
Sense-making in the easyCouncil: Confronting the Illegibility of Outsourcing in the London Borough of Barnet

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Résumé

Drawing on a case study of Barnet, an outer borough of London (UK), this paper discusses the challenges of sensemaking in local government in the neoliberal era. With the aim of making things more ‘direct’, ‘open’, and ‘streamlined,’ the borough’s council decided in 2008 to outsource the bulk of their services in two large contracts to the professional service firm Capita Plc. However, contrary to the image of institutional transparency presented, this article demonstrates that the large-scale outsourcing of services has contributed to the emergence of complex contractualized governance arrangements that raise new problems of legibility. Drawing from the methodological insights of Political Activist Ethnography (PAE), I investigate how generating knowledge about such arrangements has posed a problem for local residents and community groups who have sought to understand the relationships under which their services are designed, financed, and delivered. Through ‘infrastructures of dissent,’ I explore how local residents have developed strategies for investigating service arrangements, interrogating claims to value and efficiency, and exposing institutional blindspots in service provision. The article concludes by discussing the epistemological problems posed by neoliberal governance arrangements today, and how they raise challenges for those who confront them.

Mots-Clés: Financialization, Urban governance, Outsourcing, Contractualization, Urban social movements

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