



# The reorganization of the bureaucratic encounter in a digitized public administration

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## abstract

This article examines how an ambitious public sector digitalization strategy, focused on motivating and enabling citizens to take up digital self-service, changes the nature of everyday encounters between citizens and frontline staff in public offices. Based on an ethnographic study from a citizen service centre in a Danish municipality, our analysis shows how the sense of time and space in these encounters is radically changed, and how the relationship between private and public is reframed in this context. In contrast to the idea of digital technologies as a neutral upgrade of the state administration leading to more efficient welfare provision, the article highlights the unintended effects of digitalization, showing how the traditional ideal of bureaucracy reflected in Weber's legal-rational model, which described bureaucracy as hierarchical, rule-enforcing and impersonal, is reversed. We argue that attention to how digitalization changes daily bureaucratic encounters and the relation between public authorities and citizens, is lacking, both in policy and in the literature on digitalization and e-government.

Whether because of the structure of the apparatus or because of the structure of memory, it is certain that the noises of the first telephone conversations echo differently in my ear from those of today. They were nocturnal noises. No muse announces them. The night from which they came was the one that precedes every true birth. [...] Not many of those who use the apparatus know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sound with which it

rang between two and four in the afternoon, when a school friend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents' midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. Disagreements with switchboard operators was the rule, to say nothing of the threats and curses uttered by my father when he had the complaints department on the line. (Benjamin, 2006/1950: 48-49)

## **Purpose and contribution of the paper**

The pervasive effects of new technologies on everyday life are not a radically new phenomenon. In this excerpt from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006/1950), we are reminded of how the telephone changed mundane everyday life at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The voices that the first telephone announced were night sounds; they seemed to come out of nothing, without warning they broke into the rhythm of being here and now. The physical distance enabled by the phone eliminated other distances; the border between private and public was blurred, disagreements with employees of the phone company were moved into the home.

In this paper, we aim to shift Benjamin's sensitivity to how new technology reframes encounters in everyday life into the digital era. Based on the premise that technology determines the situation by organizing it (Beyes, Conrad and Martin, 2019), we focus on how the introduction of self-service technologies – a key tool in the Danish digitalization strategy – (re)organizes the encounter between citizens and frontline personnel in public offices. Here, we follow Beyes, Holt and Pias (2020) in being committed to the everyday, empirical world, rather than framing our interest from established disciplinary concerns. As they point out, this implies being sensitive to the material forces of organization, and how media in the form of objects and processes shape the everyday practices of organization.

Based on an ethnographic study of a citizen service centre within the Danish public sector administration, we investigate how public and private spheres, as well as the sense of time and space, become reframed in the context of new ideals of the relationship between citizen and state – as staged in bureaucratic encounters at such service centres. The article draws attention to the transformation of traditional ideals of bureaucratic conduct such as impersonality, strict adherence to procedure, expertise and the absence of

personal moral enthusiasms, as we know them from Max Weber's descriptions of the bureaucratic ethos. In order to act in the interests of welfare and the citizen, bureaucrats must be guided by an ethics of impersonality. As Weber emphasises, one of the most important 'social rules' of bureaucracy is:

the rule of formal impersonality: *sine ira et studio*, or without 'hatred or passion,' and so without 'love' and 'enthusiasm'; impersonality impelled by concepts of simple obligation. The ideal official fulfils his office 'without regard to person': 'everyone' is treated with formal equality. (Weber, 2019: 353)

Bureaucrats are committed to an ethos outside their personal moral principles (see also du Gay, 2008). These founding bureaucratic values are reversed in the new demands placed on frontline bureaucrats in the digital era. As we will argue below, attention to how digitalization reorganizes everyday bureaucratic encounters, and thereby radically changes the relation between public authorities and citizens, is lacking both in policy and in the literature on digitalization and e-government.

### **Digitalization in the Danish public sector: Self-service solutions as a key instrument**

For a decade now, digitalization in the Danish public sector has been given marked political priority (Schou and Hjelholt, 2018; Pors and Schou, 2020). On a political level, the digital strategy adopted is considered to be a success: Denmark sits at the top of international comparative assessments of the digital readiness of the public sector (e.g. OECD, 2005; OECD 2010; United Nations, 2005/2010/2012/2014; European Commission, 2014). As a 'leading edge' case with potential lessons for governments around the world, the Danish public sector is an appropriate empirical setting for studying how the bureaucratic ethos is changing in bureaucratic encounters in the digital era. A central aspect of the official strategy is the idea of what in the literature has been described as 'making able citizens do more' (Magretts and Dunleavy, 2013: 6), i.e., saving costs by developing digital solutions for self-service. Since 2012, people have had to apply online for such services as rent subsidies and day care (see The Danish Government et al., 2011: 16). Today, about a hundred welfare services, i.e., social services such as reimbursements, parental benefits and old-age pensions, have been digitized and turned into

self-service solutions. This pushes the administrative services out of the municipal office, transforming them into self-services that people both can and must access from their personal computers and mobile devices – anytime and anywhere.

Thus, the Danish public sector is undergoing a transition in which the digitalization of administration and welfare services is linked to a demand for efficiency, supported by the establishment of the *Agency for Digitisation* in 2011 – a governmental institution under The Ministry of Finance. The Agency's mission is to build and manage a clear, slim IT governance structure, creating a more digital Denmark that optimizes and frees up resources, modernizing services for individuals and businesses (Agency for Digitisation 2012: 4; Agency for Digitisation, 2021). This digitalization strategy has thrown the public sector into a radical restructuring process: both back-office administration and management, as well as the frontline services of the public sector, are being digitized. Communication between public authorities, individuals and businesses is continually being moved to digital channels:

By 2015, it will be mandatory for citizens to use digital solutions to communicate in writing with the public sector [...] This major step towards e-government 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 e-government 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: 3-5)

The objective of the public digitalization strategy is to create a simpler and more efficient public sector, in which the interface between citizen and public administration will be changed according to ideals of empowerment, flexibility and efficiency:

Overall, the strategy aims to modernize and rethink public service production by ensuring a more efficient and effective provision of public sector services. The goal is to maintain or increase the quality of public welfare services while at the same time reducing public expenditure. (Common Public-Sector, 2013)

The authorities describe the transition as an acceleration; the strategies for digital welfare 'accelerate the transformation already under way' (ibid.: 3) in everyday life, as well as in the public sector:

The central government, regions and municipalities are proposing a new e-government strategy in order to accelerate the adoption of digital solutions in the public sector. We must capitalize on our leading position and take the next steps on the way to future welfare services. (The Danish Government et al., 2011: 3)

However, in the public debate, criticism has also been voiced regarding the cost of digitalization. Public employees and their trade unions have focused on the changes that digitalization imposes on jobs and tasks (HK, 2012). The critical voices raised against digitalization are few, but often they focus on individual cases, pointing out the disadvantages for elderly or disabled people, for example, who for various reasons lack the necessary prerequisites for self-service (see e.g. Karkov, 2010; Søggaard, 2014).

Thus, the ambitious Danish digitalization strategy implies certain expectations, making demands on citizens, who are thus assumed to play an important part in achieving the political goals of efficiency and cost reduction. The strategic vision is that people should take the initiative to explore possibilities and administer their contact with the authorities – ideally stay away from the public office. The premise behind this vision is that it is better for people to be digitally self-reliant, but also that this digital self-reliance is a necessary precondition for realizing the economic gains of digital technology. However, the people who come to the citizen service centre have – for different reasons – not managed to use digital solutions on their own (Pors, 2015). When these people turn up in person at the citizen service centre, frontline personnel become responsible for not only solving their specific problems, but for training them to become digitally competent. ‘Co-service’ is the term describing this new practice, through which the capacity of citizens for self-service is trained. The staff must proactively assist, and indeed endeavour to encourage citizens to become digital. As described elsewhere (see Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020), co-service is constructed as a transitional space, a passage or intermezzo, through which citizens are guided into the digital world. Within this space, the role of the bureaucrat, is reframed in the light of a strategy according to which citizens are supposed to be prompted and guided through ‘learning by doing’ and by trying out the possibilities afforded by digital self-service. In this article we inquire into this reframing of roles and relationships in the context of digital self-service.

## **Digitalization as a management paradigm: research literature and critical discussions**

The digitalization of the Danish public sector has been influenced by private sector management approaches (Jæger and Pors, 2017), to a large extent transmitted into the public sector by private consulting firms engaged to support public sector digitalization strategies. Policymakers tend to view digitalization with a great deal of optimism, as a way of automating administrative tasks (Eubanks, 2018). This technological optimism also dominates the e-government literature, leading to a strong focus on the enabling effects of digitalization and how such effects can be increased. Reviews of the e-government literature (Grönlund, 2005; Norris and Lloyd, 2006; Titah and Barki, 2006; Yildiz, 2007) describe a field that is overly optimistic about digitalization. E-government has been portrayed as an underdeveloped research field attempting to emulate the hard sciences (Raadschelders, 2011) and as a field of literature that primarily focuses on e-government as a means to achieving certain prescribed outcomes, for example cost reduction, the upgrading of bureaucratic professions and macro perspectives on e-government (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Margetts, 2008; Pollitt, 2011). However, micro level studies on the actual deployment and use of technology in the context of state bureaucracy are sparse, e.g., studies of how welfare institutions have been prompted to adopt self-service solutions at the expense of face-to-face encounters with citizens, and how self-service changes the relationship between state and citizen. However, some scholars have begun to relate more critically to the interface between digitalization and street-level bureaucracy (Buffat, 2015; Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik, 2018; Jansson and Erlingsson, 2014; Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020).

The mainstream literature on e-government has been criticized for lacking both a theoretical and practical understanding of the wider societal consequences of digitalization. Although digitalization a management paradigm for the public sector has been conceptualized under the heading of 'digital era governance' (Dunleavy et al., 2006) – which provides a diagnosis of general changes in public governance – this still seems to fail to capture the way in which digital reforms change everyday bureaucratic encounters and therefore misses out questions about how the boundary between state

and civil society are being redrawn in everyday life (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003) as a consequence of these reconfigured encounters.

In this article, we aim to contribute to remedying this lack by taking up questions concerning self-service technology with a greater sensitivity as to how it reorganizes everyday encounters between citizen and state in the context of a citizen service centre. We discuss the displacement of the bureaucratic ethos known from the seminal works of Max Weber (1948a, 1948b, 2019), which emphasizes detached bureaucratic personae and the ethics of office. We suggest that in contemporary bureaucratic practice in the digital era, such founding values of public office as detachment and bureaucratic practice ‘without affection and enthusiasm’ (du Gay, 2008) are not only displaced, but even reversed. This reversion, we argue, is related to the public bureaucrat’s new obligation to ‘challenge forth resources’ in the bureaucratic encounter, since digitalization as a management paradigm is inherently related to a ‘more for less-rationale’. We borrow the notion of ‘challenging-forth’ from Heidegger’s seminal essay on technology (1977). While it is beyond the scope of this article to account for the vast amount of academic work on Heidegger and Weber, their influential conceptualisations of both modern technology and modern bureaucracy suggest important lines along which to look, and thus function in a way as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) as we process our empirical material and discuss our analysis.

## **Empirical material and method**

Posing the question of how (self-service) technology affects everyday encounters in the public sector, the article joins a stream of practice-based studies that focus on technology (Aakjær and Pallesen, 2021; Nickelsen and Elkjær, 2017; Gherardi, 2010; Nicolini, 2007). These contributions suggest explorations of the role technology plays in the construction of daily practices and relationships as part of a continual organizing process involving both intended and unintended opportunities and limitations. In our case, following a practice-based approach encourages us to move from the intentions and goals of the digitalization strategy as such to how digitalization works in everyday encounters between citizens and public sector professionals. This indicates the use of data collecting methods related to ethnographic

fieldwork, with its emphasis on 'being there' as a way to gain insight into everyday actions and activities (Pallesen and Aakjær, 2020). Furthermore, our initial inspiration from Benjamin's description of how the phone changed the rhythm and space of private homes resonates with the increased attention to time (Holt and Johnsen, 2019) and space (Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010; Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Hernes, 2004) that has emerged along with the growing field of process and practice-based organization studies (Gherardi, 2010; Geiger, 2009). These studies, in contrast to objective time (clock time) and objective space (geographic location), draw attention to the temporality and spatiality distinctive of (and relative to) particular practices (Loscher, Splitter and Seidl, 2019). In this context of an increased focus on lived time and space, the researcher's use of their 'own body as an instrument of research' (Van Maanen 1996, cited in Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010) gains methodological significance. Being bodily *in place* is essential for gaining access to time and space from within, for example, being able to relate to the rhythm or atmosphere of a situation.

In our case, emphasis was placed on being physically present and ethnographically studying the new practice involving assisted self-service – encounters that take place at citizen service centres all over Denmark every day. In practice, the researcher was shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) the daily activities of frontline personnel, focusing on encounters with citizens. With the researcher standing behind one of the frontline staff, these observations included dialogue, mostly of a clarifying character, and were followed up by interviews consisting of in-depth discussions of the practice observed by the researcher. Over the period of a year, Author 1 conducted a total of approximately 80 hours of both explorative and more structured observations, documented in field notes, followed by interviews later the same day with the staff who had been under observation. The data also include eight interviews with managers and consultants of varying rank in the municipality. All interviews followed the guidelines for semi-structured interviews and were recorded, transcribed and roughly coded and categorized. The empirical material in this analysis was predominantly gathered in one particular citizen service centre in a Danish municipality. The staff at the citizen service centre (which has been steadily reduced since 2010) consisted of 18 full-time employees, two office trainees and a mid-level



manager. The centre staff service around 300 users a day, mainly in the form of walk-in referrals. The ethnographic study also comprises evaluation and validation workshops with the frontline staff and their manager, as well as participation in meetings, workshops and conferences with political actors such as the Agency for Digitisation, Local Government Denmark (KL) and a variety of Danish municipalities.

### **Analysis: The bureaucratic encounter reconfigured**

In the following, we present an example from the observation material that exemplifies one typical encounter in the co-service area of a citizen service centre. This example has been selected because it condenses and illustrates the themes taken up in the analysis, i.e., how the private and public spheres are blurred, and how space and pace are rearranged and reconfigure the relation between citizens and public officials. Our analysis was substantiated by reflections made by the staff in follow-up interviews.

#### *A scene from a citizen service centre*

We are now entering the citizen service centre one Tuesday before noon. The centre occupies part of the ground floor of a large office building housing a variety of local government departments. A big white and green poster says: 'Digital co-service. Avoid the queue – use the Internet! Health service medical cards, new addresses, parking permits, child benefits and much more. There are many possibilities at [www.municipalityX.dk](http://www.municipalityX.dk). Our digital ambassadors will help you get started.' A flat screen on the wall informs people that it is the turn of customer number 630. Three out of the ten service counters in the co-service area are occupied by a member of staff (citizen guide), each assisting someone in the use of digital self-service. At the reception desk, people have formed two queues.

After ending a session with an elderly man, a member of staff in her forties walks over to the waiting area and calls out the next number. A young man of about 20 reacts to number 631 and follows her to one of the service counters. His slightly older-looking friend follows, and they both stand facing the staff member on the other side of the high counter. 'How may I help you?', she asks. 'I need to activate my "Digital Post"', he responds in a low voice. 'Come over

here to the computer on this side of the counter, so you can do the typing', she tells him, and continues: 'OK, start typing "borger.dk" [public self-service portal]'. The staff member waits a bit, then types in the URL, 'B-O-R-G-E-R-DOT-D-K'. 'And then you sign in by entering your CPR number and your personal code', she continues. She then steps aside and averts her gaze for a few seconds. 'You can enlarge the image by clicking there', she says, pointing at the screen. 'And I can see you've already signed up for an "e-Boks" [secure electronic mailbox]. Try to open it. It seems that you have 17 unopened letters in your inbox. I can see there are a few letters from Danske Bank. OK, I'm not entitled to interfere with your private mail'. Again, she steps aside and averts her eyes. 'But I'm not a customer with Danske Bank, Nordea is my bank', the young man says with a puzzled look on his face. 'Well', the staff member replies, 'I don't know, but you seem to be connected with Danske Bank in some way as well. Ok, never mind'. She points to the screen and says: 'Digital Post is actually the same as the "e-Boks" that you already have. If you tick right there, you will gather all your electronic mail in one mailbox, both mail from the private firms that you have subscribed to in the "e-Boks" and digital mail from all public authorities. It's very smart; the mail is automatically transferred'. His eyes flicker and he looks at his friend, who speaks to him in a foreign language. The staff member explains further, looking at the computer screen: 'The most important thing is that you know that 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 outside your home. By ticking here you agree that no public authority will send you physical mail anymore, and that you are required to read your mail, for example, regarding notice to attend court, or if you are applying for a student grant'.

### *Reframing the relationship between the private and public spheres*

This scene illustrates several themes that arise in many of the encounters observed in the citizen service centre: one of these is the relationship between the private and public spheres. Just like Benjamin's first telephone moved disputes with the telephone office into the living room, the border between private and public in the bureaucratic encounter is redrawn in the context of self-service technology. In this case, not only is private bank information (which has nothing to do with the matter in hand) suddenly visible to the staff member, the latter's professional focus also goes beyond the citizen's

administrative problem and into such personal areas as responsibility and motivation, reaching into the everyday life habits of the individual. This blurring of the private and professional spheres is underlined in the choreography and scenography of the encounter, in which the traditional office desk is replaced by an open space with only some vague demarcation of the beginning and end of the formal encounter (handshakes, doors, sitting down, etc., are absent). One member of staff at the citizen service centre reflects as follows on her ways of working with co-service, and on how her encouragement and connection with citizens is central in the new role:

You meet people in a different way. You're in another environment up there [standing up at the counters]. You see things differently. Well, I think it's because you stand there side by side with the person saying, "Oh sometimes, I'm...". Sometimes you just get along very well with the person. "Oh, you just do this ...", and then you find yourself chatting a bit and saying "that's really good" and things like that. I can get kind of relaxed standing up there with the person, you're in very intense contact, actually. It's just you and the person [...] Often I move around behind people while they are typing, but there's another connection up there than down at the desk. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

Ideally, self-service technology enables citizens to handle problems while physically distant from the service centre. However, in the encounters at the citizen service centre, in which citizens and frontline staff are standing up side by side, both the physical and formal distances that the desk created in classical bureaucratic encounters are eliminated. Another staff member reflects as follows:

I don't know. There's also less authority involved compared to if you were sitting on either side of a desk. Then no one would doubt the distance, formality, and that I'm the authority. It's true, [in co-service] it becomes more like "This is an act of friendship", "I help you", the desk distance has kind of disappeared. So, the border between citizen and public authority is sort of blurred, in some ways at least. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

This new supportive and coaching relationship moves the staff member's role away from classic bureaucratic virtues such as professionalism and impersonality; however, it is explicitly valued in the booklet from Local Government Denmark (the municipalities' association) and HK Kommunal (trades union for non-academic administrative personnel in municipalities)

that guides the administrative employee's work with co-service. The material describes how there are two layers in communication with people, meeting up at the citizen service centre: 'The specific professional content, what the person is seeking an answer or a solution to', and 'the emotional layer in play within the person [...], which is what we can work with and use as an implementation kit' (Kommunernes Landsforening [Local Government Denmark] and HK Kommunal).

Here, the emotional connection becomes a strategic resource – a tool that can help implement the strategic goal of creating a digitally self-reliant citizen and realise the expected economic savings in relation to new digital technologies. The staff members working with co-service are given several training courses directed towards their ability to enhance their contact with people and create positive relationships. The guide from Local Government Denmark lists eight basic 'tools' that will help the administrative employee professionally: The staff member must 1) motivate people to adopt digital self-service; 2) ask about the person's digital readiness; 3) create enthusiasm by showing the possibilities offered by digital self-service; and 4) 'sell' the digital solutions – including their failures and shortcomings. The remaining four 'tools' are all about habits in the employee's own private life: staff members must, for example, use IT in 'everyday life for news, mail, a modicum of Facebook, Net TV, NetBanking and phone apps' (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2012). Again, the private and public spheres, the private self and the public role (or institutional 'persona') are connected and blurred in new ways by thus encouraging the frontline bureaucrat to use compassionate tools in communicating with people in order to generate the enthusiasm needed to realize policy goals (see du Gay, 2008).

Hence, the new task of administrative staff is not only centred around laws and rules, but around a more personal involvement: that is, enthusing about, motivating people to use and 'selling' to them both the idea of learning and the digital solutions. Here, the public sector strategy reaches into the private life spheres of both citizens and staff members, making use of them in new ways; and it implies an emotional connection, in which the professional task almost appears as an act of friendship. Hence, the public and private spheres become related and blurred due to the new practices. This reorganization of the relation between the public and private spheres is especially related to the

reconfigured space of the bureaucratic encounter, in which time is also experienced differently. In the next section, we take up this power of digital technology to reconfigure the sense of time and space in the bureaucratic encounter.

### *Reorganizing the sense of time and space*

Parallel to how the phone altered the rhythm of everyday life around 1900, highlighted by Benjamin, the rhythm of the bureaucratic encounter is altered by self-service solutions. The classic bureaucratic encounter between citizen and public administration takes place over a desk; the public bureaucrats write on their computer and determines the pace and progress of the conversation. The physical-technical milieu of the modern citizen service centre is different: here, the citizens and staff members meet over high counters, with one computer at each counter, in an open office layout without clear demarcation of the beginnings and ends of the encounters. The encounters themselves involve people standing shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face, with the citizens managing the keyboard and the staff member assisting. Whereas frontline staff used to sit down with citizens in closed spaces, they now have to guide them in open self-service landscapes. An employee describes how the timing and pace in this changed work space affects her professional role:

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.[...]. Up there [in co-service] you need to see it right away. If we were down by the tables [face-to-face interaction], then I would get an impression of her as we proceed, but now you have to be able to see it right away. It feels like it has to be faster. When facing each other across a desk, you can afford to pause to reflect, or just talk normally, but with the technology and the self-service solutions, it is like everything has to be a bit faster.(Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

There is a restless pace in the encounter as it is sensed by the employee: meetings are always potentially on their way to being started or broken up. The staff member moves in and out of the relation, and is regularly interrupted by contact with other people in the open co-service space. Control over the timing, tempo and pace of the encounter is predominately in the

hands of the citizens trying to learn how to apply for something online, or search for information in order to handle their own casework. In this accelerated time of co-service, space is sensed differently too:

I would say that [in face-to-face interaction] you're able to hide a little [...]. You sit at your own desk, you have your own screen, you can take a sip of your tea. Well, you can't do that up there [in co-service] – you're bare, very exposed, it's more intimate standing up there, much more intense. You're 'on', and it's more intense because you're more open, very uncovered standing there, and you can't just walk away. Even if you're working with a screen, you're still open. If you are sitting at your own desk at your computer, then it's like you have a territory, you don't have that up there; there's a clear and unobstructed view of you. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

The staff member is standing in an open space where she can be approached from all angles. There is no front or rear, no entrance or exit point, like in the traditional office. The co-service area is a more free-flowing but also unpredictable space, in which encounters may emerge and end without further notice and in which the space to pause and reflect is diminished. This creates a certain restless intensity in the co-service work and a feeling that 'everything has to be a bit faster'. This also means that there is less time and space to help citizens who might not be able to understand particular problems or administrative procedures right away. One frontline staff member explains:

Maybe you [the citizen] are not so good at Danish, and checked a box without having read what it says, then you don't know, or are not aware of, or have not heard, what has been said – there may be so many things. [...] The work situation has become very different from when I started and where you sat and sketched it out, and told them to do this and that: 'look at the paper, go home, and if you forget it, then read it again.' It is more difficult today, because the tempo is a bit hectic. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

In this open space, the pace is high and encounters shift in a staccato rhythm. Furthermore, the citizen's right to privacy and discretion comes under pressure. Two frontline staff members reflected on this as follows:

Frontline staff member 1: I sometimes think that it may be a little indiscreet, also for the citizens. 'Are you on social benefits?'. It feels uncomfortable to say that [in public], but we have to ask. Otherwise, we won't be able to refer to the right place. It may be a little...

Frontline staff member 2: Yes, it is [indiscreet]. And that is also something that clients have expressed when we have done interviews and given them some questionnaires and made them answer all kinds of things. They often say that they are missing something...

Frontline staff member 1: Discretion.

Frontline staff member 2: Yes, they really do. I can understand that, because nobody wants to stand up there and talk loudly about their CPR [Civil Registration Number]. Or say: 'I'm on welfare benefits, I can't support myself...'. (Interview after observation in a citizen service centre)

In this open space, created for the new task of teaching citizens how to administer their own cases in a digital format, the relation between citizen and public employee changes. Citizens become more exposed and the staff member must be careful not to approach them in a way that positions them as incapable or ignorant:

You must really be careful not to make people dumber. One thing is to sit with people across a table, it was a little easier to be on the same level as them. But when you put them in a situation where they do not know how or what they need help with, nor how to find it, and they are not particularly good at it. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

Thus, far from being an impersonal *bureaucrat*, the staff member becomes responsible for the citizens' feelings of failure. This need to gloss over people's difficulties with accommodating small talk is intensified in the open space, where other people may always be standing close by and witnessing the situation. Taken together, these feelings of a faster pace and more open space are experienced by front desk staff as a loss of control. Instead of acting as professional experts, they have to improvise, encourage and draw on more personal traits to protect people from the experience of being exposed as digitally incompetent.

## **Discussion: The bureaucratic encounter reframed**

In this reconfigured space-time, in which the private and public spheres blend in new ways, the staff member is less an authority who presents professional knowledge that helps solve an administrative problem and ensures that it is legally correctly processed. Here, the public bureaucrat is rather a personally

involved motivator, guiding the citizens through the session and prompting them to see the new possibilities of digitalization. This also repositions the citizen: Rather than individuals with a specific administrative problem, they become the carrier of a human resource to be unlocked and extracted in order to meet an efficiency target and, ultimately, contribute to cost reductions in public service. This is not simply a matter of activating motivation in the specific encounter here and now, the focus is to build up citizens' digital competence, i.e., to unlock a durable resource that is on call for further ordering – to use an expression from Heidegger's famous essay on technology (1977), in which he addressed the characteristics of modern technology. While traditional technologies (such as building a house) is a 'bringing-forth' [*hervorbringen*], modern technology, Heidegger maintains, is a 'challenging-forth' [*herausfordern*] (Heidegger, 1977: 6). This is where a significant shift lies, according to Heidegger: to get energy from a windmill, we must rely upon the wind's movements and shifts and our ability to make use of them as they are, whereas the heating value of coal is *challenged-forth* by transforming a piece of land for a human purpose, i.e., 'extracting, storing and circulating' the energy latent in it. Technology here involves an external end that imposes itself on the world, converting a piece of land into a storable value, always on call for a further ordering (Heidegger, 1977: 7).

Although what Heidegger called modern technology is far from current digital technologies (Schiølin and Riis, 2013), the essay suggests some lines along which to look when considering technology as a tool in human purposes. For Heidegger, a key point is that the 'challenging-forth' of modern technology is always and inherently directed 'toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense' (Heidegger, 1977: 7). In other words, getting more for less is the inherent and inevitable rationale. It is not difficult to recognize this logic of 'more for less' in the material that communicates the official Danish digitalization strategy and its realisation so far (presented in the citations above), which speaks about 'a more efficient and effective provision of public sector services' as the overall goal. Digitalization is a matter of 'capitalizing on' 'accelerating' and 'increasing quality while at the same time reducing public expenditure' (Common Public-Sector, 2013). However, this does not in itself happen with the introduction of digital technology; technology does not simply do that *for us*. What the empirical material from the citizen service



centre presented above reminds us is that pursuing this strategy implies a whole chain of reorganizing, reframing and reconfiguring, in which citizens as well as employees are transformed into ‘human resources’ that can help realize this reduction of public expenditure.

Rather than being a context for solving the problem that motivated people to go to the public office in the first place, the bureaucratic encounter becomes instead an occasion for extracting the resource latent in people (in terms of unlocking motivation), storing it (building up digital competence) and circulating it (reinserting the resource in new digitized practices) with the aim of cost reduction in public sector expenditure. Extracting and storing resources here implies that the bureaucratic encounter is reframed as a learning situation. Motivating and educating people to do certain things by themselves is at the centre of this encounter, while informing citizens and solving the administrative problems they came with is shifted into the background. In the examples presented above, pursuing the goal of the ‘self-servicing citizen’ means that people might actually not even receive all the information that the staff member finds relevant to their case.

In this process, we do not just inject digital technology into public sector administration; we also get reconfigured citizen roles, new ways of understanding the bureaucratic profession and changed bureaucratic practices, in which the public and private spheres are activated and blended in new ways. The bureaucratic encounter in itself is changed: time, pace and space are sensed differently in ways that change the experience of the encounter and what is possible within it.

The traditional ideal of bureaucracy reflected in Weber’s legal-rational model, which described bureaucracy as hierarchical, rule-enforcing, impersonal in the application of laws and composed of members with well-defined formal qualifications and specialized technical knowledge of rules and procedures (Weber, 2019) is reversed: in the frontline of Danish bureaucracy, the injunctions aimed at the public *bureaucrat* are to be responsive to the citizens’ hesitation and lack of digital literacy, and then strategically to use compassion as a policy implementation tool in their role as enthusiastic advocates of this policy. The demands for more ‘personal’ involvement and the ways in which staff enter into the private sphere need careful

consideration. Therefore, the roles, practices, tasks and virtues of frontline staff are important points to examine in order to understand current transformations in bureaucracy. The unresponsive, impersonal expert who sharply separates public and private, work and everyday life, is redefined in this altered ideal of service delivery. Digital reforms require frontline bureaucrats to embrace a stronger attachment to managerial goals that go beyond the goals of bureaucratic case processing and compassionately embrace the learning needs of the citizen in an improvisational encounter aiming to push the citizen to 'become digital'.

These insights form a basis for contributing to the rather limited amount of research on the interface between digitalization and bureaucratic encounters (Buffat, 2015; Hansen, Lundberg and Syltevik, 2018; Jansson and Erlingsson, 2014; Lindgren et al., 2019; Madsen and Christensen, 2019; Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020) in two ways. Firstly, the analysis demonstrates how new forms of interaction are shaped in the transition towards digitalized public bureaucracies. This is something that has not yet received a systematic treatment in this field of literature. The study showcases the specific ways in which self-service leads to new roles and tensions in the bureaucratic encounter. Secondly, it shows how roles and relations are entangled with technology and with changes in the material set up. These are not just minor, mundane changes; rather they are experienced as intrusive reconfigurations of the time and space of the bureaucratic encounter. Such insights challenge the often technocentric strategic narratives which tend to overlook how adjustments of practice might have intrusive effects on the way governance is performed. Against images of digital technologies as a neutral upgrade of the state, inherently capable of creating more efficient welfare provision, the analysis brings to the fore the unintended effects of new roles for both citizen and bureaucrat. Thus, there may be good reasons to pursue digitalization strategies in the public sector and digitalization may serve us well in reducing public expenditure; however, self-service technology is not simply a cost-reducing tool in human hands - to paraphrase Heidegger (1977). Pushing digitalization as an efficiency tool *does* something to public space as well as to private life and it has practical, political and ethical consequences. All of this raises questions about what constitutes bureaucracy and which values should guide the conduct of public bureaucrats.

## Conclusion

Around 1900, the phone was not just *a new thing* taking its place among other things in existing homes; it was a *newness* changing the entire home and its daily life, reconfiguring its time and space: the public office moved into the home and siestas were disturbed. With self-service technology, there are also new configurations of distance and closeness that blend the public and the private in new ways. Today, welfare service and provision can be accessed at a distance from anywhere, independently of the opening times and spaces of public offices. At the same time, the traditional distance of the bureaucracy (the desk, the formal interaction style, etc.) is transformed into new forms of closeness in the actual encounter between bureaucratic staff and citizens, both in terms of physical closeness (when citizens and professionals are standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the computer and private mail appears on the screen) and an emotional closeness, when the staff member is expected to tap into the person's emotions and personal motivations and make use of them to realize public digitalization goals.

Pursuing an ambitious public digitalization strategy like the Danish one in the name of effectiveness does not simply get new things, devices, apps and electronic templates, into the public sector; it reconfigures the bureaucratic encounter and reframes the bureaucratic profession, and it establishes a new kind of relationship between the public sector and its citizens, in which the latter is positioned as a latent human resource waiting to be unlocked for the purpose of cost reduction and efficiency. Being aware of such changes in everyday encounters between citizens and public sector professionals, we argue, is necessary in order to attune ourselves to ethical and political questions that may otherwise be lost behind the celebration of Danish digitalization success, such as: What kind of demands and expectations can the public sector impose on its citizens in the name of rationalization? What kind of costs and social biases, in terms of specific groups of people being incapacitated in terms of important communication with public authorities, are acceptable? And how far can we go in transforming the public *bureaucrat* into a strategic outpost, committed to goals of competence development and efficiency?

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