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When Sociotechnical Imaginations Come True: The Pandemic's Digital Transition of Public Services and Inequalities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments around the world to accelerate the digitization of public services. The use of technology to deliver public services had long been on the horizon, but the pandemic's urgency prompted governments to fast-track their digital transition. In this article, we will explore the impact of this digital transformation on various facets of public service delivery and how it has revealed and exacerbated inequalities in society. We will delve into the concept of "sociotechnical imaginations" and examine how they have unfolded in the real world during the pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 required governments to rapidly adapt and implement digital solutions for public service delivery. It became apparent that digital technologies could play a crucial role in maintaining essential services during lockdowns and social distancing measures. Here, we will examine the digital transition in various sectors of public service.

Keywords: Public services • Sociotechnical • Digital transition

Introduction

Telehealth and digital health solutions emerged as essential tools in responding to the pandemic. Healthcare providers adopted telemedicine to provide remote consultations, monitor patients, and facilitate diagnostics. This transition prioritized accessibility and safety; however, it also exposed disparities in access to healthcare technology and the internet, particularly affecting marginalized communities. The closure of schools and universities necessitated a swift shift to online learning. While the move to virtual education aimed to ensure continuity of learning, it revealed the digital divide. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lacked access to necessary devices and reliable internet connections, exacerbating educational inequalities. Government agencies turned to digital platforms for the distribution of financial aid, unemployment benefits, and other social support services. This transition expedited the process, but it highlighted challenges related to digital literacy and access [1,2]. Many individuals struggled to navigate online application processes, and those without internet access faced significant barriers in accessing essential aid.

Literature Review

The concept of sociotechnical imaginations refers to the collective visions and values that guide the development and deployment of technology in society. These imaginaries influence how technology is designed, implemented, and used. In the context of the pandemic's digital transition, we can identify several key sociotechnical imaginaries at play. In the realm of healthcare services, the pandemic drove the development of telehealth and digital health technologies. The sociotechnical imaginaries guiding this transition prioritized accessibility, efficiency, and safety. However, these imaginaries did not fully account for the digital divide, data privacy concerns, or the potential to exacerbate health inequalities. Consequently, while telehealth expanded access for some, it inadvertently left others behind [3,4].

Discussion

The move to online education was primarily guided by the imaginaries of flexibility and personalized learning. These visions emphasized the potential benefits of adaptive learning technologies and the ability to tailor education to individual needs. However, the digital transition in education often overlooked the reality of unequal access to devices and internet connectivity, perpetuating disparities in educational outcomes. In the realm of social support services, the imaginaries focused on streamlining and simplifying the distribution of aid. While this made the process more efficient, it failed to account for the digital literacy of aid recipients. Many individuals, particularly older or less technologically savvy individuals, struggled to navigate the online systems, leading to delays in receiving critical support. The digital transition of public services during the pandemic has starkly revealed and exacerbated existing inequalities, with the digital divide being a central issue [5,6].

Conclusion

The pandemic's digital transition of public services has brought sociotechnical imaginaries into reality. While these imaginaries aimed to improve accessibility, efficiency, and safety, they often overlooked the existing digital divide and inequalities, exacerbating disparities in access to essential services. As we move forward, it is imperative to address these inequalities, invest in infrastructure, promote digital literacy, and develop technologies with inclusivity in mind. Only then can the digital transition of public services truly benefit all members of society, regardless of their socioeconomic status or digital proficiency. Efficiency should not come at the expense of equity. Policymakers should carefully consider the trade-offs when implementing digital solutions and seek ways to ensure that no one is left behind. Sociotechnical imaginaries should prioritize inclusivity and consider the needs of all users, including those who may be digitally disadvantaged. This involves consulting with marginalized communities during the design and development of digital solutions.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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