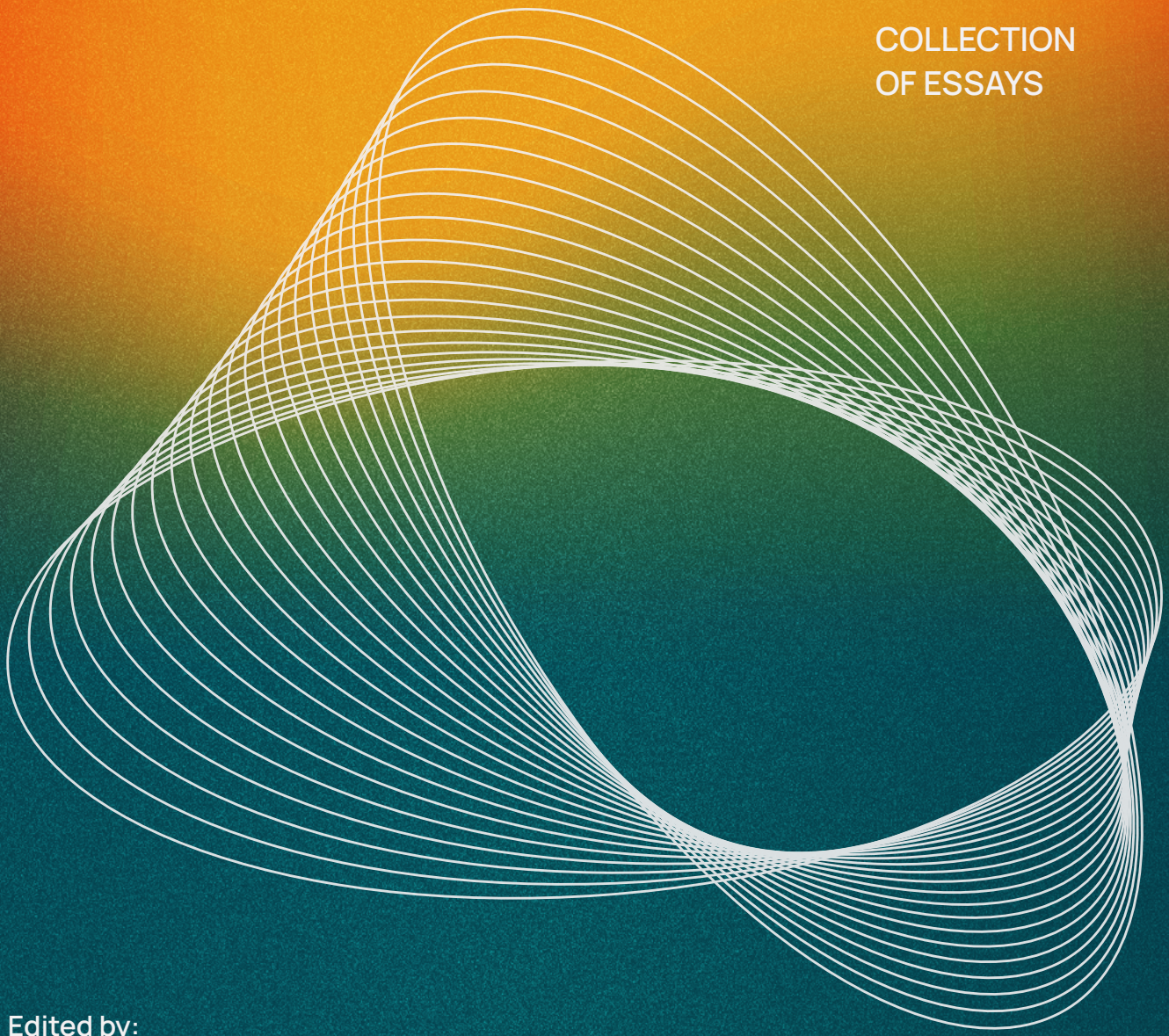
2025

Reimagining AI

For Environmental Justice and Creativity

COLLECTION OF ESSAYS



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SETTING UP HUMAN-AI *Teams in the Public Interest*

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How should AI systems be integrated into public sector settings for outcomes that are in the public interest? Public managers are told to adopt AI in their organizations, but are not always aware of whether AI is appropriate for a particular task or collaborative environment. Diffusion of AI systems in the public sector remains low, despite surging interest in adopting AI to improve public managerial decision-making. Prominent among the risks and challenges of AI adoption in the public sector is the need to uphold public sector values of transparency, democratic accountability, privacy, legitimacy, fairness, and equity. However, little attention is given to the cognitive and motivational factors that influence public managers to adopt AI.

We surveyed US-based emergency managers to understand their attitudes toward AI and their intentions to rely on AI in a set of decision-making scenarios relevant to crisis management. Emergency managers play an important role in society before, during, and after disasters. They work at all levels of the government, in non-profits, and the private sector.[1] While emergency managers had less positive attitudes toward AI and were less likely to rely on AI for decision-making, it wasn't because of wariness toward AI or lack of trust in AI. We found that public managers' humanistic and organizational needs are at least as important as technology design considerations for AI implementation in the public sector. We distill our findings into six insights for designing and implementing Human-AI teams in a way that aligns with public managers' cognitive capacities, responsibility to the public good, and organizational set up.

There's little trust in AI without transparency. If public managers are going to be asked to rely on AI for decision-making (sometimes overriding their intuition, experience, and expertise), they need to know and understand what factors the system used to determine the result. Managers need to be able to trace their decisions through a process that would satisfy their standards for rigor and transparency.

AI will place cognitive and administrative demands on public managers. AI is different from other types of technologies because of the need for intra and inter-organizational coordination, data infrastructure, organizational resources, expertise, operational capacity, and significant changes in organizational processes. Most AI systems are not designed for the public sector. The adoption of AI in the public sector organizations will need the establishment of the data infrastructure, training in the use of new AI systems, testing and evaluation protocols, and building in additional time and resources for decision-makers to verify AI. AI may unnecessarily replace current processes, tools, and technologies that work well without AI.

Inefficiencies and redundancies have value, especially when new technologies are adopted. Public managers are not comfortable integrating AI into their workflows without thorough vetting and evaluation. Any first run of any technology should be scrutinized and monitored with built-in redundancies. Even though checking the outputs of AI systems are likely to increase administrative burden, they are necessary to ascertain accuracy, consistency, and fairness of results.

Public managerial expertise and experience are undervalued in the discourse on Human-AI teaming. Discourses of human-AI collaboration often emphasize the potential value AI could bring to the table, such as speed, efficiency, pattern recognition, consistency, and accuracy for certain types of tasks. The skills, talents, and capacities humans bring to the table are given short shrift. The public managers we talked to emphasized the importance they placed on human input, their own extensive real-world experience, place-based knowledge and knowledge of their communities, and empathy in public managerial decision-making. Managers are more concerned about improving their own skills and those of their team members in AI environments, rather than concerns about narrow notions of efficiency or productivity.

Oversight and control over decisions are paramount. Among the organizational processes and work design conditions that managers said need to be place for public interest-centered AI integration are: (a) ground rules and shared understanding of how AI results should be interpreted; (b) systematic processes of experimentation and evaluation; and (c) organizational processes that enable managers to validate their analytical process, allow corrections, and review decision points.

Not all public managerial tasks are AI-appropriate. Managers distinguish between tasks that may be AI-appropriate under certain conditions and tasks that are inappropriate for AI. For example, some managers may be comfortable with AI assistance in crafting emergency preparedness messages, but not sending out the messages automatically and certainly not sending messages during an emergency. Many others noted the need for multilingual communication in the communities they serve as well as contextual knowledge about the community for emergency preparedness and crisis messaging.

Administrators and decision-makers who are thinking of implementing AI should rethink their program and policy design in light of these findings. In particular, they should

view adoption and implementation not just as a single decision but as a phased process that requires consultation at key points. Building in space, time, and resources for experimentation, evaluation, training, and collaborative deliberation routines is an important element of public interest-centered AI systems integration.

ENDNOTES

1 Misra, S., Katz, B., Roberts, P., Carney, M., & Valdivia, I. (2024). Toward a person-environment fit framework for artificial intelligence implementation in the public sector. Government Information Quarterly, 41(3), 101962. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2024.101962