

'Digital first' or 'People first'? Changing service delivery in New Zealand

Abstract: 'Digital transformation' is invoked by organisations and governments to signal that digital services are the endpoint of an inevitable process of digitalisation. This has led to many services being increasingly digital-available or digital by default. This positions those who prefer non-digital services or who cannot access digital devices as a deficiency that can be overcome through 'digital inclusion'. However, this oversimplifies a complex situation and assumes that embracing digital services will increase social inclusion. This study takes a critical perspective to better understand the manifestation of this digital transformation logic in service delivery and its consequences for citizens in New Zealand.

MOTIVATION

- CAB (2020) found increasing numbers of people struggling to access government services through digital channels.
- They argue that "access to government services is a human right", and that a move to digital-only public services that are not accessible by everyone deprives some people of this right.
- This is suggestive of "digital enforcement": an ethical and moral problem in which institutional policies and practices and societal reliance on the Internet is reducing people's choices to engage or not engage with digital technology (Diaz Andrade and Techatassanasoontorn, 2021).
- Informed by the notions of social justice and human dignity (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999), we examine how the digital-first strategy embraced by the government and other powerful actors impacts citizens, especially in terms of feeling disenfranchised and cut off from societal activities.

METHODS

- We are partnering with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), a nationwide community organisation that informs, advises and empowers people and works for positive social change
- CAB's activities have been significantly affected by the progressive removal of non-digital government services and the reduction of paper-based resources.
- Three phase study involving semi-structured, in-depth interviews with:
 - CAB executive, branch managers and volunteers who interact with clients affected by the digitalisation of services;
 - government officials and company employees who play a role in digital transformation strategy; and
 - citizens affected by the digitalisation of services.

Digital services by design → Societal implications

"Technology and digital processes can help us to overcome challenges that affect every New Zealander. Digital tools and services can enable us to learn new skills, transact with ease, and to receive health and wellbeing support at a time that suits us and without the need to travel from our homes." *Towards a Digital Strategy for Aotearoa* (NZ Government, 2021)

Digital transformation logic



Assumes a static environment made up of stable and repeated patterns of action and equal access to necessary resources

Uses efficiency as the main criterion for evaluating choices between modes of interaction



"It feels like every government department is just withdrawing as much as it can from face to face" (CAB Volunteer)

"It is nice to get through to a human being because they can understand the frustration and will assist you" (CAB Manager)

"Chaotic lives ... poverty and generations of unemployment, too ... sometimes it is cultural ... Naturally, they feel disenfranchised" (CAB Manager)

"I would call digital exclusion a symptom of poverty" (CAB Analyst)

"They just feel that they are falling behind" (CAB Manager)

"Now, we are starting to talk about it more in terms of social exclusion in a digital age" (CAB Advisor)

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION

- Unintended consequences of digital transformation include increased marginalisation of already disenfranchised individuals
- Feed findings into the discussion on policy and practical implications of government's digitalisation process to ensure that services are delivered in an inclusive manner following the principle of 'people first'.

References

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