Emerald Insight

Journal of Organizational Ethnography

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Becoming digital – passages to service in the digitized bureaucracy

Anja Svejgaard Pors

Department of Management and Administration,
Metropolitan University College, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of e-government reforms on street-level bureaucrats' professionalism and relation to citizens, thus demonstrating how the bureaucratic encounter unfolds in the digital era.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on an ethnographic study of frontline work at a citizen service centre in a Danish municipality, and draws on empirical material generated through observations, field notes, interviews and policy documents.

Findings – The paper shows that e-government changes the mode of professionalism in citizen service from service to support. An ethnographic account of how digital reforms are implemented in practice shows how street-level bureaucrat's classic tasks such as specialized casework are being reconfigured into educational tasks that promote the idea of "becoming digital". In the paper, the author argues that the work of "becoming digital" in client processing entails two interconnected changes in frontline agents' practice: de-specialization of the task and intensified informality in relation to citizens. As a result, the frontline agent works as an explorative generalist whose professional skills and personal competencies are blurred.

Originality/value – The study contributes to ethnographic research in public administration by combining two separate subfields, e-government and street-level bureaucracy, to discern recent transformations in public service delivery. In the digital era, tasks, control and equality are distributed in ways that call for symmetrical and relational approaches to studying street-level bureaucracy. The argument goes beyond technological or social determinism to find a fruitful intermediary position pointing at technological change as having both constraining and enabling effects.

Keywords Ethnography, E-government, Public administration, Digital era governance,
Public service delivery, Street-level bureaucracy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

> The type of public service we can expect tomorrow is not necessarily the same as the one we know today. Thus, the digitization of public service creates a new relation between citizens and the public sector (The Danish Government *et al.*, 2011b, p. 6, author's translation).

In recent years a wide range of digital reforms have been implemented internationally, thus leading an ever-growing number of increasingly complex service areas to become digitized (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006; OECD, 2005; European Commission, 2014). E-government and digital reforms are mainly analysed from a macro perspective as new ways of organizing public administration and service delivery (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013; Pollitt and Boukaert, 2011, p. 122ff). Consequently, research into the practical impacts of digital reforms on public service delivery needs to be done (Buffat, 2013; Lipsky, 1980/2010). Ethnographic, detailed accounts of new tasks in the bureaucratic encounter between citizen and authority (Hasenfeld *et al.*, 1987) can reveal how e-government works in practice, as well as fuel discussions about the role of street-level bureaucrats in public administration and policy implementation.

This case study of a citizen service centre in a Danish municipality explores the impacts of e-government reforms on frontline agents' professionalism and relation to citizens in a street-level bureaucratic encounter. The analysis shows that digital reforms are changing these service provider's professional mode from welfare service to support. Digitization policy spawns new tasks that require street-level bureaucrats to guide, prompt and produce learning for the citizen while also promoting the policy of the digital era. I argue that contemporary political demands for e-government entail two interconnected changes in frontline agents' work to provide citizen services: de-specialization of the task and intensified informality in relations with citizens. These findings give rise to a discussion of the effects of digitization policy, in particular how the distinction between frontline agents' professional skills and personal competencies becomes blurred in the contemporary digital welfare state.

Theoretical landscape

An extensive amount of the critical literature on professions and public management (e.g. Budd, 2007; Healy, 2005; Newman and Clarke, 2009) focuses on how the shift from traditional bureaucrat to professional service provider deskills and reskills the public servant, for example, by shifting from knowledge and training acquired in specialized fields to required "personality skills" and skills often associated with successful sales workers (Niaconachie, 1993). Although inspired by themes addressed in the critical literature, this paper aims at providing a more nuanced analysis of the bureaucratic encounter in the digital era, drawing on ethnographic accounts that indicate both the constraining and the enabling effects of re-professionalizing practice. E-government has remained relatively unresearched from both an ethnographic and a street-level perspective of professionalism in public administration. Reviews of e-government literature (Grönlund, 2005; Norris and Lloyd, 2006; Titah and Barki, 2006; Heeks and Bailur, 2007; Lee, 2010; Andersen *et al.*, 2010; Hardy and Williams, 2011; Buffat, 2013) describe a field dominated by a confused positivism that is overly optimistic about digitization. E-government is portrayed as a undeveloped research field attempting to emulate the hard sciences (Raadschelders, 2011, p. 916), and the literature primarily presents e-government as having an enabling effect, for example, as a means of upgrading and upskilling bureaucratic professions.

To study e-government, one must take into account that the contours of public administration and bureaucracy have been blurred over the past decades (Du Gay, 2008, p. 336; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The traditional ideal of public sector organizations reflected Weber's legal-rational model, which described bureaucracy as hierarchical, rule-enforcing, impersonal in the application of laws and composed of members with well-defined formal qualifications and specialized technical knowledge of rules and procedures (Weber, 1978, pp. 220-221). Today, bureaucracy is influenced by new descriptions of public management and governance conceptualized as New Public Management, New Public Governance or the Neo-Weberian State. The different models do not replace the classic ideals of bureaucracy, but public sector models and reforms add new layers that overlap to create a more hybrid ideal of contemporary public sector governance and practice (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, p. 8). Elements of these layers are present in what Dunleavy *et al.* (2006) call "Digital Era Governance", which reintegrates public administration organizations and re-unifies services around client groups as well as sets such objectives as efficiency, transparency and client co-production of welfare services (Alford, 2009). Public service organizations are

transformed into "digital agencies" (Dunleavy *et al.* 2006, p. 225), thus "making (able) citizens do more" (Margretts and Dunleavy, 2013, p. 6). The theory of "Digital Era Governance" is an apt diagnosis of some general changes in public governance. However, it fails to capture how digital reforms change the bureaucratic encounter in practice, e.g., how new modes of bureaucratic practice are applied to handle "unable citizens" in the digital era. Digital reforms might redraw the boundary between state and civil society (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 42) and are said to intrude on the organization as well as interfere with tasks and public employees' professional roles (Greve, 2012; Jæger and Löfgren, 2010; Melin and Axelsson, 2009). This paper provides an organizational ethnography of e-government practices that indicates both the enabling and the constraining effects of the bureaucratic encounter between citizen and state.

Method
Organizational ethnography (Rhodes, 2011) and ethnographic research in the field of science and technology studies (e.g. Akrich, 1995; Latour, 2005; Svenningsen, 2004, Zuboff, 1988) suggest descriptions of organizational everyday life and explorations of the role technology plays in the construction of daily practices and relations as part of a continual organizing process with intended and unintended opportunities and limitations (Zuboff, 1988). As always, frontline agents are assumed to implement political strategies in practice by gatekeeping and managing the relation to citizens on behalf of the state. Thus, public policy can be studied not only by taking a macro-perspective or looking among government elites (Rhodes, 2007, 2011) but also by examining how frontline workers navigate in the lower hierarchical levels of public sector organizations (Boll, 2012, 2013; Buffat, 2013; Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Pors, 2012). Ethnographic approaches to public administration and service can unfold how e-government in practice co-produces tasks, roles and relations in public office. There, public policy effectively becomes through the decisions and routines carried out and the devices used in the encounter with the citizen (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. xiii). Ethnographic studies can show the effects of mandatory self-service by studying the coping mechanisms frontline agents use when "helping citizens to help themselves", e.g., the way in which street-level practices organize content, timing and pace in clients' passage through the bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980/2010, pp. 120-133). Such studies can contribute to discussions about how the contour and content of both client-processing procedures (Lipsky, 1980/2010) and the classic Weberian role of public servants are transformed (Du Gay, 2000, 2008). Bureaucratic tasks and virtues are reconfigured when public administration moves into the digital era. Therefore, the new roles and practices of frontline agents are important points to examine in an ethnographic study of the digitized bureaucratic encounter.

Empirical background

> The digital transformation of welfare services will give managers and employees in the public sector a role in motivating and assisting the individual citizen in using technological solutions and getting the best out of them (The Danish Government *et al.*, 2013, p. 3).

In all advanced industrial states today, digitization has become a leading organizing principle in the public sector. Denmark is at the vanguard of public sector digitization (Greve, 2012, p. 55; Jæger and Löfgren, 2010), scoring high on "digital readiness" in international rankings (e.g. OECD, 2005, 2010; United Nations, 2005, 2010/2012/2014; European Commission, 2014).

In 2011 the Danish Government established the *Agency for Digitisation* under The Ministry of Finance to "capitalize on our leading position", and the concept of "mandatory digital self-service" was introduced:

> By 2015, it will be mandatory for citizens to use digital solutions to communicate in writing with the public sector […] This major step towards eGovernment will require considerable changes to the way public authorities work, and a certain degree of acclimatization from citizens (The Danish Government *et al.*, 2011a, pp. 3-5).

Since 2012, citizens have had to apply online for rent subsidies and day care, among other things, and ultimately social services such as reimbursement, parental benefits and old-age pension will all have been digitized (The Danish Government *et al.*, 2011a, p. 16). The implementation of these political reforms pushes these services out of the office, making them self-services that citizens can access anywhere and anytime from their personal computers and mobile devices. This change entails a shift from a demand-oriented to a supply-oriented perception of service, in which efficiency (e.g. Agency for Digitisation, 2013a) is closely linked to the idea of changing citizens' habits by changing the law (e.g. Danish Parliament, 2012, 2013). However, some citizens need support in managing digital self-service. The reforms have thus led to a new form of client-processing in citizen service centres, where frontline agents with the new job title "citizen guide" offer so-called "co-service" to assist citizens with low digital literacy in using digital tools. This makes a Danish citizen service centre a pertinent empirical setting for studying the bureaucratic encounter in the digital era and its effects on the tasks and roles of frontline agents.

Empirical setting
The fieldwork was predominantly carried out in a single citizen service centre in a Danish municipality. In 2014 the staff at the citizen centre consisted of 18 full-time employees, two office trainees and a mid-level manager. The staff has been steadily reduced since 2010. The centre staff services around 300 citizens a day, mainly as walk-in referrals. Service provided at the front desk lasts approximately three to five minutes, co-service an average of 20 minutes, and face-to-face interactions from five to 40 minutes.

Constructing empirical material
To understand frontline agents' tasks and roles, I observed and shadowed (Czarniawska, 2007) the employees as they interacted with citizens, mainly at the front desk and in the co-service area. Over the period of a year, I conducted a total of approximately 80 hours of explorative and more structured observations. I documented these activities in field notes, which in most cases were shared at an immediate debriefing within the research team[1], where observations were discussed for the purpose of preparing follow-up interviews with the observed employees later the same day. The data also include eight interviews with managers and consultants of varying rank in the municipality. Both individual and group interviews followed guidelines for semi-structured interviews and were recorded, transcribed and roughly coded and categorized (in NVivo) using a grounded theory approach inspired by Clarke's situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). The analysis also draws on field notes from 40 hours of participation in meetings, workshops, and conferences with political actors such as the Agency for Digitisation, Local Government Denmark (KL) and a variety of Danish municipalities.

The choice of an extreme case
The case selection was guided by both practical and methodological concerns. The studied citizen service centre is situated in a neighbourhood with a high density of unemployed and marginalized citizens, which means that the segment with low digital literacy, i.e., language or cognitive issues, is overrepresented in this area. As a result, this study sets the challenges associated with implementing digital reforms sharply in focus. Thus, the case study is not a representative sample but an extreme case, which offers empirical advantages (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The overrepresentation of non-digital citizens serves to concentrate data on how digitization imposes a new set of practices on frontline agents. The location of this centre and its social profile contribute to establishing an extreme case that can shed light on new roles and relations between the citizen and the digitized state.

An ethnography of citizen service in the digital era
Access and assessment – a passage to service

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

Front desk staff must instantly assess citizens' level of digital literacy. To this end, the staff member asks a few questions about familiarity with using a computer, such as whether the citizen has a computer at home. According to the answer, the staff estimate whether the citizen has the capacity to use digital solutions right away, can learn to use them after receiving guidance in the co-service area or needs classic, dialogue-based face-to-face consultation during which the frontline agent does the file work while having access to different professional systems. The two waiting areas are designed with colourful, contemporary furniture, iPads, a touchscreen computer decorated as a toy for preschool children and a vending machine with free coffee and tea. Numbers are displayed on a screen in subdivided numerical categories according to the type of service offered – for example, tax, social services, passport renewal, co-service and so on. Changing staff members continously attend to the waiting areas and announce the next number in the category.

Mandatory digital self-service gives rise to new public service tasks, while others become obsolete. The task of the front desk has expanded from categorizing citizens into the areas of expertise they need (e.g. tax, social services, passport renewal) to include a quick estimation of the level of service citizens require. The political strategy defines the staff's new core task: "As an employee you will have to make an on-the-spot assessment of the service level needed, and, if possible, support the citizen in becoming digital" (Agency of Digitization, 2013b – author's translation). Automation means that the discretion practice of the citizen service centre relates solely to assessing the level of service in the bureaucratic encounter. The above-mentioned political backdrop leads to professional practices where the work of the frontline agent is highly scripted through digital standards that are a means to political ends, on the one hand, and that consist of practices requiring flexibility and on-the-spot responsiveness to the individual case, on the other (cf. Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. xii). The staff must, if possible, proactively assist and endeavour to push citizens into becoming digital. If front desk staff estimate that a citizen is able to learn to use digital solutions, the citizen is referred to co-service.

Co-service – a passage to the digital era

On a Tuesday afternoon in the beginning of March 2014, two female senior citizens, probably retirees, are sitting on the new wool-upholstered sofas, waiting. A big white and green poster says: "*Digital co-service*. Avoid the queue – use the Internet! Health insurance cards, relocation, parking-licenses, child benefits and much more. There are many possibilities at www. municipalityX.dk. Our digital ambassadors will help you get started." A flat screen on the wall informs the citizens that number 630 is receiving co-service. Three out of the ten stand-up workstations in the co-service area are occupied by a citizen guide, each of whom is assisting a citizen in using digital self-service. At the front desk citizens have formed two queues. After ending a session with a male senior citizen, Anne[2], an employee in her forties, walks over to the waiting area and calls out the next number. A young man of about 20 reacts, his being number 631, and follows Anne to one of the workstations. His slightly older-looking friend follows, and they both face Anne on the other side of the high table.

"How may I help you?" Anne asks.

'I need to activate my "Digital Post," he responds in Danish with a low voice and a thick accent.

"Come over here on this side of the table at the computer, so you can do the typing," she tells him, continuing, "OK, start typing "borger.dk" (citizen.dk)." Anne waits a bit, then spells the URL, "B-O-R-G-E-R-DOT-D-K, and then you sign in and enter your civil registration number and your personal code." Anne steps aside and averts her gaze for a few seconds […] "And you can enlarge the image by clicking there." She points at the screen. "And I can see you've already signed up for 'e-Boks.'" E-Boks is a digital mailbox used by private actors such as insurance companies, banks, supply and utility companies, etc.

"Try to open it. It seems that you have 17 unopened letters in your inbox. I can see there are a few letters from Danske Bank. OK, I'm not entitled to interfere with your private mail." Again she steps aside and averts her eyes.

"But I'm not a customer with Danske Bank, Nordea is my bank," the young man says with a puzzled look.

"Well,' Anne replies, 'I don't know, but you seem to be affiliated with Danske Bank in some way as well. OK, never mind."

Anne points at the screen and says: "Digital Post is actually the same as the 'e-Boks' that you already have. If you tick right there, you will gather all your electronic mail in one mailbox, both mail from the private firms you have subscribed to in the 'e-Boks' and digital mail from all public authorities. It's very smart; the mail is automatically transferred."

His eyes flicker and he looks at his friend, who is talking to him in a foreign language. Anne explains further, looking at the computer screen: "The most important thing is that you know you are required to keep an eye on your mailbox. You are *required* to read it just as if you had received a letter in your mailbox at the entrance to your home. By ticking here you accept that no authority will send you physical mail anymore, and that you are required to read your mail, for example, regarding notice to the court, or if you are applying for public support for education."

His friend talks to him again. The young man answers his friend in the foreign language. Now the friend asks Anne: "Can you help me as well? I need to check my tax calculation."

Anne answers him in a friendly tone, but briefly, that she will assist him after she has finished this session. She turns to the screen again, points and says: "This is really smart; if you enter your mobile phone number, you will get a registration code by SMS in a few seconds, and then in the future you will get a text message every time there is new mail in your inbox. This way you don't have to remember to check your mailbox every day."

The young man frowns, but finally types his number into the computer. Anne waits a few seconds and then says: "OK, did you receive an SMS? OK, you just have to type this code here, then everything is up and running." He hesitates and asks whether he need to use the code again.

"No, just delete the text message, it was just a one-time confirmation password […] OK, so did you see how we entered this subpage?' she asks. He nods hesitantly. 'So you click here on 'My Page', select this tab [again she points at the screen], and then you can sign up.' His friend says something else to him. Anne interrupts: 'Do you remember if you have created any subscriptions?' He shakes his head. 'Try to go into 'My Items'. You can see the tabs there. OK, you have not signed up for any of these, but you can choose to do so. For instance, try to sign up for your phone company or bank. Which bank did you say you have? Nordea?' Anne confirms. 'Ok, well here it is, now let's see."

They look at the screen and Anne continues: "If you're interested, the public libraries have two-hour courses where you can learn more about using Digital Post, borger.dk and various self-services, and you can also just try it out at home." He nods. "Ok, anything else you need assistance with?"

"No, thank you," he replies.

"Just remember to log off," she says, turning to his friend and saying: "You would like to look at your tax calculation? We have had a lot of them this week." The young man stands next to them and checks his smartphone while Anne starts assisting the friend.

In the following sections, I will examine how "co-service" as a passage to the digital era enacts changes in working modes for frontline agents in citizen services. The analysis is based on the above observations as well as other observations in the co-service area, the official competency profiles of the citizen guide and interviews with managers and staff in citizen services.

De-specialized tasks and intensified informality
The emergence of "citizen guides' marks a redefinition of frontline agents' roles and tasks. Anne's interaction with the young man is a prime example of the form of authority performed by citizen guides, where discretion and the tasks of assigning benefits and providing public services are removed from frontline agents' work practice. Rather, Anne acts as the facilitator of a framework for distributing responsibilities; for example, she makes it clear from the start that the citizen must do the typing, and she explains the rules and duties connected with Digital Post. She primarily gives advice to aid the citizen in understanding and solving the relevant tasks on his own. She also gives the citizen technical and practical instruction, spelling words for him, telling him where to click and pointing at the screen. She is less an advising authority presenting professional or organizational knowledge than a coach informing the citizen about his responsibility, guiding him through the session and prompting him to see the new possibilities of "becoming digital".

The explorative generalist
Before 2012, when so-called "waves of digitization" were introduced, frontline agents largely worked as specialists. Because of their formal education and experience, staff members were individually specialized within different areas such as social services, tax, passports and so on. The new role as citizen guide is described in a competency profile for frontline agents:

Professionalism means having knowledge of the various services and self-service solutions. You don't have to know everything in detail, but must be able to find answers in the systems

and guide other self-service users. As a guide, you have comprehensive knowledge about public self-service solutions and services, and are familiar with a citizen's typical situation as well as the relevant digital solutions that the citizen must learn to use. The role as guide is based on the traditional citizen service, but can be performed by other members of staff (Local Government Denmark, 2012: slide 6 author's translation).

As the quote shows, a citizen guide is not qualified by formal education or well-defined skills; the citizen guide is an explorative generalist who does not have to know everything in detail.

Staff meet these demands individually, but common to all informants are reflections on both the pros and cons of the new tasks. A staff member, Tina, puts it this way in an interview:

[…] you are forced to get acquainted with several areas, which obviously makes the task a bit confusing, because you don't dig deeply into each area. On the other hand, however, it's a good thing because it might be easier to make the areas work together […] all in all, you become a better all-round employee, I would say, right? Though, it may well be that you aren't as thorough and detailed with all of it, or you don't have the time to be as thorough and all-knowing as you might have been had you been here for 40 years, for example, but in return you get a better idea of how everything fits together, I think (Interview, staff member).

The head of digitization also asserts the change from specialist to generalist, claiming:

The staff have to be digital more than, for example, doing good casework. The decisions are no longer in-house, but distributed on PCs […]. Today, we are far from the specialized legal officer […] in the future we will move away from the concept of specialists. The staff are supposed to screen the citizen and guide him. That's the way the development goes […] We have been up front in saying that as an employee here, you have to recognize yourself in that picture (Interview, head of digitization).

According to the interviewed consultants and managers, future citizen services do not consist of specialists, but explorative, guidance-giving generalists. The frontline agents have to be adaptable and let go of their former professional identity as specialists, instead instilling political and managerial strategies and promoting digital self-service, as the case of Anne's work shows.

Learning by doing: unlearning the past – promoting the future
The municipal managers designate employees' shift from specialist to generalist as a process of "unlearning" a problem-solving mode of service. As a consequence of the digital reforms, the object of learning has changed from content – learning about rules and regulations – to contour – learning how to do the job (e.g. at courses and training on communication style and intercultural competencies).

Today, both the citizen guide and the citizen are supposed to explore the possibilities of the digital era and learn to handle unpredictable situations and technologies. As generalists, the staff members themselves have to learn in practice; they have to learn by doing. In an interview, a staff member describes the new tasks of the citizen guide:

[…] be curious, pose questions to the citizens. That's the way to learn the job, and that's one of the good things about standing up there [in the co-service area] – that sometimes you find yourself in a situation thinking 'OK, I've never seen this before. OK, we take it from one end, do it together, and probably end up in the right place (Interview, staff member).

Both the quotation and Anne's actions correspond well with the competency profile from Local Government Denmark (2012), where the citizen guide is described as being active, taking initiative, and motivating citizens in relation to digital self-service (Local Government Denmark, 2012). As a citizen guide one has to identify with the digital universe, for example:

You must motivate citizens by showing the opportunities inherent in digital self-service.

"Sell" the digital solutions – including the errors that might occur.

You should use IT in your everyday life – for news, mail, some Facebook, TV on the web, net banking, and apps on your phone (Local Government Denmark 2012, author's translation).

Local Government Denmark comments that this change in competency profile might be difficult for some staff members, stating: "You will learn this because you have to" (Local Government Denmark, 2012). The focus is not on principles of law or public administration regulations, but on communication, social interaction, improvisation and learning by doing – together with the citizen and also in the employee's private sphere. Take the case of Anne's co-service, for example. She tries to create a learning situation by saying "[…] did you see how we entered this subpage?", and by letting the citizen experiment with the digital solutions – even though adding mail from the citizen's phone company or bank is not part of a public employee's job. Anne spent an extensive part of the session on such explorative work together with the citizen. Additionally, she told the citizen about the possibilities of learning more through courses at libraries. When promoting the possibilities and solutions generated by the digital reforms, the citizen guide assumes a professional attitude that appears to be comparable to that of a sales assistant. This shift from service to support and sales is also reflected in the local description of workflows at the citizen centre. Here, one of the first steps in the encounter with the citizen at the front desk is literally termed "giving a sales pitch" for the digital solutions.

All in all, the role of the citizen guide in co-service unfolds in a less specialized and more strategic way, with the bureaucratic encounter becoming focused on an ongoing assessment of how the citizen can be prompted and guided through learning by doing and trying out the possibilities afforded by the digital era. Strategic and situated communication is desired as a means of fulfilling political goals and promoting the idea of the digital to as many citizens as possible.

Intense and fragmented relations
In the co-service area, the encounter between citizen and public employee is physically and temporally different from classic face-to-face service. Today, the citizen and the employee stand shoulder-to-shoulder, as exemplified by Anne telling the young man to come to her side of the table and do the typing. Standing beside the citizen, the employee alternately moves closer to the citizen's work by the computer and keeps her distance when the citizen enters codes and creates passwords. In a follow-up interview after an observation session in the co-service area, I asked two citizen guides to describe the differences between performing face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder citizen service. Their answers became a dialogue:

Lea: I would say that [in face-to-face-interaction] you're able to hide a little […]. You sit at your own desk, you have your own screen, you can take a sip of your tea. Well, you can't do that up there [in co-service] – you're bare, very exposed, it's more intimate standing up there, much more intense. You're "on", and it's more intense because you're more open,

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very uncovered standing there, and you can't just walk away. Even if you're working on a screen, you're still open. If you sit at your own desk by your computer, then it's like you have a territory, you don't have that up there. You are out in the open up there; there's a clear and unobstructed view of you.

Karen: Up there it becomes a common task.

Lea: Yes.

Karen: You could say, if you're sitting on the opposite side at your desk, well then we have a distance: "I'm doing something for you because you show up here with a problem to solve," but up there we're doing it together.

Lea: Yes, and you're more equal, because you stand shoulder to shoulder, even though the feeling there is very intense, but you're more equal, there is nothing between you […]. And you're used to encountering the citizen separated by a table – at the reception or your own desk, so sometimes it's a bit trans-boundary [in co-service]. In the beginning I thought: "Everybody is looking at me up here, I can't hide behind my table," but you encounter the citizen in another way (Interview, staff members).

The dialogue illustrates that the physical changes are performative: standing instead of sitting down, and working together side by side have practical, professional and emotional effects. The classic bureaucratic territory of the employee behind the screen with her own cup of tea and access to systems and information, protected by handbooks on the shelves, is displaced into an experience of intensity, where both the employee and the citizen are exposed and more equal. The observations also indicate that the pace is faster, and the encounter more fragmented because the staff member stands with the citizen, steps in and out of the process and is sometimes contacted by other citizens in the middle of a consultation, as occurred when Anne's work was interrupted by the client's friend. Whereas a face-to-face-consultation has a beginning and end, where the two parties often introduce themselves, shake hands, and say goodbye, the co-service process is blurrier and more informal. As was the case in Anne's interaction with the two men, neither of the actors introduced themselves, there was no shaking of hands or formal ending of the sessions. Sometimes the citizen walks away without letting the citizen guide know whether the task was completed. Yet another employee, Joan, explains the intensity, timing and pace in co-service:

You're on, you're off, you know. And sometimes my intention is to dig deeper into things in her life situation after finishing the application, but it's difficult to handle. Maybe I just turn around for a moment, and she's gone […] so she never got the advice I would've given her if we had been sitting at my desk. […] Up there [in co-service] you need to see it right away. If we were down by the tables [face-to-face-interaction], then I would get an impression of her as we proceeded, but now you have to be able to see it right away. It feels like it has to be faster. While sitting across a desk, you can afford to pause to reflect, or just talk normally, but with the technology and the self-service solutions […] you have to deliver general knowledge all the time. I don't know. There's also less authority involved compared to if you were sitting on either side of the desk. Then no one would doubt the distance, formality, and that I'm the authority. It's true. [in co-service] it becomes more à la "This is an act of friendship" (Interview, staff member).

When the frontline agents describe co-service, they talk about a lack of distance, formality, control over timing, pace and content in relation to the citizen. The fact that the citizen is the one logged into the systems redefines the bureaucratic encounter with

the frontline agent: The relation is more equal – physically as they stand shoulder-to-shoulder, and as regards control over timing and access to information. The encounter is fragmented and goes at a faster pace, sometimes without clear closure, and there is intimacy in the way the bodies stand close to each other – looking at the same screen – like a pair of friends, or at least acquaintances. Lea explains the reconfigured connection with the citizen:

> **Lea:** You get used to the role up there, even though sometimes there's a lot of pressure, and a lot of people, but anyways, you meet the citizen in a different way. You're in another environment up there. You see things differently. Well, I think it's because you stand there side by side with the citizen saying, "Oh, sometimes I'm …" Sometimes you just get along very well with the citizen, "Oh, you just do this", and then you find yourself chit-chatting a little and saying "really good" and things like that. It can get kind of cosy standing up there with the citizen; you're very intense with the citizen. It's just you and the citizen […]. Often I move around behind the citizens while they are typing, but there's another connection up there than down by your desk (Interview, staff members).

According to the accounts citizen guides give about their experience, their new role is far from the well-known, familiar stereotype of the unresponsive, soulless, and uncaring pen pusher of bureaucracy (Du Gay, 2008). Observations and interviews provide a picture of a proactive public servant that uses personal involvement and enthusiasm to handle unpredictable situations, challenges and error-prone technologies.

The frontline agents can establish and nurture an empowering connection with the citizen by chit-chatting and revealing a personal self in the encounter. While shadowing their guidance practice, I observed the way personal experiences were sometimes used to convince the citizen that his or her challenges were "normal". When I discussed these narratives with the citizen guides, I realized that they were not as much putting themselves into play, as they were using stories customized as "white lies" to put citizens at ease and to encourage them to keep on trying and exploring. The citizen guides were sometimes strategically fabricating personal stories about "becoming digital" to fulfil the strategy and boost the citizens' good experience with digital solutions[3]. The frontline agents are not resistant to the policy, but rather advance the policy ambition of "becoming digital" by being informal with the citizens.

Discussion

Theoretically, the ethnographic analysis points to the fact that the transformation of public service organizations into "digital agencies" does a lot more in practice than "making (able) citizens do more" (Margretts and Dunleavy, 2013). This paper has studied in detail how digital reforms reorganize the relevant tasks and competencies involved in the bureaucratic encounter, and the picture proves to be more nuanced. In the digital era the citizen ideally takes over administrative tasks in co-production with digital systems. For frontline workers, skills are no longer bound to specialized fields of knowledge, while discretion and the power to assign benefits are automatized. Today, discretion and responsiveness to individual cases are not a matter of professional content, but concern the relational and communicative capacity to support while reading the situation. Along with the critical literature on professions and public management, the ethnographic analysis shows that what it means to be a frontline agent has been extensively redefined. De-specialization of the task and intensified informality in relation to citizens stand out as two overarching changes that blur the boundaries between professional skills and personal competencies, each with both

constraining and enabling effects. Observations of the bureaucratic encounter and frontline workers' reflections on their practice show some subtle ambivalences connected to co-service. The stressful constraints of having to deliver general knowledge all the time in fragmented bureaucratic encounters are coupled with an enabling experience of everything fitting together in the reintegrated public sector with its re-unified services (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006). The analysis also points to a new relational connection where frontline workers find closing the distance to the citizen and "doing it together" to be a meaningful and rewarding practice.

The Weberian ideal type of an unresponsive, impersonal expert that sharply separates public and private, work and everyday life, is redefined in the current strategic supply-oriented ideal of service delivery – and in practice the ideal type is almost reversed. Digital reforms require frontline agents to embrace the supply-oriented ideal and "unlearn" their role as a "problem-solver" for the citizen, a role that stems from a demand-oriented ideal of welfare service. The analysis also shows that the bureaucratic encounter in the digital era has turned into a learning situation for both parts, standing as they do on the same side of the table. The frontline agent is "reskilled by doing", a process enacted as an entrepreneurial and improvisational encounter with citizens and strategically aimed to push the citizen, thus promoting the policy ambition of both parties' "becoming digital". This explorative learning practice draws on both professional skills and personal competencies, and classic boundaries in the bureaucratic encounter appear to be blurred. The analysis brings forward an ethnographic account of enthusiasm and commitment among frontline agents, which enables a more equal, intense and informal encounter with the citizen. Here personal competencies and (fictional) everyday life experiences are understood as being within the relevant set of job competencies. The bureaucratic encounter in the digital era requires the frontline agent to be both responsive to the citizen's digital capacity and able to continually assess the citizen's ability to understand the access to public service as well as its content and use.

Today, citizens' passage to service is mediated by more than frontline agents' control and the limits and possibilities of the standard digital solution offered. In the digital era, control and equality are distributed, while citizens and technology also take part in organizing tasks and relations. This analysis identifies new modes of working and learning for both employee and citizen in the bureaucratic encounter. These modes call for more symmetrical and relational approaches to studying street-level bureaucracy than provided by the critical management literature and Lipsky's classical theory of coping mechanisms. More qualitative research to supplement quantitative evaluations of the results of digitization reforms could shed light on political effects in practice and give input to national developments of strategies for e-government and its local implementation.

Conclusion

Organizational ethnography offers an approach that can bring a nuanced understanding of both constraining and enabling effects of governance strategies. The ethnographic approach to public administration and service provide accounts of how politics are enacted in practice and thereby changing the experience of intensity, equality and informality in the bureaucratic encounter. Digital self-service and co-service imply a transformation in the tasks and roles of the frontline agent whereby the relation between citizen and public office turns from welfare service to support. Classical core tasks such as discretion, decision making and casework focusing on professional content are replaced with tasks requiring low levels of

specialization and high levels of adaptability. Staff relate to the citizen with less formality as they guide, prompt, push and produce learning for the citizen. The frontline agent inculcates the policy and idea of the digital era by drawing on his or her personal competencies and connection to the citizen. There is a range of practical, professional, and emotional challenges in the intensified informality of co-service: the pace is faster, the encounter is fragmented, and there is a lack of distance and formality as well as an experience of an equal relation between citizen, technology and frontline agent – physically and in terms of timing and access to information. In these reconfigured relations, personal competencies are relevant, and private stories are customized to meet political targets. Thus, an unintended effect of digitization policy is that the distinction between the frontline agent's professional skills and personal competencies is blurred.

"Becoming digital" is the political objective for the bureaucracy, its employees and citizens. The e-government literature follows this agenda with a sole focus on the possibilities and enabling effects of the digital era. Conversely, the critical literature on professions and public management solely points to the costs of changes in public governance. Ethnographic studies of public administration offer a more nuanced understanding of how politics and strategies come into being through the practices conducted in everyday organizational life.

Notes

1. The study was designed and some of the data collected in collaboration with colleagues Jesper Hundebøl and Lars Hove Sørensen.

2. The names used are fictional.

3. This practice is related to what Madeleine Akrich refers to as an 'I-methodology', whereby the designer replaces his professional hat by that of the layman' (Akrich, 1995, p. 173).

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About the author

Anja Svejgaard Pors, PhD, is an Assistant Professor. Her research interests are ethnographic studies of professions, organization and management in the public sector – with a focus on the bureaucratic encounter between citizen and state. Most of her ethnographic work has been conducted in the frontline of the Danish public sector; at hospitals, clinics and citizen service centres. Assistant Professor Anja Svejgaard Pors can be contacted at: anjasvej@gmail.com

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