

Digital citizenship and neoliberalization: governing digital citizens in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Digital citizenship is becoming increasingly normalized within advanced democratic states. As society and governmental institutions become reliant on digital technologies, citizens are expected to be and act digitally. This article examines the governance of digital citizens through a case study of digitalization efforts in Denmark. Drawing on multiple forms of data, the article showcases how digital citizens are governed through a combination of discursive, legal and institutional means. The article highlights the political, but also institutional work that goes into making citizens digital. Providing this case study, the article contributes to current critical perspectives on the digital citizen as a new political figure. It adds new insights into digital citizenship by connecting this figure to wider processes of neoliberalization and state restructuring, pushing for a more pronounced focus on governmental practices.

KEYWORDS

Digital citizenship; digitalization; politics; Denmark; governance

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Introduction

Digital citizenship has become an increasingly important area of research for the past two decades (Isin and Ruppert 2015; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Couldry et al. 2014). With the near ubiquitous spread of digital technologies, the saturation of daily practices by internet-driven platforms and the widespread uptake of mobile technologies, it has largely become a 'truism' to argue that digital technologies have impacted contemporary societies in profound ways (Isin and Ruppert 2015). While enduring digital divides still exclude large portions of the world population from access to the internet (Ragnedda and Muschert 2018), being digital is a reality for many citizens within western countries. Digitalization has also made its way into governmental practices, with new forms of so-called 'e-government' and 'digital era governance' making states increasingly reliant on digital technologies to deliver state services to citizens and reconfigure work practices within public sectors (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Henman 2010). With governmental services becoming premised on digital technologies, digital citizenship has taken on renewed importance (Isin and Ruppert 2015).

This article seeks to unpack and examine these new modalities of digital citizenship. It does so by responding to a recent turn within digital citizenship studies. While research has been conducted on this topic for almost two decades, it is only recently that a critical stream of scholarship has emerged (Isin and Ruppert 2015; Isin and Ruppert 2017; Vivienne, McCosker, and Johns 2016). This work has stressed how the digital citizen must be seen as the product of discursive, technological, legal and political practices. It has sought to bring back questions of power and politics to a field of research otherwise dominated by fixed definitions and pervasive normative assumptions. Challenging the established underpinnings within the existing literature, this research has emphasized that a situated and contextual account is needed if we wish to understand the implications of this new political figure (Isin and Ruppert 2015; McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns 2016).

Our aim with this article is to push these recent interventions further on two fronts. First, we want to place questions of digital citizenship within the context of wider political-economic changes. To do so, the article situates itself in the interface between critical studies of digital citizenship (Isin and Ruppert 2015; McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns 2016) and the bulging literature on neoliberalism and state restructuring (Jessop 2002; Peck 2010; Brown 2015; Wacquant 2009; Dardot and Laval 2013). We seek to embed the existing literature on digital citizenship more firmly within the context of historical changes in the capitalist state and its modes of governance. Doing so, we want to suggest that there is a need to integrate these strands of research in order to produce a more coherent outlook on the digital citizen as a new political figure. All too often, research on digital citizenship has detached this figure from these broader developments. This goes

for the dominant approaches to digital citizenship, but also applies in lesser scale to the critical stream of research driving this paper. By coupling the recent focus on digital citizenship as a situated set of practices with wider political economic processes, the article contributes to further clarifying the impact and consequences of this figure for contemporary forms of statehood and governance.

Second, we use these theoretical coordinates to provide an empirical study that examines the practices implicated in the governance of digital citizens. More specifically, we provide a study of digital citizenship in Denmark, showcasing how links are being made between existing forms of governance and this new political figure. Denmark is often constructed as an European forerunner in terms of digitalizing its public sector (Igari 2014; Schou & Hjelholt 2018). Drawing on multiple forms of empirical data, we trace how digital citizens are governed through a combination of political imaginaries, legal measurements and governmental institutions. How and in what ways, the article asks, are Danish citizens being governed as digital citizens? And to what extent do these governmental practices overlap and rework existing 'state projects' (Jessop 2015)? Advancing these simultaneously theoretical and empirical vectors, we hope to deepen our understanding of the connections being made between existing modes of governance and the digital citizen as a new subject of state intervention

The digital citizen as a key political figure

Digital citizenship constitutes a 'highly contested notion' according to McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns (2016, 1) that is 'primed for critical scrutiny'. Reading the existing literature on this topic, it quickly becomes apparent that the concept has been used in a number of different ways (Choi 2016). In this article, we take our conceptual point of departure in what may best be termed as a turn within the international scholarship on digital citizenship. We want to suggest that this turn has implied a move from thinking through questions of digital citizenship in terms of certain predefined characteristics to situating this new figure in the context of historical power relations, governmental practices and geographies.

In the late 1990s, Jon Katz (1997), a writer for the magazine *Wired*, argued that a new kind of political subjectivity had started to emerge. Situated within a specifically American context, he hypothesized that the digital citizen heralded the coming of a more engaged, committed and informed citizenry. This image of the digital citizen was subsequently taken up, and criticized quite unanimously, by a number of scholars. Warnick (1999) for example argued that Katz infused his arguments with too many positive traits, connecting the digital citizen to 'optimism, confidence, vision, and engagement' as if these were inherent properties of this new figure. Whatever the merit of these debates, the figure of the digital citizen nonetheless stuck in the academic literature. Since then, especially two dominant positions have stood out.

One position has sought to define the digital citizen within the specific context of the educational system. In 2001, Gurstein argued that ‘the question should be how to train effectively for “digital citizenship” [. . .]. In this context there is a need to identify what the elements of “digital citizenship” might be’ (Gurstein 2001, 280). Two years later, Oakley (2003) posed a very similar conundrum, arguing that the ‘education system of most member states [in Europe] will now include an ICT component – but we are less confident perhaps of what it means to be a digital citizen’ (Oakley 2003, 37). These calls for research were taken up, if not directly then in spirit, by scholars such as Ribble, Bailey, and Ross (2004, 7), who argued for an understanding of digital citizenship in terms of ‘the norms of behavior with regard to technology use’, identifying nine areas of behavior as requirements for the ‘proper’ forms of digital citizenship. These included concepts such as ‘etiquette’, ‘responsibility’, ‘rights’ and ‘safety’. This line of research has since then been taken up by a fairly large body of literature (see e.g. Borko et al., 2009; Ohler 2011; Jones and Mitchell 2016). What unites this work is its basic conceptualization of digital citizenship as a set of competences that should delineate proper forms of behavior. Framed as a set of normative guidelines, these should be used to teach citizens how to behave online.

The second position that has emerged since the 1990s has mainly turned to concepts such as access, participation and societal integration. Writing in 2006, Mossberger, Tolbert, and Gilbert (2006, 585) argued that ‘[d]igital “citizenship” [. . .] enables individuals to participate fully in society’. Underpinned by the idea that ‘digital citizenship is a prerequisite for participation and engagement in society’ (Shade 2002, 2), this research has sought to map out, often using quantitative instruments, how digital citizenship correlates with different degrees of political engagement, economic activities and democratic participation. To do so, it has worked with a fixed definition of digital citizenship as being ‘the ability to participate in society online’ (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008, 1). Not unlike the first position sketched above, this second conceptualization also emphasizes digital citizenship as a ‘desirable’ and ‘proper’ form of citizen-subjectivity. Making its way into the works of a number of different scholars (Mossberger 2009; Oyedemi 2014; van Deursen and Helsper 2015), digital citizenship has even been seen as ‘a fundamental concept for modern democracies’ (Missingham 2009, 392) or ‘the ideal of citizenship in the twenty-first century’ (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008, 140).

Scrutinizing the implicit assumptions governing this research, recent scholarship has problematized both of these dominant positions (Isin and Ruppert 2015; McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns 2016). It has done so by highlighting concepts such as power, practices and socio-technical configurations as central for understanding this political figure. To our mind, this amounts to nothing less than a genuine turn that reconnects questions of digital citizenship to the broader critical scholarship concerned with citizenship studies (Isin and Turner 2002).

Isin and Ruppert (2015) thus argue that researchers cannot simply assume digital citizenship to already mean something and then study how and to extent reality aligns with these assumptions (Isin and Ruppert 2015, 19). Instead, there is a need for research that examines how this new form of political subjectivity is made and governed with a focus on its embeddedness within particular contexts and geographies. These authors have suggested that research ought to investigate how and in what ways digital citizenship is constructed by different

actors, institutions and socio-technical ensembles. Placing the digital citizen within such a view forces us to look at how this figure is intertwined with relations of power. It furthermore means, in the account provided by Isin and Ruppert (2015) at least, holding together the different forces of subjectivation involved in the production of citizen-subjectivity.

This article seeks to advance these scholarly dialogues on the figure of the digital citizen. Following from the intervention providing by Isin and Ruppert (2015), but also scholars like McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns (2016), we too view the digital citizen as a situated and ultimately political figure. Rather than working with fixed definitions of who this figure is, we search for the mechanisms that goes into the construction of these new citizen-subjectivities. We do so with a particular focus on governmental practices. While existing scholarship has often pointed to the relation between digital citizenship and governance, research is yet to produce a coherent outlook on how digital citizens are actually governed and managed. Despite calls for more situated research, it is as if this figure has been detached from wider forms of governance and statehood. Indeed, as research has turned its gaze on private actors like Google and Facebook (Isin and Ruppert 2015), surveillance (Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2017) or performative rights claims (Isin and Ruppert 2017), more traditional state institutions have been somewhat neglected. We see ample opportunity for using the theoretical groundwork provided by the latest research within a more pronounced focus on governance and state restructuring. As critical researchers have rightly emphasized: digital citizenship does not emerge within a political and historical vacuum. If this is the case, then it also seems pertinent to link this figure to the dominant governmental rationalities promoted by political decision-makers.

Neoliberal governance and (digital) citizenship

An expansive body of literature has sought to capture the political and economic transformations taking place in advanced capitalist states across the western world since the 1970s and 1980s (Jessop 2002; Peck 2010). These changes have often been conceptualized as the accelerating expansion of ‘neoliberalism’ as a political and economic project (Harvey 2005; Wacquant 2009). While ‘neoliberalism’ has become an increasingly unruly or even ‘rascal’ concept (Peck 2010), used to denote everything that is deemed deplorable about the current political conjuncture (Birch 2017), it may still serve as a useful heuristic for thinking through wider transformations within citizenship and statehood.

Without diving into the complex historical legacy of neoliberalism, we take this concept to imply, in its most rudimentary form, a combined promotion of ‘the extension of markets and logics of competitiveness with a profound antipathy to all kinds of Keynesian and/or collectivist strategies’ (Peck and Tickell 2002, 381). As scholars like Jamie Peck (2010) have emphasized, neoliberalism should not be considered a monolithic or fixed block, but is better conceived in terms of neoliberalization, understood as a continuously unfolding process that is variegated, layered and multi-scalar. That being the case, certain ‘family resemblances’ can still be foregrounded.

The neoliberalization of advanced capitalist states has thus entailed a ‘refunctionalization’ (Jessop 2002) of existing public sector institutions, as these have been faced with political calls for increased competitiveness, marketization and efficiency. Politicians have demanded a more lean, flexible and international state that is able to accommodate the shifting conditions of the global market. At the same time, scholars inspired by the work of Michel Foucault in particular, such as Brown (2015) and Dardot and Laval (2013), have argued that neoliberalism must be considered as a particular normative rationality or mode of governance. Doing so, they have showcased how the coming of the neoliberal state is a constructivist project concerned with actively forming and governing citizens based on particular ideals. What is at stake is the construction of certain forms of ‘proper’ citizen-subjectivity. According to these authors, neoliberalized forms of citizenship have largely been modelled on the figure of the ‘entrepreneur’, as citizens have been expected to be inherently market-oriented, involved in continuous self-work (in order to optimize their competitiveness), responsabilized for otherwise collective risks and highly individualized. Critical researchers highlight how these new modes of governance have simultaneously given way to novel inequalities and forms of stratification, as those unable to follow along these new demands become the target of disciplinary strategies (Wacquant 2009).

These structural changes, articulated at an ideal-typical level by international research, can also be found when looking at the specific context for this article, namely Denmark. Scholars like Pedersen (2011) and Torfing (1999; 2001) have argued that the universalistic welfare state that developed in the post-war period – characterized by a commitment to the extension of welfare services, an emphasis on universal rights rather than duties and an ambition to mitigate the market’s cycles of ‘boom and bust’ – underwent significant changes during the 1990s and 2000s. As a response to the crises of Fordist-Keynesianism in the 1970s and 1980s (Jessop 2002; Harvey 1989), political decision-makers sought to create a more competitive and market-oriented state, focusing on marketization, privatization and liberalization as important mechanisms of change. This has entailed a shift in the articulation and governance of Danish citizens (Pedersen 2011). Channelling ideological tropes associated with neoliberalism, citizens have been expected to act as flexible and competitive beings that can (and should) take part in the global competition. This has, amongst other things, meant that what was previously seen as universal rights are increasingly cast as active duties. Making citizens responsible for tasks and risks previously handled by collective structures, public sector institutions have to help citizens become active and self-leading beings. In this sense, the new ‘competition state’ (Pedersen 2011) expects its citizens to be more market-oriented, individualized and entrepreneurial than did the welfare state.

What has often been left unnoticed in these accounts, however, is how these developments have taken place alongside and together with the emergence of new forms of digital citizenship. With this article, we want to bring the critical literature on digital citizenship into contact with the wider field of research dedicated to exploring state transformations and neoliberal governance. By working in the interface of these two bodies of literature, we can begin to see how digital citizenship both reproduces and intervenes within existing forms of governance and statecraft. Doing so contributes to nuancing our current understanding of this political figure, showcasing how the

digital citizen has served as a subject of governance and institutional changes in both continuous and discontinuous ways.

Governing digital citizens in Denmark: a case study

Denmark is a small Scandinavian country that is often considered to be a digital leader in terms of digitalizing its public sector. For the last number of years, Denmark has consistently scored the highest marks on the European Union's Digital Economy and Society Index, being ranked the most digital society across the continent. While electronic archives have been employed within the Danish public sector since the 1970s and 1980s, policy efforts really took off in the early 1990s. Inspired in large part by the European Union's work on the so-called information society, Danish politicians sought to formulate a comprehensive vision for the transformation of the Danish state into a fully digital society. Since then, rapid changes have turned large parts of the Danish state and public sector into digital institutions, pushing digitalization to the front of the political agenda (Ejersbo and Greve 2014; Schou and Hjelholt 2018). These changes have taken place alongside wider modernization programs and reforms intended to introduce market-like mechanisms into the public sector. Relying on neoliberalized policy-visions, these changes have been subsumed as the gradual transition from a welfare state to a competition state (Pedersen 2011), as noted above.

In the specific context of digitalization reforms, the underlying ideas driving policymaking have changed considerable over time. In the 1990s, Danish policymakers emphasized that the transition to an information society should be a broad societal project focused on retaining welfarist ideas of solidarity, equality, local democratic participation and education. However, as Henriksen (2017) remarks, 'since 2001, [. . .] there has been a continuous effort in getting more service out of a limited public budget. The driver for the digitization agenda has been increased efficiency and effectiveness'. Partly as a response to a series of governmental failures in the 1990s, digitalization has come to be seen as a means to optimize existing work processes, make governmental institutions more efficient and replace manual forms of administrative labor with digital interfaces (Schou & Hjelholt 2018). This has also implied the implementation of a wide range of digital 'self-service' solutions, promoted to make citizens interact with the state without the need for governmental officials.

In the following sections, we investigate the governance of digital citizens in Denmark. We proceed to do so in three steps. First, we examine how Danish citizens have been constructed within national digitalization strategies, with a focus on the particular normative ideas tied to this figure. Second, we showcase how these political imaginaries have been translated into legal and technological components. Third, zooming in on one particular governmental institution, we showcase the practices that go into the governance of citizens as digital subjects, especially citizens that cannot conform to the normative rationales produced by the political system. In doing so, we can begin to see how the governance of digital citizens – as a simultaneously normative and institutional set of practices – has come to modulate and overlap with wider governmental changes. Before turning to our analysis, however, some brief methodological remarks are in order.

Methodological remarks

To explore the governance of digital citizens, the paper draws on different empirical sources. We use these to produce a multilayered picture of the processes involved in governing these new forms of citizen-subjectivity. Most substantially, the article investigates national policies and strategies produced by the Danish government and draws on a set of qualitative interviews conducted in 2017 with welfare state professionals in municipal citizen service centers (called 'Borgerservice' in Danish).

For this paper, we have mainly analyzed the five national digitalization strategies that have been produced by shifting Danish governments since 2002. Enrolling various actors, ministries, organizations and experts over time, these national strategies have attempted to articulate and formalize certain visions, initiatives and strategic aims for what digitalization 'ought' to do and how the Danish society 'should' be changed. They have also contained a more or less stable image of how Danish citizens 'ought' to act as digital individuals (see also Schou & Hjelholt 2017). Through a document analysis, we zoom in on the normative and moral ideals of citizenship expressed in these political documents. How have citizens been expected to act as digital individuals? And what has defined what is considered to be 'proper' forms of digital citizenship?

This analysis is combined with qualitative interviews with 17 welfare professionals from citizen service centers conducted in early 2017. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate how and in what ways welfare institutions are being redefined through governmental digitalization. Guided by the previous work of other scholars (Pors 2015), we identified citizen service centers as an important site of change within the context of digitalization. We conducted semi-structured interviews with both frontline workers and managers from seven different municipalities. Denmark has since 2007 been split into five regions and 98 municipalities. For this paper, we choose a broad selection of different municipalities. Taking geographical, socio-economic and demographic characteristics into account, our data contains both 'urban' municipalities with a high average income per citizen and 'rural' municipalities with a relatively lower average income per citizen. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were supplemented by guided tours of each center, as well as informal observational studies. In this article, we have anonymized all names and places, emphasizing the findings that cut across the different municipalities.

Digital citizenship as a normative rationality

The changes associated with the neoliberalization of advanced capitalist states have in large part been fueled by the influx of new normative ideas about how citizens 'should' and 'ought' to behave (Dardot and Laval 2013). Generalizing this argument somewhat, Bjorklund (2016) has suggested that citizenship always involves a moral component in the form of certain values and imperatives ascribed to this figure. In a Danish context, shifting networks of policymakers have sought to formulate visions for how (and why) core parts of Danish society and the public sector should be made digital since the early 1990s. Through policies, annual reviews and white papers,

state officials have selected and retained particular political imaginaries concerned with how Danish citizens ought to act as digital individuals (Schou and Hjelholt 2017).

Within the national digitalization strategies, Danish citizens are first of all articulated as a more or less homogenous group of subjects. Indeed, throughout these documents, it is generally assumed that all ‘Danes’ behave in more or less the same way. The implicit idea promoted by policymakers has been that all Danish citizens are increasingly becoming digital by default: ‘Danish citizens use their computers, mobile phones and the Internet every day’ (Regeringen, KL & Danske Regioner 2011, 3), making ‘[t]he internet [. . .] the primary gateway to public administration for the majority of Danes’ (The Government, Local Government Denmark & Danish Regions 2016, 6).

The national strategies do mention that not all citizens are able to use digital solutions. Yet, according to these documents, most citizens are in fact already digital. In this way, being able to use digital technologies is systematically articulated as the desired and proper norm. In one passage, dealing with ‘citizens who have trouble with or are simply unfamiliar with using digital channels’ (Regeringen, KL and Danske Regioner 2011, 14, our translation), citizens who deviate from these normative expectations are described as being ‘[c]itizens with weak IT skills, such as frail senior citizens’ (Regeringen, KL and Danske Regioner 2011, 14, our translation). This showcases how being digital is constructed as the proper mode of citizen-subjectivity, as any deviance is seen as a subtraction or negation of this. The normative yardstick used to measure citizens thus works with a binary distinction between those who are digital and those who are not.

Being digital is linked to a number of normative ideas within the national strategies. Digital citizens are framed as individualized subjects, ‘who do not want to waste their valuable time on paperwork at their local government office’ (Regeringen, KL and Danske Regioner 2011, 3, our translation). Indeed, the strategies often argue that these digital individuals require more efficient and lean forms of government: ‘With digital solutions becoming ever more widespread, citizens and businesses have high expectations for digital public services that are up-to-date and add value to everyday life’ (The Government, Local Government Denmark & Danish Regions 2016, 10). As individualized beings, digital citizens are furthermore portrayed as customers with particular expectations that the public sector should deliver on. As citizen-customers, digital citizens are imagined to have distinct needs and requirements that the public sector should accommodate. ‘Digitalization’, a strategy produced by the Danish Ministry of Finance in 2002 thus states, ‘will serve as a basis for service improvement for “customers” in the form of access to self-service systems and information at all times of the day, faster handling and less bureaucracy’ (Finansministeriet 2002, 15, our translation).

To meet these new requirements, national policymakers suggest implementing digital self-service solutions across the public sector. The idea is that as digital citizens, all subjects should be able to serve themselves through digital means: ‘Danes have to serve themselves on the internet in a large number of areas. This is practical and it saves time for the citizens, businesses and the authorities’ (The Government, Local Government Denmark & Danish

Regions 2016, 21). Digital citizens should, according to these normative ideas, be responsible for filing their own requests and handling their own administrative problems. Within these official political narratives, being self-serving is connected to ideas of living an active life, contributing to the societal economy and being able to fulfill individual wishes: ‘The majority of citizens want to live active lives, be able to cope on their own and be free to do the things they enjoy. Digital welfare solutions play an important role in making this possible’ (The Government, Local Government Denmark & Danish Regions 2016, 28).

When taken together, we can begin to see how a very particular image of Danish citizens as digital citizens have been contained within the political documents crafted by policymakers. Based on an overarching division between digital and non-digital citizens – where being digital is articulated as the normatively desirable form – digital citizenship has been connected to a whole set of ideas about the proper forms of life. Digital citizens are collectively seen as individualized, active and participating beings that demand more lean and efficient forms of government. These citizens must carry responsibilities and duties previously handled by governmental organizations through digital self-service solutions. In doing so, new ‘energy’ will be released from the public sector, making it possible to create more competitive and flexible institutions. Returning to our discussion of neoliberalism and state restructuring, we can begin to see how many of the ideals typically tied to neoliberalization (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2009) have been continued and extended in the construction of these new images of digital citizenship. Individual responsibility, personal flexibility and market-like logics have been coupled to the digital citizen, translating neoliberal ideas into a digital register.

Digital citizenship as legal and technological ensembles

These normative constructions of digital citizenship have not been confined to the articulation of certain political imaginaries, but have also been translated into new legal frameworks and technological solutions. In a legal perspective, the so-called Law on Digital Post was put into effect in November 2014. Codifying many of the normative assumptions laid out above, this law implied that all Danish citizens above 15 years of age should now conduct all their communication with the Danish state and public sector using a digital mail infrastructure called Digital Post. ‘Physical persons’ the law states, ‘that are 15 years or more, and who live in Denmark or have a permanent residence in Denmark, must use Digital Post’. The Law on Digital Post meant that the capacity to use digital technologies to communicate with the Danish state was tied to citizenship as such. For all intents and purposes, being digital became the default mode of citizenship, as all citizens now had to communicate and interact through digital means. If not, they would have to ‘opt-out’ of the system. Citizens can thus be exempt from using digital self-service solutions like Digital Post if they do not have access to digital technologies or are otherwise deemed unable to use them.

These legal measurements have been implemented in conjunction with a number of new technological infrastructures. Across the public sector, a number of digital technologies have been put in place. Directly linked to the imaginaries discussed above, these technologies have been premised on the notion that citizens should solve

their own administrative problems using self-service platforms. Often, these solutions have been in the form of governmental homepages where citizens can manage and administer their cases. This includes pages such as borger.dk [citizen.dk], skat.dk [tax.dk] and virk.dk [work.dk]. These have been implemented together with NemID [EasyID], a physical keycard tied to the individual citizen's social security number. Using this card, citizens can sign into governmental systems in a 'secure' way. This physical keycard can be seen as the direct materialization of the Law on Digital Post: as an object, it signifies the individual citizen's status as a digital citizen.

These developments showcase how the normative ideas tied to digital citizenship have been constructed together with new legal and technological forces. These have served to actualize these political visions by tying digital citizenship to formal citizenship and make citizens responsible for carrying out their own administrative tasks through digital means. In the following section, we zoom in on one of the particular institutional sites in which these complex changes have been most visible. Turning to Danish citizen service centers (Borgerservice in Danish), we will explore how Danish citizens are governed within the 'frontline' of the Danish state. Doing so, we want to showcase how the normative ideas explored above have led to the refunctionalization of existing institutional spaces and the emergence of (partially) new modes of governance.

Digital citizenship as a governmental practice

Citizen service centers began to spread across Danish municipalities in the mid 1990s (Pors 2015, 624). At the time, these centers were labeled under different names across the Danish municipalities. That being the case, they nonetheless constituted a relatively coherent setting across the country, handling more or less the same set of administrative tasks. In 2005, these centers were officially made the 'entrance-point' to the Danish public sector, taking care of casework, administrative guidance and handling of official documents. The idea was to create a 'one-stop shop' for all interactions between citizens and the public sector. With national digitalization efforts, however, these service centers have been transformed significantly. Many of the tasks previously handled within these spaces have been gradually transferred to digital platforms and online webpages, as citizens are expected to administer and take care of such requests online. This has implied profound institutional changes across the different municipalities. A manager condensed these trajectories in the following way:

Interviewer: How has Borgerservice changed in the past 10 years?

Manager: Radically. It can be answered that easily. [. . .] Before, in Borgerservice, we only stood and took tasks more or less on demand from the citizen. We were the specialists. And then gradually as the digital Denmark also got changed, amongst other things through the mandatory self-service waves, well, then the role of a Borgerservice employee also took on a whole new character. Now, you had to be more on the general level, you had to be a tutor, a guide, a teacher.

These changes were voiced across our interviews. Both frontline workers and daily managers recounted how the roles and responsibilities of citizen services had shifted in conjunction with the increasingly pervasive digitalization agenda. As captured by the quote above, frontline workers used to constitute specialized administrative workers in the 1990s and early 2000s, capable of helping citizens with filling in standardized requests and handling administrative problems. Yet, as these tasks have moved online, the role of frontline workers has changed accordingly. These workers now have to help citizens use the official digital platforms and become self-serving. The point is to make citizens help themselves. As one frontline worker explained, ‘citizen services want citizens out of the “store”. They must serve themselves’.

Making citizens their own ‘caseworkers’ was narrated by both frontline workers and managers as implying a turn towards ‘guiding’ and ‘coaching’ citizens. Frontline workers have to teach citizens how to navigate the standardized governmental platforms. They have to guide them through the official digital platforms. These changes have been underpinned, in the municipalities we studied, by a refurbishing of the institutional space itself. While citizen service centers were previously organized around an administrative desk, clearly demarcating between citizens in need of help and frontline workers helping them, the centers had all implemented new ‘computer environments’. Partially dispelling with the administrative desk – and its clear division of labor – these ‘environments’ included open computers in the middle of the room that citizens were free to use. While doing so, particular frontline workers would circulate amongst these, guiding citizens as to how they should use the official platforms. Standing shoulder to shoulder, frontline workers would tell the citizen where to click, help them login and guide them through the official platforms. ‘We firmly believe that it is not us who should press the keys’, a frontline worker explained, ‘It is the citizen [that should do it]. We’ll probably stand by and help, but it’s the citizen who is going to operate the computer’.

According to frontline workers, these changes have meant that they have to relate to citizens in new ways. ‘You have to be a good communicator’, one frontline worker explained, ‘as it [helping citizens] demands a different way of relating to the citizen. It boils down to whether you have understood what they come in with and what they want help with’. These new ways of ‘relating’ imply a closer physical proximity, as citizens and frontline workers have to stand or sit shoulder to shoulder. ‘I have some colleagues. . . They don’t like it’, a frontline worker told us, ‘Because you have to be okay with being closer [to the citizen]’. Indeed, this new form of physical proximity was often described as a significant change in our interviews. A manager explained how some frontline workers ‘hated sitting next to citizens in our computer environment. Their personal boundaries were being crossed. They needed [...] the distance, and the physical desk between them’.

These new ways of relating to – and governing – citizens also imply a shift in the focus within the encounter between frontline workers and citizens. While the main object used to be particular administrative problems, it is now the citizen herself – as an individual being – that comes into focus. It is the citizen that has to be transformed. And doing so requires governing the citizen as an individual being with particular psychological, emotional, personal and physical abilities. ‘You try to create a picture’, a frontline worker told us, ‘of the person in order to

see what it makes sense'. Frontline workers thus have to relate to each citizen as individual beings. Relaying the normative ideas proposed by policymakers, being unable to use digital technologies is seen as a personal deficit. As a consequence, what needs to be transformed through governmental practices is the citizen herself.

In helping citizens who are unable to use the official governmental platforms, citizen service centers start to become the place where 'non-digital' citizens gather. It is the citizens that do not conform or follow along with the dominant policy visions that enter these spaces in order to acquire assistance. This signals a quite profound change in the group of citizens using this space, as one frontline worker told us:

Interviewer: Did it used to be other types of problems you helped with?

Frontline worker: Yes, I would say so, because everybody came here. It wasn't possible to do it digitally, 10 years ago. So, it was everybody that came down here. No matter what class you belonged to. [...]

Interviewer: What about today then?

Frontline worker: Well today, it is. . . Everybody comes for passports and their driver's license. And the rest of the person group we have here are those that need help. Else they would not be here. [. . .] The people we have now, it is the heavy ones that take a lot of time.

Particularly among frontline workers, there was often a sense that the citizens using these centers were already at the fringes of the welfare state. Indeed, as one frontline worker explains, 'we need to help those who find it difficult. And now there might be some who were already in a tough position, but have gotten it even tougher because they have been pushed out and cannot use the digital platforms'. Throughout our interviews, both managers and frontline workers would often explain how these citizens felt like 'second-class citizens' or 'b-citizens'.

What we can begin to see, then, is how certain normative ideas about digital citizenship, crafted by national policymakers over time, become the foundation for new governmental practices within existing welfare institutions. Citizen service centers, previously responsible for helping the entire population with administrative requests, increasingly have to handle the subjectivities that do not conform to the dominant normative ideas. Doing so, they have to transform citizen-subjectivities through new forms of 'guidance' and 'coaching'. What is at stake is not just the individual's ability to use a certain platform, but the entirety of their subjectivity. Contrary to the narratives provided by policymakers, who describe the national digitalization agenda as driven by citizen demand, the governmental practices found in these citizen service centers form a murkier picture. Rather than citizens demanding digital services, it is administrative personal that have to actively create citizens as digital beings. This showcases the constructivist and interventionist ambitions of the neoliberal state: digital citizens are not simply there. They have to be actively created through new governmental and disciplinary practices.

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to deepen our current understanding of the digital citizen as a key political figure. It has done so by combining insights from recent scholarship on digital citizenship (Isin and Ruppert 2015; McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns 2016), advocating for a more situated and contextual approach, with literature on neoliberalization and state restructuring (Dardot and Laval 2013; Jessop 2002; Peck 2010; Wacquant 2009). We have tried to connect these bodies of literature in order to push for a more pronounced focus on the links being made between existing governmental practices and the rise of the digital citizen. Doing so, this article has sought to contribute with new insights on the construction of digital citizenship within governmental digitalization practices using Denmark as our particular case study. We have traced the specific normative ideas attached to digital citizenship by national policymaking, shown how this has manifested itself in legal and technological developments, and examined the new governmental practices this gives way to within existing public sector institutions. Taken together, we want to suggest that this study highlights some of the novel links being made between wider state restructurings and the coming of the digital citizen as a particular site of intervention and governance.

In focusing on the connections between citizenship and neoliberal governance, this article treads well-worn ground (Hindess 2002; Suvarierol and Kirk 2015; Charles 2013). However, as argued earlier, existing research on digital citizenship is yet to make these connections in any sustained manner. Our case study may begin to foreground these relations by exploring how neoliberal tropes (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2009) have been appropriated and selectively mobilized by Danish policymakers in their normative constructions of ‘proper’ digital citizenship. Being a digital citizen intermingles with wider political calls for personal responsibility, flexibility and optimization. Nuancing this further, we have shown how these normative rationales have warranted new forms of legislative and governmental practices. Far from being a mechanical application of (big N) ‘Neoliberalism’ (Ong 2006), new and partially unforeseen forms of governance have emerged around the neoliberalized digital citizen. Public sector institutions, such as citizen service centers, have been refunctionalized in order to accommodate the perceived ‘failures’ of the national policy agenda. The citizens that do not conform to the normative ideas have to be transformed through new forms of ‘coaching’, ‘tutoring’ and ‘guidance’ intended to actualize their digital potentialities.

These trajectories showcase how digital citizenship and neoliberalization start to cross-pollinate and influence each other. ‘Being digital’ is becoming a genuine concern for the neoliberal state, as being able to use digital technologies is seen as a prerequisite for competitiveness and inclusion in the political community. In this way, neoliberal governance and digital citizenship combine and mutually influence each other. Developing the links between digital citizenship and neoliberal governance can thus help to further challenge the depoliticized narratives voiced by policymakers as well as the pervasive normative assumptions of existing research on digital citizenship. Far from simply an ‘ideal’ or ‘fundamental concept’, digital citizenship is part of wider political projects intended to change the very shape and form of the state itself.

Pushing these trajectories forward, the article also points to new forms of exclusion and marginalization. As discussed earlier, the coming of the neoliberal state (Wacquant 2009) has signaled new forms of penalization of those deemed unable to fit the demands imposed by this rationality. Our study extends this point by showing how digital citizenship – or lack thereof – is becoming a novel engine of exclusion. Going forward, we would do well to consider how new types of ‘monsters’ (Haraway 1992) or ‘digital outcasts’ (Schou & Hjelholt 2018) are being created, displacing and further excluding those already at the fringes. Recalling Isin’s succinct argument, formulated in his *Being Political* from 2002, ‘citizenship and its alterity [have] always emerged simultaneously in a dialogical manner and constituted each other’ (Isin 2002, 4). To speak of the others of digital citizenship, then, simultaneously means to speak of the group that ‘makes citizenship possible by their very formation’ (Isin 2002, 4).

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