

Bad Services

**How to fix services
that don't work**

Lou Downe

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'Anger is a gift'

Freedom by Rage Against the Machine

**For anyone who has been impacted
by bad services, and everyone who's
tried to change them**

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Foreword

Carrie Bishop

There is a good chance that you experienced a bad service today.

Perhaps you tried to sign up for a new gym but the sign-up process was so long you decided to stay on the couch instead.

Perhaps you had to contact customer support for an online order and found yourself lost in a phone tree, endlessly hitting the zero button and yelling 'agent!' at the robotic voice on the other end, so you decided to just keep the faulty purchase and absorb the cost, even though you couldn't really afford it.

Or maybe you tried to organise care for an elderly loved one, only to be passed from agency to agency, lost in a maze of silos, and watched as weeks of dead ends and unreturned calls prolong your loved one's pain.

Bad services are everywhere, and their impact ranges from minor irritation to life-changing consequences. At their worst, bad services bring a kind of brutality. They don't see you as an individual with a unique set of needs, they see you as a unit to process. Bad services don't care that you tried your hardest to follow the rules but still couldn't get it right.

It is the customer, citizen or patient who feels the immediate pain of a bad service, but bad services often have ripple effects that are hard to quantify.

As a society, we feel the impact of bad services when the needs of individuals aren't met at scale; from collapsing healthcare systems, to the irritation of being stuck in a phone queue to get a doctor's appointment.

I have seen services that require you to go to an office building in person, so the service provider can 'look you in the eye to see if you're being honest'. I have also seen services that require proof that you were arrested in order to make a complaint, which you can only retrieve by going back to the police station where you were processed.

In other words, services that ask you to 'prove to us that you were arrested (and probably treated you very badly), by going back

to the place and reliving what happened, just to get a piece of paper that proves it happened’.

In both these instances, and in many others, the policy is designed to mitigate against bad actors – those who might lie or cheat to get benefits, permits or other services that they don’t truly deserve. Since policymakers can’t know who is going to cheat the system, everyone is treated like a potential fraudster. But rarely do we analyse the aggregate cost of this lack of trust. While businesses build in a percentage of ‘shrinkage allowance’ to absorb the cost of theft, fraud and error in their accounting, the public sector cannot be seen to do this with taxpayer money.

I have spent my career working to improve services. Sometimes, people with good intentions try to mitigate risks, but inadvertently create bad services. But what is the cost of all of this ‘accidental’ bad service design? There is a cost to the economy when people have to take a day off work to sit on the phone, or show up in person at an office, not to mention the cost to the individual. There are opportunity costs and safety costs when people fail to navigate a process successfully and reach an outcome.

Handling the failure demand of bad services is a cost to customers and to taxpayers that is rarely quantified – that is, until their dissatisfaction shows up en-masse, in the ballot box, by rapidly declining sales or a lawsuit.

Services are an expression of our operational and organisation design. You can feel the seams between departments most keenly in regulated services, but they exist everywhere. Any time you move between one part of your credit card service to another; ditto, an airline, an insurer or a phone provider.

Most services are so rife with seams they become like escape rooms filled with portals and log-ins and reference numbers. ‘You are the only point of integration between departments’ – words once uttered to me by a doctor when my records were lost between 2 departments on different floors of the same hospital in one night. If an organisation is not aligned around its customers’ needs, the customer will feel the gaps between departments, and most likely fall through them. This is the tough business of organisational change, and it is where the hard yards of service design are won.

As we stand at the dawn of the AI age, the need to pay attention to our organisations and their services feels urgent. We shouldn’t be

afraid of new technology, but the effects of AI are hard to know, and very far reaching. Applying AI to our existing mental models and organisational structures will likely yield bad results at scale, perpetuating the problems caused by services that do not put the person at the centre. We are at a unique moment where we could shape our future by deeply exploring this new technology to bring about radically better services and organisations, but this is only true if we take a human-first (and humanity-first) mindset.

Regardless of technology, knowing what your service is for, who is using it and what their needs are, then lining your operations up behind those needs – that’s what makes the fundamental difference between good and bad services, and that’s the essential wisdom that Lou shares in this book.

Lou has been a service explorer since I’ve known them. Many (even Lou) might say service designer, but Lou does more than design. They are a service palaeontologist, botanist and forager, digging up the bones of services past to understand how today’s services have evolved, examining closely the different varieties of services, and harvesting the best examples.

Lou shared the knowledge of good services in their first book and showed how to navigate service design for the best results. This book is the natural companion – what to avoid, and how to fix the organisational problems that lead to bad service design. Like the Attenborough of service design, though, Lou remains optimistic about our ability to affect services through good design, and gives us practical tools to make change, in whatever terrain we find ourselves.

I can think of no one I’d rather have guiding me through the world of services, good and bad. Lou has a wealth of experience in designing services, and they are, in large part, responsible for a global movement of service design that has revolutionised government services. As the UK government’s director of design, they defined a profession that has produced talented people who have gone on to lead change in many sectors. In short, there are few people as qualified as Lou to share the wisdom in this book.

You should read this book if you are in any way involved in delivering a service. And even if you think you are not, look again – you most likely are. A service mindset puts the user of the service at the centre, and sees them as a whole person, with a unique set of needs and wishes. This mindset can be applied to almost anything.

Most likely, you are reading this because you are responsible for fixing bad services and creating change in organisations that are struggling to put their users or customers at the centre. If that's the case, you've found the right book.

You are doing critical work, not just for the individuals who use your services, but for everyone. Thank you! It's hard, and is better viewed as an ongoing collaborative effort than a finite heroic journey. By all means take breaks, but please never give up. The stakes are high, and it's up to you to take the wisdom that Lou shares in *Bad Services* and turn it into services that bring humanity, care and integrity for all of us.

Prologue

I haven't watched a single Star Wars film without falling asleep.

It's not through lack of trying. Growing up, all of my friends were fans. But by the time all the beer had been drunk and the Star Wars DVDs were playing, there was no chance I'd be awake for more than 5 minutes. Then there was the time when my wife Sarah and I came back from a Christmas trip to the US and decided to give up caffeine... by watching *The Last Jedi* at the cinema. Needless to say, we woke up at the end credits.

My friends tell me that when George Lucas released *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* in 1977, he started the story in the middle, throwing audiences into the most exciting part of the saga. But to really understand the universe (the same friends insist), you need to explore forwards and backwards in time.

I may not be a Star Wars expert, but I do understand what it's like to start a story in the middle. It was only when my book *Good Services* was published in 2020 that I realised it wasn't the beginning, or even the end, of the story about how we create services that work for users. In a way, *Good Services* tells the most heroic part of our story. How do we understand our users, and make our services findable, understandable and usable?

I started in the middle. Once the book was out, people started to ask me questions like: 'How do you get buy-in to improve your services before you start to design good ones?' or 'How do you actually make sure your organisation can deliver those services?'. These are all perfectly reasonable questions.

As you'll see in the rest of this book, one of the biggest challenges of designing services is creating a shared understanding of what it is exactly that we're designing. Before we build a shared understanding of what good services are, we need to see services as something that can (and should) be designed. To do that, we need to acknowledge that they exist. You might think this is a ridiculous statement. Surely, we all acknowledge services exist?

Yes, but (and it's a big but) we rarely agree on what services are, how big or small they are or where they begin or end.

When you're designing services, you often find yourself working in an environment that doesn't acknowledge the existence of the thing you're designing. Of the daily job of designing services, we spend a gargantuan amount of time arguing that a system, form, process or tool is a part of, but not the entirety of a service. No wonder it's hard work.

But, once we've seen services as something that can (and should) be designed, and understood what good looks like, how do we then build (or rebuild) an organisation that can deliver the services we've designed?

Doing this means commitment of people, time, money and – crucially – permission. How do we make the case for service design? Especially if our organisation's idea of a service is either nonexistent, or so different from what our users need that we may as well be designing a hat stand? Or if we're accidental 'enshittifiers', having scaled our businesses only to find that our services and teams have become bigger, yet our Trustpilot reviews are worse?

Bad Services is this next part in the story, the sequel in a trilogy that I started somewhere in the middle.

In this book, we'll learn why we struggle to deliver good services, and how to build organisations that can go beyond the nice words we like to say about service design and actually commit to designing them. We'll pick over the reasons why – despite our best efforts – most organisations struggle to do this, and understand what we need to do to make this journey easier.

Ultimately though, we'll understand the reality of how we need to work to deliver a service that works for everyone.

I hope that this book gives you hope that change is possible (even in the most difficult circumstances) and shines a light on where you need to dig to find a way forward.

**The 5
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At the end of 2019, Paris looked just like any other large Western European city: cramped, messy, pricey and damp. But like every other city, if you looked close enough, there was a more deliberate pattern behind some of this 'mess'.

Paris's streets were jammed with Ubers, snaking around apartment blocks that were secretly hotels. High rises that skirted planning laws with the promise of being affordable homes had started to appear on the edges of the city, only to become holiday lets at the last minute. Rents were skyrocketing, property prices were fluctuating wildly and the French authorities had had enough.

Paris was seeing the consequences of the once-hopeful 'sharing economy': the compelling idea that we could all reduce our consumption if we 'shared' our cars, homes or tools. Companies such as Uber, Bolt and Streetcar allowed us to share our cars; Airbnb allowed us to share our homes.

The reality was slightly different. By 2019, one in every 50 homes in Paris was on Airbnb, causing a massive housing shortage. Beyond people subletting their own homes, unscrupulous property developers set up so-called 'ghost hotels', buying apartment blocks and turning them into giant hives of holiday rentals.

Very few cities have been successful in restricting sharing platforms, but Paris was not deterred. In December 2019, the French Association for Professional Tourism and Accommodation (AHTOP) took Airbnb to court, accusing it of violating a 51-year-old piece of legislation called the Hoguet Law – a law that is supposed to protect renters and the wider city from unscrupulous landlords.

Introduced in 1970, the Hoguet Law is just one among hundreds of property rental laws in France, making it one of the most heavily regulated property markets in the world. To operate as a property broker in France, the AHTOP argued, Airbnb should have to register as a regulated operator and follow the same rules as everyone else.

The European Court of Justice thought otherwise. Because Airbnb didn't actually own any buildings, the court argued, it wasn't a property rental company. Instead, they ruled that Airbnb is an 'information society service', exempt not only from property rental laws, but from French laws altogether.

What transpired that day in court didn't just set a precedent for how we regulate services. It was also a glimpse into how unprepared we are for a world that relies on them.

Services are an international no-man's land

You'd be forgiven for thinking that an 'information society service' sounds more like a dating agency for wayward 1920s debutantes than the description of a €1 billion property brokerage company such as Airbnb.

In fact, an information society service is 'any service normally provided for remuneration, at a distance, by electronic means and at the individual request of the recipient of services'. They were invented as a regulatory concept in the early 1990s as the balance of the world started to tip from physical to digital, and created a kind of international waters for digital services. In turn, they helped the internet to become the global connector it is today.

Free from the burdensome laws of any specific industry, or country, information society services exist in a kind of no man's land of regulation. As a 'service provider', you can do whatever is legal in the area you're registered, which might be wildly different (and far more liberal) than the one you operate in.

Importantly, since very few countries have existing regulations specifically aimed at the quality of services (beyond basic safety or industry-specific regulations) you are pretty much at liberty to do what you like.

If you want to create a property-booking website that inflates rental prices for local people, there's nothing to stop you. If you want to provide insurance that's almost impossible to claim in an emergency because you don't have a phone line (so long as it's technically possible to make a claim *somehow*), it's going to be hard to prove that this service isn't fine. Or if you want to make it hard to cancel a subscription by hiding the cancellation button deep in the small print, it's extremely unlikely you'll face litigation.

As any lawyer will tell you, laws represent what we believe at the time they're written. In the 1990s, there seems to have been a belief that service providers are somehow less responsible for the outcomes of their services than organisations that sell physical products are for the potential harms their products may cause.

The challenge we have today is that a 'service provided for remuneration at a distance by electronic means' could describe almost every service in existence. The dawn of seamless digital marketplaces in the early 2000s and the idea of a 'sharing economy' barged through the door left ajar by information society services and set up camp squarely in this grey area of legislative oversight.

Perhaps the idea of a sharing economy has always been part of our consciousness. After all, the belief that one day we'd all get rid of our possessions and begin to share houses, cars and offices can be traced back to almost every left-leaning manifesto. What the sharing economy has become, though, is very different to the ideals it may have held for us 20 years ago.

In hindsight, we should have seen this coming. As soon as these services became businesses, they changed. Digital services can scale beyond physical things: we can reach more people and make more money if we charge for a service *around* an asset – be that cars, restaurants or housing – rather than owning that asset ourselves.

We live in a world unprepared for the impact of services

Today, being a service creates a kind of invisibility that allows us to break rules. This isn't true for physical goods. Cars go through thousands of rounds of testing to make sure they don't kill people. We recall physical products for the most minor of infringements.

That is less true for the service layers around them. Who is watching when the service we use to buy a faulty thing doesn't have a clear refund policy upfront, or makes it impossible to get a repair or make a complaint? What happens when using our service creates a whole new issue (or set of issues) that we hadn't anticipated? Unlike many industries, there are no 'professional standards' for service design. This means that, should a case of bad service design find its way into the courts, it becomes incredibly difficult to prove that the provider has done anything wrong. The laws that do exist to protect consumer rights are usually based on principles such as making reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities or showing that you've made attempts to contact a customer, not a wider legislation around what it actually looks like in practice.

Not every organisation uses the invisibility of services to their own advantage. Even the ones that do probably aren't doing it consciously. The effect is the same nonetheless: little thought is given to the decisions that impact our users, simply because what we're delivering is 'a service'.

I experienced this first hand a few years ago. As the director of design and service standards of the UK government, I was visiting a large central UK governmental team to discuss their future plans for a service focused on small businesses.

Twenty minutes in to a relatively innocuous conversation about APIs, things took a strange turn. The team finally got to the point they'd been circling around for the entire meeting. Was it OK for a service to be designed as an API first? Oh and API only. I was shocked. I could answer the first question, but the second? I absolutely couldn't.

Now, I think creating APIs to make it easier for others to build on top of existing services is a Good Thing. (An API or application programming interface is a sort of digital bridge; a way for software to share information with other software.)

There's a difference, though, between 'API first' and 'API only'. Designing something 'API first' can help to lessen the burden of interacting with a service. It makes it easier for other digital teams to use that API to build services that may help users to do things. For example,

paying tax directly through accounting software, or automatically registering a car with the DVLA as part of the manufacturing process.

By contrast, 'API only' means users have to interact with that service via a third-party provider, or they have to code their own ways of interacting with it. No user interface at all.

Putting aside how few users also have the technical ability to build their own way to access an API, there are huge implications for depending on third parties to provide the user interface to our services. For instance, that third-party service provider can choose to charge for what is otherwise a free government service, making it inaccessible to certain groups. Or they can decide that edge cases aren't worth designing for, or a host of other things we wouldn't expect from a public service. They can also choose to make it inaccessible, or only targeted at a certain user group.

Alarm bells started to jingle in my head. Wasn't this... privatisation? I tentatively asked who had approved the idea. No elected minister or official had looked at it. No vote had been held, no public consultation opened. I voiced my concerns and was met with frustrated confusion. What we were discussing was a purely 'technical' issue. Why was I making such a fuss?

Whether or not privatising this service was the right thing to do, it wasn't my decision to make.

But it wasn't the decision of anyone else in the room, either.

Privatising government services – whether you agree with it or not – is a big decision. But there we were. Somehow, the digital team of a large government department was proposing a service be privatised. Not only without consultation or media fanfare, but with no knowledge of the fact that they were doing it in the first place.

This (attempted) privatisation didn't involve physical things. There were no trains, telephone poles or reservoirs to divide up, no power stations and cables to think about. It would have been a very different discussion if so. But as it was a digital service, much like Airbnb, the team's suggestion that they shift from being 'API first' to 'API only' could be dismissed as a minor technical detail.

In 1971, Victor Papanek wrote, 'There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few'. If we don't think through the consequences of our actions, service design could be one of those few, hyper-harmful professions. As a profession, it also has the potential to save a lot of money.

**There are few
professions more
harmful than
industrial design**

**Service design
is one of them**

Bad services waste time, cost money and can even ruin lives. Why, despite advances in technology, are most services getting worse rather than better?

From the author of the bestselling *Good Services*, *Bad Services* untangles why, despite our best efforts, organisations struggle to deliver services that work for their users.

This book will help you to understand the universal challenges we face when it comes to delivering good services, and give you simple, straightforward ways to solve these problems.

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