

**Helen Dickinson**

## **Applying *Perform or Else* in the Public Management Field**

### **Introduction**

Rarely a day goes by without the performance of government and public services providing a topic of discussion and debate within the media. Whether this is in relation to child protection services, the quality of built infrastructure, the operation of border controls or dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, what is clear is that there is extensive public scrutiny of governments and the services they deliver and to a degree we have not previously seen. Van Dooren et al (2010) go as far as to question whether 'it is possible to envisage management in the public sector without due regard to the pursuit of results and the measurement of performance' (pg. 1). As an academic working in public management, I am expected to spend time thinking about performance and encouraging my students to do the same. Yet what it means to perform is rarely questioned and the field has a disconcertingly narrow view on what performance constitutes. Stumbling across *Perform or Else* (McKenzie 2001) had a profound impact on my work and helped to make sense of a number of phenomena that I had observed. In this essay, I describe this impact and the ways that I have used McKenzie's work and considerations about its ongoing contribution in a post-pandemic world.

### **Unpacking performance**

Over the last three decades we have seen the rise of neoliberalism in the West and the field of public management has played an important role in fuelling this through the development of the ideas associated with New Public Management. Broadly speaking New Public Management is a set of ideas associated with the proposition that large public services are inefficient as they consume too much of a nation's resources and service the interests of public services professionals and not consumers of services (Friedman and Friedman 1980). The response proposed to this is to make governments more 'business-like' harnessing market forces to drive improvements and in the process 'hollow out' government, devolving core responsibilities to a range of actors (Peters 1993). Such forces have encouraged governments to provide strategic oversight of policies and programmes, but not to deliver these. By 'steering and not rowing' (Osborne and Gaebler 1993), governments have a core role in setting the strategic direction of services and then hold a range of partners to account for delivering against this. Such a proposition requires a much smaller public service that is more strategic than operational in nature.

Proponents of market-based reforms argue these can be effective in driving efficiencies and creating services that are better tailored to what consumers want (Miranda and Lerner 1995). There are vast volumes of literature that debate whether or not this is a desirable state (e.g., Warner and Hefetz

2002), but the reality is that in many countries they are central to public service systems and are unlikely to be removed any time soon (Dickinson et al. 2021). The ideas associated with New Public Management have served to develop the Public Management literature into one that is most frequently characterised as quantitative empiricism based on causal explanations and predictions (Newman 2001). As such, the field is often less concerned with normative questions and more preoccupied with ‘results.’ This has given rise to particular views about what it means for governments, policies and public servants to perform. ‘Performance is about intentional behaviour, which can be individual or organisational’ and ‘we can infer a universal definitional ingredient’ that is of a ‘relatively neutral nature’ (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan 2010: pg. 2). Such a view seems to afford a large degree of opportunity to individual agency, given that factors do not seem to be overly encumbered with structural dimensions. Performance is a rationalist concern, free from political concerns. Yet, the day-to-day realities of politicians, public servants and citizens alike is that these structures and systems are anything but neutral, free from playing politics and open to individual agency.

### **Working with McKenzie**

Turning to the framework of performance set out by McKenzie (2001), what we find is that the public management literature is typically concerned with one of the three elements of his performance framework. Public management audiences are well acquainted with notions of organisational performance, that is ‘working better and costing less ... maximising outputs and minimising inputs, the challenge of efficiency’ (pg. 56). Turning to the remaining performance paradigms, as a number of authors have noted, the public management academic community has often failed to give sufficient attention to aspects of technological change (Pollitt 2016), although this is starting to gain greater consideration in recent years (e.g. Dickinson 2018; Jeffares 2021). Although ideas associated with technological performance (the effectiveness challenge) have not traditionally been well served by the field, we are starting to see more significant contributions in this space. Where public management is more absent is in discussions of cultural performance (the efficacy challenge). McKenzie argues that cultural performance operates through staged or ritualised representations or enactments of particular social and cultural traditions. Moreover, these cultural performances, ‘may be transformative or transgressive, encouraging and securing conformance to a set of traditions and values or promoting subversion of these same traditions and values in pursuit of others. Cultural performance then can offer the means of both reaffirmation and resistance’ (pg. 164). It is this latter paradigm and the interaction between forms of performance that has helped to analyse key phenomena in my work, and I will illustrate this with a few examples.

Through the late 1990s and the following two decades, collaboration has appeared as a common feature of contemporary governance. Sullivan and Skelcher (2002: p. 2) describe this as ‘the coming together of actors to work across boundaries in pursuit of public purpose’ and it is embedded across all tiers of governance from the global to local. It has been argued that collaboration is essential in meeting a range of challenges that contemporary governments face including cross-cutting policy dilemmas such as climate change, poverty, urban regeneration and the creation of user-centred services (Glasby and Dickinson 2014). Significant amounts of government resources and attention have been invested in attempts to forge more effective collaboration and yet a number of commentators have demonstrated significant gaps in terms of the costs of collaboration and the benefits reported (Dickinson and O’Flynn 2016).

Despite large amounts of efforts being undertaken to evaluate collaboration and its impacts (Sullivan 2011), there is limited evidence of improved social or economic outcomes. Yet the appeal of collaboration has persisted to policy makers and public servants alike. Exploring collaboration

through a lens of cultural performance offers the opportunity to consider alternative explanations for why actors collaborate, going beyond rational motivations for collaboration, drawing instead on attachments to values or meanings. In applying these ideas, with Helen Sullivan, we argued this could provide new perspectives on why actors choose, or continue to rely on, collaboration despite an absence of evidence that it 'works' (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014). We explored a range of factors such as language, symbols and objects, emotions, practices and identity as a way of explaining why it is that collaboration retains its appeal and the 'additional' work that collaboration does/is done in the name of collaboration that the public management literature typically misses.

In the book *Performing Governance* (Dickinson 2014), I applied these ideas to a number of areas of policy reform under the British 'new' Labour governments (1997-2010). One area of focus was a series of reforms made to child protection services following a high-profile death of a child who had been in contact with a number of public services and yet managed to fall through a series of organisational cracks while being horrifically abused by family members. A series of changes were made to services following this incident, including significant investment in new technologies in the form of integrated information systems and workflow systems to better manage the work of child safeguarding professionals. But the result of these reforms did not ultimately produce more effective safeguarding for children. A subsequent independent inquiry ordered by the government (Laming 2009) argued that the reform trajectory was correct and blamed local organisations and professionals for not implementing these appropriately. I argued that these reforms were effective in terms of their technological performance but failed to account for the interpretive nature of communication and its role as a practice that informs professional identities in specific times and places. In an attempt to standardise and 'manage' the work of child safeguarding professionals this undermined professional judgement, de-skilling and de-motivating professionals along the way. Doing more on the reform agenda would not prevent future incidents happening and may actually serve to undermine future safeguarding efforts.

More recently we have turned this analysis to the topic of robotics and their application in care services (Dickinson et al, forthcoming). Robots are increasingly been seen as the answer to a number of challenges associated with the care crises that many areas of the world are experiencing fuelled by older more sick populations coupled with workforce gaps (Carey et al. 2018). We explored the various ways that robots are perceived to perform in care service contexts, finding evidence across all three of McKenzie's performance domains. We argue that the main challenges that emerge for these technologies are in the dynamic interactions between these performance domains. At present, the high price point of most of these technologies outweigh nearly all effectiveness considerations. We propose that until we see a significant reduction in the price of these technologies or at least the availability of other funding to support their purchase, we will not see an extensive expansion in their use unless there is a substantial and incontrovertible effectiveness case. Some of the more problematic tensions that are less easy to resolve relate to issues of efficacy. Analysing technologies from this perspective raises questions about what is that we actually value in terms of care and the types of moral and ethical values that are embedded in these. We believe this is the start of debates that will run for some time as we see greater use of fourth industrial revolution technologies.

### **Moving into a post-pandemic world**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on many areas of the world, with a significant burden of death and serious illness resulting from infection. Early in the pandemic it was described as the 'great equaliser' as anyone could feasibly contract the illness (Devakumar, Bhopal, and Shannon 2020). But we now know that the burden of COVID-19 has fallen most heavily on the more disadvantaged and marginalised in our communities, driven by a range of structural factors

that pre-date the pandemic and which neo-liberalism and the ideas of New Public Management have played a role in fuelling. The pandemic has, in essence, illuminated a number of the trends that these ideas have created over the past few decades. In the public management space, the effects of the pandemic seem to be having a significant impact on the field and one that will be felt for some time. McDonald et al. (2022) write that 'Increasingly, we are witnessing a shift in public-sector values away from efficiency and effectiveness and toward a paradigm that highlights equity' (pg. 1). Such a transition would be significant and will also require different sorts of analytical tools to support this shift. The time may have come for a broader application of the insights provided by *Perform or Else* to the public management field.

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