

Service systems, citizen ecosystems, and the politics we deny: towards a binocular public service science

Abstract

'Service systems science' promised a disciplined way to study, design, and improve complex services. In public services, that promise is real but partial. Most service-system frames still privilege the 'service' as the unit of design, and downplay the socio-ecological ecosystems in which lives unfold, and the political contest over what counts as a 'good' outcome, a 'deserving' claimant, a 'legitimate' boundary, and a 'successful' intervention. This article develops a binocular stance: one lens on service systems (contact, flows, decision rights, measures, design) and one lens on people's lived ecosystems (place, community, household economies, informal care, civic association, and the more-than-service determinants of need). I argue that public service science must explicitly include (a) boundary-setting as a political act, (b) demand as a socially constructed signal shaped by transaction costs, (c) value as contested and plural, and (d) legitimacy and ideology as design variables, not externalities. I propose a socio-technical, socio-ecological, and socio-psychological synthesis, and offer practical implications for 'front door' design, demand work, and place-based reform.

Keywords

service science; service systems; public services; socio-ecological systems; demand; place; legitimacy; ideology; relational public services

1. Introduction

There is a recurring frustration in public service reform. We can often improve a service. We can improve contact, reduce rework, and tighten the flow from request to outcome. We can sometimes do this at speed. But we repeatedly fail to hold 'services' and 'people's lives' in the same sights. We oscillate.

One week the structures and power dynamics talk like a call centre: volumes, channels, deflection, triage. The next week they talk like a community organiser: belonging, mutual aid, neighbourhoods, capability, trust. The system cannot focus both lenses at once, so it squints with one eye shut.

Service science and service systems thinking were meant to help. The classic service science definition frames service systems as configurations of people, technology, value propositions, and shared information that co-create value, and treats service science as the study of those systems in order to improve and scale them. ([IBM Research](#)) That frame is useful. It legitimises a systems view of services rather than a narrow 'process improvement' view. It invites modelling, measurement, and design. But it often still starts from the provider-side system boundary.

Public services do not only 'provide services'. They participate (whether they like it or not) in place-based ecosystems of living, caring, coping, exchanging, and governing. If we design only the service system, we often optimise the wrong thing well. We make the service legible, auditable, and efficient, while making the person's life less navigable and more

brittle. In demand terms, we reduce visible demand in one doorway and increase invisible demand elsewhere.

This paper makes a claim and a proposal.

The claim: the standard service-system lens is necessary but insufficient for public services. It misses (or elides) ecosystems and politics. The result is reform that is systematically prone to 'failure demand' loops, displaced costs, and legitimacy crises.

The proposal: a binocular public service science that holds two lenses in disciplined tension. One lens is the service system. The other lens is the lived ecosystem. The binocular stance is not a vague 'holistic' plea. It is a method: explicitly shifting focus between two frames, and treating the oscillation itself as a design discipline.

2. What service science gives us (and what it doesn't)

Service science emerged as an interdisciplinary effort to study and improve service systems, often associated with IBM and scholars such as Spohrer and Maglio. ([IBM Research](#)) In that tradition, service systems are analysed as value co-creation configurations of people and technology connected by value propositions and shared information. ([IBM Research](#)) The promise is attractive to public services: stop treating 'services' as administrative silos and start treating them as dynamic systems with emergent behaviour.

This is compatible with long-standing practice in public service transformation that starts from demand, contact, and flow, and asks what proportion of work is value versus failure, how the design of contact creates rework, and how measures drive behaviour. It is also compatible with a more explicitly relational stance: contact as a sensing-and-learning system, not merely a cost centre to minimise.

But published accounts of service science rarely tell that full, messy, mainstream story. They tend to treat 'service' as the primary unit of analysis, and then bolt 'context' on afterwards. That works for designing a call centre. It breaks down when the thing you are trying to understand is a life.

First, ecosystems. People do not live 'in services'. They live in households, streets, communities, labour mar, and informal care networks. A service system is one contributor within a wider socio-ecological system. If the service frame is primary, the ecosystem becomes a context note. That is backwards.

Second, politics. Boundary-setting and value-setting are political acts. 'What we are responsible for' is never purely technical. It is contested, negotiated, and enforced through institutions, budgets, law, and ideology. Treating politics as 'external' to design is itself a political move: it defaults the ideology of legible central control.

Third, signal distortion. Demand is not 'what people need'. Demand is what shows up at contact, shaped by the transaction costs of access, eligibility rules, fear, stigma, hope, and previous experience of the system. If you model demand without modelling transaction costs, you model your own categories, not their reality.

Fourth, socio-psychology. Public services are not only systems of work. They are systems of identity, safety, and moral judgement. Professionals and managers develop defences. Institutions have immune responses to threats, including relational reforms that redistribute discretion and weaken auditability.

3. Why 'services' and 'people's lives' slip out of focus

The repeated oscillation between 'service' and 'community' has structural causes.

One cause is the difference between units of management and units of living. Services are managed through budgets, teams, contracts, targets, and legal duties. Lives are lived through relationships, time, place, and meaning. These units do not map onto each other.

A second cause is accountability architecture. Most public accountability is vertical. Place-based outcomes are horizontal. You can announce 'system working', but if finance, targets, and scrutiny remain vertical, the system behaves vertically.

A third cause is legibility. Central systems prefer what can be counted, standardised, and compared. Relational and place-based work is often slower to evidence, more variable, and easier to attack. It will be selected against unless leaders explicitly protect it.

A fourth cause is what might be called the contact fallacy: believing that if you optimise the front door you have 'managed demand'. In reality, front door design can either (a) resolve need, (b) (c) legitimate escalation; or it can (d) delay, deflect, deny, and multiply failure demand.

4. The binocular method

A binocular method needs explicit lenses and explicit switching rules.

Lens A: the service system

This lens treats a public service as a designed system. Demand hits a contact point, contact triggers a process, process consumes resources, structures and sourcing shape capability, and policy shapes what is offered. This lens privileges concrete redesign: forms, scripts, handoffs, decision rights, data access, escalation routes, and measures.

Lens B: the lived ecosystem

This lens treats the person-in-place first. Services are one set of actors in a wider ecology of support, stressors, and meaning. Needs arise in lives, not in service taxonomies. Presenting demand is a lagging indicator of upstream conditions. The unit of improvement becomes not 'the service' but 'the pathway from need to outcome' across formal and informal supports.

Switching rule 1: boundary honesty

Start by stating the boundary you are taking responsibility for, and name what sits outside it but drives demand inside it. Do not call an organisational boundary a 'system boundary'.

Switching rule 2: demand as language

Capture demand in citizens' own words at first contact, before it is coded into categories. Treat that language as data about the ecosystem, not as noise to be cleaned up.

Switching rule 3: transaction costs as design material

Model how forms, eligibility tests, channel splits, and referral norms distort the signal of demand and create rework. Then treat those transaction costs as design variables, not as 'necessary friction'.

Switching rule 4: legitimacy and ideology on the table

Make explicit the worldview assumptions shaping design choices: who decides, what counts as success, what is considered 'reasonable', and what is treated as moral failing. The absence of declared ideology does not mean neutrality.

5. A synthesis: socio-technical, socio-ecological, socio-psychological

Socio-technical

Classic socio-technical thinking reminds us that technology and process cannot be separated from work roles, power, and learning. Service science formalises this through service-system modelling and value co-creation. ([IBM Research](#)) In public services, the socio-technical core is the front door: the interface where demand is translated into categories, decisions, and pathways. Treating contact as a learning-and-enablement system is a direct socio-technical design choice.

Socio-ecological

A socio-ecological stance treats the service as embedded in place-based life systems. It aligns with place-based reform arguments that silos do not match people's lives and that pooled, place-based governance is necessary to reduce duplication and treat cause. But it must go further than 'integrating services'. It must include community capacity, informal care, and civic association as real components of the system, not 'partners' in a comms plan.

Socio-psychological

Relational reform depends on confidence, agency, and trust, for also triggers identity threats and defensive routines in institutions. If we ignore this, we misdiagnose resistance as 'culture' in the abstract, and we respond by adding more control, which worsens the problem. This is where 'postmodern' oscillation becomes practical: we must hold multiple truths at once. The system needs legibility and accountability. It also needs discretion and relationship. The design problem is the tension, not a single best answer.

6. Implications for design and governance

6.1 Front door design as epistemology

Front doors do not only route work. They produce the organisation's knowledge of reality. If the front door is designed for speed, deflection, and narrow scripts, the system learns noise, not need. If it is designed for resolution, enablement, and legitimate escalation, it becomes a sensing organ. The demand map becomes less fictional.

A practical framing is to insist that first contact turns demand into: (a) resolution, (b) enablement, or (c) legitimate escalation. Anything else is likely to be rework in disguise.

6.2 Demand work that does not become rationing

'Demand management' frequently becomes delay, deflection, or denial, because those are the easiest moves inside silo budgets. A more serious demand practice distinguishes purpose, need, and demand, and treats presenting demand as a lagging signal. It then uses a small number of real levers: prevent demand arising, identify earlier, handle better at first contact, intervene earlier rather than endlessly downstream, align incentives across the system, and build measurement and learning loops.

6.3 Place, politics, and the institutional 'immune system'

Proposals like 'Total Place 2.0' make a strong structural case for pooled analysis, reduced duplication, and place-based redesign. But structural proposals often underplay why relational and place-based reforms repeatedly collapse: institutional immune responses, identity threats, and the reassertion of vertical control under pressure. This is where a binocular public service science helps. It treats governance not only as boards and pooled budgets, but as a set of protective arrangements for learning, discretion, and relational practice under scrutiny.

7. Relationship to 'the new public service'

The tradition argued (in contrast to New Public Management) that public servants should 'serve rather than steer', focus on citizenship and the public interest, and recognise that accountability is complex. (socialscilib.org) This matters here for two reasons.

First, it gives a public-administration home for the claim that people are citizens, not customers. That is directly relevant to the binocular stance. It legitimises the lived ecosystem lens, not as sentiment but as democratic theory.

Second, it highlights a problem that service science often sidesteps: public value is not only co-created, it is contested. In public services, 'value propositions' are not mere agreements between provider and customer. They are political settlements, often unstable, often fought over, and always shaped by power.

So the criticism that 'service' framings miss ecosystems and politics is, in part, a call to rejoin these traditions rather than treat them as separate literatures.

8. What a research agenda might look like

If this were taken seriously as an academic programme, three kinds of work follow.

First, descriptive work: empirical studies of how front door designs distort or clarify the signal of demand, including the role of transaction costs, fear, stigma, and repeated referral loops.

Second, design work: comparative studies of front doors designed as learning-and-enablement systems, including measurement regimes that do not punish discretion and relational work.

Third, political work: studies of boundary-setting, ideology, and legitimacy as design variables, including how reforms survive (or fail) under changing political and fiscal conditions.

This is where the service science ambition to model and improve service systems becomes genuinely public: it must include the governance of meaning, not only the governance of process.

9. Conclusion

Service science and service systems thinking offer public services something important: permission to treat services as systems that can be studied, designed, and improved with rigour. ([IBM Research](#)) But the public sector cannot afford a service-only gaze. People live in ecosystems, not in service catalogues. And public service design is unavoidably political, because boundaries and values are political.

A binocular public service science is a practical discipline of oscillation. It keeps 'service' and 'life' in the same sights by switching lenses deliberately, making boundaries explicit, treating demand as a distorted signal, and bringing ideology and legitimacy into the design room.

If we do that, we stop mistaking 'better services' for 'better lives'. Sometimes better services help. Sometimes they harm. The binocular stance is how we tell the difference early enough to matter.

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