

THE MONSTERS OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: ADVANCED MARGINALIZATION IN DIGITAL SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

This work-in-progress paper reports on preliminary findings from 15 interviews with so called “non-digital” Danish citizens to address and problematize this classification as a social category. In linking classification theory (the categories used in the digital post system) to a notion of advanced digital marginalization (to portray the path dependency of those who struggle to maintain links to societal membership) the paper expose the complexity of the “non-digital” and discusses how the assembling and connection of certain people, as a starting point for governmental strategies, might distort and prevent insights into how individuals and social groups are (re)-produced into new socio-technical configurations. The paper presents preliminary findings that suggest that “non-digitals” are in fact digital users but not in a way that allows them to be categorised as such. Finally the paper outline how further work will use the concept of advanced digital marginalization, to elaborate on these findings.

KEYWORDS

Advanced digital marginality, Classification, Digital communication

1. INTRODUCTION

“Assembling and targeting those people as homogeneous in their inability to participate also has the effect of accentuating dispossession” (Bourdieu 1999).

In 2014, the law of *digital post* was affirmed. This regulation declared that all citizens in Denmark with a social security number must oblige to conduct all communication, in the citizen/state relation, digitally by logging into the “digital post” system. This represents a fundamental shift in the more than 350-year Danish history of national registration, administration and communication. From public sector institutions holding the jurisdictional responsibility to facilitate communication and protect the data of the citizen, to citizens individually representing themselves digitally and thereby holding the full jurisdictional responsibility to act/react and facilitate the communication. The mandatory digital communication system additionally derives from an attempt to dissolve spatial and temporal dimensions of the citizen/state relationship. Physically placed citizen-service centres have been closed down as main entry points, as the “digital post” system provide secure communication through a centralised mailbox. As this entrance is made mandatory for all citizens huge efforts have been made to target those who are considered non-digital. This study considers these efforts and portrays how new spatial and geocentric categories of territorial fixation and stigmatization are re-introduced in new socio-technical configurations. The *monsters* of a mandatory digital communication system, to use Donna Haraway’s notion of the exceptions that cannot be fitted into the category of the ordinary, are the people deprived of all the assets necessary to participate in various social games. Their common lot consists only in their common ex-communication (Wacquant 2007).

In the “digital post” system these people are marked in a field as “non-digital user”. However findings in this study show that people classified as such are in fact often users of digital communication tools as well as primary users of various public institution services. In the state/citizen relationship they have been historically dependent on a linkage – a translator of institutional lingua and logics - to become *civilized* (users) in Norbert Elias vocabulary. By digitally removing this link the “digital post” system symbolically reconfigures social orders, embodying malfunctioning automation and digitalisation into strict categories of users/non-users.

This work-in-progress paper reports on preliminary findings from 15 interviews with “non-users” and observations in Danish citizen service centres to address and problematize the classification of the “non-user” as a social category. In linking classification theory (the categories used in the digital post system) to a notion of advanced digital marginalization (to portray the path dependency of those who struggle to maintain links to societal membership) the paper exposes the complexity of the so-called non-user and discuss how the assembling and connection of non-users, as a starting point for governmental strategies, might distort and prevent insights into how individuals and social groups are (re)-produced into new socio-technical configurations.

2. E- SOCIETAL BACKGROUND

For centuries civil registration has been an integral part of being a legitimate and legal Danish citizen. Since 1645 civic registration has systematically been conducted by injunction in official church books. Initially the books were kept locally with the priest in charge of what should be noted as relevant. From 1812 and onwards official schemes were mandatory but they entailed a “margin”, a blank field, where the priest could note additional information. In 1924 the National Register of Danish citizens was established as local municipalities manually registered information on index cards (Pedersen et al. 2006). This system was used until 1968 where the Central Civil Registration System (CCRS) was established and all persons alive and living in Denmark were registered centrally (Pedersen 2011). The register included individual information on a unique personal identification number, name, gender, date of birth, place of birth, citizenship, identity of parents and continuously updated information on vital status, place of residence and spouses. From 2004 all civic registration has been digitalized. Church representatives conduct the registration of birth, name and death directly in the CCRS, other religious communities maintain handwritten protocols, but they are digitally reproduced in the CCRS. In 2014, the *law of digital post* was affirmed. This regulation declared that all citizens in Denmark who has a CCRS number oblige to update key information in the register by themselves alongside conducting all communication, in the state-citizen relation, digitally by logging into the system using a unique code tied to the personal CCRS number. This represents a fundamental shift in the more than 350-year history of Danish civic registration. From a system of numeric representation controlled and legitimized directly by authorities to mandatory digital self-representation.

As codes, algorithms and networks increasingly shape social positions an ethical examination of digital classification work is vital for future societal and cultural priorities. Inescapably every classification system functions by inclusion and exclusion practices in its margins. The Danish CCRS system and the mandatory “digital post” system are built as main infrastructural elements in the relationship between the citizen and the state. In its appearance and strategic formulation it might seem at a neutral and straight forward way of making a nation more digital however as this work highlights; build spaces always represent control rights, as they belong to someone and not others (Bowker & Star 1999, Joerges 1999).

This study suggests contemporary digital *classification* work to be portrayed in the light of what, in urban studies, has been called *advanced marginality* (Wacquant 2007, 2008, 2009). New forms of exclusionary social closure and peripheralization have arisen, as a result of the uneven, disarticulating, mutations of the most advanced sectors in the western societies and economies (Wacquant 1996). Represented silently in the digital registers are the mutations of otherwise distinct administrative fields. A clash between, what Pierre Bourdieu (1999b) would call the right and the left hand of the state, where the penal state, efficiency and neo-liberal governance become an integral part of welfare support functions for those living in the margins of the wage labour relationship (1999a).

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

The theme of this work-in-progress paper is to investigate how classification takes formal shape and become standardized in commercial and bureaucratic products. Over time the processes of civil registration in Denmark has transferred various institutional responsibilities to machine technologies and so removed these responsibilities from everyday and made the margins unreadable/invisible (Star & Strauss 1999). *“Norms and practices of registering and organising people progressively devolve into society’s material basis: Inscribed in machines, institutions are literally black boxed”* (Joerges & Czarniawska 1998)

This study reports on an on-going 5-year research project concerning digitalization in Denmark. The research project consists of 14 researchers investigating from different perspectives of national digitalization and marginalization. This particular paper builds on 15 interviews with citizens defined to be in the margins of the systems and participatory observation of learning initiatives on libraries across Denmark. A focus is held on the margins arising at a temporal interval as digital representation become mandatory. This part of the research is informed by citizens targeted as being non-digital to spotlights how the historical path dependency of digital registration systems is interwoven with contemporary hidden specificities and modes of appropriation (Durkheim 1982, Star & Ruhleder 1996).

4. PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS AND FINDINGS

The preliminary findings show four types of “non-digital” citizens. Type A who has not signed up for “digital post” but in various ways uses digital media. This type represented more than half of the interviewees. Type B who actually was using the digital post system without knowing it as someone has (family members, case workers etc.) had signed them up. This meant that they were not aware of their own digital classification and potentially would not receive important information. Type C who did use neither “digital post” system nor digital media in general. This type represented only 6% of the interviewees. Type D was a user who actually used both “digital post” and digital media in general. The reason for this type to show up in the sample is that these people originally had signed up for courses learning how to use “digital post” and initially applied to be allowed not to use the “digital post” system. In this process this type had signed up for the “digital post” system and were now using it.

Table 1. “Digital post and digital media users”

	“Digital Post” user	Digital media user	Percent
A		X	61%
B	X		19%
C			6%
D	X	X	14%

The preliminary results show that being non-digital is not a simple category. As the “digital post” system classifies citizens as such raises questions both concerning how to “be digital” as well as how the system marginalized certain citizens by reproducing certain societal patterns in the system. The marginalisation occurs not only as a result of access/non-access to the Internet. Preliminary findings suggest that a certain kind of digital behaviour is promoted to differentiate between how people are seen in the “digital post” system.

ICT practices by the interviewees regarded as “non-digital” differ according to, amongst other things, their habitus. Habitus produces practices that are patterned on, or connected to, past conditions. Even if we think that a practice is geared towards a future outcome, it is predicated on what has happened in the past. Practice is not a mechanical reaction (Bourdieu 1977, p. 73). Consequently the respondents mirror their life practices and existing communication patterns in their use of ICT. While people with a strong cultural understanding of the public sector logic feel their habitus fits the social structures in place in the “digital post” system. As such they feel like a fish in the water (Wacquant 1996) they don’t feel the weight of the water and take the world about them granted. The cultural understanding of how to navigate in the categories provided in the public sector sites proves a vital ability that is primarily learned through education and social background including parent’s level of education, occupation and geographic location. However, as the

public sector lingua, seems to be difficult without an interpreter, other digital medias provide new connections for communication or leisure: “I don’t want to use the system as I don’t know what it means. Normally I have had a caseworker who would do these things for me – but I still skype a lot with my son” (interview 12, respondent 8)

The preliminary findings suggest how behaviour might be “regulated without being the product of obedience to rules” (Bourdieu 1990). As the law on “digital post” regulates how communication between the state and the citizen should occur certain people are classified as “non-digital”. This classification neglects the social background and cultural forms not obedient to public sector lingua. This however, does not mean that people in this category are non-digital users. New technologies is constantly a part of shaping new cultural forms but the forms that dominate are those that fit a certain habitus. Consequently people are digitally marginalized from societal and cultural structures that make it very challenging for people without the correct training and education to apply for membership in the digital society.

5. FUTURE WORK

As more interviews and data are collected this work will start with a more elaborate introduction of the dominant literature on which the article builds its theoretical argument is offered. A combination of literature on *classification* and the notion of *advanced marginalization* are presented. This combination is suggested to capture both the path dependency and historicity of digital registers as well as to understand the social re-configurations that result in a multifaceted pressure on digitally marginalized individuals. Second, a detailed presentation of the data collection method and ethnographic approach will be offered. Next, the theoretical construct and methodological approach will be utilized to present and analyse the case of the Danish digital post system. The future work will then use the notion of *advanced digital marginality* to discuss what “mediating institutions” needs to be invented to overcome future margins of digital registration and communication.

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