

The introduction of new technologies can change power relationships within collaborative groups. Collaborative governance will only work if there is an awareness of how a given technology affords uneven power relations in a collaborative relationship and there are efforts to address that unevenness within other aspects of the collaboration.

Guiding Questions

New technologies can change power relationships within collaborative groups. How can the system be designed but also be set up/used in a way that will allow power asymmetries to become visible and accountable?

Can (and should) the system encourage ways of balancing out uneven relationships within collaborations?

Can (and should) the collaborative platform be set up in ways that support different forms of collaboration (i.e. hierarchical, flat, horizontal)?

Should the platform encourage or prohibit specific ways of collaboration?

Further Information

Processes of technological innovation are often rationalised with the promise of improved efficiency. Support for collaboration, communication and coordination is no exception. However, the introduction of new technologies for collaboration are transformative and can change existing partnerships and relationships and power relations within them. This often happens in unexpected places or ways and in relation to complex organisational structures, cultural influences, and interests. In addition, when focusing only on the advantages of novel technologies, the problems they bring with them can easily be ignored.

Examples

Changing Roles: In an interview for the SecInCoRe project a responder describes how, when the Hazardous Area Response Team acquired the new communication and body safety technologies, their role in multi-agency response collaborations changed:

...we used to have to stand there waiting for the fire service to do all the rescue stuff and then bring [the victims] over to us and that would be it. So with the [new technology] it took us right to where the patient was, so we sort of walked past the

firemen wearing our own breathing apparatuses. It's a real game changer from the patient treatment [and] our relationship with our colleagues from the other agencies, as well, because we were on an equal footing which was good" (SecInCoRe: Senior HART liaison UK, 2015).

Mass Casualty Incidents: In a study of the project SOGRO ("Immediate rescue in a large-scale accident with mass casualties") which brought together hardware and software engineers, social scientists and end-users (emergency physicians, paramedics, fire-fighters) to develop an integrated system for mass casualty incident (MCI) events, Ellebrecht and Kaufman (2013) found that the system transformed practices of triage and the power relations between the parties involved. Introducing decision support technology entailed three ambivalent consequences. Firstly, it allowed assigning new competencies to paramedics. Delegating these competencies was only possible because execution of the triage tasks could be pre-defined to the last detail and completely controlled. This technology provided new options for action but at the same time curtailed others. It redistributed responsibility to paramedics without allowing them skill or discretion. Aside from this, the novel possibilities of technological surveillance introduced a second instance of ambivalence. While rescue forces may gratefully employ them because they help with the concrete management of a mass casualty incident, they may also drive them towards undesired strategies of avoiding mistakes for fear of having 'disobedience' to the system's suggestions logged. Moreover, any documented errors may unsettle the hitherto high public trust in the reliability of this organisation. Time savings and the acceleration of the rescue process thus become ambivalent as they come at the cost of new uncertainties about responders powers to exercise skill within the asymmetric power relations of a multi-agency response.

Resources

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