

English translation of "Ny teknologiutfordrer statsformen" in *bredbånd skaper nærhet*  
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## New technology challenges Government structure



**“Technological advances can lead to more transparent democracies, but also to unlimited controlling tyrannies”, said Jane E. Fountain, one of the world’s leading social science researchers in the field of digital government, in a visit to Norway in May.**

Jane E. Fountain was one of the invited speakers at the Research Council of Norway’s seminar on the results and challenges within research for innovation in the public sector in May. Fountain

is professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and director of the American National Center for Digital Government. She is the author of the 2001 book “Building the Virtual State” where she describes how the American public sector must evolve and adapt to exploit the possibilities of digital governance.

### **Personal security exposed**

At the conference, Fountain emphasised how new technology strengthens government opportunities for both control and openness. The state’s greatest challenge in the digital age is to balance the protection of citizens’ privacy and security with the benefits of being able to connect information held in gigantic registries and information banks. Registries with sensitive personal information can be justified by the government when used for purposes that are of benefit to society. However, the risk of misuse of information is also present, for example, from multinational companies that coax sensitive information from citizens in exchange for innovative and user friendly free services.

### **Social qualities**

Professor Fountain believes that this development weakens the Government’s role as a guarantor of citizens’ personal privacy and security, and provides a basis for a renegotiation of the theoretical social ‘contract’ between citizen and state.

State structure is put to the test when the Government has to manoeuvre itself forward in the best manner possible, utilising technology in the best interests of its people, in the midst of demands from both citizens and multinational companies.

Fountain states that technology has social qualities and implications, and that the consequences of these depend upon how the technology is used. It is the Government’s responsibility to control this.

## **Perverse incentives**

Fountain believes that the future will bring with it more openness and that it will be more user oriented. However, such a development demands that the public sector abandons today's system of autonomous silo organisations. Instead, the current sector based administration must collaborate horizontally to a much greater extent than it does today. This will result in a flatter and more dynamic public sector.

The American professor believes that perverse incentives in the public sector are the primary reason that development proceeds so slowly. A central problem is that the Government has a tendency to transfer current procedures to the internet (automating the status quo) and maintains the separation of its institutions and its traditional departmental structures. Fountain therefore foresees traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical ideals being challenged by flatter bureaucratic structures.

She underlines the fact that in our new network society, where institutions must collaborate to provide citizens with the best possible services – across government sectors – traditional systems cause inefficiencies.



Picture text: Professor Jane Fountain met with Law Professor Jon Bing during her Norwegian visit, to discuss their experiences in the area of public sector digitalisation. Photograph: Arne B. Langleite

### **Suggested note:**

This article is an edited version of a longer article that appeared in the Norwegian newsletter, Mandag Morgen (Monday Morning), issue no. 16 2007, shortened with the permission of the editor.