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Jeppe Agger Nielsen

Aalborg University, agger@dps.aau.dk

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Reflection note

Comments to Tina Blegind Jensen's SCIS/IRIS keynote

Jeppe Agger Nielsen

Department of Political Science, Aalborg University

agger@dps.aau.dk

1 Digital transformation of work: Working (smarter) with robots

In her motivating SCIS/IRIS 2018 keynote, Tina Blegind Jensen argued that IS researchers should pay close attention to the consequences of increased digitalization of work at both individual and organizational levels. She touched upon many relevant issues; however, in this note, I will only elaborate on one issue, namely the implications of replacing workers with robots. To focus my discussion, I will concentrate on robotic innovation in the public sector context, in particular health care and elderly care.

The discussion on automation and robotization of work is not new, but it has intensified in recent years. In the context of industrial work environments, robots are increasingly used and are expected to lead to major transformations of work practices and generate productivity gains (Brynjolfson and McAfee 2014). In Scandinavia, among other places, public sector organizations have started using robotic process automation through machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI). Medical robots are used at hospitals, while service and socially-assistive robots are found within municipal elder care (Nielsen, Andersen and Singh 2016)—sometimes highlighted in relation to the broader phenomenon of welfare technology (Aaen, Nielsen and Elmholdt 2018).

Robotization is currently one of most hyped technological innovations, perceived as a technology that potentially revolutionize the way we work and deliver services. Despite great expectations, there is a scarcity of research-based knowledge of how the use of robotic technology and advanced algorithms impact work practices in core public sector service areas, such as hospitals and municipalities as well as how managers, employees, and citizens react to and interact with these robots. Some commentators worry

that the next generation of robots will result in massive increases in unemployment rates, while others argue that there is no reason to fear the rise of robots and AI. Again, others state that robotic technology is over-hyped.

Although the public and private consumer markets for robotic innovations will continue to evolve and grow, influenced by both demand pull-mechanisms (aging population) and technology push-mechanisms (development of new robotics), the advancements in the implementation and use of robotics do not happen as fast as many think. Professor in Economics Philipp Schröder is probably right when he claims that robots unlikely will be as revolutionary as they sound to be in the short term. In the context of healthcare and elderly care, robotic innovations have potential but many promising ideas fail to move beyond the pilot stage and progress in wide-spread adoption moves slowly. Many robotic pilot inventions fail to be transformed into large-scale innovations with proven successful practical use, and it is difficult to realize the expected benefits. I agree with Tina Blegind Jensen that we need critical inquiries on the robotic phenomenon, and as researchers, we therefore need to go beyond the hype—and fear—and take a nuanced view on how we can work (smarter) with robots and how robot technology and humans can work together.

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