SMART METERS

Tell me something I don't know

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By providing accurate and immediate feedback on energy use, smart meters have been touted as a tool to help households make better energy choices to reduce energy costs. However, making energy information available does not necessarily make it useful, particularly for households that would benefit most from lower bills. To better understand how smart meters are perceived and experienced, Fiona Shirani and colleagues from Cardiff University conducted interviews over a two-year period with residents of Careau, Wales, the majority of whom met criteria for energy vulnerability.

The research team found that low-income participants were already very aware of their energy use as an essential part of managing limited household finances. Consequently, these participants were sceptical that smart meters would provide additional benefits. This was borne out by the experiences of those who had smart meters installed as part of a broader energy scheme in the area: they eventually stopped using the smart meter because it did not tell them anything they did not already know. Moreover, some participants expressed concern that instead of helping those experiencing fuel poverty, smart meters could be a source of stress for households already struggling to meet their energy needs. These results call into question the assumption underlying smart meter roll-out policies, that access to more information will help vulnerable households and alleviate fuel poverty.

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