Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare

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Abstract: Digitalisation reforms have become increasingly pervasive across European welfare agencies and public sector institutions. As welfare provision becomes premised on the use of digital technologies, often in the form of 'self-service' solutions, new demands are imposed on citizens, including already disadvantaged groups. While existing research has showcased how digitalisation often reproduces existing lines of stratification, little to no work has been conducted on such processes in the context of welfare provision and public administration. Through a study of citizen service centres in Denmark, based on ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, this article analyses the new exclusionary mechanisms that emerge at the frontline of the digital agenda. The article argues that digitalised welfare agencies simultaneously sustain existing lines of social stratification and enhance these by producing new forms of digital exclusion. Taken together, the article contributes with new knowledge on the impact of digitalisation policies and their exclusionary consequences for disadvantaged citizens.

Keyword: Digitalisation, exclusion, welfare agencies, reform, public sector, social citizenship

1 INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become increasingly important for public sector institutions and welfare agencies across European welfare states (Chini, 2008; Margetts, 1999, 2009; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Fountain, 2008, 2014). With the pervasive use of digital technologies in society in general, policymakers have intensified their calls for implementing and adopting technologies within governmental institutions (Buffat, 2015; Janson & Erlingsson, 2014). They have done so not least in pursuit of more 'flexible' and 'cost-effective' welfare institutions *and* as a means of making citizens responsible for provisioning welfare services themselves (Henman, 2010). Today, citizens are increasingly seen as a central part of the solution to complex governance problems in which improved 'efficiency' and 'quality of service' are expected to go hand in hand. This paper is concerned not so much with the political processes that go into the production and implementation of digitalisation policies and reforms. Instead, it focuses on the consequences of such reforms for citizenship in practice. As welfare services become increasingly digitalised, citizens unable to use standardised digital technologies start to face new forms of exclusion. This paper attends to the emergence of such forms of exclusion arising alongside the use of ICTs in welfare agencies.

The paper addresses this issue by presenting insights from qualitative studies of so-called *citizen service centres* in Denmark. This country provides an in many ways instructive case for understanding the impact of digitalisation as a new policy instrument. Not only has Denmark been continuously framed as a "leading" European nation within international benchmarks, the policy trajectory adopted in this country also stands out. In contrast to comparable welfare states, such as Sweden and Norway, Danish policymakers have adopted a more centralised, top-down and coercive form of policy implementation (Joseph & Avdic, 2016; Janson et al., 2016). Municipal welfare institutions have been obliged to adopt national digital infrastructures, and from November 2014 all citizens above 15 years have been mandated by law to conduct all their communication with the public sector using a digital mailbox named Digital Post (Henriksen, 2015). In contrast to other Scandinavian countries, Denmark has thus pursued a strategy based on citizens

being 'digital by default.' In light of these new policy trajectories and institutional changes, the article seeks to understand the consequences of these wide-ranging digitalisation reforms for disadvantaged citizens and marginalised populations.

Despite the increasing use of digitalisation across European welfare states, few scholars have researched how digitalisation has impacted welfare institutions and professional practices (Pollitt, 2011; Löfgren & Sørensen, 2011). As Hansen, Lundberg & Syltevik (2018, p. 67) have rightly argued, "there have been relatively few studies on service user experience with ICT and whether and in what manner this transforms the relationship between citizens and the welfare state." Indeed, all too often both scholars and policymakers have tended to depoliticise digitalisation, turning it into a merely technical issue and downplaying its political contents and consequences (Hall, 2008; Lofgren & Sorensen, 2011). This current neglect is especially pronounced in the context of social exclusion and marginalisation. While research has been conducted on questions of 'digital exclusion' and the so-called 'digital divide' since the 1990s (Norris, 2001), less research has turned to the intersection between welfare provision and digital exclusion. This is despite studies showing that already existing forms of social exclusion and stratification are often reproduced through digital means (Watling, 2011; Murphy, 2017).

This paper contributes to our current understanding of these issues. It does so by providing a qualitative study of a specific welfare institution, namely citizen service centres, showcasing the exclusionary consequences of national policies in action. Doing so, we show how existing forms of social stratification are reproduced and enhanced in the transition to digital forms of welfare provision. As digital self-service solutions are implemented across the welfare state, demanding that citizens can and must obtain important information and apply for welfare services online, the groups of citizens already at the fringes of the welfare system risk being further excluded. They do so because they either do not have access or competences to navigate in official governmental domains. Not only does this pose problems to the basic idea of social citizenship, premised on equality and social rights for all (Marshall, 1992 [1950]), it also means that already excluded citizens are pushed

further to the fringes of the welfare system.

2 DIGITALISATION AND WELFARE REFORM

The use of digital technologies within public administration – or what has often been called 'e-government' – is not a new phenomenon and can be traced back to the early 1950s (Margetts, 2009). However, with the technological advancements in the 1990s and 2000s (including the widespread adoption of internet-driven platforms), digitalisation policies intensified amongst advanced democratic states. In line with public sector reforms in general, digitalisation can be understood as a "comprehensive political intervention" (Bejerot & Hasselbladh, 2013) that seeks to introduce new institutional logics and regulations (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018). In European welfare states, such interventions have to a large extend sought to automate public administration and transform public service organisations into "digital agencies" (Dunleavy et al. 2006, p. 225) aimed at "making (able) citizens do more" (Margretts & Dunleavy 2013, p. 6). In this sense, digitalisation encompasses a fundamental change of both normative and operational elements in public sector practices, which is often made visible in the concrete tasks and routines of practitioners' daily practices (Power, 1999; see also Pors, 2015; Janson & Erlingsson, 2014).

The digitalisation of welfare services and institutions has often taken place through the introduction of self-service solutions, making citizens responsible for actively seeking out services previously administered by welfare professionals (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018). In this context, Henman (2010, p. 216-217) has argued that this turn to self-service solutions has served to push market-oriented strategies of state restructuring: "This shift to self-service by governments […] is part of the neoliberal strategy that combines cost cutting with customer service. This strategy contrasts with paternalistic welfare states, whereby welfare subjects are conceived as passive. Instead, self-service provision involves active welfare subjects taking their own initiative to engage the welfare state without bureaucratic assistance and to ensure that they obtain the benefits and services they need and to which they are entitled." This normative shift – moving citizenship from being primarily rights-based to being

activity or obligations-based (Brown & Baker, 2013) – is broadly resonant with changes within welfare states from a demand-oriented to a supply-oriented perception of service. So-called 'active' citizenship, premised on self-provision strategies, has thus been labelled as the 'new face' of welfare (Jensen & Pfau-Effinger, 2005) or as signalling the coming of an 'activating' welfare state (Lessenich, 2009).

Denmark has in many ways pursued a highly proactive digitalisation agenda since the early 1990s. This policy agenda has, however, shifted quite substantially over time in terms of its political content, not least due to changing allocations of responsibilities within the Danish political field. From the early 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, the Danish Ministry of Research was in charge of formulating national policy visions, emphasising ideas of inclusion, free choice, democracy and participation as key to the formation of an 'information society' (Jæger & Pors 2017; Hjelholt & Schou 2017). From 2001, the responsibility for this area was *de facto* given over to the Ministry of Finance (Jæger & Löfgren, 2010), due in large part to a series of policy and governance failures taking place in the late 1990s. With this shift, policymakers increasingly came to promote the use of digital technologies as an instrument for rationalising the Danish public sector, providing a means of optimising existing administrative processes, automating routine work-tasks and creating more flexible forms of service delivery. Additionally, policymakers came to push the idea that digitalisation should change the direct relation between citizens and the state. In 2011, the Danish Government established the Agency for Digitisation under The Ministry of Finance and the concept of 'mandatory digital self-service' was introduced:

> By 2015, it will be mandatory for citizens to use digital solutions to communicate in writing with the public sector. Once printed forms and letters have been phased out, all citizens will have to use online self-service. […] This major step towards eGovernment will require considerable changes to the way public authorities work, and a certain degree of acclimatization from citizens. However, the transition will take place gradually, as user- friendly eGovernment solutions are introduced in more

and more areas. Help will be available for citizens who find it hard to use the new solutions. (The Danish Government et al., 2011, p. 5)

Since then, digital self-service technologies have been implemented across a wide variety of welfare areas, making citizens responsible for actively provisioning services. Citizens have, moreover, increasingly been framed as being "digital by default" by policymakers, implying that citizens unable to adopt these new systems have been construed as departing from the dominant expectations and norms. These new forms of 'moral' citizenship have served to discursively legitimize the turn to *mandatory* self-service, where the ability to communicate with the Danish public sector has been formulated as a legal expectation.

With this paper, we examine how the turn towards self-service solutions and mandatory digitalisation influences already excluded citizens. We do so by providing a qualitative study of the daily tasks and routines in bureaucratic encounters in Danish citizen service centres where welfare services are increasingly replaced with public servants 'teaching' and 'supporting' citizens in the use of self-service solutions. Doing so contributes to enhancing our understanding of the impact of digitalisation on social policy and public administrations. It showcases not only the institutional transformations caused by digitalisation policies, but also the impact these have on the relation between the state and citizens.

3 DIGITAL EXCLUSION AND STRATIFICATION

Scholars have since the late 1990s pointed to the exclusionary impact of digital technologies (Norris, 2001; Mossberger et al., 2003; Warschauer, 2004; Henman, 2010; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018). Using terms such as the "digital divide" and "digital inequalities", researchers have shown how differences in access to and use of digital technologies can create and sustain inequalities in society at large. Whereas research in the 1990s particularly looked at the difference between the so-called "haves" and "haves-not", scholarship has increasingly foregrounded the complex set of social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors involved in such inequalities (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018). As Min (2010, p. 24) remarks, "research has focused

on what some have termed the 'second-level' digital divide [...] which is a divide that concerns 'multiple layers of access and use' of ICTs." In this sense, the digital divide(s) literature has evolved significantly since its original inception and is today firmly embedded within the social scientific tradition (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; Ragnedda, 2017).

More recently, the notion of "digital exclusion" has been proposed as a useful frame. This concept has particularly been used in studies on the relation between (dis)abled bodies and digital technologies, not least in the work of Sue Watling (2011, 2012). In her studies of (dis)abilities, she notes how "dividing lines of digital exclusion are closely aligned to those associated with social exclusion, for example income, age, ethnic minority, location and disability" (2012, p. 126). Adding to these discussions, the idea of a "digital underclass" has also been suggested. In a comparative study of Britain and Sweden, Helsper and Reisdorf (2017) thus conclude that "non-users in Sweden and Britain are increasingly older, less educated, more likely to be unemployed, disabled, and socially isolated" (p. 15). This means, according to these authors, that "exclusion and economic disadvantage have become stronger determinants of digital disengagement than they were when research into digital divides started, indicating the emergence of a digital underclass" (p. 13).

These new disadvantages are particularly important in the context of welfare agencies and public sector institutions, not least because the users of these institutions are often those who are already excluded or marginalised in terms of income, educational level and so forth. In this sense, the increasingly pervasive coupling between welfare agencies and digital technologies might pose problems to already disadvantaged groups. If, indeed, digital exclusion reproduces existing forms of social and economic exclusion, as existing research underlines, then this suggests that already disadvantaged groups might encounter new barriers to inclusion. As Murphy (2017, p. 4) underlines, "[d]igitalisation offers opportunity and threat, with potential to overcome old forms of social cohesion while also threatening the possibility of new forms of social exclusion." At the present moment, however, questions of 'digital divides' and 'digital exclusion' have almost solely

focused on areas outside social policy and public administration. Indeed, little research has been conducted on the ways in which digitalised welfare agencies might produce new forms of digital exclusion.

Table 1. Adoption rates for Digital Post (% of total population)

Date	Signed-up	Opted-out
January 2014	69,6%	30,4%
November 2014	89,5%	10,5%
March 2015	89,0%	11,0%
June 2015	89,0%	11,0%
January 2016	89,0%	11,0%
October 2016	89,8%	10,2%
January 2017	89,8%	10,2%
June 2017	90,2%	9,8%
November 2017	90,7%	9,3%
March 2018	90,9%	9,1%

Note: When Digital Post became mandatory in November 2014, citizens were automatically signed-up for the platform. This explains the large jump at that point in time.
Source: Compiled by authors based on official statistics from https://digst.dk/it-loesninger/digital-post/om-loesningen/tal-og-statistik/

In a Danish context, policymakers have addressed questions of digital exclusion since the early 1990s. The specific solutions and problematisations regarding this issue have, however, shifted over time alongside the political changes noted above. Within the policy discourse promoted in the early 1990s, ideas of 'solidarity', 'equality' and 'protection' of so-called "weak" citizens played important parts. Policymakers emphasised that digital technologies should not be forced on anyone, that they should constitute a free choice and that citizens unable to use digital technologies should have improved, if not equal, access to information. With the gradual shift towards a market-premised policy line, the response to digital exclusion has also altered. Being digital has become the underlying norm and the inability to use official technologies has increasingly become an almost moral deficit or failure on part of the individual subject (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018). Against this backdrop, policymakers have advanced two different responses to questions of exclusion. First, they have allowed citizens to "opt-out" of mandatory services. This was, for example, the case when "Digital Post" was implemented as a nation-wide public mailbox in 2014. Citizens who are unable to use digital means of communication can be formally opted-out and will then continue to receive their

governmental information through paper and letters. However, citizens must actively choose to opt-out from digital solutions. The other response, which will be the focus of our empirical analysis below, has been to create new institutional spaces meant to handle the citizens that cannot use official platforms.

This latter response has been implemented together with the introduction of official governmental statistics and measurements. The Agency for Digitisation has released a monthly national statistic on adoption rates of "Digital Post" since 2011. These statistics have, in line with the official policy, worked with a binary distinction between citizens who are 'signed-up' or 'opted-out.' From these statistics, it currently appears that 90% of the population has signed-up for Digital Post (see Table 1). These statistics do, however, not include socio-economic variables, but only age, gender, municipality and employment status. Moreover, as will become clear from the study provided below, the division between 'signed-up' (digital) and 'opted-out' (non-digital) does little to capture processes of inclusion and exclusion. As will be shown, the citizens who are facing the most severe difficulties are often included and 'signed-up' in the official material, while still being unable to access, use or otherwise participate in the mandatory digital systems, being excluded *in practice*. With this paper, we seek to showcase how qualitative and ethnographic observations might provide a more adequate view of digital exclusion in the welfare system. We want to foreground a series of mechanisms that are not easily captured by official statistics, but instead require a different empirical entry-point, namely the daily practices found in the frontline of the digitalised welfare state. By providing this empirical material, we contribute to current knowledge on the impact and consequences of digitalisation reforms on excluded citizens and disadvantaged populations.

4 FINDINGS: CITIZEN SERVICE CENTRES AND EXCLUSION

Having outlined the backdrop to our research, we now turn to citizen service centres. Based on our qualitative study, we will showcase how new forms of exclusion become visible in this particular welfare agency as public sector institutions become increasingly reliant on digital self-service solutions. Our analysis

is structured in four main parts. First, we describe the methodological aspects of this study, outlining how we have employed a combination of ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews to examine citizen service centres and exclusion. Second, we provide a description of how citizen service centres have changed their function and institutional role over time. In doing so, we describe how these centres increasingly have to handle citizens unable to use standardised, digital platforms. Third, we zoom in on this group of citizens. We show how it is mainly already excluded and marginalised citizens who frequent citizen service centres in need of help. This suggests that digitalisation policies are reproducing existing lines of social exclusion. Finally, we describe the consequences that these new means of exclusion have in terms of welfare benefits and experiences of exclusion.

4.1 Methodology

The empirical material for this paper is based on qualitative work conducted in 2013-2014 and 2017 respectively. In order to gain insights into the everyday practices found in Danish citizen service centres, we have chosen to combine ethnographic participant observations with in-depth qualitative interviews. As we primarily wanted to focus on professional encounters between welfare state professionals and citizens, we opted for this type of qualitative approach, focused on new professional practices and the meaning attributed to these by frontline workers themselves. The ethnographic observations were conducted in one citizen service centre in 2013-2014 by shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) frontline workers as they interacted with citizens. This started out as open explorative shadowing and gradually became more focused and structured observations in the context of "walk-in referrals." These are cases where citizens come in from the street without a prior appointment and are then helped by frontline workers, either at a front desk or in a so-called "co-service" area. Service provided at the front desk lasted approximately three to five minutes, while "co-service" took an average of 20 minutes. Approximately 80 hours of explorative and more structured observations were conducted and extensively documented through field notes. These observations included ongoing dialogue, for example clarifying questions in order to understand the observed practices, between the observer and frontline workers. Observations were moreover followed by

interviews with the observed employees later the same day. By combining observations with interviews, it became possible to both observe frontline practices as these actually took place and allow for frontline workers to reflect on these afterwards. This helped us go beyond some of the inherent limitations of interviewing, as we were able to not only gather information on welfare encounters based on frontline workers' own narratives, but observe these encounters directly. This also meant that we were able to base our interviews on observations of encounters and other activities in the citizen service centre. In 2017, these ethnographic observations and interviews were complemented with semi-structured interviews with frontline workers and daily managers in seven different citizen service centres. The interviews were conducted in municipalities spread out across the five main Danish regions and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Each interview focused on daily work practices and encounters between citizens and welfare professionals. 17 welfare professionals were interviewed. The profile of the frontline workers in both our ethnographic material and interviews was quite diverse in terms of age, gender, education and experience with frontline work and digital solutions. There was, however, a relatively higher percentage of female frontline workers, and most of the informants had several years of experience in welfare work, some even decades. In this paper, we use the interviews conducted in 2017 to further flesh out the themes being addressed in the initial ethnographic material. This not only allows us to dive deeper into the initial themes found in the ethnographic observations, but also provides a means of exploring issues that can be found *across* different municipal settings. Both the individual and group interviews followed guidelines for semi-structured interviewing and were recorded, transcribed, coded and categorized. All places and names have been anonymised in all the material.

The empirical material was analysed through an iterative and inductive coding scheme that took place in two main steps. First, the transcribed field notes, interviews and observations were collectively read through, while noting down key themes emerging from the material. The recurrent topics emerging from this first phase revolved around the encounter between frontline workers and citizens as well

as issues such as exclusion, non-use and marginalised groups of citizens. Second, using the codes established in the first phase, particularly those linked to questions of exclusion and marginalised citizens, we re-read the empirical material and further fleshed out our inductive categories. The analysis developed in this paper reports on the results of this coding process, presenting the findings that cut across our empirical material.

4.2 The changing function of citizen service centres

As a local municipal unit, citizen service centres started to emerge in the mid 1990s across Danish municipalities. Frontline workers employed in these centres constituted specialised, administrative staff, taking care of casework, issuing of official documents and guidance in the context of welfare requests. For all intents and purposes, citizen service centres were conceived as the citizen's main entrance to the public sector and welfare system. With the gradual implementation of self-service solutions across the Danish public sector, however, many of the administrative duties previously handled in these have been delegated to citizens themselves. Indeed, from the late 2000s and onwards, self-service solutions have been implemented across many of the areas previously administered by citizen services. This has meant that the tasks and responsibilities of frontline workers in citizen service centres have changed accordingly. These are no longer, at least not primarily, expected to be specialised administrative staff, tasked with solving administrative problems for citizens. Instead, these workers increasingly have to help citizens use the 'proper' self-service solutions in order to make them carry out a given task themselves. The following ethnographic field note provides a description of one of these centres, showcasing the particular forms of work taking place in these.

"The citizen service centre occupies part of the ground floor of a large office building housing a variety of local government departments. When the service centre opens at 10:00 a.m., a large crowd is invariably waiting outside. The citizens enter the building and queue up at the front desk. The staff at the front desk typically ask: 'How may I help you?' or simply 'Yes?' In some cases, such as the issuing of keys and codes for

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digital transactions, the tasks are completed immediately at the front desk, while, in other cases, the citizen is given a number and asked to wait. Front desk staff must instantly assess citizens' level of "digital literacy." To this end, the staff member asks a few questions about familiarity with using a computer, such as whether the citizen has a computer at home. Depending on the answer, the staff estimate whether the citizen has the capacity to use digital solutions right away, can learn to use them after receiving guidance in the "co-service" area or needs classic, dialogue-based face-to-face consultation. A flat screen on the wall informs the citizens that number 630 is currently receiving co-service. Three out of the ten workstations in the co-service area are occupied by an employee (a so-called "citizen guide"), each of whom is assisting a citizen in using digital self-service solutions. After ending a session with a male senior citizen, an employee in her forties walks over to the waiting area and calls out the next number. A young man of about 20 reacts, his number being 631, and follows the employee to one of the workstations. His slightly older looking friend follows as well, and they both face the employee on the opposite side of the high table. 'How may I help you?' she asks. 'I need to activate my digital mailbox' he responds in Danish with a low voice and a thick accent. 'Come over here on this side of the table at the computer, so you can do the typing,' she tells him, continuing, 'OK, start typing 'borger.dk' [citizen.dk].' The employee waits a bit, and then spells the URL, 'B-O-R-G-E-R-DOT-D-K, and then you sign in and enter your civil registration number and your personal code.' She steps aside and averts her gaze for a few seconds […] 'And you can enlarge the image by clicking there.' She points at the screen. 'And I can see you've already signed up for e-Boks.' E-Boks is a digital mailbox used by public sector institutions and private actors such as insurance companies, banks, supply and utility companies. 'Try to open it. It seems that you have 17 unopened letters in your inbox.' […] The employee explains further, looking at the computer screen: 'The most important thing is that you know you are required to keep an eye on your mailbox. You are required to read it just as if you had received a letter in your mailbox at the entrance to your home. By ticking here, you accept that no authority will send you physical mail anymore, and that you are required to read your mail, for example, regarding notice to the court, or if you are applying for public support for education.' (Field note from observation, 2014)

This field note captures the new institutional logics and roles found in citizen service centres. As shown in this, frontline workers have to help citizens help themselves.

They do this by guiding citizens in using standardised self-service solutions within open 'computer' or 'co-service' environments. In these, citizens and frontline workers stand or sit shoulder to shoulder, with the frontline worker guiding the citizen through the self-service solution. As one frontline worker explained in this context: "*You meet the citizen in a different way. You're in another environment up there. You see things differently. Well, I think it's because you stand there side by side with the citizen*" (Interview, 2014). Frontline workers thus have to teach individual citizens how to navigate and use digital solutions. "*It is not something where we take over the task*", a frontline worker told us, "*and say 'well, we will fix that and call you when the problem is solved.' It is all a process where you, as a citizen, must take part*" (Interview, 2017). This also means that the focus of the welfare encounter has shifted. It is no longer a specific administrative problem, formula or request that is the focus, but the citizen *herself*. The citizen is the object of change. He or she is supposed to become self-serving and digital. This means that if the encounter has been a success, the citizen should not return. As one frontline worker formulated it: "*citizen services want citizens out of the 'shop.' They have to serve themselves*" (Interview, 2017).

As citizen service centres change their function, turning from being traditional administrative institutions towards having to help citizens 'become' digital, so the group of citizens using these centres also shift. Prior to the implementation of digital reforms in public services, the broader population had to show up in these centres if they had requests related to welfare. Today it is increasingly only the group of citizens who, in one way or another, have trouble using official digital platforms that frequent these centres. This also means that in substantial aspects, citizen service centres become the place where the exclusionary consequences of mandatory digitalisation appear most visible. It is in this institutional space that citizens unable to follow along the state's new demands are supposed to learn and change into becoming a digital citizen.

4.3 The users of citizen service centres

Which groups of citizens, then, start to use citizen service centres in need of help with digital self-service solutions? As suggested in the text above, national

policymakers have often framed questions of digital exclusion through a division reminiscent of early research on the digital divide. In so doing, policymakers have categorised citizens into those who are either 'signed-up' for digital solutions and those who have 'opted-out.' However, conducting research in citizen service centres, it became apparent to us that these categories did not map onto our observations of the practices or experiences of frontline workers. Indeed, these would often tell us of several different groups of citizens visiting the centre. In one municipality, a frontline worker told us that they had worked with (at least) three categories of citizens: "*We were all on a course. […] At that point in time, we talked about three groups of citizens. Group one, who were self-reliant and who would never come here because they would figure it out themselves. Group two, who was on the verge of self-help but just needed a push or someone to show them. And then the last group of citizens who would be... We would not be able to help them digitally*" (Interview, 2017).

This categorisation resonates with the experience voiced in the different municipalities where our empirical work was conducted. There was a large group of citizens who used to visit these institutions, but now managed their problems through digital self-service solutions. This was designated by one of the frontline workers as "*the ideal citizen*" (Interview, 2014). Then there was a middle-group who, although signed up for official digital systems, either had trouble using these or did not have the technology at their disposal. According to the frontline worker quoted above, these citizens were originally envisioned to simply need 'a push' to become digital. However, as had become increasingly clear over time, making citizens able to use digital self-service technologies was far from just a gentle push. Finally, there was a third group of citizens who were formally opted-out and used paper formulas instead. Across the municipalities we researched, it was primarily the second group that constituted the largest and most work-intensive set of users. Indeed, as several frontline workers told us, the citizens who were "opted out" of digital systems were often primarily elderly citizens with both social and economic resources. Fleshing out these descriptions a bit more, the frontline worker quoted above gave the following characterisation of the 'three' groups of citizens:

"We do not see the first group at all. And we may feel that there are more of them. Of course, there will be more of them when everything is digitalised. The middle group is very middle-aged I think. […] And I think many of them have some kind of… They are homeless, have been homeless, are addicts of some kind, or alcoholics, or have had difficult, maybe on social benefits. […] I think that those in the middle group are middle aged, who are having difficulty or have had a hard time. […] And the last group contains those where we already know when they come in that they are "on dispensation." Because we know we have exempted them from Digital Post, and we also gave them a form last time they were here. It's basically only older people where they would never be able to sit with a mouse or click through." (Interview, 2017)

This quote resonates with the narrative we were told across the different municipalities we visited. The "middle" group of citizens was broadly said to be composed of already excluded or marginalised citizens. These citizens did not fit within the distinction between being *either* digital (signed-up) or *not* (opted-out) but were articulated as the ones that experienced the most trouble with the standardised self-service solutions. Some frontline workers named this group as "the heavy ones":

Frontline worker #1: We do have many of the 'heavy ones' down here, no doubt about that.

Frontline worker #2: That is to say many older citizens, but also younger citizens who are not well functioning in regards to 'the digital.'

Interviewer: Is this group composed in a certain way? Can you say more about them?

Frontline worker #2: […] Well, it is mostly those who are socially vulnerable or excluded in some way.

Frontline worker #1: I don't know how to describe it, but you are right. […] They stand out in some way. It is difficult to say… But yes, socially vulnerable. (Interview, 2017)

Other frontline workers told us that citizens with (dis)abilities or psychological "disorders" were also visitors of citizen service centres. In this sense, the narrative expressed by frontline workers was that the group having trouble with digital self-service solutions were often composed of citizens who were already in a precarious

situation. Indeed, across our interviews and observations, homeless, addicts, poor immigrants, unemployed and otherwise disadvantaged citizens, such as for example dyslexics, were articulated as and observed to be the main users of assistance in citizen service centres. This suggests that the implementation of digital technologies serve to further exclude citizens who are already on the margins. In this sense, digital technologies are added to already existing patterns and mechanisms of exclusion. This is consistent with both quantitative and qualitative research conducted in other settings, which has documented that access, competences and use of digital technologies is dependent upon wider socio-economic characteristics (Min, 2010; Watling, 2011).

4.4 Consequences of not being "digital by default"?

Conducting research in citizen service centres, we became aware that having trouble using standardised self-service solutions was not just a minor practical or administrative problem. Instead, the "inability" to use official welfare systems in the intended ways could have a number of both economic, psychological and social consequences for citizens. Across our qualitative material, frontline workers described how the citizens that showed up in citizen service centres would at times be uncomfortable with getting assistance. Often, frontline workers explained, these citizens would be very emotionally impacted by their inability to use digital platforms. "*[I]t means a lot to them*", a frontline worker thus explained, "*some will say: 'I have tried to log in and see, but I am afraid to do something wrong or what the consequences might be.' So yes, it does influence them a lot*" (Interview, 2017). This insecurity was also present in citizens' often hesitant attitudes and behaviour, as shown in the field note in section 4.2, and it would sometimes be labelled in our interviews as an additional source of exclusion:

> "*The citizens we've got here, they're so cautious ... They're unsure what to do […] Some of them may be in a very vulnerable situation: 'I've just moved, my husband has left me, I have three children and I need help. I'm unhappy.' And so, on top of that, not everyone can manage to seek help digitally, to find out what to do, what to complete, or send.*" (Interview, 2014)

Some frontline workers said that citizens would even be unable to sleep or feel very anxious about using digital solutions. "*Some are really affected by it*" one frontline worker said, "*because they feel like they have become b-citizens, a bit second class*" (interview, frontline worker, 2017). These experiences of exclusion also have a more direct impact on individual citizens. All communication received through "Digital Post" is considered legally binding and citizens are expected to be able to read it digitally. If citizens do not respond to requests made through digital means of communication, they could risk losing their welfare benefits. This is particularly a problem for citizens who are the primary users of social welfare *and* unable to use digital platforms. In many of the municipalities we conducted work in, this was voiced as a problem:

> *"If you do not make sure you get exempted from digital post, and there is a target audience that is registered as receiving digital mail but has never been in and opened the mailbox, then they also receive all their digital mail through it, then it's their support and everything that is impacted."* (Interview, 2017)

As one manager said in this context: "*We sometimes find ourselves in contact with a citizen too late. There are some citizens who simply do not feel well*" (Interview, 2017). In this way, the inability to use digital solutions might pose very real problems to citizens. This is, furthermore, accentuated by the shifting administrative practices themselves. The turn towards digital self-service and the new administrative practices this necessitates means that citizens are no longer guided in terms of their wider social and economic situation. Instead, the focus is on the citizen's use of a particular technology or platform: "*You're on, you're off, you know. And sometimes my intention is to dig deeper into things in her life situation after finishing the application, but it's difficult to handle. Maybe I just turn around for a moment, and she's gone [...] So she never got the advice I would've given her if we had been sitting at my desk*" (Interview, 2014). Frontline workers would often explain that their ability to help citizens in terms of welfare benefits was being problematised by the focus on the use of technologies and the institutional setting of welfare encounters.

Taken together, we argue that these observations showcase that the "inability" to use digital self-service solutions pose a number of different problems: citizens not only feel excluded and insecure, they also risk losing their welfare benefits. This is being further problematised insofar as frontline workers can no longer give specialised guidance on individual citizens life situation. Instead, they have to focus on making citizens capable of using digital platforms in order to transform the citizen into the idealised digital citizen.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has used ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews to showcase how already excluded and vulnerable parts of the Danish population are further excluded within digitalised welfare encounters. As citizens are increasingly expected to be or become 'digital by default', new patterns of exclusion also start to emerge. Zooming in on citizen service centres, we have shown how citizens visiting these centres are primarily in need of help navigating the welfare system and using the self-service solutions designed to make them do so. This group is, in many ways, made up of citizens who are already partially excluded or at the fringes of the welfare state. Homeless, addicts, poor pensioners, unemployed and (dis)abled citizens are thus further disadvantaged through digital forms of exclusion. We have argued that these exclusionary effects can have very real repercussions on citizens: not only do disadvantaged citizens experience a sense of exclusion, they also risk losing their welfare benefits. Taken together, these findings point to the new exclusionary effects of mandatory digitalisation. They showcase how the move towards policies premised on citizens being 'digital by default' has stratifying consequences, as already marginalised groups of the population are further excluded. With the transition from a rights-based to an obligations-based and active form of welfare provisioning, those unable to be active in the way imagined by the state increasingly face new barriers to full inclusion.

These exclusionary effects pose problems to traditional notions of social citizenship. In his famous essay, *Citizenship and Social Class*, T. H. Marshall (1992 [1950]) argued

that citizenship has been and should be about giving all citizens equal rights and opportunities. This "equality [that is] implicit in the concept of citizenship", Marshall (1992 [1950], p. 19) argued, "undermined the inequality of the class system." Marshall was, however, aware that equality *in principle* did not necessarily translate into equality *in practice*, and that citizenship might reproduce existing (class) inequalities. He even went as far as to argue that, under certain circumstances, "citizenship operates as an instrument of social stratification" (p. 39). With the gradual rollout of digitalisation policies, premised on turning citizens into active and self-reliant individuals, such stratifying effects once again seem to be at play. Citizens are divided into new groups depending on their ability to use digital platforms. This is done in a way that both implicitly and explicitly favours citizens who "are" digital. Claiming one's rights to welfare becomes conditional on the ability to use and navigate official digital systems (Henman, 2010). These stratifying effects tread similar terrain to broader changes within social policy and welfare reforms. Scholars like Pedersen (2011) have thus argued that since the 1990s, the Danish welfare state has largely abandoned its universal ambitions and now "accentuates existing social inequalities by distributing rights and duties depending on where in the social hierarchy the individual is (administratively) placed" (Petersen, 2011, p. 278, our translation). Digitalisation policies seem to follow this general trajectory, deepening already existing divides rather than alleviating them.

In showcasing the links being made between social and digital forms of exclusion, the article further substantiates the argument that digital inequalities both depend on and reproduce existing social, economic and cultural inequalities. Indeed, not unlike the work conducted by Helsper and Reisdorf (2017) and Watling (2011, 2012), we have also showcased how already marginalised citizens are being further pushed to the fringes of the welfare system. Contrary to existing research, however, we are not certain that these processes are best captured by the notion of a "digital underclass." Indeed, while the concept does point to deep-seated forms of inequality, it also seems to presuppose that the group of citizens being excluded is more or less homogenous. Yet, rather than any one group, our study points to how digital exclusion impacts several groups of citizens. These citizens are often

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disenfranchised or marginalised in very different ways. In this sense, there is a need to see how digital inequalities might cut across already existing groups of citizens, merging these together in new forms of exclusion without presupposing too much unity. We cannot presume that digitally excluded citizens all face the same set of problems or share the same experiences of exclusion. This also speaks against the official labels currently used in a Danish policy context, not least in official statistics. By looking at the use of digital platforms as merely a question of being signed-up or opted-up, policymakers and politicians seem to miss the complex ways in which exclusion actually takes place. The group of citizens described in this paper often become invisible in the official statistics: they are formally signed-up but unable to actually use official platforms. Formally included, but excluded in practice.

The findings presented in this article should not be generalised to encompass all processes of public sector digitalisation in Denmark or in a transnational perspective. Indeed, as argued in the introduction, Denmark is a quite unique case insofar as it has pushed the policy agenda much further than comparable countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland (Joseph & Avdic, 2016; Janson et al., 2016). The dynamics reported in this paper should, as a consequence, be seen as the specific outcome of particular historical trajectories and institutional changes. That being the case, there are good reasons to take note of these issues in Denmark. This country is often branded as an example of one of the most digitalised public sectors and societies, scoring the highest marks on the European Union's "Digital Economy and Society Index" (see Schou & Hjelholt, 2018). In this sense, the policy option adopted by this country is constructed as a pathway to be followed by others. The present paper challenges the narrative promoted by these indexes. It does so by documenting how digitalisation does not just serve to create more efficient and streamlined public administrations, but that it might also exclude already precarious groups of citizens further.

In this light, there is need for more in-depth research examining the ways in which digitalisation policies might serve to both extend and reproduce existing forms of exclusion. As argued in the introduction, there has so far been a very limited set of

discussions around digitalisation and public administration (Pollitt, 2011). This has, not least, been due to a tendency to reduce these reforms to merely technical issues. In this paper, we have tried to showcase that this is far from being the case, and that digitalisation reforms demand new expertise of not only citizens but also welfare professionals. Going forward, we would do good to proceed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies. In this paper, we have relied exclusively on qualitative observations and interviews. These have served as a means of going beyond official policy narratives and into the concrete practices of welfare encounters. However, many of the arguments put forth in this paper could be systematically fleshed out using either national or municipal level surveys, showcasing how the patterns observed here might be different or similar across a larger sample of cases. Moreover, our account has mainly focused on exclusionary patterns from the perspective of frontline workers and public administration. In the future, it will be important to also include citizens' narratives and experiences. Doing so, we can gain new knowledge on the complex reasons for not being able to use standardized governmental technologies. We can also start to understand how digital exclusion is experienced and the consequences it has on everyday life. All of this might pave the way for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the profound impact of digitalisation reforms on public administrations and social policy.

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