CHAPTER 6

Machinic Bureaucracy, Affective Atmospheres, and the Impact of Digitalising NAV Services: The Case of a NAV Reception Area

Christian Sørhaug Østfold University College
Pia Eline Ollila The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)
Julian Slettaøien Oslo Metropolitan University (master's student)

Abstract: Digitalisation of public services and communication also affects architecture and the interior design of public buildings. In this chapter we follow the machinic philosophy of Giles Deleuze, and his insistence that the entanglements and communications of humans and machines are co-constitutive. In this case the machine is the bureaucratic system of NAV, and we investigate how changes in socio-material organisation influences the encounter between state and citizen. Using a NAV reception area to study this encounter, we have interviewed employees and user rights consultants, to examine how they experience the changes brought about by digitalisation. In particular, we were interested in the affective response to the interior design. The findings indicate that the NAV reception area is experienced as clinical, sterile and cold. However, at the same time, the informants differ as to whether they think this is a good thing. Managers and employees draw attention to the effectiveness and security issues the design addresses. The user rights consultants on their part experience the space as hostile and unwelcoming for clients. Lastly, we discuss the double bind design. Two contradicting messages are given to clients. On the one hand, NAV welcomes clients to their reception area, and offers people assistance in a situation of personal crisis. On the other hand, the very interior design and 'ontological choreography' indicates hostility through its security guards, electronic registration, and electronic gates.

Keywords: risk society, double bind design, affective atmosphere, digitalisation, machinic bureaucracy

> But one can also say: There must be a dancer here who functions as a part of a machine; this machine's component can only be a dancer; here is the machine of which the dancer is a component part. The object is no longer to compare humans and the machine in order to evaluate the correspondences, the extensions, the possible or impossible substitutions of the one for the other, but to bring them into communication, in order to show how humans are component parts of the machine, or combine with something else to constitute a machine … The dancer combines with the floor to compose a machine under the perilous conditions of love and death.
>
> —Deleuze & Guattari, pp. 91–92

Upon entering the new office of the Norwegian Welfare and Labour Organization (NAV), an architecturally interested individual is struck by the design and interior of the building. You enter the building from a heavily trafficked road passing through sliding doors. What stands out immediately are security guards, three electronic gates made of metal and glass, and a large touch screen on stilts to your left. The security guard will ask if you have an appointment, and if so to register on the screen. Your appointment number is entered onto the screen, however, it does not work. Next to the screen there is an entrance into another room. A row of computers is arranged on standing desks for self-service, a NAV supervisor at the entrance informs you. A supervisor tries the number, and it does not work. A call is made, and after a while the frontline worker shows up, uses her card, and the electronic gate is opened. Beyond the electronic gates there is a large open space. There are some seats against a wall, and windows at the far end. The reception area has linoleum flooring, powerful lighting, and there is not much on the walls. A series of cubicles for meetings with clients are organised in a row. Each has a window. All are more or less identical: a desk, a chair on each side, no personal items, white walls, and bright lights.

The architectural and interior design of the reception area can be seen as a consequence of the white paper, *NAV in a New Era*, and NAV's channel strategy, by which clients are strongly encouraged to use digital platforms in communication with the welfare office. A central goal of the white paper was to enable NAV to improve its employment services and ensure user-oriented services (Fossestøl et al., 2020). Intensifying

the process of digitalising NAV services also meant that several work tasks would be outsourced to users through digital platforms (Breit et al., 2021). Such 'proactive welfare services' (Larsson & Haldar, 2021) have a range of consequences. For example, frontline workers in the reception area today are frequently instructed by managers to send clients home if they have not used NAV's self-help platform navet.no (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016). This shift in services from face-to-face to screen-level bureaucracy (Røhnebæk, 2016) also influences the very architectural and interior design of several contemporary NAV reception areas, as illustrated above. In this case the digitalisation of society influences the spatial arrangement of welfare services, and the encounter between frontline workers and their clients.

In this chapter we try to understand interaction in the NAV reception area, from an assemblage analytical approach. Central to this approach is the fact that we do not limit our analysis to purely human interaction. Rather, we suggest understanding the reception area as a heterogenic assemblage of human and nonhuman component parts. As the quote from Deleuze indicates, the human 'dancers' need to be brought into communication with the machine in order to grasp how they mutually constitute each other. As we will argue throughout this chapter, the 'dance' between client and frontline worker is inhibited through the current design of the NAV reception area under discussion. The claim is that the combination of security concerns and the digitalisation of NAV services has created a reception area with an inhospitable atmosphere that influences the encounter between citizen and frontline worker. Though it can be argued that NAV reception areas have always had a tense atmosphere (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016), the current reception area under discussion, exacerbates this tension. The dual process of heightened security concerns, combined with inserting digital technologies to effectuate welfare services, can potentially be counterproductive to the welfare produced in these public spaces. The antagonistic atmosphere may provoke citizens rather than help them with their problems.

The assemblage approach relates to how entanglements play out in practice, as well as the need to describe unfoldings of humans and nonhumans. In our case it is a question of interactions of different human actors (dancers), like welfare clients, security guards, and frontline (social) workers, with a host of nonhuman component parts in the reception area, like electronic gates and the self-help screen of a contemporary, public, bureaucratic

NAV machine. We are especially interested in trying to grasp some of the various ways one can experience affective atmospheres, which are generated through this machinery. We argue that we need to pay more attention to the design and interior organisation of public buildings, when elucidating the quality of the welfare services provided.

The NAV reception area is also an affective space, where people bring hope and desperation with them in their quest for welfare assistance. As part of the geography of hope (Anderson, 2006), the reception area is for some people a highly affective space, thus directing our attention towards analysing the affective materialism at play (Anderson, 2004). We need a shift in understanding from how architects like Le Corbusier argued that houses are machines for living in, whereas public buildings for the most part are treated as containers for people, who both provide and receive welfare services effectively. Rather, we are interested in what types of affective atmospheres are created in the NAV reception area, given the architectural and interior design, and how these structures influence service providers, as well as service receivers (Nord & Högström, 2017). Shifting the focus to buildings as performances, or continuous processes of assembling (Rose et al., 2010), provides us with the opportunity to recognise the many actors, human and nonhuman, involved in creating a particular space.

Method, Data Collection and Analysis

In our method we utilise a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents. Data was gathered and analysed through a student active learning lab (Halvorsen et al., 2018), called 'NAV: Organization, Services and Technology' by our social studies research group. In our student lab we were concerned with how NAV organises their services, and how digitalisation has impacted the encounter between citizen and frontline worker. This is not a laboratory in the traditional sense of doing experiments in a confined space, but a naturalistic approach striving to explore the in-situ unfolding of encounters. The first author has followed students in practice at more than 10 NAV offices between 2017 and 2023, making more than 50 visits to these venues. During these visits the first author has made a range of short, informal, covert observations of how the channel strategy has affected the organisation of NAV offices' services. These short observations were made while

entering and leaving the reception venue, and the initial description is from one of these visits.

Doing covert observations in public spaces like a NAV reception area requires ethical consideration (Tjora, 2021). In our case we need to weigh the potential harm in relation to the people being studied, against the potential social benefits of making these observations (Petticrew et al., 2007; Podschuweit, 2021). As we see it, the potential for doing harm is considered low, as there is little likelihood that the people being observed can be identified. Further, the findings from the study reveal an aspect of public life that is seldom discussed. Covert observations created an important basis for understanding how the encounter between citizen and frontline worker develops, and how the physical organisation of these surroundings influences the encounter. Descriptions of physical elements of the NAV reception area have also been changed to ensure anonymity of the venue.

The interview data is primarily from the frontline workers' professional experience of the reception area, though user representatives are present for both 2019 and 2022. The students recruited employees and managers from the NAV office, and employees from a local organisation that works with and for user rights. The students used a snowball method to recruit informants. They contacted team leaders at NAV and the user organisation via e-mail. In conversation with the team leaders, they found potential candidates for the interviews. All the informants have been employed for at least two years and have positions that involve regular meetings in the reception space.

Nine interviews were conducted, three during spring 2019 and six during spring 2022. These two stints of interviews follow the same procedure, using a combination of go-along (Kusenbach, 2003) and photography (Del Busso, 2011), followed by qualitative interviews. The informants were asked to walk through the reception area, and take pictures of the elements in the space that they thought were important to talk about, or that made an impression on them. During the go-along the interviewers and the informants had an unstructured conversation about the reception area. The pictures the informants took were later used in the semi-structured interviews, when they were asked why they chose the motifs they did. This approach made it easier for the informants to discuss the architecture, interior design, and other elements that operate in the reception area. The interviews were recorded.

Table of Informants 2019 and 2022

Frontline worker inside NAV	4	Eva 19', Edvarda 19' Rita 22', Ragnhild 22'
Frontline worker outside NAV	2	Anne 22', Anita 22'
Management	1	Reidar 22'
User rights consultant	2	Claudia 19', Geir 22'

During coding of data, a thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method in which one identifies and systematises data to look for themes in the material. A six-step thematic analysis followed: familiarity, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and describing findings. This minimises and describes the data on a detailed level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The NAV office we studied is relatively new, large, and whose interior design we would say is inspired by the channel strategy. The office is in one of Norway's larger cities. The data presented in this chapter are only related to one office out of 264, so we cannot generalise based on this one case. At the same time, we would suggest that there are some general analytical insights to be had as to how the reception area unfolds in a digital age NAV. Other NAV offices have similar inscriptions in their reception area design, and the tension between security concerns and a welcoming atmosphere is something we would argue needs more attention from researchers. Our findings are 1) An Efficient Reception Area: Clinical, Cold and Sterile; 2) Inscriptions: A Security-Oriented Design; and 3) A Double Bind Design: Welcome and Not Welcome. The findings led us to articulate the following research question: How does the architectural and interior design of a NAV reception area influence the encounter between frontline worker and welfare client? Secondly, we ask: How can an assemblage analysis help to shed light on this encounter?

An Efficient Reception Area: Cold, Clinical and Sterile

> It is not supposed to be warm and cosy, coming to NAV. You come to NAV to get assistance with something, and you are there to meet a person who will help you, and eventually guide you further.
>
> —Eva 19'

All the informants agreed that the reception area was clinical, sterile and somewhat 'cold'. However, they were divided as to whether or not that was a good thing. From the position of the manager and the frontline workers in NAV, this was a good thing. Eva 19', quoted above, thought that the reception area was designed correctly, given that it reflects the idea of NAV as a public place. She also added that she did not think there should be pictures on the walls, since they might constitute a security risk. Instead, she thought there could be screens in the reception, with NAV information. This point was further elaborated by Edvarda 19':

> The reception area should not be too attractive a place to be. Earlier, in other offices, there were sofas, tables and coffee in the reception area. At that time, it was used as a place to be, where people would come by and visit the users who were there applying, and waiting for help from NAV. (Edvarda 19')

Edvarda reminisces about a time when the reception area had a social function for the visitors, when the atmosphere was influenced by serving coffee and the chance to sit down to talk and socialise. The NAV employee informants look back on this type of design for user encounters as less effective than today's solution. Changes in many NAV reception areas have been substantial. The contrast is evident even from the research on NAV reception areas. In their article 'Everyday Interaction at the Front Line: The Case of the All-in-One Bureaucracy' (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016), Kjetil Lundberg and Liv Johanne Syltevik reveal a gap in research relating to public reception areas where the state meets its citizens. Their argument is that reception areas are important venues to study the encounters between frontline workers and citizens/clients. The ethnographic approach provides data on how interaction works in institutional settings, and provides an insight into the boundary work being performed in these micro settings. Boundary work refers to the group dynamics of performative strategies, creating experiences of inside and outside. Here we are also presented with the ethnography of a somewhat different waiting room. The reception area was open throughout the day, there were no security guards mentioned, people drew a number and waited for their turn, there was comfortable seating and attempts to create a friendly atmosphere, even though the power asymmetry makes itself felt in the older venues as well (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016). The authors

conducted their short-term fieldwork before the changes at NAV that interest us took place. They note that the all-in-one bureaucracy they were observing '… is designed to include most people, with its universal design, play corner for children, computers for free use, chairs and sofas, and a variety of activities taking place there' (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016, p. 158). With the implementation of the channel strategy, we are confronted with a somewhat different waiting room:

> … it's designed rather plainly, grey, few pictures, grey on the walls, we have one of those branches of fake flowers over there by the corner … chairs, tables, that is every-thing is very institutionally designed. It's the same. In a certain way I understand why people think it is … it's not so nice to come here, I can get that from a purely visual standpoint. (Rita 22')

This institutional design has produced popular tongue-in-cheek expressions like 'prison yard' and 'airport' to describe the reception area at NAV. This was the case from the establishment of the reception area, as well as in 2022:

> …. comments that it looks like a prison or an airport are very common, so I usu-ally treat this as nonsense, or small talk. I do think it's somewhat sterile, and I do understand why. However, it would not hurt to have a picture on the wall, some-thing that demonstrated some warmth, because there's a lot of warmth at NAV, it's not just gloomy. Some think it's great and modern, and it is modern, and that's positive. However, sometimes I think it's a little bit cold when you arrive as a user. (Ragnhild 22')

Though the frontline workers express somewhat more ambivalence to the atmosphere created through the interior design, some are quite content with the performance of the venue:

> The space is as it should be in most ways. There is a small waiting room, because people should not wait too long. It is perhaps a somewhat cold room to enter, and somewhat sterile. But then you will meet pleasant people who come over to you and are eager to provide service. (Eva 19')

From a management perspective the concept of security is emphasised. The manager Reidar talks about personal security when discussing the design:

> I guess it's mainly positive. But I see that it … takes care of personal security well, given that people with appointments are guided in, and not kept standing and waiting in a crowd. And so, we do not have a lot of people that, so to say, stay in the reception area. There is a short time lapse, and then it's into a conversation room, and there the user sits with their back to [others], so even if it's possible to see in, a partial view into the room ensures the security of people … (Reidar 22')

The security issues he refers to relate to privacy rules, though the security of the frontline workers is also important. NAV's user research indicates that most people are satisfied with digitalisation (NAV, 2021). The channel strategy produces more efficient public management, while also saving time, and freeing up time for other activities for users. The strategy implemented in NAV reception areas entails shorter public opening hours, and encourages the use of digital platforms, as well as changes in architecture and interiors. And this was an explicit goal of the white paper, *NAV in a New Era*, in which you can read repeatedly that the goal of the channel strategy is to free up time so that one can help those most in need.

However, as Ida Løberg has argued, the drive to make NAV more efficient also carries a range of hidden costs (2022). Digitalisation standardises and makes bureaucratic processes more efficient. At the same time, these processes of standardisation make it more difficult for people who live unstandardised lives, simply because they do not fit the 'mold'. The ideology of efficiency permeates contemporary public management, and yet there are reasons to be sceptical of the tendency towards efficiency for the sake of efficiency. In the drive to govern by numbers (Shore & Wright, 2015b) we risk seeing that the reason for the existence of a particular institution becomes shrouded in efficiency goals, rather than that it actually assists the people involved in what is important for them. In our 'audit culture' we run the risk of undermining professionals and their discretionary understanding (Shore & Wright, 2015a), and thus potentially create a deeper desperation in people already in desperate need of help. Though research indicates many positive sides to the channel strategy (Breit et al., 2021) we are sceptical of what may be called 'unintended' effects of this strategy. One such unintended effect is the design of the NAV reception area.

Inscriptions: A Security-Oriented Design

> I was in a meeting with a client whose request for financial aid was turned down. The client reacted with violent frustration and wanted to get out of the reception area as quickly as possible. When she stormed out of the meeting room, she collided with the glass doors of the electronic gate. Moreover, the glass sliding doors in the entry room open and close slowly, so she also crashed into them. When this happened, the reception area was full of people.
>
> —Edvarda 19'

The security arrangements and design of the reception area not only make it more difficult to enter, but also to leave. The machine and the dancer mutually influence one another, both positively and negatively. The machinic metaphor is meant to draw attention to concrete practices that develop in the everyday experiences of people in need of assistance. As we argue, the spatial organisation, material components, and technological solutions constitute nonhuman components that also need to be examined when we describe the encounter between client and frontline worker. In science and technology studies, the concept of *inscriptions* has been important. Technological entities and objects are inscribed with certain patterns of how they are to be used, and these can be strong or weak. Madeline Akrich and Bruno Latour use the example of a hotel key (1992). If hotel managers grow tired of guests losing their key, they can attach a heavy weight to the key, creating a stronger inscription, and an incentive to deliver the key to the reception. Similarly, the designers of the NAV reception area have tried to influence the behaviour of clients and frontline workers and their encounters:

> The channel strategy is a key word. We try to be good at guiding how you as a user should approach NAV and your case worker. We direct users to the number 55 or digital plan. However, we also need to apply understanding. We take into consideration if it is an elderly person, then we can't send them home to get help from their grandchildren. Then we need to provide some extra service. (Eva 19')

Many frontline workers, at least in 2019, were aware that there was a certain connection between the design of the reception area and the channel

strategy. Managers in many NAV offices across the country encouraged their frontline workers to push clients to use digital platforms, instead of coming to the NAV reception area. The user rights consultant is quite explicit about her point of view:

> I think that NAV wants to minimise the numbers of visitors. This has been a guiding principle in shaping the building. I feel that those who come here will not experience much value as citizens. That it might be difficult to visit the office, because one must think about what one really wants here. That if you want to get help, then you need to master the digital. (Claudia 19')

From NAV's public administration point of view, the reason for the channel strategy and accompanying reception design, these inscriptions are a question of efficiency and providing better services, not about excluding citizens. The frontline workers themselves do reflect on the fact that the channel strategy makes it more difficult to visit NAV. At the same time, they focus on the positive side of the inscriptions:

> The fact that you need to use an electronic gate to be admitted, some clients think this is very positive. Since you can log in at an electronic gate, we supervisors receive an immediate notice, so some think this is very ok. But other users think this makes it even more difficult to come into NAV. I hear a lot of words like 'prison' and 'airport', so they think it is more difficult to come to NAV. If a supervisor has made a human mistake, something that happens, or there is something wrong with the system, then you are not able to enter [the building]. (Ragnhild 22')

Spatial organisation, material components, and technological solutions are involved in staging encounters between clients and frontline workers. And some frontline workers express an explicit satisfaction with the way the inscriptions form these encounters, hindering people from visiting the NAV reception area unnecessarily:

> I do not like it that people can just walk right in. I like having the electronic gates. If not, I think that a lot more people would come by, and then the design of the reception would be completely different. They would have to go back to the counter, like we had before. In terms of the channel strategy, I think it works well. (Eva 19')

Frontline workers located outside the NAV office have a somewhat different perspective on the reception area:

> I know many think it's uncomfortable to meet at NAV … I work in a job where I can meet people anywhere really. So, when they go to NAV … you talk about standing outside, because sometimes they are not allowed inside, so they stand on the street outside. Then I think they experience this as stigmatising, that they are in a way standing outside NAV, and are not allowed inside. And when they are allowed inside, they need to talk to a security guard in a uniform, and then they need to give personal information, and then they are allowed into a very sterile place, where in a certain manner it's not … I don't know … I work for the most part with people who are mentally ill … I work to motivate towards the future and for a belief that things can work out and so on, and I think these venues do not enable that. (Anita 22')

Having your workplace inside the NAV office versus outside seems to influence the frontline worker's opinion on whether the design of the reception area is good for the quality of welfare services. However, they all seem to agree that the inscriptions of the venue influence the encounter between client and frontline worker. The user rights consultant wanted to take pictures of how narrow the reception area was during opening hours. She talks about the fact that the clients she escorts to NAV often have substantial and complex issues. When she is asked about the design of the reception area, she emphasises how the appearance might create challenges for people with anxiety issues.

> It's not like you can pass the electronic gates if you cannot persuade the security guard that you have an appointment with someone. You must have an appointment ready on your phone or on an app. If not, you have to stand outside the 'sluice' gates and wait until you are seen by the person you are supposed to talk with. When I accompany people to their meetings, we plan well in advance to have their documents ready, and arrive early to avoid too many people in the reception area. I don't think that you need to be prone to anxiety in order to feel that it's uncomfortable to be here during opening hours. (Claudia 19')

During the photo session, the user rights consultant wanted to take a picture of a motif that showed the spatial organisation of the self-service apparatus. The space is framed by partially screened windows facing a heavily trafficked road, with glass walls and glass doors, facing the waiting area and the entrance. There is a row of computers along the windows. The computers are placed at standing height, and there are separation walls between each machine. According to the user rights consultant, this was a privacy problem, given that it was easy for others to hear what was said when you were getting assistance. Further, as Lundberg and Syltevik point out, this

also means that clients are forced to make their lack of digital competence visible to others (2016, p. 163).

Analysing the reception area as a machine bureaucracy directs our attention not just to the human interactions that occur. We also understand how nonhuman component parts influence the interaction. Commenting on the vocabulary of science and technology studies, comparable to the initial quote by Deleuze, Madeline Akrich and Bruno Latour say that we should understand the actors, not in isolation but rather in a setting: 'A machine can no more be studied than a human, because what the analyst is faced with are assemblies of human and nonhuman actants where the competences and performances are distributed …' (Akrich & Latour, 1992, p. 259). The object of analysis is then a locus, a hub of various component parts coming together, creating a certain situation. Our work in understanding this situation, like Deleuze and Latour and others, requires us to consider all the various entities that generate a particular situation.

A Double Bind Design: Welcome and Not Welcome

> Concrete, that is ok, however [you can have that] at your own place. This is a place for people who might be in their darkest [moments], in their most depressive state. It is not a mingling space for architects.
>
> —Claudia 19'

The user rights consultant makes a rather sharp comment as to how architects might appreciate this venue. Her point of view is that the design is not suitable for welcoming people in their darkest moments. She points out the use of security in the reception area: the reception space outside the electronic gate is small and tight, while the waiting zone inside the sluice is a large, open and spacious room. She claims that for such a type of spatial partitioning to work, NAV needs to let people in past the electronic gates. As she experiences it, given the current plan of the space, it is only the space outside the electronic gates that functions as a reception area.

> The last time I was here with a user, there were three, four guards. I think this was a lot. The need for guards is substantial. I respect the need for a safe work environment, I think everyone wants that. However, it might be that the arrangement of the sluice gate system creates the need for even more security.

> I think it can be agitative for those who have to stand and wait. One is especially visible when standing outside the sluice. And it is a tight fit. Then you might become infuriated if you do not get in. It's like standing in line at a night club, where people make one another angry. Just imagine what happens in a taxi line. There you stand in the same manner. (Claudia 19')

The user rights consultant's experience of the reception room is a contrast to some of the in-house frontline workers describing the same venue. For example, Eva 19' emphasised the productive aspect of the strategy, when she says that this gives the supervisors time to prepare encounters with users, and that they may answer good individual questions. Further, she emphasised the need to limit access, because NAV is responsible for the management of public resources, and is therefore responsible for prioritising in order to use these resources correctly. Eva 19' said she had been able to influence the design of the office in terms of the security measures in the architecture. Eva said that one of these ideas was a specially adapted crisis room for drop-in users who seek financial social help. The room ensures the employees' security, given that there is a table separating the employee from the visitor. However, another IPS (individual work support) supervisor, Anna 22', experiences the offices in the reception area, meant for emergency conversations, as being challenging to use in relation to the building, given the original architectural design, and the distance to the client that might be created:

> I think it really gives an impression of, 'I am on this side of the table and you are on the other side of the table'. It creates a distance. I assume that the person on the other side may quickly feel inferior. So, if I must use these rooms, I always take the chairs and place them alongside each other, as we are sitting now … [meaning sitting next to each other]. (Anne 22')

Security issues are central themes that often appear in the interviews. For example, the team leader Reidar had a different understanding of the electronic gate, and its influence on the clients. He emphasised the importance of security for both client and frontline worker, and the need to have a system for registration that generated efficiency and flexibility in public management work. When he was asked if he would feel less safe without the electronic gate, he responded:

> Yes, if you took away all the alarms, it's clear that that would have an effect. If you take away the security guards it would have an effect, if you take away the registration screen it would have an effect, so all these factors would reduce the experience of safety. (Reidar 22')

Most informants used the word 'airport' for either describing the electronic gates the users had to pass in order to enter NAV, or words they had heard the users themselves use to describe the entrance to the reception area. The first picture the in-house frontline worker Rita 22' took during the go-along was of the electronic gates. During the interview after the go-along, she recalled what she had been thinking the first time she entered the NAV reception area during a practice period, revealing an ambivalence to the security measures:

> The first time I was here I thought, wow, am I going to be 'sluiced' further? … like Gardermoen or another airport type device, because you log in with your birth date and receive a note, and walk nice and orderly through a sluice, and I guess it looks more dramatic than it is, because it's about security, both for the ones who are in-house as well as the users themselves, considering fire and registration. However, sometimes people might find it overwhelming, because for many it crosses a threshold – it's uncomfortable. However, we need to have it for control and security. (Rita 22')

Rita also notes that the current design might also dissuade people from contacting NAV. The associations with airports and prisons are also emphasised by the out-of-house frontline worker, Anita, in her interview. Anita, who has worked as a prison correctional officer, described the electronic gates as more or less identical to the ones they have in the prison she worked in. In addition, Anita pointed out the fact that encountering the electronic gates and security guards, which are present at all times in the reception area, in many ways can be experienced as inhospitable, and generate a feeling of not being welcome:

> I think a lot of NAV employees are preoccupied with security when they are going to meet clients, nonetheless I think that this is an inhospitable way to be met. It was the uniform [of the security guard] I was considering taking a picture of, who then stands by the entrance in front of these electronic gates. Though they also stand inside, the security guards are very visible. I figure that, that you feel somewhat suspect, like being an enemy of the state. (Anita 22')

The user rights consultant Geir recounted incidents of clients who experienced being met by the electronic gates and security guards as uncomfortable and discouraging. In addition, he emphasised the experience of power asymmetry between NAV and the clients:

> They [clients] say they think that it's scary to walk through the door, and that they think it's difficult both to be met by a supervisor, but also by a security guard, and that creates a type of, I don't quite know how to say it, a power relation … that you tell the user that they see the supervisor behind an electronic gate, and that they need to type the code so that they are able to enter. You are not overconfident when you come in there. (Geir 22')

Citizens seeking assistance from the state often find themselves in a vulnerable situation. The different informants indicate the challenge of a reception area that is supposed to be the venue for an encounter between the state and the citizen. Public waiting rooms are physical spaces central to understanding how the encounter between citizen and state plays out, creating barriers to the availability of welfare services, and analysing who are denied or given access to these services (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016). One way of analysing the design of the reception area is what Gregory Bateson calls a double bind. A person receives two conflicting messages. Bateson uses a range of examples: the mother who holds her child sternly and shakes him/her while saying, 'I love you'; or the alcoholic who is told to go and do some controlled drinking (therapeutic double bind) (Bateson, 1971, p. 450). On the one hand, the client as a citizen of the Norwegian state is invited to NAV to claim his/her rights to welfare benefits. The universal welfare state grants the right to support for all citizens. However, upon arriving, a different (meta) message is received. For example, as the user rights consultant Geir reflects upon entering the reception area:

> The first thing I think about is that I am met by a sliding door and security guards, and that in itself is rather scary … there have been occasions during winter when people have had to stand outside – and then security guards asked, 'What do you really want here?' So this is in itself rather scary. The venue when you come in through the sliding doors …. comes off as sterile and cold, and the building in itself, when you are about to enter NAV, it comes off as very big, and you quickly feel very small when you come through that door. (Geir 22')

The informant describes a consequence of the double bind, which might belittle, confuse, and stigmatise clients entering the NAV reception area,

creating a potentially inhospitable atmosphere for them. A central component of the double bind is conflicting communication, which causes great anxiety in the person, and which, in addition, the person cannot necessarily escape (Bateson et al., 1956). The contradictive messaging can be illustrated when you enter the homepage of nav.no. You are asked the inviting question, 'What can we help you with?' However, when entering the NAV reception area, other messages are communicated. Security guards ask what you want, you need to make appointments in advance, and register electronically. Citizens in need of assistance, who lack the possibility or digital competence to do this, might find themselves in this double bind design. Elaborating on Bateson's theoretical cybernetic system approach, Linda Blaasvær and Tore Gulden explore how we can understand the design of public services' influence on communication between client and social worker.[1] The contradictory messaging in NAV and other public services is the object of their on-going research, in which design itself is involved in the feedback communication system.

Double Bind Design in a Digital Risk Society: How to Dance Better?

In an opinion piece written by a former NAV manager, she says that the current NAV machinery is not calibrated to take care of people who find themselves in their worst crisis in life.[2] Her statement came in the aftermath of another murder of a frontline worker by a client. The security measures we find in today's NAV reception areas were generated by these types of incidents, where frontline workers are threatened and intimidated by clients, to whom they also provide assistance. Ulrich Beck's understanding of a 'second modernity' as a risk society (1992) provides fertile ground for analysing the contradiction between helping clients in need, and at the same time protecting frontline workers. Risk society hinges on '… a historic trend towards an *institutionalized* individualization' (Beck, 2008, p. 4). Beck aligns himself with Zigmund Bauman and Anthony Giddens in making this argument. 'The crucial idea is this: individualization really is imposed on the individual by modern institutions'

---

1   31.10.2022: https://www.designsociety.org/publication/43539/DESIGN+AND+DOUBLE+BIND+COM MUNICATION+IN+PUBLIC+SERVICES%E2%80%94THE+MODEL+OF+LOGICAL+PARADOXES
2   31.10.2022: https://www.nrk.no/ytring/jobben-i-nav-1.15660271

(Beck, 2008, pp. 3–4). These sociologists identify the fact that although a second modernity relishes the ideal of individualisation, this individualisation also has a flip side. You end up being individually responsible for your own failures. This becomes especially evident when you as a citizen are confronted by a NAV reception area that gives you ample time to reflect on your own failures.

The institutionalised individualisation characterising a second modernity manufactures uncertainties, which are unintended side effects of technological and economic developments (Beck, 2008, p. 5). Debora Lupton elaborates on this point, through what she calls a digital risk society (2016). In a digital risk society, certain citizens are targeted and separated as more dangerous and riskier than others. Everyday surveillance, or *dataveillance*, is the process of sorting out certain groups, potentially discriminating or stigmatising these groups of citizens (Lyon, 2002). Of course, this chapter is concerned with the unintended consequences of a public institution like NAV and its reception area, which is designed in a manner that responds to the digitalisation of society. We do not want to imply that there was any malign intent or deliberate attempt to create a situation in which welfare clients are sorted out and stigmatised. A central goal of the digitalisation of NAV and its channel strategy was to 'free up time to assist those most in need of help'. (*frigjøre tid for å hjelpe de som trenger det mest*) (*NAV in a New Era*). However, at the same time we need to consider the possibility that this type of architecture and interior design create an affective atmosphere, which provokes and antagonises, potentially leading to the exclusion of and even violent responses from certain citizens more than others.

We have applied an assemblage analysis to generate understanding, which can shed light on what might unfold through the various perceptions of the NAV reception area. A precursor to assemblage analysis is the cybernetic system theory of Gregory Bateson (Shaw, 2015), who insists that it is always a question of man plus his environment, which needs to be accounted for when trying to understand the human condition, as mind is immanent in the surroundings (Bateson, 1971, p. 444). The immanence philosophy of Giles Deleuze is especially interesting when he applies this thinking to the emergence of new types of control in society. Digital technology and computers are new machines, which also make possible a new way of controlling a population, and do not need the establishment of great enclosures. 'Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are modulations, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from

one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 4). Deleuze claims that computers and associated digital technologies enable a modulation of human behaviour that does not need the disciplinary enclosures of the psychiatric clinic, military, prison, or museum that Michel Foucault analysed (Foucault, 1973, 1977, 1986, 1995).

Though the reception area is most certainly an enclosure, in a wider sense it also modulates citizens, so that they become good digital users. Today, we see a continuous modulation of users in their encounter with NAV employees in the reception, where they are persuaded yet not necessarily disciplined into becoming digital citizens. For example, social work students in practice talk about how they themselves, and other employees, are instructed by leaders to send clients home, and thus to try to solve their problems through their personal navet.no. These instructions are not malignant or meant to be disciplinary, but are rather benign and encouraging. They encourage clients to be responsible and in charge of their own life. They can be the captain of their own ship, if only they can learn how to control themselves through the digital machinery that now partly regulates all our lives. Another relevant architectural element in this staging is the control mechanism. Examples from the data material, where the NAV employee must run after an agitated social client and let them through the electronic gate, is a clear picture of how political influence on architectural design has a direct influence on users, and on the interaction between users and street-level bureaucrats. Within these material frames, employees are supposed to encourage changes in the attitudes of non-digital users, while simultaneously making discretionary evaluations of the channel strategy on the front line.

The dance, or interaction, between client and frontline worker is influenced by the bureaucratic machine within which the dance unfolds. The bureaucratic machine is an integral part of welfare society, and it is difficult to do good and efficient social work without these tools (Ellingsen et al., 2021). At the same time, the very design of the bureaucratic machine might be altered somewhat, to improve the very dance in which one is entangled. A report from the Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, which is legally bound to review the work of NAV, criticised the effects of digitalisation and the channel strategy (Helsetilsynet, 2022). Though many citizens expressed satisfaction with the strategy, some were left out. The Norwegian Board of Health Supervision pointed out that the strategy, which aimed at reducing

the number of drop-ins, thereby also reduced opening hours. Further, as some citizens cannot for various reasons be digital (lacking bank-id, don't speak the language, or for mental and health reasons are unable to communicate digitally), their problems are exacerbated. NAV is the last resort for many citizens, and when this safety net does not work properly, we risk that people who were already struggling become even more desperate, pushing them further to the fringes of society.

This criticism was not lost on NAV, and the director of NAV said that NAV offices needed to expand their opening hours,[3] something which has already happened. The NAV office in our case study expanded from two hours to six, as have many other NAV offices as well. This external critique thus altered the organisation of the NAV office. However, nothing has been said about the very physical design and atmosphere of the NAV office, as a place where citizen and state meet, and how the reception area itself lays the groundwork for a good encounter. For example, NAVs design concept for their offices does not mention how users might experience visiting the reception area.[4] If social work is a core competency in NAV, as the director himself claims,[5] we need a reception area that enables the social aspect of doing work in these spaces to be possible. In the current double bind design of the NAV reception area, we argue it is difficult to establish a good dance between frontline worker and citizen. We need a reception area that creates the conditions in which interactions between client and frontline worker can develop productively and generate welfare for citizens. NAV's reception area represents the public encounter between state and citizen. The way we choose to design space sends a clear signal to the public in relation to how NAV receives citizens. All in all, we believe we need to lay the groundwork for a better dance, as the very dance itself hinges on a machinic bureaucracy, which should facilitate success.

---

3   21.04.2023: https://www.altinget.no/helse/artikkel/nav-direktoeren-vi-fungerer-daarligst-for-dem-som-trenger-det-mest

4   21.04.2023: https://www.ntl.no/Content/209001/cache=1625473520000/attr=C1F53FEDC6341BC3E0530100007FEFA2/Arealkonsept%20for%20Arbeids-%20og%20velferdsetaten%201.0.pdf

5   21.04.2023: https://fontene.no/nyheter/navdirektoren--sosialfag-er-en-kjernekompetanse-i-nav-6.47.913583.feabc10272

References

Akrich, M., & Latour, B. (1992). A summary of a convenient vocabulary for the semiotics of human and nonhuman assemblies. In W. E. Bijker & J. Law (Eds.), *Shaping technology/building society: Studies in sociotechnical change* (pp. 259–264). Massachusetts MIT press.

Anderson, B. (2004). Time-stilled space-slowed: How boredom matters. *Geoforum, 35*(6), 739–754. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.02.005

Anderson, B. (2006). Becoming and being hopeful: Towards a theory of affect. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 24*(5), 733–752. https://doi.org/10.1068/d393t

Bateson, G. (1971). The cybernetics of "self": A theory of alcoholism. *Psychiatry, 34*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1971.11023653

Bateson, G., Jackson, D. D., Haley, J., & Weakland, J. (1956). Toward a theory of schizophrenia. *Behavioral Science, 1*(4), 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830010402

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Sage.

Beck, U. (2008). World at risk: The new task of critical theory. *Development and Society, 37*(1), 1–21. http://isdpr.org/isdpr/publication/journal/37-1/01.pdf

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Breit, E., Egeland, C., Løberg, I. B., & Røhnebæk, M. T. (2021). Digital coping: How frontline workers cope with digital service encounters. *Social Policy & Administration, 55*(5), 833–847. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12664

Del Busso, L. (2011). Using photographs to explore the embodiment of pleasure in everyday life. In P. Reavey (Ed.), *Visual methods in psychology: Using and interpreting images in qualitative research* (pp. s. 43–54). Psychology Press.

Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October, 59*, 3–7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828

Ellingsen, P., Eriksson, R., & Tangnæs, E. (2021). Digital samhandling i den norske arbeids- og velferdsforvaltningen. Veiledernes arbeidssituasjon i en teknologisk samtid. *Fontene Forskning, 14*(2), 17–29. https://fontene.no/forskning/digital-samhandling-i-den-norske-arbeids-og-velferdsforvaltningen-veiledernes-arbeidssituasjon-i-en-teknologisk-samtid-6.584.876073.b7e50ca7a7

Fossestøl, K., Borg, E., & Breit, E. (2020). Nav i en ny tid? En evaluering av hvordan retningsvalgene i Stortingsmelding 33 implementeres på Nav-kontorene. In: Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University.

Foucault, M. (1973). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish*. Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics, 16*(1), 22–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648

Foucault, M. (1995). *Seksualitetens historie: 1: Viljen til viten*. EXIL.

Halvorsen, L. R., Løkke, J. A., & Granmo, S. (2018). Studentaktiv forskning som virkemiddel for å utdanne profesjonsutøvere som også kan atferdsanalyse (Student-active research as a tool in educating professionals that master applied behavior analysis).

Helsetilsynet. (2022). *Landsomfattende undersøkelse av tilgjengelighet til sosiale tjenester i Nav 2020–2021*. https://www.helsetilsynet.no/publikasjoner/rapport-fra-helsetilsynet/2022/landsomfattende-undersoekelse-av-tilgjengelighet-til-sosiale-tjenester-i-nav-oppsummering/

Kusenbach, M. (2003). Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography, 4*(3), 455–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343007

Larsson, K. K., & Haldar, M. (2021). Can computers automate welfare? Norwegian efforts to make welfare policy more effective. *Journal of Extreme Anthropology, 5*(1), 56–77. https://doi.org/10.5617/jea.8231

Lundberg, K. G., & Syltevik, L. J. (2016). Everyday interaction at the front-line: The case of the all-in-one bureaucracy. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography, 5*(2), 152–166. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-12-2015-0026

Lupton, D. (2016). Digital risk society. In A. Burgess, A. Alemanno, & J. Zinn (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of risk studies* (pp. 301–309). Routledge.

Lyon, D. (2002). Everyday surveillance: Personal data and social classifications. *Information, Communication & Society, 5*(2), 242–257. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180210130806

Løberg, I. B. (2022). Utviklingsoptimisme kan skjule økonomiske og sosiale kostnader i den digitale forvaltningen. Retrieved from https://www.nav.no/no/nav-og-samfunn/kunnskap/analyser-fra-nav/arbeid-og-velferd/arbeid-og-velferd/arbeid-og-velferd-nr.3-2022/utviklingsoptimisme-kan-skjule-okonomiske-og-sosiale-kostnader-i-den-digitale-forvaltningen

Nord, C., & Högström, E. (2017). *Caring architecture: Institutions and relational practices*. Caring Architecture.

Petticrew, M., Semple, S., Hilton, S., Creely, K. S., Eadie, D., Ritchie, D., … Hurley, F. (2007). Covert observation in practice: Lessons from the evaluation of the prohibition of smoking in public places in Scotland. *BMC Public Health, 7*(1), 204. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-7-204

Podschuweit, N. (2021). How ethical challenges of covert observations can be met in practice. *Research Ethics, 17*(3), 309–327. https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161211008218

Rose, G., Degen, M., & Basdas, B. (2010). More on 'big things': Building events and feelings. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 35*(3), 334–349. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00388.x

Røhnebæk, M. (2016). Fra bakkebyråkrati til skjermbyråkrati. *Tidsskrift for Velferdsforskning, 19*(04), 288–304. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-3076-2016-04-01

Shaw, R. (2015). Bringing Deleuze and Guattari down to earth through Gregory Bateson: Plateaus, rhizomes and ecosophical subjectivity. *Theory, Culture & Society, 32*(7–8), 151–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414524451

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015a). Audit culture revisited: Rankings, ratings, and the reassembling of society. *Current Anthropology, 56*(3), 421–444. https://doi.org/10.1086/681534

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015b). Governing by numbers: Audit culture, rankings and the new world order. *Social Anthropology, 23*(1), 22–28. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12098

Tjora, A. H. (2021). *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis* (4th ed.). Gyldendal.