



REFERENCE GUIDE

The GovTech Glossary

Plain-language definitions of the terms that dominated the Congress — evergreen reference for anyone working in digital government.

Intro paragraph: Every field develops its own shorthand once enough smart people spend enough time arguing about the same problems. This glossary collects the terms that surfaced most often, or most usefully, across G4I 2026 - defined simply, with the session where each one was introduced or best illustrated.

Agentic City

Not an established term prior to this usage. It draws on "agentic AI" - AI systems capable of autonomously planning and executing multi-step actions, rather than just responding to prompts - applied at the scale of a city.

G4I framing: Juan Corro's (Madrid) proposed successor to the "smart city." A smart city is technology-centred - sensors, dashboards, infrastructure. An agentic city is citizen-centred, using AI to deliver value in people's own language and context. His test: if it doesn't work for the ordinary citizen, it isn't truly working.

Agentic State

Also draws on "agentic AI," extended to statecraft. Estonia has been developing and publishing about this concept internationally, giving it some currency in GovTech policy circles, but it is not a standardised term with one canonical definition.

G4I framing: Used independently by Valeriya Ionan (Ukraine) and Ott Velsberg (Estonia) to describe AI becoming foundational to how the state is architected, not layered on top of legacy systems. Velsberg mapped its evolution using a vehicle-autonomy analogy - manual, assisted, predictive, then semi-autonomous services that intervene proactively.

City Brain

A real, established term - Alibaba launched "City Brain" in Hangzhou, China in September 2016, an AI platform analysing traffic camera and sensor data to manage congestion and dispatch resources in real time. It has since expanded to other cities in Asia.

G4I framing: Madrid's panel used the term more cautiously and provisionally - Marta Cruz described it as one layer within a four-part model (smart urban spaces, digital twin, city brain, data spaces), and speakers were explicit that the concept remains immature and should not be understood as a single command centre controlling the city.

Collective Intelligence

An established concept in cognitive science and organisational theory - the shared or group intelligence that emerges from the collaboration and coordination of many individuals, studied by centres such as MIT's Center for Collective Intelligence.

G4I framing: Albert Tort's (Catalonia) preferred term over "artificial intelligence" - signalling that AI should augment public servants' capability and judgment, not displace their responsibility.



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Data as Soil, Not Oil

Inverts a well-known phrase "data is the new oil" coined by mathematician Clive Humby in 2006, describing data as a raw resource that must be refined to become valuable.

G4I framing: Audrey Tang's deliberate inversion: rather than data as oil - extracted, centralised, refined into a distant general-purpose intelligence she proposed data as soil: locally stewarded, community-specific, improved through participation. Used to argue for smaller, purpose-built models over centralised ones.

Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)

An established term in international development and tech policy, formalised through the G20's 2023 New Delhi Declaration and used by the World Bank and UN. Generally defined as foundational, reusable digital building blocks - identity, payments, and data exchange, that societies build on much as they build on roads or electricity.

G4I framing: Pramod Varma's sharper point: DPI is not a fixed menu of identity, payments, and data exchange, but an architectural and policy mindset built on unbundling problems and enabling optionality - and he warned explicitly against "copy-paste" adoption of India's model elsewhere.

Disintermediation

An established economics and business term describing the removal of intermediaries from a supply chain or transaction - "cutting out the middleman," commonly discussed in banking, retail, and media.

G4I framing: Christine Bellamy applied it in reverse to government: as AI agents increasingly handle bookings and applications on a citizen's behalf, the government itself risks being disintermediated - the citizen experiences only the commercial interface, never the service, brand, or accountability behind it.

Freemium Trap

"Freemium" is an established consumer tech business-model term (basic service free, premium features paid), in wide use since the mid-2000s startup era.

G4I framing: Tiago Carneiro's (World Bank) specific warning, based on an analysis of roughly six million procurement notices: a vendor's low-cost entry point can become so embedded in government workflows that switching later is prohibitively difficult - especially risky given public administrations' limited contractual flexibility.

Frontier Government

Draws on "frontier AI" - an established term used by AI labs and regulators to describe the most capable, cutting-edge models, distinct from "government."

G4I framing: Ana Rita Pereira's (Microsoft) term for the stage beyond "digital government" - where AI integrates information in the background to serve citizens proactively. Her warning: governments that simply layer AI onto unchanged processes will hit a plateau.

Plurality

"Pluralism," in political science, refers to a system where multiple competing interests and centres of power coexist. More specifically here, Plurality: The Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy is a 2024 open-source book co-authored by Audrey Tang and economist E. Glen Weyl, laying out a broader movement around technology-enabled democratic collaboration.

G4I framing: At G4I, Tang used it as a governance model contrasted with social-media systems optimised for "polarisation per minute" — designing digital systems that surface the most bridging voices rather than the most inflammatory ones.



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"Silent" Use of AI

Echoes "ubiquitous computing," a term coined by Mark Weiser in the early 1990s describing technology that fades into the background of everyday life rather than demanding attention.

G4I framing: Albert Tort's (Catalonia) specific goal: normalising AI so thoroughly that citizens and public servants stop thinking of it as separate from the service itself.

Sovereignty by Design

Echoes "privacy by design," a formally established principle developed by Ann Cavoukian (then Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner) in the 1990s and later written into GDPR Article 25 - the idea that a protection should be built into a system's architecture from the outset, not added afterward.

G4I framing: Kelly Ommundsen's (World Economic Forum) application to digital sovereignty: not owning the entire technology stack, but making deliberate choices - modular architecture, interoperability standards, multi-vendor strategy - that preserve autonomy and control at the layers where it matters most.

Human-Centric AI

An established term in EU AI policy, formalised in the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group's "Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI" (2019) and carried through into the EU AI Act - AI that respects human autonomy, prevents harm, and remains subject to meaningful human oversight.

G4I framing: One of Ott Velsberg's three strategic pillars for Estonia (alongside a data-driven state and an AI-driven state). He gave it concrete form through Estonia's "right to dispute" principle, discussed as its own term below, arguing that principles alone are insufficient unless they become practical rights and interfaces citizens can actually use.

Right to Dispute

Connects to an established legal protection — Article 22 of the EU's GDPR gives individuals the right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing that produces significant effects, and a related right to contest such decisions.

G4I framing: Ott Velsberg's non-negotiable principle for Estonia's agentic state: individuals must always retain the right to dispute decisions made by AI systems, in both public and private sectors. He pointed to Estonia's data tracker (over 100,000 queries per week) and consent service as the practical, usable form this right takes — arguing that transparency is achieved through concrete tools citizens can act on, not policy statements alone.

Interoperability

An established technical standard (defined by ISO/IEC) - the ability of different systems to exchange information and use it without requiring special effort by the user. One of the oldest and most foundational concepts in computer science and systems engineering.

G4I framing: Positioned repeatedly not as a technical challenge but a cultural and organisational one. Leanne Cummings (UK GDS) argued the barriers to interoperability are rarely technical - they are cultural, incentive-based, and organisational, since every department optimises for its own metrics. Kelly Ommundsen and Pramod Varma both framed it as central to sovereignty and to DPI respectively - the property that lets multiple institutions build on shared infrastructure rather than isolated systems.