johnson was the Chief Technology Architect of the Health and Human Services Access Card program; formerly Microsoft World Wide Executive Director Public Services and eGovernment; and former Head of the NDIS Technology Authority. Marie is an inaugural member of the ANU Cyber Institute Advisory Board.

Do you know more? Contact James Riley via [Email](#).

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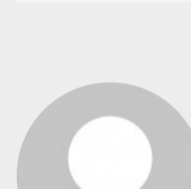
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