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## Autonomy Alliances and Data Care Practices

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**Abstract.** Recent studies focusing on the digitalization of welfare provision draw attention to digital infrastructures that produce new forms of social inequality and disempowerment due to inaccessibility. Against this backdrop, we study the practices of a Danish public library in supporting citizens with digital applications for welfare benefits. Through a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis, we draw on ethnographic materials and Catriona Mackenzie’s multidimensional analysis of autonomy to conceptualize *autonomy alliances* and *data care practices*. These are collective efforts that attempt to subvert inaccessible and autonomy-undermining public digital infrastructures. Drawing on a relational view of autonomy, we examine how certain design choices can constrain citizens’ personal autonomy and equal access to welfare services. For this reason, we discuss the importance of studying political decisions affecting the design and organization of digital welfare services, as well as the local practices that compensate for discriminatory design choices through social inclusion and a commitment to equity.

**Keywords:** relational autonomy, digital welfare, public library, equity, digital inclusion, inaccessibility.

### 1 Introduction

Across science and technology studies, human-computer interaction, and related fields, a growing body of literature is tracing and critically attending to how governments digitalize the provision of welfare services. These studies indicate that public digital infrastructures can create new citizen responsibilities [1], render citizens’ needs and affective interactions invisible to the state [2], fail to comply with web accessibility guidelines [3], demand new skills [4, 5], reinforce or produce exclusion [6], or undermine citizen’s personal autonomy and data rights [7, 8]. Also, a crucial concern in these studies, is how digital infrastructures used in welfare provision can constrain the citizen’s capacity to enact personal autonomy and have control over data collection, and decisions taken in relation to such datasets [7–9]. In this vein, Velden et al. explore a relational [10] and socio-material understanding of autonomy that articulates how different actors enact, negotiate, and constrain citizens’

personal autonomy [11]. As the authors argue, a relational understanding of autonomy can be generative to trace how technological actors, such as information and communication technologies, promote or hamper citizens' personal autonomy and rights.

Against this backdrop, we draw on an ethnographic study conducted at a Danish public library to explore how library employees support citizens with digital applications for welfare benefits. Through this study, we reflect on wider national concerns voiced by civil society organizations in Denmark regarding present social inequalities produced by inaccessible mandatory digital infrastructures [12, 13]. When unfolding the work of the library, we conceptualize *autonomy alliances* and *data care practices* as collective efforts performed by frontline workers and community members to promote citizens' self-governing agency when navigating autonomy-undermining digital infrastructures. Bridging our analysis to design justice [14] and critical disability literature [15], we reflect on the value of studying grassroots projects, that compensate for exclusionary design choices in digital welfare provision.

In what follows, we first provide a brief overview of Catriona Mackenzie's multidimensional analysis of autonomy to study socio-material relations promoting or undermining autonomy. We outline the value of exploring personal autonomy in digitalized versions of welfare provision as a collective responsibility, rather than solely as a matter of individual traits, resources, or skills. Second, we contextualize mandatory digital self-service in Denmark and outline our grounded and ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, including our ethical and data protection considerations. Third, we analyze ethnographic materials collected at a Danish public library. Throughout our analysis we develop *autonomy alliances* and *data care practices* as concepts to think with when exploring exclusionary digital infrastructures. Lastly, we conclude our paper by discussing how choices in the organization and design of public digital infrastructures are political and have both enabling and disabling effects. In conceptualizing *autonomy alliances* and *data care practices*, our paper draws attention to a local initiative that subverts and reimagines more equitable and accessible versions of digital welfare.

## 2 Theorizing Relational Autonomy

Drawing on the work of feminist philosopher Catriona Mackenzie [10], a relational understanding of autonomy can be generative to recognize people's different positionalities, interdependence, and liberties in the study of welfare provision. When reflecting on individualistic notions of autonomy, found within neoliberal political discourse [1, 10], Mackenzie argues that only paying attention to individual behaviors and traits, is insufficient to account for how social inequalities and systems of power influence a person's opportunity to live a self-determining life. For this reason, she draws on feminist relational autonomy theory, committed to social justice, to unpack how social discrimination and inequalities influence a person's opportunity to enact autonomy. Drawing on her multidimensional analysis of autonomy we focus on Mackenzie's three conceptual and interdependent dimensions: self-determination,

self-governance, and self-authorization [10, 16] that we find helpful as sensitizing concepts [17] and starting points in our analysis.

First, Mackenzie outlines self-determination, explored as a status, in which she draws attention to external structural conditions, often regulated by the state, namely freedom and equal opportunity. For example, anti-discrimination laws or political and personal liberties are important structural factors influencing the status of a person in being a self-determining agent. Equal access to goods and opportunities, and freedom from domination and discrimination are therefore paramount [10]. Second, Mackenzie outlines self-governance, explored as a capacity, in which she identifies internal agential conditions for autonomy such as the capacity to enact choices that cohere with one's own values, commitments and identity [10]. Importantly, rather than conceiving self-governance as an isolated capacity of individuals, she considers the interdependencies between interpersonal and social relations and how these constrain and enable people's self-governing agency. With the example of projects helping women in abusive relations or drug rehabilitation programs, Mackenzie argues that social scaffolding efforts must respect people's agency and facilitate participation and dialogue. In this vein, the third conceptual layer is self-authorization. Through this notion, Mackenzie draws our attention to social relations of recognition and oppression that produce self-evaluative attitudes, e.g., self-respect and self-esteem, that influence how people enact personal autonomy.

Through Mackenzie's multidimensional analysis of autonomy, we have briefly outlined the social and interpersonal factors we are interested in analyzing and unpacking empirically in the study of a Danish public library supporting citizens with digital applications for welfare benefits. In what follows, we first contextualize current concerns on digital inequalities in Denmark and why a public library is an insightful space to study digitalized versions of welfare provision. Second, we delineate the methodological orientation and ethical concerns of the study.

### **3 Empirical Setting's Background**

In the context of Denmark, and since the early 2010s, applications for welfare benefits have been transformed into mandatory online forms as "self-service" digital infrastructures [18]. Due to the increasing lack of in-person support and the inaccessibility of websites and mobile applications provided by the authorities, civil society organizations and the Danish Institute for Human Rights have raised concerns regarding discrimination and digital inequality affecting diverse groups [13, 19, 20]. Whilst disability rights organizations have been vocal about the lack of web accessibility compliance across public sector websites and mobile applications [19–21], organizations representing minority communities have raised concerns regarding the lack of in-person services and accessible communication [13, 19].

What these concerns illustrate is that increasingly, more welfare benefits are delivered via digital self-service infrastructures that fail to meet citizens' diversity. In this regard, recent statistics indicate that approximately 20 percent of the population is "digitally challenged" [12]. As we are interested in the tension between inaccessible

digital infrastructures and the authorities' categorization of some citizens as digitally challenged, we use ethnographic methods [21, 22] to explore the work of a Danish public library financing and developing learning and support activities for diverse citizens who encounter accessibility barriers. Due to the diverse ways in which public libraries support citizens across Denmark, our empirical materials are specific to the library and municipality of study and cannot be generalized. As other researchers indicate, policymakers have tasked public libraries with the responsibility to support citizens in using and adopting public digital infrastructures, yet not all libraries have accepted this responsibility, and support varies across Denmark's 98 municipalities [18].

#### **4 Methodological Orientation and Research Ethics**

In the summer of 2021, the first author conducted fieldwork at a Danish public library in Copenhagen as a part of her PhD study mapping formal and informal work supporting citizens who encounter inaccessible public digital services in Denmark. The use of ethnographic methods in this study allows us to map and analyze situated practices and social relations [22, 23] involving citizens, digital infrastructures, and library employees. Over the course of three weeks, the first author spent 34 hours conducting observations and writing detailed fieldnotes on a physical notebook. Further, she conducted 6 semi-structured interviews on-site with library employees and volunteers. To include citizen perspectives and remain mindful of their time and privacy, she took notes of what citizens wished to share with her through informed consent. Information that directly identifies citizens has been modified or pseudo-anonymized (e.g., name, age, nationality). Our approach to data analysis and collection draws on feminist grounded theory [24]. This involved a series of situated and ongoing coding exercises through the software NVivo in combination with monthly discussions reflecting on the main themes emerging from the data. While analyzing data, the first author was in dialogue with research participants through follow-up emails or via short additional interviews.

The first author designed her study according to the General Data Protection Regulation and created consent forms that clearly explained the purpose of the study and provided relevant legal and contact information to research participants. Furthermore, she followed government guidelines during fieldwork to maintain adequate physical distance with citizens to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

#### **5 Digital Inclusion at a Danish Public Library**

Since 2013, employees and volunteers with diverse educational backgrounds (public administration, library science, digital project management) organize myriad activities dedicated to digital inclusion for teenagers, adults, and seniors, with diverse ethnic backgrounds and citizenships. Library employees explained that their approach to digital inclusion is influenced by their own interpretation of the Danish tradition of *Folkeoplysning* (public education) that dates to N. F. S. Grundtvig, a pastor and an

important figure in modern Danish national identity [25]. As the Head of Section for Service and Materials explained:

“The *Folkeoplysning* tradition is the DNA of public libraries. And the library's approach to citizen service and digitalization is thus to use the tradition of *Folkeoplysning* as a supportive method. We contact and support citizens who have had a hard time in the new digital reality. There are many who feel they are left behind at the gate and cannot hop on the train. We have learned that there are many more who are digitally challenged than we anticipated. There were also digitally well-functioning citizens who had problems because the digital solutions were so difficult to understand at first. This applies, for example, to the online application for housing benefits (boligstøtte), which was virtually impossible to figure out. Therefore, in 2013 it made sense to take on functions such as NemID<sup>1</sup>, Digital Post<sup>2</sup>, and online banking. But for the library, it was also important to offer help beyond citizen service tasks. Here I am thinking of digital everyday challenges that you as a citizen must master to function in a society. So, when we said yes to taking on the tasks, it was important for the library to help set a new inclusive agenda.” (Own translation, July 2021.)

Through *Folkeoplysning*, across interviews, library employees described digital inclusion as an integral activity of the library committed to helping citizens participate equally in all aspects of a digitalized society. This responsibility was apparent in practice through different activities, in which citizens were taught how to use digital infrastructures and were helped to apply for welfare benefits step-by-step. Public organizations such as the Agency for Digitization or the national network of public libraries had previously showcased their activities as exemplary to other libraries across Denmark. This meant the library's work had been recognized on a national level. However, library employees voiced concerns regarding the difficulties they experienced in providing feedback when digital infrastructures were inaccessible or lacked key functionalities. As one library employee explained:

“Giving feedback is a very opaque process. Especially when it comes to who to contact, you can feel like a drop in the ocean. For example, at a public digitalization conference I approached an IT consulting firm that designed a digital solution for immigrants. I asked them: ‘may I give you some feedback on your solution because it works really poorly’. And of course, they said ‘yes!’ and they seemed interested. I told them that the solution was only available in Danish, but users of this service speak many other languages. I also told them that it was impossible to log out. When I helped different citizens, it was difficult to help more than one person on the same computer [...] And then I wrote a private message to one of them again on LinkedIn a year later, but I have not heard back from them.” (Own translation, June 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> NemID is a personal log-in solution necessary to access public digital services in Denmark and online banking.

<sup>2</sup> Digital Post is a mandatory digital mailbox to communicate with the authorities.

During observations it was apparent that public digital infrastructures, useful to immigrants who recently arrived in Denmark, were in Danish by default. Furthermore, many application forms required that citizens used a computer, while most citizens requesting assistance at the library could only afford a mobile device. Library employees also admitted that some websites were not intuitive or lacked functionalities, as the example above illustrates. Difficulties in providing feedback meant that even though the library was recognized for its work on a national level, it was difficult for the library to influence the improvement of digital services. Considering these challenges, library employees found other ways to help citizens, namely through collaborations across the municipality.

This was the case of an activity called *Hverdagsrådgivning* (*Everyday Counseling*). This weekly “digital guidance project”, as library employees called it, lasted 2 hours and was visited on average by 13 to 16 citizens each week. *Everyday Counseling* was financed and organized in collaboration with an organization offering counseling and learning activities to families with an ethnic-minority background or refugee status. To advertise *Everyday Counseling*, library employees explained they had joined many local events organized by representatives of minority communities and offered digital assistance outside the library: at the local health center, in social housing areas and at local schools. A manager at the library also explained the importance of hiring employees who had similar backgrounds and mother tongues to underrepresented citizens needing help. In addition, the library offered the services of interpreters in e.g., Urdu, Tigrinya, and Arabic. Interpreters were physically present at the library and, in exceptional circumstances, library employees could be supported by an interpreter speaking other languages on the phone. This option, however, was limited due to budget constraints.

## **6 Autonomy Alliances and Data Care Practices at Everyday Counseling**

The atmosphere at *Everyday Counseling* was friendly and the architecture of the building provided different common areas where citizens could sit at their computers. The library had 10 laptops that citizens could borrow if they did not own a computer. Many citizens spoke more than two languages and had various levels of digital and Danish language skills. In what follows, we bring to the forefront one ethnographic fieldnote where we meet Ana, who recently arrived in Denmark and urgently needs assistance to apply for housing benefits (*boligstøtte* in Danish).

### **Ana’s Application for Housing Benefits**

A library employee [a man in his 30s], carrying a Lenovo laptop, introduces me to a citizen who like me, speaks Spanish as her mother tongue. I say hello in Spanish. Ana smiles and tells me where she is from, she has been living in Denmark for just a few months. I inform Ana about my research, and she agrees to participate in my observations. The library employee takes us to a quiet area, in an open space, close to the music and films section. We sit at a free desk. Luckily, this area of the library is

not in use while we are here. I sit opposite Ana and the library employee because they are going to interact with different digital interfaces and Ana will type various usernames and passwords. Now, the library employee positions his laptop in front of Ana, and then proceeds to make a phone call. Meanwhile, Ana explains to me that her job counselor referred her to the library because she needs to apply for housing benefits, but she has not yet completed her Danish language course. She voices embarrassment for not being fluent in Danish. I quickly tell her it took me more than a year to learn Danish, and I admit feeling insecure about my Danish sometimes. We smile at each other and then the library employee addresses Ana in Danish. I try to translate: “he says that he is calling an interpreter who speaks Spanish.” The library employee turns on the speaker function and the interpreter addresses Ana in Spanish. The interpreter kindly explains to Ana that information shared on the phone is confidential, and that the sole purpose of the translation is to help her with the application. Ana nods and while looking at the library employee, she communicates with the interpreter she understands.

First, Ana is asked to log into her Gmail, Digital Post, and an online application for housing benefits through the website *borger.dk* (*citizen.dk*). The library employee guides Ana through the process. Ana is told that she is responsible for typing her information correctly, and logging into different systems with her username and passwords. The library employee reads aloud information on the screen step by step, and the interpreter translates carefully, finding the correct terms, so that Ana understands what she needs to type on different interfaces. While Ana logs into the online form, the library employee explains that her income is automatically shown on the screen, and that she needs to verify if the data are correct. Ana must also disclose the square meters of her home and other information such as the names and personal identification numbers of her children who live with her. The library employee reassures Ana by saying, “great, let’s take a look at the next question!” [...]. During the application, Ana needs to attach her rental contract. She then opens her Gmail on the library’s laptop. When Ana finds her contract, the librarian asks for permission to download the document to the library’s laptop. He promises to delete it later. He then quickly helps her attach the file to the online application. Each step of the way, the library employee describes what he is doing, and the interpreter translates accordingly. Ana also asks questions when she is in doubt. In the process of applying for housing subsidies and going through the form, the system asks for her son’s online signature and the disclosure of his income. Ana explains her son is over 18 years old. The library employee explains to Ana, through the interpreter, that her son must sign the application and disclose his income for Ana to be able to complete the application. As Ana’s son is not present at the library, Ana gets nervous and decides to call her son. He does not reply. Ana tries to text him while the library employee and interpreter wait patiently in silence. In the meantime, the library employee reviews the application. After a couple of minutes, Ana receives a message from her son. Ana explains that her son has logged into the application, disclosed his income, and signed the application digitally with his NemID. After some minutes, Ana and the library employee browse through the application and the library employee asks her to press send. Then he explains to Ana she will be notified via Digital Post once the

application is reviewed. The interpreter on the phone says goodbye to the library employee and wishes Ana good luck. We spent approx. 40 minutes together. (Fieldnote, June 2021)

Through this ethnographic fieldnote, we follow a situation in which design decisions materialize as constraints and collective resistance. Ana, her son, the library employee, and the interpreter, support each other to complete the application. Within the space of *Everyday Counseling*, we observe different examples of *autonomy alliances* that promote Ana's self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization, despite the limitations of the online form that does not meet her needs and automatically collects data about her. Ana and her helpers collectively reconfigure the application from being intended as a screen-based service, to being a service based on social relations of recognition. Instead of problematizing Ana's language skills, *Everyday Counseling* problematizes the online form as insufficient to meet Ana's communication needs. In this way, promoting Ana's self-governance, to take decisions that are her own, in her language, and through informed consent.

Ana, the library employee, and the interpreter exemplify different care relations. These are noticeable through small gestures, such as waiting patiently while Ana tries to communicate with her son on the phone or by anticipating what the online form will ask her. Care is enacted when the library employee articulates aloud what he is doing, while asking for consent and having the interpreter translate what he is saying. Through these collaborative practices, Ana and her helpers enact subtle *digital care practices* in which Ana is supported in providing consent and modifying data that are collected about her within the possibilities of different digital interfaces.

When reflecting on the online form's default language, small design decisions can ration who benefits and who is constrained by an online application that is necessary to access welfare services. As Sasha Costanza-Chock notes [14], default language settings are important design choices that privilege certain groups over others. Non-native speakers, of different backgrounds, continue to be problematized in Denmark as "digitally challenged" by virtue of not speaking Danish well enough [12]. However, we argue, the work of the library reformulates "being digitally challenged" as a result of digital infrastructures that fail to meet citizens' diverse needs.

## **7 Subverting Individualistic Ideals of Citizens and Fostering Equity**

As Hjelholt and Schou unfold in the Danish context [26], policy discourses influenced by neoliberal values in recent digital reforms have constructed ideas of citizenship based on self-responsibility, individual autonomy, and citizen homogeneity. As we have learned through the work of one Danish public library, these dominant discourses have materialized in digital infrastructures that erase citizens' diversity and do not meet the needs of citizens visiting the library. Furthermore, design decisions in digitalized versions of welfare provision enable and constrain citizens' data rights and access to welfare benefits. When digital inclusion solely focuses on honing people's skills, and the authorities and companies making digital infrastructures are not held



accountable for their design choices, citizens can experience rights violations, and dire financial and emotional consequences. As critical disability scholars continue to voice, discriminatory values and attitudes in technology development reproduce social inequalities and stigma [27]. For this reason, it is increasingly important to trace how digital inequalities and social inequalities configure each other [28] and impact people's self-determination, self-governance and self-authorization.

The library, as a site to explore these dimensions of autonomy, unveils different ways in which digital welfare services can be repurposed and supplemented in meaningful ways. However, our study indicates library employees are not powerful enough to finance their activities in isolation or influence the design of mandatory digital infrastructures on a national scale. For this reason, it is important to reflect on wider systemic inequalities and political decisions that govern how citizens can exercise their rights and easily claim welfare benefits.

## 8 Conclusion

Through Catriona Mackenzie's multidimensional analysis of autonomy and ethnographic materials generated at a Danish public library, we have described how citizens and library employees attempt to subvert autonomy-undermining online applications through *autonomy alliances* and *data care practices*. These grounded concepts help us make sense of collective efforts tackling inaccessible and mandatory digital infrastructures. In providing qualitative detail to situated practices at one Danish public library, we draw attention to local initiatives that can help us reformulate the questions we ask and the values we embed in the digitalization of welfare provision and digital inclusion projects. Importantly, whilst local efforts can compensate for discriminatory design, future research should explore more directly how public authorities can be held accountable for political and design choices gatekeeping universal welfare benefits. Drawing on social justice orientations to design [14, 15, 29], we believe it is increasingly important to ask: What organizational and design choices constrain certain people from experiencing the benefits that digitalization promises? And how might we repair such choices collectively so that digitalization fosters equitable relations and addresses people's differences, interdependence, and liberties?

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