

Democratic Professionalism in Public Services: Online Afterword in Response to COVID-19

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The COVID-19 outbreak is a major public health emergency which has triggered an economic and social crisis. This has already had implications for public services. Many have continued to function during the lock-down, adjusting and innovating to meet the changing needs of different groups. Social distancing is expected to continue for many months, and even years, and will continue to shape how services are delivered.

The crisis has exposed the extent of inequalities in many societies. It has become more apparent that low paid and undervalued workers perform essential roles in keeping society working. Care workers, delivery workers, transport workers, waste management workers and others have been belatedly recognised as playing a valuable role in society. These groups have also experienced the highest levels of COVID-19 mortality.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to some remarkable changes in the way some public services are delivered. Although this has been in response to a global pandemic, which was unimaginable to many people and has created a sense of uncertainty which will take a long time to resolve, it also provides opportunities to rethink how public services are delivered. If the way in which services are delivered is changing, this is also having an impact on public service professionals.

Teachers have had to deliver lessons online, as well as deliver classes to small groups using social distancing measures. Many schools have had to take responsibility for providing food for children who would normally have free school meals.

Health workers have been in the public eye, often being part of teams caring for COVID-19 patients with innovative treatments and new ways of working. They have had to communicate with family and friends of patients in emotional crises, as well as dealing with their own feelings about the risks to their own health that their work now involves.

Social workers are operating in different ways, more distanced from their clients, often unable to deliver services in the ways they would like and having to respond to new demands for support.

Urban planners are expanding bicycle and pedestrian areas to encourage people to use alternatives to public transport. Cities have become less polluted with reduced traffic congestion. The value of parks and open spaces has become more widely recognised.

These examples show how the COVID-19 crisis is having an impact on public professionals, which is challenging their understanding of what being a public professional means. *Democratic Professionalism in Public Services* (Policy Press, 2019) provides a set of ideas and strategies about how to create more democratic services which value service users and public service professionals in ways that support and complement each other. This is needed more than ever. The COVID-19 crisis is making people think about how society could function in the future in a different way. The speed with which public services were able to respond to changing needs shows that public services can be innovative and can respond to people's needs in a more holistic way than has perhaps happened before.

Democratic Professionalism in Public Services explores three elements of democratic professionalism, drawing from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* and the 'vita activa':

- **Recognising plurality**

A first step towards operating as a democratic professional involves recognising the value of the knowledge and skills of their clients, patients and students. The lack of people's involvement in national COVID-19 strategies has created a sense of top-down policies which have not benefitted from local public health expertise.

- **Defining the public interest**

A second step is how to balance individual and collective needs. The COVID crisis has made many people more aware of the importance of shared collective needs and how they can be met in new and different ways.

- **Taking action to create something new**

The crisis has made some public services respond rapidly to new demands. There was no question that new ways of working had to be created quickly. For many health care professionals, collaborative working and operating in new roles were crucial to delivering new services.

This framework is highly relevant for the rethinking of public services which is taking place in response to COVID-19 and will have to continue after the pandemic to meet people's changing needs.

Democratic professionalism is at an early stage of development. *Democratic Professionalism in Public Services* concluded with five principles of a democratic public service:

1. Listening
2. Creating a shared language
3. Valuing and sharing expertise
4. Creating new forms of expertise together
5. Creating a shared sense of value throughout an institution.

These principles underpin a process of economic, social and political change that is widely expected to take place post-COVID-19. Trade unions and professional organisations have an important role to play in shaping professional practice. They will have to create alliances with campaigns, social movements and political parties that are working towards changes in how we live and work.

References

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition: 2nd Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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