Leading change in public services  
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Title: Dilemmas and unlearning – the case of big data  
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Abstract

Developments in IT and particularly big data gathering, storage, analysis and retrieval for the public sector is increasingly important supporting cost-downs (Leavitt 2009; Lin et al 2009) resulting from data integration, knowledge management platforms and where applied effectively (enhanced service flow and evidence-based improvements (Kinder and Trelawney 2013). As Kaivo-oja et al (2015) show, deeply embedding big data is accompanied by dilemmas – competing desirable outcomes. Our paper focuses on one of these – the ability of individuals in public services to unlearn previous ways-of-working when faced with desirable change; in particular change occurring as a result of including citizens in the co-design and co-production of services.

Literature on big data analytics takes an uncritical stance on its benefits; for example Liebowitz (2013); Willcocks et al (2013); Mayer-Schonberger et al (2013); and Davenport (2014). Leblanc (2014) argues that cloud and big data technologies create the foundation for flexible delivery model. Alternatively, we note with dilemma theorists such as Hampden-Turner (1990); Kangaslahti (2007); and Kuoppakangas (2014) that recognising and reconciling possible and actual dilemmas is crucial to aligning strategic performance goals with today’s practice. In short, the danger is that big data becomes a top-down barrier to bottom-up inspired change and improvement. From this viewpoint, as Vogels (2011) argues, big data can imprison public service providers in infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS), platform-as-a-service (PaaS) or software-as-a-service (SaaS) instead of being one amongst many inputs into learning and unlearning cycles of improvement.

Unlearning is not forgetting (like a dementia patient), or suppressing negations (Freud) or restraining the use of knowledge (Ulysses). Unlearning is the implicit idea in Lewin’s (1935; 1936) famous theory of change management - freeze-change-refreeze; brought to prominence by Hedberg (1981) who contests Cyert and March’s (1963) behavioural theory seeking to explain how organisations learn by stressing the importance of discarding old knowledge to make way for change and innovation. Whilst accepting the idea of unlearning, Newstrom (1983) viewed it as eradicating barriers to new learning, arguing against a ‘clean slate fallacy. It is possible to think that dilemmas make unlearning process more difficult and complex.

Our paper frames big data in public services by the need to unlearn. We illustrate the use of the framework with a case from the City of Helsinki illustrating the dilemmas of using big data in local public service change processes generalising our argument as a contribution to theory of new public governances.

References
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