



Novel for Whom, Obligatory for Whom?

Observer-Indexed Novelty in the Deontic Structure of Digital Health Innovation

Novelty is frequently treated as a property of an idea, artefact or scientific contribution, yet judgements of novelty invariantly depend on a standpoint: a technology may be familiar to engineers but new to a care organization, disruptive to a household while invisible to the metrics used by funders or evaluators.

This paper develops an observer-indexed account of novelty and examines possible consequences for the governance of digital health innovation by sketching three theses: The first thesis is that a novelty judgement is incomplete unless it specifies the observer, reference set, representational capacity, temporal horizon and equivalence relation under which something counts as new. This distinguishes historical from local novelty, unexpected events from previously unrepresentable possibilities, and changes in the world from changes registered by a measurement system. The second thesis is that observer-dependency is asymmetrically consequential. Patients, caregivers, developers, clinicians, algorithms, regulators and funding bodies do not merely perceive novelty differently: they possess unequal authority to classify, validate, finance, deploy or reject it, while those with the least classificatory power may bear the greatest consequences. The third thesis is that innovation has a deontic dimension. Digital health technologies change not only what actors can know and do, but also who is expected, permitted or required to observe, respond, maintain, disclose, justify and assume responsibility. I introduce deontic novelty as a change in the configuration of obligations, permissions, prohibitions, powers and claims produced by an innovation. Illustrative cases from digital public health and domestic monitoring show how technically familiar systems can generate normatively novel relations, and how the recognition of a novel signal may create duties of investigation without thereby licensing deployment or intervention.

By combining observer-indexed epistemic analysis with deontic logic, the paper argues that novelty assessment should ask not only what is new, but new 1. to whom, 2. recognized by whom, and 3. with what redistribution of authority and obligation. This framework contributes to debates on how novelty is produced, recognized and translated into innovation, while exposing the normative transitions concealed by apparently descriptive novelty claims.