RESEARCH PUBLICATION

CHAPTER 7

'You Become Very Powerless in This System, the Digital System' – Becoming a Digital User in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administrations

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Abstract: This paper shows how social service users experience the process of becoming digital users in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The main objective is to examine the impact of e-government reforms on social service users, by exploring the channel strategy in NAV, from service user perspectives. Our research question is: *How do users experience becoming a digital user in NAV?* We explore the question empirically by examining experiences from service users' perspectives, based on findings from qualitative interviews with people having substance abuse and mental health challenges.

An analysis of our findings shows that NAV may have failed to recognise the complexity of becoming a digital user in a digital social welfare system. This complexity may cause less user participation, and thus further marginalise people in vulnerable positions.

Becoming a digital user in NAV is referred to as a 'faceless position', which involves a kind of powerlessness, and also requires digital skills that exclude those without them. In this respect, we argue for more attention to juridical and ethical dilemmas to prevent digital unpredictability, and risks of systemic injustice regarding current data-centric developments in social services in NAV.

Keywords: digital services users, systemic injustice, digital welfare

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Introduction

Digitalisation has become a leading organising principle in the Norwegian public sector. Norway is also most advanced in the digitalisation of this sector (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2019), ranking at the top in Europe in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and online services. According to Madsbu (2016), coordination, efficiency, and simplification for the user are three main factors explaining the increase in digital public services in Norway.

Digitalisation of the public sector is often characterised by optimism and faith in digital management (Germundsson, 2022). This optimism and faith tend to create high expectations, with less attention paid to outcomes. This could therefore entail a risk of technologies being adopted before their actual consequences are understood (Lindgren et al., 2019). This paradox calls attention to the fact that the transformational effect of digital technologies might be a double-edged sword, generating new types of societal challenges. This necessitates a critical understanding of the actual impact of the expansion of digital technologies in the domain of social services (Løberg, 2022).

The Norwegian government's current digital strategy involves becoming efficient, and utilising the information digital reality can offer, while placing service users in the center (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2019). Digital administration can give users easier access to services, but also requires expertise (Løberg, 2022). Thus, digital administration is often difficult to navigate for users with insufficient digital competence, and complex support needs (Fugletveit, 2021).

This can result in digital exclusion with costs for both individuals and society. Hence, whether the public sector can achieve the creation of *both* effective *and* user-oriented services often depends on the complexity of users' needs (Løberg, 2022). The increased use of digital social services might fail to recognise the complexity and variations in the needs of service users, and lead to further marginalisation of vulnerable people by placing them in 'homogenising categories' (Harris, 2020, p. 2).

Although Norway ranks at the top in the use of ICT in Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD (2017), highlights the need for stronger governance and coordination of this work, as well as for clarification of roles and responsibilities between sectors and administrative levels. Coordination, efficiency, and simplification for the user are evident in the case of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), and its implementation of the channel strategy introduced in 2015 (Breit, 2019). The aim of the channel strategy is twofold: firstly, to improve services in terms of helping service users receive correct answers; and secondly, to improve service efficiency by freeing up resources for one of NAV`s primary objectives, which is motivating unemployed citizens to return to work (Breit et al., 2019; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015, 2016).

The channel strategy in NAV has led to a further emphasis on digital processing in communication and decision making within NAV. Service users are routed away from resource demanding, face-to-face meetings towards digital channels, which are less resource intensive for case management (Breit et al., 2019). The justification for this digital shift was to release more time for close follow-ups of vulnerable clients. In reality, this development led to shorter opening hours and more communication using various digital solutions, creating a need for increased digital literacy among service users and counsellors (Løberg, 2021).

Digital Social Services Becoming 'Faceless Interaction'

More emphasis on digital self-service solutions means that both service user and counsellor must relate to multiple digital solutions (Breit et al., 2019). Fugletveit and Lofthus (2021) have conceptualised these changes in relations in NAV as 'faceless interaction', referring to digital interactions in NAV between users, frontline workers, and the welfare system. These elements form parts of a closed circuit that is widely influenced by technology. In our context, the closed circuit involves three actors: the NAV service user, the counsellor, and the digital system. Faceless interaction has contributed to increased activity among service users in the production of their own services. This can be interpreted as a form of participation (Løberg, 2022). An example of this is the increased use of digital self-service solutions, which allow users to solve administrative problems on their own by collecting information themselves or submitting applications online. Breit, Egeland, Løberg, and Røhnebæk (2020) demonstrate how this new self-service solution has altered case workers' routines and coping strategies.

The overall intention of digital social services is to produce better services, create a simpler everyday life, and enable more efficient use of resources in public enterprises (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2019). Hence, digital social services have in fact 'distanced bureaucrats from the citizenry by relying on digital systems and platforms to facilitate interactions' (Larsson, 2021, p. 3).

'Techno-digestion' and Risks of 'Systemic Injustice'

The term 'techno-digestion', introduced by Haraway (Haraway, 1987, p. 18), refers to the way we process information to suit the demands and needs of technology. The term refers to limiting human subjects simply by using nonhuman technological objects. Haraway's (1987) critique is directed at the use of quantifiable information allowing for universal translations. This undermines individual differences among users in a welfare context. More emphasis on digital interaction among users suffering from substance abuse and mental health challenges increases the risk of further 'homogenising categories' (Harris, 2020, p. 2), when in fact the complexity of users' everyday lives both unites them as a group, but also separates them through individual differences and needs. This is an important issue in the ongoing distribution of digital social services in NAV.

Digital social services in NAV affect case management, communication between service user and counsellor, and front desk operations (Breit, 2019). Busch and Henriksen (2018) suggest that relational and professional values are weakened in a digital discretion system in the interests of/in the name of ethical and democratic values. A crucial question is how these changes impact relationships with social services users. Digital social services in NAV might redraw the boundary between state and civil society, as well as interfere with tasks and public employees' professional roles, as many studies have already shown (see Breit, 2019; Greve, 2012; Jæger & Löfgren, 2010; Løberg, 2022; Melin & Axelsson, 2009; Røhnebæk, 2016). Public service organisations are transformed into 'digital agencies' (Dunleavy et al. 2006, p. 225), thus 'making (able) citizens do more' (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013, p. 6).

The overall risk of 'homogenising categories' (Harris, 2020, p. 2) and greater marginalisation of vulnerable service users as consequences of increased 'techno-digestion' (Haraway, 1987) in social services might be termed as elements of 'systemic injustice'. Haslanger (2023) characterises systemic injustice as occurring in a social system of networks of various relations that develop from social practice. 'Systemic injustice' occurs 'when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that is self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it' (Haslanger, 2023, p.22).

Service Users with Complex Needs Becoming Digital Users

Digital social services have contributed to changes in relations between counsellors, service users, and technology (Breit et al., 2019; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Pedersen & Wilkinson, 2019). According to Pors (2015, p. 178), digital social services require the introduction of new tasks, which change service providers' professional practice towards a greater emphasis on welfare support rather than on service. In a previous paper (Fugletveit & Lofthus, 2021), our purpose was to explore how digitalisation of social services works for NAV service users with mental health and other co-occurring challenges. Our findings indicated that digital solutions in NAV have become a crucial part of 'faceless interaction' involving self-service and more distant service providers (Larsson, 2021; Løberg, 2021). Our aim in this paper is rather to explore how service users with complex needs respond and act in a digital context.

The empirical sample consists of service users with complex needs, meaning a situation where multiple social problems exist simultaneously and require assistance in different ways. Our research question is: *How do users experience becoming a digital user in NAV?* Our main task is to explore how users with complex needs experience the transformation into a NAV digital user. What does it mean for users with complex needs to become digital users? We explore these questions empirically by examining experiences from services users' perspectives, based on findings from qualitative interviews with people having substance abuse issues and mental health challenges.

People stuggling with substance abuse and mental health challenges are not homogeneous, and their complex situations are experienced in various and sundry ways (Fugletveit, 2021). This complexity includes poor living conditions, poverty, unemployment, criminality, lack of meaningful activity, and other individual challenges in their everyday lives, which require extensive follow-ups from health and welfare services (Lofthus et al., 2018).

We argue that involving users of social services is crucial to understand how digital reforms are applied and change practice. Exploring this from the perspectives of social services users is also a response to the call for empirical research into the role of citizens in the processes that make digitalisation possible (Broomfield & Reutter, 2022). Drawing on citizen experience also has the potential to expand practical knowledge about: i) how the digitalised systems that organise the modern welfare state may constitute and reshape the identities and experiences of users of social services; and ii) how becoming digital users of social services may involve a risk of systemic injustice.

Methodology, Methods, and Sample

Transformative Paradigm and 'Systemic Injustice' Considerations

As indicated above, the main aim of our study was to examine marginalised groups' experiences of becoming users of digital social services. We chose a transformative paradigm as our philosophical framework (Mertens, 2017, 2019). According to Mertens (2017), this framework is based on the following four assumptions: 1) The axiological assumption relates to the ethical importance of the lived experiences of people in marginalised groups, in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Our study focuses on the voices of people dealing with substance abuse and mental health challenges; 2) The ontological assumption privileges multiple versions of a phenomenon described by a group. This emphasises the importance of capturing the diversity of opinions among research participants; 3) The epistemological assumption demands a critical sensitivity to the researchers' lenses and how their own views shape the research; and 4) The methodological assumption requires a meaningful inclusion of service users' voices. In our study, this was achieved partly through the inclusion of a researcher with personal experience as a user of NAV services.

In accordance with the transformative paradigm, researchers have an ethical and moral obligation to describe possible wrongs in society (Mertens, 2019). Our concern is that marginalised groups (comprising vulnerable individuals with complex needs) may become excluded or further marginalised in digital encounters with the welfare system. This is a crucial ethical and social justice issue, which requires further attention and knowledge concerning the actual consequences of digital social services from the users' perspectives. We argue that systemic injustice can serve as a key concept to guide the examination of *both* the experiences of digital users of NAV services, *and* power structures in the complex digital social services system. As stated above, 'systemic injustice' occurs 'when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that is self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it' (Haslanger, 2023, p. 22).

Methods, Recruitment and Sample

The empirical sample is based on a qualitative design and consists of individual interviews and focus groups. The topics discussed in both were related to participants' experiences of digital social services in NAV. We have taken a multimethod research approach combining two qualitative methods, thus giving us access to a wide range of voices and perspectives (Mik-Meyer, 2020; Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2023). Our rationale for choosing both individual and group interviews (focus groups) involved both strategic and ethical considerations. Strategic reasons related to getting access to as many participants as possible. During the recruitment process we found it challenging to recruit young people for focus groups. This challenge was addressed by offering the participants individual interviews. Group interviews enabled us to be efficient while maximising the valuable knowledge and insights (Silverman, 2017) gained from our participants' reported experiences of becoming digital users in NAV.

In the recruitment process, we contacted several institutions to recruit participants in various age groups from non-governmental organisations, and local mental health and substance abuse services. Our rationale for doing so was to ensure that the participants faced complex needs in their everyday lives. The sample consists of participants with experience of NAV's services over time, mainly related to unemployment, work assessment allowances, and disability benefits. Service users in our sample had substance abuse and mental health challenges, and consisted of 25 service users with complex needs, referring to a situation where multiple social problems coexist and require assistance/support in different ways.

The sample included 11 females and 14 males, ranging from 19 to 65 years old, with temporary or permanent benefits in NAV.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles regarding conducting both individual interviews and focus groups meant ensuring participant choice. Some participants, especially the young ones, preferred individual interviews. However, some of the other participants, mainly older, preferred focus groups.

Our research question highlights the consequences of digitalising social welfare by emphasising the ethical consequences emerging among users, in their interactions with NAV. We start with users with complex problems, some finding themselves in a vulnerable situation in society, in terms of access to work, activity, and relationships. The respondents have utilised services from NAV for longer periods of their lives, and they have ample experiences, for better or worse, which are also important to highlight as ethical issues in relation to digital interactions in social welfare.

Further emphasising the point stated above, we repeat that in accordance with the transformative paradigm, researchers have an ethical and moral obligation to describe possible wrongs of society (Mertens, 2019). Our concern is that marginalised groups may become excluded or further marginalised through digital encounters with the welfare system. This is an ethical issue, which demands more attention and knowledge about actual consequences of digitalisation in social services from user's perspectives, and whether digital social services enforce systemic injustice.

In the analysis that follows, participants' names are pseudonyms.

Analysis of Findings

Our analysis drew on Braun and Clarke's (2022) description of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is 'flexible' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57), which suggests a variety of analytic processes. Our analysis of the transcribed material from the individual qualitative interviews and focus groups, was an iterative process, focusing particularly on themes that pertain to *power* and *becoming digital users* in NAV. We explored terms such as *trust*, *efficiency*, *predictability*, *feedback*, and *skills* in the transcribed material.

The findings are structured as four main themes and thematic categories: 1) Powerlessness/disempowerment ('You become very powerless in the digital system’); 2) Digital response as both digital independence and digital relationship; 3) Unpredictability of digital feedback and doubts regarding the effectiveness of the digital service transformation; 4) Manoeuvres in the digital domain.

‘You Become Very Powerless in This System, the Digital System’

Our analysis shows that some participants’ levels of trust in their own digital competence appeared to be low. Several participants reported difficulties in trusting their digital competence when they tried to navigate the social services website in their homes. Furthermore, accessing their case records was complicated for some. James, one of the participants, described the challenges relating to accessing his case records on the social services website as follows:

> I found it extremely difficult. I do not know enough about data and how to use it. So, for me, just writing a message on the website under “My Page” and asking for a meeting with the case manager is a challenge. I can do that, but from there to dealing with my case… it is hopeless. So, for me, it has been hard.

James strongly emphasised that digital interaction is a complicated and incredibly stressful situation, for which there is no support. A lack of skills in being able to find his case records on his personal page on the NAV website causes uncertainty, and dependence on caseworkers in NAV. Yet according to the respondents, the caseworkers in NAV constantly replace each other, so there is always a new caseworker. Paula, one of the respondents, expressed her frustration about this as follows:

> If I have talked to someone, I find that next time they have changed my caseworker. They change very often, and it is so frustrating!

The lack of continuity/stability in personal support appeared to dominate some participants’ experience of digital interactions. Paula and other respondents expressed difficulties with technical elements, but also with the fact that there is less personal contact between service users and caseworkers. To some extent this creates difficulties, since service users do not get the answers they need. Previously, service users could phone their caseworkers in NAV directly, and be updated on their case. This is one of the most radical changes for many participants in our study. Many seemed very disappointed and troubled about this change.

Another problem relating to digital solutions appears to be the lack of control over one's case. One of the participants, Peter, describes this in terms of a feeling of being disabled:

> In other words, you become disabled by things you somehow have no control over. You become very powerless in the digital system. When you call them (NAV) and talk with a (recorded) voice, or you have contact, they should register your information. But that is true sometimes, and sometimes not. When you then refer to something in your case that has not been registered, and then there is something that is registered, and still other things that are not registered, it's hard to convince NAV about what is missing, because it has not been registered, and they (NAV) suspect that you are lying. So... I cannot do anything about it. And then it becomes, in a way, a vulnerable system for some. And why something does not sometimes work, I don't know, but anyway there are a lot of conversations that both my employer and I have had with NAV, in connection with my case, which are missing in the system (NAV) and are not registered. In other words, you become disabled by things you somehow have no control over.

Losing control, as Peter describes, was found to be of central importance to some participants in this study, and demonstrates feelings of being unable to communicate with the digital system. A number of participants appeared to experience digital interactions as unpredictable, in the sense that they did not trust the digital system, and preferred non digital feedback from their counsellors.

Digital Response as Both Digital Independence and Digital Relationship

Participants in this study reported a variety of experiences of digital responses in NAV. Experiences were at times contradictory, which highlights the complexity of the issues at hand. For example, some respondents asserted that digital communication was more predictable than face-to-face communication. They pointed out that the digital encounter could improve service efficiency due to shorter and more transparent case management on their own personal page on the NAV website (my nav.no), especially in cases that did not require many meetings between service providers and service users. One of the participants, Victoria, explains how digital solutions worked well for her without any assistance from counsellors in NAV as follows:

> I reapplied for a work assessment allowance after a period of work. This process was digital, and it was predictable. The answers were good, and it was a well-organised and positive experience. I felt no need to meet a person. It was OK to sort it out on my own screen. I got what I asked for, and within a reasonable time limit.

Evidently, Victoria had no need for additional help as the digital relationship worked well, and her application process was completed without a face-to-face meeting. Victoria illustrates how digital relations can also contribute to independence. Other participants described digital communication on their NAV personal page as a tool for establishing digital relationships with counsellors in NAV. Digital communication on "my nav.no" may demonstrate case management developments and one of the participants, Charles, illustrates how digital relationships with counsellors may work as follows:

> My counsellor helps me by reading the activity plan as a diary, taking notes and 'seeing me through it'. That gives the counsellor a better overview.

According to Charles, the digital responses established a relationship between user and counsellor in order to control the activity plan, but they also established a relationship helping to navigate digital interactions in NAV at large.

Another participant, Caroline, also pointed out the possibility for dialogue and relationship with her counsellor based on digital tools:

> My activity plan (on the website) makes it possible to have a dialogue with my counsellor. To call NAV means waiting. It is a problem that not everybody has a computer, because NAV needs us to use the website.

Caroline implies that ordinary modes of communication, such as using the phone, are difficult in the world of digitalisation and create more uncertainty in case management. On the other hand, using the available technological solutions makes case management easier, which in some ways affords the service user a sense of control. Although Caroline found the use of the NAV website convenient, she was concerned about people with fewer digital skills. Even though a number of the study participants do not appear to mind operating without regular face-to-face meetings and in a faceless environment, on the whole, it is important for participants to know who they are dealing with. Our analysis shows that digitalisation requires various kinds of communication between actors. Although face-to-face interaction may enable more substantial communication, digital encounters were experienced as adequate by service users who were digitally literate. On the other hand, service users with limited digital knowledge described digital solutions as incomprehensible and cumbersome.

Unpredictability of Digital Feedback and Doubts Regarding the Effectiveness of the Digital Service Transformation

Another topic regarding digital public encounters we identified in our data, related to digital feedback from counsellors. As indicated above, the shift to digital solutions changed the nature of service users' contact with counsellors in NAV. Participants in our study reported not knowing when to expect digital feedback from counsellors. One of the participants, Mick, was very troubled by the digital solutions, because of what he described as unpredictability in terms of the timing of decisions in case management:

> The information works well on the digital website, but the challenge is to know who your caseworker is in the digital services. It's great to have digital services when you know how to handle them, but not knowing if things will take a day or three days, and you haven't had any real dialogue with your caseworker yet, so you don't know who's behind the keyboard. If you've met the person only once, you have no confidence. How are you going to do it then? Not only to know who your caseworker is, but also how long it will take to get a decision in your case.

Mick expressed a lack of trust and confidence in the digital system. As a result of the unpredictability of feedback, some participants also felt a greater sense of responsibility for their own cases.

For example, Oscar, another participant, maintained that digital services led to more individual responsibility. Like Mick above, Oscar and some other respondents appeared very frustrated and confused, since they did not know when to expect feedback from the digital system. Oscar expressed his increased frustration about the unpredictability of digital feedback as follows:

> I think it's a really great way to do it, if you just had a little more information about 'When do I actually get feedback?' Because there you tend to have deadlines, and you're not quite sure if this is what you're going to submit, and so on. It's difficult to get specific answers about what you must do. You kind of must figure it out for yourself. That's what's a bit silly about digitalisation, that you must figure out a lot yourself. So then, but no one taught me how to do it, so I just had to go about it myself. It's impossible to find out yourself, when you don't know the system, it's hard. It should be like, the first time you're with the caseworker, you just sort of go through it once. It took six months before I realised how to get hold of my caseworker online. It's supposed to be more efficient. I understand that for those who use it, it's probably easier to deal with in a way, but it gets very impersonal then. And then you run the risk that you've already given all the information, but then you still must explain what you're going to do because they often don't know what you've already submitted.

Our study found both advantages and disadvantages in digital encounters, but revealed a definite need for a greater degree of certainty in terms of case management given the 'digital unpredictability' discussed above. It could be argued, therefore, that participants expressed a degree of doubt as to whether the digital transformation of social services in NAV is effective.

Manoeuvres in the Digital Domain

Johnny, one of the respondents, compared NAV services before and after the digital transformation. According to Johnny, the staff's newly acquired digital routines may be experienced as more limited help compared to the past, when social service users could get instant help and answers to various questions in the NAV office. Johnny presents this argument as follows:

> Everything needs to be digitalised, you see, but I personally know that before social services were digitalised, you could talk to people who knew about social security, welfare things, unemployment, you got an answer. Today, you're very much at the mercy of who you're talking to.

According to Johnny, the expansion of digital social services made it more difficult for service users to be informed about important elements of the social welfare system. Johnny alluded to a system of mutual scrutiny involving both service users and counsellors, that appears to have been lost in many ways following digital transformation.

Furthermore, many participants expressed considerable frustration at NAV counsellors' digital behaviour, such as being unavailable and hard to reach for the service user. One of the participants, Nick, characteristically, said:

> The counsellor here hasn't called me often, it was just, 'I'll call you!' The only time I remember her calling me was when I put a message on Facebook to the local group asking for a lawyer, because I saw a lot of arguing between NAV and my employer. Then it took about one or two hours after I posted the message on Facebook that she called me and advised me to delete the message on Facebook, because it would put me in a bad light with my employer. But I think she was more concerned about her reputation, or she would never have called me.

In his account, Nick describes himself as being in an inferior position in his digital encounters with his counsellor. Hard-to-reach behaviour on Nick's counsellor's part led to a rather desperate situation, in which Nick to some extent precipitated feedback from his counsellor (a call from her) by threatening.

Manoeuvring in NAV's digital domain requires digital skills. As we have shown, digital encounters in NAV involve less human presence and greater dependence on technology, thus resembling developments in digital society in general. One of the participants, Sue, drew a parallel between banks and NAV, in terms of the movement from physical encounters to digital service. Sue said:

> It's like banks, there are no people anymore. It's not like that anymore. In the end, we may end up with NAV as a receptionist, then there are plenty of screens around that can communicate with some caseworker. I don't know if that's the future. I don't care, but again, some have more digital skills than others, and I guess they're not going to create a system that only works for those with digital skills. A lot of people don't understand how to use a computer, but they still need help.

Stressing variations in digital skills among service users, Sue warned against a development where service users` digital competence becomes pivotal to exercising fundamental rights, such as accessing social welfare benefits.

Overall, participants emphasised how various digital skills, both technical skills and knowledge about social media, were important tools to be able to navigate the digital system, and secure their fundamental rights in NAV.

Discussion

Becoming a digital user in NAV is experienced as marginal analogue support in vulnerable situations, and indicates that digital social services both strengthens and weakens the end user’s power and opportunity to influence their case management. According to Haraway (1987, p. 19), cybernetic (feedback controlled) systems theory applied to digital interactions developed on ‘a theory of language and control’. Our study shows that becoming a digital user involves challenges in translating into coding. This problem or challenge is revealed by the fact that digital social services consist of operations of coding that also, in accordance with Haraway (1987), determine quantifiable elements allowing universal translations. This leads to less activity among service users in the production of their own services, and promotes less security for the end user’s needs in order to counteract systemic injustice.

Our analysis shows that becoming a digital user involves, to some extent, digital faceless interactions, which deprive service users of their rights and power. It is a part of NAV’s power structure that makes it possible for the system to communicate both inside the system, as a part of case management, and outwards – to the clients (Løberg, 2022). Our analysis also shows that faceless welfare service was difficult to deal with, and user descriptions coincided with the overall NAV system’s demand for digital skills. Digital technologies undermine your ability to negotiate and deliberate in relation to your own problems. To ‘become powerless’ implies that you do not own your own problem, and that you have fewer options or the ability to define your own problem. Therefore, to become a digital user in NAV means or implies lower user involvement.

This study contains various experiences of becoming a digital user in NAV. In sum, the analysis indicates increased uncertainty and lack of power in becoming a digital service user. This may be a hindrance for digital users to be able to receive just case management, and to secure their juridical and social rights in the Norwegian welfare state. In this matter we argue for concern towards increasing systemic injustice related to maintaining an unjust structure. This structure, in practice, forces subjects’ identities to conform to the new system. These findings make the concept of systemic injustice relevant (Haslanger, 2023). Lack of trust in digital users’ knowledge and difficulties in accessing their own cases, reveal some of the realities and consequences of digital welfare related to the power of digital users. Digital users are expected to accept that a significant part of their case management fits the cyborg bureaucracy's needs (Breit et al., 2019; Larsson, 2021; Løberg, 2022). However, our study also shows that becoming a digital user gives digital independence. The participants who had digital competence could experience this intention as relevant and essential. Others in vulnerable situations, who are digitally illiterate, become more marginalised in faceless interactions. This acknowledgment is critical to understand, as one of the consequences of digital interactions.

Digital Social Services Promote Digital Unpredictability for the Faceless Users

Digital solutions are described as both effective and ineffective at the same time. Breit et al. (2020) outline strategies counsellors use to survive in a digital world, which the authors call digital coping. Various means were utilised by the counsellors to meet the demand for increased availability, and more responsibility for service users, as well as noise reduction. Increased transparency in digital settings led to cautious behaviour and use of language. Løberg (2022) maintains that digital encounters have social costs regarding the demand for digital skills among NAV's digital users. Our findings show service users' responses to this digital coping, and indicate that digital services are effective in matters limited to specific areas, such as submitting an employment status form and seeking information. The participants expressed uncertainty regarding whether digital solutions worked well for them. This is another description corresponding to the definition of systemic injustice, in which the tasks, roles, and identities of the system actors become shaped by the system's needs (Haslanger, 2023).

Overall, the participants responded that digital services were efficient. This statement was related to whether they were computer literate and knew how to log on and register. The chat function on the entrance page "nav.no" was considered less reliable, because the chat text was not saved, and it was difficult to prove what was said by NAV, due to this impersonal/anonymous service. Nevertheless, participants seemed pleased with the chat function on the website, My NAV, which gave digital users easy access to their counsellors, and may be interpreted as a strengthening of power for them.

One aim of the digitalisation of NAV was efficiency (Breit, 2019; Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2015-2016), and Madsbu (2016) emphasises that a digital process is motivated by coordination, simplification, and efficiency, and argues: ‘These justifications are closely connected to key normative ideas of NPM on how and why modernization and reform processes should be carried out within the public sector’ (p. 171). Even though expectations were not always met in this digital transformation, this does not affect the commitment to go all in for digital solutions in the future. Madsbu’s (2016) argument seems relevant in the case of NAV. Løberg (2021) argues that digital efficiency sparks a need for innovative services to support the impression that digital transformation is being advanced.

It is essential to question whether and how digital practice is profitable for all involved: the NAV organisation, the individual counsellor, and the digital users. Technology tends to precede administrative and human practice, and transformation seems to be woven together with optimism and faith in digital management, without knowing the consequences (Germundsson, 2022; Lindgren et al., 2019). Our findings show that digital social services promote ‘digital unpredictability’ among digital users, and trigger a need for confirmation from counsellors in ‘digital digestion’ in NAV.

Becoming a Digital User Indicates a Faceless Position in the Social Welfare System

Overall, our inductive approach in this paper shows that becoming a digital user in NAV involves processes that force the social service user into a faceless position. This position involves advantages and disadvantages, and contains powerless situations, unpredictable feedback, and efficiency. The term faceless position evolves in favour of the system, organised as a top-down principle in the public sector in Norway, in favour of optimism and faith in digital management (Germundsson, 2022). In practice and regarding our empirical sample, we must emphasise the outcome and impact that digital social welfare creates, as well as the overall risks of becoming a digital user.

Our analysis shows that becoming a digital user in practice might create a double-edged sword in generating new societal challenges. Our concern is that this issue is linked to the overall risk of ‘homogenising categories’. In contrast, the digital user in practice has less impact on adjusting their needs and social support. This fact shows the need for knowledge about the actual consequences of the expansion of digital technologies in distributing social services. It also leads to consideration of ethical assumptions and juridical rights in order to prevent further marginalisation as a consequence of increased 'techno-digestion' (Haraway, 1987). The expansive use of digital platforms in closed circuits might reduce user involvement and contribute to a feeling of powerlessness, thereby promoting systemic injustice. This demands more attention to striving to increase transparency in providing welfare services to citizens.

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