# Preface

What do you get if you ask artificial intelligence to generate an image from the prompt: 'Welfare state that goes from analogue to digital'? Apparently, our front cover. In the centre of the image, a woman with an iPad is talking to a man. Helping with directions? Conducting a survey? Is she a social worker doing outreach work? Their surroundings are dominated by a flow of information in the 'cloud' that mirrors traditional infrastructure such as roads, electrical grids, and streetlights. In the process of digitalizing our welfare state infrastructure and communication, the structures in-between us have become even more concealed, obscure, and invisible. Yet the impact of digitalizing welfare on our everyday lives has never been more profound.

In our critique, we have emphasised how digital translation risks reducing, supplanting, or undermining the analogue dimensions of human communication. This influences the very production of meaning. As the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes in *Being Singular Plural*: 'There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because *meaning is itself the sharing of Being*' (2000, p. 2). Communication and community are etymologically close allies. How we communicate also influences how we are as a society. We cannot separate online from offline in everyday life when it comes to how we share our existence. Sharing digitally also gives existence meaning.

Artificial intelligence is for the most part a question of statistical machine learning processes. AI is a tool that may or may not assist us in grappling with existential questions like the meaning of life, or why we write books like this. The designer of the cover of our book said he was not concerned about AI taking over his job as a designer: AI does not understand context, and his job is to calibrate and tailor the design the way the customer wants. AI is simply not able to do the things that he does.

Our primary focus has been to sort between the techno-optimistic and the techno-pessimistic narratives that emerge from a society that is engaged with a massive experiment of digitalizing its welfare infrastructure and

services. The Norwegian state is eager to explore and exploit the potential gains in digitalising its welfare system. However, as modes of communication, services and transfers are digitalised, we argue that certain dimensions of welfare are influenced. For some citizens these changes are beneficial, while for others, misery is exacerbated. The Norwegian Digitalisation Agency calculates that about 20% of the population experience some kind of digital exclusion. However, less is qualitatively said about exactly how this exclusion is experienced, negotiated, and understood by citizens.

Through the studies presented in this book we provide insight into the digital resistance and accommodation expressed by various citizens and how they relate to the state and its effort to digitalize its infrastructure. If what Nancy says is true – that meaning is itself the sharing of being – what happens with meaning when the sharing of being becomes increasingly digitalised? What is lost? Which types of knowledge are prioritized, and which types are marginalized? As we see it, the very composition of our welfare state is at stake in these questions, and hence what welfare is and should be, is in play. Being a Norwegian citizen has in the postwar era been concerned with a robust welfare state that is rather more a guarantor of autonomy than a threat. We believe this is still the case. At the same time, we argue for a concern that involves some worrying tendencies in a state that is eagerly mining the benefits of digitalization, without being sufficiently critical of the innovations it is pushing through the state apparatus.

We hope that this book will contribute to the expanding field of digital welfare studies. Through the journey of writing this book we are lucky to have collaborated with inspiring colleagues and co-workers. First, we would like to thank Østfold University College, with its research initiative The Digital Society, for its generosity in financing the project's seminars as well as this book. Special thanks go to our administrative director Trine Eker Christoffersen for her generous support of the project from the beginning to the end. We are also very grateful to the publisher, Cappelen Damm Akademisk, and particularly Marte Ryste Ericsson for her insightful and experienced editorial work.

During the work with this project, we organized several seminars during which the contributors presented their chapters. We would like to extend special gratitude to Jens Olgard Dalseth Røyrvik at NTNU's Department of Social Anthropology: Your presence, comments and input have been greatly valued. Last, but not least, we are especially grateful to all the authors who contributed to the book. We feel privileged to have

had the possibility to work and collaborate with you all during the last two years. This book is the product of us sharing and being together. It has been a pleasure.

Christian Sørhaug and Ragnhild Fugletveit
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## References

Nancy, J.-L. (2000). *Being singular plural*. Stanford University Press.