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Primary Research Area

In the last few years telehealth, telemedicine and telecare have been increasingly considered as alternatives to more conventional health services. These three terms are related and refer to health/medical services that can be provided in electronic form over various telecommunications networks. Telehealth is concerned with the provision of health services to communities and into homes, rather than in a hospital setting.

My research aims to contribute towards a greater understanding of the concept of telehealth and to deliver critical analyses of telehealth projects in the light of government polices and processes of technology adoption. The analyses will also consider how telehealth is conceptualised by projects initiators and developers, how this translated into the approach taken and how it effected the outcomes. Ultimately, this work aims to explore if telehealth can fulfil expectations and contribute towards aims articulated in the UK government health polices. This is to be seen in a wider context, for example considering a changing role of health and medicine in the society. These aims translate into the following research questions:

• What is telehealth? How it is conceptualised by different groups (how is it manifested in e.g. government policy papers or companies’ strategies) and how is it realised in real-life projects?
• Can telehealth help to realise the UK government vision for health provision?

Theories and Research Approach

This exploration of telehealth concepts is undertaken within a larger framework of theories of the information society. Theories of the information society should provide a better understanding of general trends in society and their relationship to new information technologies. My technological perspective is informed by a number of theories often referred as the Social Shaping of Technology (SST). SST has been concerned with the way organisational, political, economic and cultural factors influence the process of technological change. It provides an alternative to technological determinism view by proposing that technological change is shaped by the conditions of its creation and use.

The concept of telehealth is explored using variety of methods, from comprehensive literature review, policies study (European Community and British government documents) to the investigation of the emergent markets (products and services on offer) and culminating in the secondary analysis of real-life projects.

Project Contribution

This research should contribute to a better understanding of telehealth, particularly social factors effecting its development and usage. Although methodological issues are not at the centre of this PhD, in the process of research, the theories used will be evaluated. Specifically, the aim is to validate SST applicability for researching developing technologies, rather than just past cases.

Project Limitations

The nature of telehealth, as a new and evolving technology poses difficulties in obtaining quality research material, limits any historical studies and raises methodological problems. The broad scope of this thesis means that some aspects may be researched to a lesser depth. Finally, the results of three or four case studies cannot be easily generalised.

References