



From the desk to the cyborg's faceless interaction in The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration

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Abstract

We explore the shift from desk to digital services in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). This organizational shift is part of the “Channel Strategy”, which aims to route service users through multiple choices of media channel in NAV. The research question is: How do NAV service users with mental health challenges and co-occurring disorders experience the digitalization of NAV’s services? Our methodological framework is a bottom-up perspective. Our empirical sample consists of qualitative interviews with 25 service users with co-occurring disorders and challenges with mental health problems who have extensive knowledge of and experience using NAV’s services. The findings indicate a shift towards what we have termed “faceless interaction”, which refers to interactions related to users, frontline workers and the welfare system, as well as to how users respond to mediation in a digital context. In this integrated circuit, humans are responding to the terms set by technology; human interaction related to user involvement and responsibility is less prominent. The conclusion indicates that a shift towards digital social services in NAV requires new forms of skill and communication among both frontline workers in NAV and users with mental health challenges and co-occurring disorders.

Keywords

Digitalization, co-occurring disorders, service user involvement, social interactions, cyborg bureaucracy

Introduction

This paper explores service users’ experiences with the digitalization of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration’s (NAV) services. Since 2006, NAV has been the largest body of the Norwegian public administration. The overall aim of the welfare reforms is to activate people into employment. The implementation of digital services represents an important step towards incorporating citizens into working life, or work inclusion (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2018; Svensson, 2015; Breit, Egeland & Løberg, 2019). This implementation is part of a larger development in which digital technology has increasingly permeated all aspects of society and social life in the last 20 years (Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs, 2013). In a welfare context, this shift into digital welfare services also contributes to a change in relations between professionals, ser-

vice users and technology (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Pedersen & Wilkinson, 2018; Breit, 2019).

Research regarding increased use of information and communication technology (ICT) in a welfare context suggests that this development has both enabling and constraining impacts (Bovens & Zouidis, 2002; Røhnebæk, 2014; Breit & Salomon, 2015; Røhnebæk, 2016; Hansen, Lundberg & Syltevik, 2018, Breit, 2019). Hansen et al. (2018) and Breit (2019) point out the importance of seeking an empirically grounded understanding of the impact of ICT, and of avoiding a broad and deterministic position. Regarding this perspective, our approach is a compromise which highlights both the enabling and the constraining impacts that are consequences of the digitalization of NAV's services. Few existing studies explore how marginal groups experience a digital social service.

Our intention is to explore the digitalization of NAV's services in relation to two subgroups of service users: persons with mental health challenges and persons with both mental health and drug challenges, often referred to as co-occurring disorders (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2012). One important consideration that serves to highlight the need for an empirically grounded understanding of these particular groups of service users of NAV is the current lack of relevant literature. Most studies on the implementation of ICT in a social welfare context have focused on perspectives from the organizational point of view (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Gillingham, 2015a; Gillingham, 2015b; Breit, Andreassen & Salomon, 2016), which in general consists of samples composed of leaders and frontline workers (Røhnebæk, 2014; Røhnebæk, 2016; Breit, 2019; Breit, Egeland & Løberg, 2019). Some scholars have focused on service users' experiences of ICT solutions (Hetling, Watson & Horgan, 2014; Breit & Salomon, 2015; Hansen et al., 2018). Despite an increase in the number studies of service users, in this literature there remains a lack of focus on how users with mental health challenges and users with co-occurring disorders understand the increasing implementation of ICT in a social welfare context.

A central perspective in the literature based on users' experiences of ICT solutions is the concept of the digital divide (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Norris, 2001; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2010). This term refers to the unequal distribution of ICT in society (Hansen et al., 2018) and has developed two levels of focus: access to tools (computers, internet or mobile phones) and knowledge and skill in use of the tools. A central hypothesis in this literature is the increasing gap between those who have access to and manage ICT and those who are not in such a position (Hansen et al., 2018). Most relevant to this study is the concept "digital inequality" (Hansen et al., 2018). This term refers to a number of dimensions, such as social context and historical factors. These dimensions are central in access to, and mastery of, ICT.

ICT and digital transformation in a welfare context

We define digitalization as the integration of multiple technologies into all aspects of daily life that can be digitized (Gray & Rumpe, 2015). This process consists of two dimensions. The first dimension is the transformation of analogue communication, such as face-to-face meetings and postal letters, into digital solutions, such as video conferencing and email. We can summarise this dimension as digital services. The other dimension of digitalization is when digital technology is the core of the communication between sender and recipient; this entails the use of various digital solutions such as smart phones and computers for the purpose of collecting big data. A 2013 white paper by Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs (2013) defines digital competence broadly:

Digital competence is the ability to relate to and use digital tools and media in a safe, critical and creative way. Digital competence is both about knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is a matter of being able to perform practical communications, collect or process information. Digital judgment, such as privacy, source criticism and information security, is also an important part of digital competence (Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs (2013), section 2.2).

In this paper, we understand digital competence primarily in terms of service users' knowledge, skills, attitudes and interactions in connection with the increasing use of ICT by NAV. We adopt the concept "digital encounters" by Lindgren, Madsen, Hofmann and Melin (2019, pp. 429–430), who identified four main categories with which to classify digital encounters between citizens and the government. The first category is the nature and purpose of the encounter (i.e. exchange of information, service provision and control). The second category is the form and setting of the communication (using digital channels anywhere the service user has internet access). The third category is the central actors' involvement in the encounters (self-service citizens, technology developers and providers). The fourth category is the initiation, duration and scope of the encounter (actor-initiated or automated, fixed or undefined time and place). To sum up, the digital encounter describes a shift in the interaction between a citizen and a public official from traditional to novel ways of communication.

Digital communication and digital interactions in a bottom-up perspective

We approach NAV's digitalization strategy from a bottom-up perspective (Blumer, 1969), considering the experiences and interpretations of service users. This perspective acknowledges the perspective of service users as vital to an exploration of the dimensions of digital communication and interaction that are part of the use of ICT and the overall digitalization of social services in NAV. Despite the increasing importance of ICT in modern welfare states, there are few studies of how user experience and competence affect the impact of new ICT in the context of e-governance (Buffat, 2015). Even fewer scholars have addressed the issue from a bottom-up perspective.

Our main task in this study is to analyse how digitalization of social services works for NAV service users with mental health challenges and co-occurring disorders, users who are often referred to as marginalized. These groups may have different kinds of challenges in their everyday lives, and both groups need the extensive follow-up social benefits NAV provides. Regarding the need for extensive follow-up through benefits that NAV provides, our research question in this paper is: *How do NAV service users with mental health challenges and co-occurring disorders experience the digitalization of NAV's services?* Our research question refers to users' experiences with the digital social services that NAV provides. Our main task is to explore in particular how users interact with digital solutions in a welfare context.

People with co-occurring disorders are registered as having particularly poor living conditions (Lie, 2017). Data from Userplan, a mapping tool that Norwegian municipalities use to register information about users' life situation, confirms this fact. In 2016, 57 per cent of those registered with co-occurring disorders had "alarmingly poor living conditions", with reference to housing situation, meaningful activity, finances, physical health, mental health, drug use, social care and/or social networking (Lie, 2017). Poor living conditions may be an obstacle to participation in the digitalization of society in general, and to the development

of digital competence in particular. Hence, it may be challenging for this group of service users to participate in public encounters (Lindgren et al., 2019).

Busch et al. (2018) claim that the introduction of new ICT in street-level bureaucracies reduces human involvement and discretion in decision-making. Their conceptualization of the automation process involves a transition from street-level bureaucracies to screen and system-level bureaucracies, and thus a transition from face-to-face meetings and discretionary decisions to routinized through-the-screen interaction with fixed electronic templates. In the final stage, the system level, most counsellors and frontline workers are redundant and the system itself makes the decisions (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). However, the tension between the system level and frontline workers seems to be nuanced in empirical studies (Busch et al., 2018). Hansen, Lundberg and Syltevik (2018) dispute that such a development has taken place in NAV. Although there has been some routinization on the front line, screen interactions have not replaced face-to-face interaction in NAV (Hansen et al., 2018). Røhnebæk (2016) argues that the decision-making computer system Arena both provides and restricts flexibility for NAV frontline workers. However, the front line responds to the restriction with tinkering (Røhnebæk, 2016). Hence digital decision-making does not have to be deterministic, but decision-making tools might still influence decisions and affect discretion (Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). A further emphasis on digital processing in communication and decision-making within NAV was introduced by the so-called channel strategy in 2015 (Breit, 2019)

A channel strategy with several layers

The aims of the channel strategy were to make workforce-oriented follow-up more efficient, to reduce costs, and to concentrate resources on NAV's primary objective: to activate unemployed citizens and impose a demand for the citizen to find work (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015–2016; Breit et al., 2019). The starting point of the channel strategy was to use digital technology in the best interest of both service users and NAV (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015–2016). Service users were routed away from resource-demanding face-to-face meetings towards digital channels, which are less resource-demanding for case management (Breit et al., 2019). This routing is in line with offering analogue services as digital solutions. A white paper outlines that “the Labour and Welfare Administration’s channel strategy will contribute to [this goal], and the development of good digital solutions will contribute to improved services for users and a more efficient use of resources” (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2015–2016, p. 9).

The channel strategy, along with the digitalization of services, offers users a variety of ways to communicate with counsellors. Media richness theory (MRT) compares different communication media in terms of their ability to transmit information (Madsen, Hofmann & Pieterse, 2019; Madsen & Kræmmergaard, 2015). MRT addresses direct communication between a sender and a recipient. Face-to-face communication is the richest medium, while text message is the leanest (Ishii, Lyons & Carr 2019). Even though face-to-face may be the richest medium, service users differ in their preferred medium. The choices available to service users are often determined by knowledge, experience and culture (Ledbetter, Taylor & Mazer, 2015). Users’ choice of medium may depend on accessibility, in terms of technical solutions and digital competence among both counsellors and service users.

Media richness can also be described in terms of the variety and availability of multiple channel choices (CC). Reddick and Anthopoulos (2014) identify three categories of channels that citizens can choose from: traditional channels (face-to-face, telephone conversa-

tions and traditional letters), e-government channels (web and mail), and new digital media (text messaging, social media and mobile apps). They study how different channels affect the communication between government and service users. According to NAV's own annual satisfaction survey, NAV service users had a largely positive response to digitalization (Nav, 2020). The dimensions of satisfaction, trust and respect were used to measure service users' response to and attitudes towards NAV.

Digitized services, a term which denotes delivery through digital solutions, can also provide new opportunities for co-production (Breit et al., 2019). This is in accordance with Lindgren et al.'s (2019) definition of public encounters. Users can receive information about their case through new modes of communication and functionalities such as mobile and chat technology. These new modes of communication and opportunities for co-production still involve power relations between counsellors and users, just in "newer forms than in traditional face-to-face service encounters" (Breit et al., 2019, p. 166). Another effect of digital solutions is a possibility for NAV to classify and structure the service users.

A shift towards digital self-service solutions

There are several rationales behind the emphasis on ICT in NAV. One is to meet the goals of Norwegian workfare policy (*arbeidslinja*). Workfare is a concept used to describe all efforts to reach a specific goal, namely, the more people there are at work, the fewer there are on disability benefits (NOU 2004:13, 2004, p. 12). Digital solutions aim to be more effective and to save resources for large organisations (Breit, 2019).

To this end, one of the first steps in the interaction between a counsellor and a service user in NAV is to clarify the level of support to which the user is entitled. According to Kane (2020) the support is divided into four levels to which the user may be entitled. The first level, "Standard effort", is for service users who can find and keep work on their own. The second level, "Situational effort", is for service users who can find and keep work with some assistance from NAV. The third level is "Special effort", for service users who have reduced abilities to work, often due to health conditions or large mismatches between qualifications and labour market requirements. The final level according to Kane (2020) is "Permanent special effort", which is for service users who have permanently reduced working ability. The last two categories require a closer follow-up and a work ability assessment (WAA). Kane (2020) is concerned about service users' legal rights in the work ability assessment process, which involves mapping out the service user's needs and his or her participation. The quality of the decisions made in this process is influenced by the general conditions for the counsellor, including NAV's guidelines, law and official policies. Regarding the law, NAV is obliged to take the service user's situation into consideration when assessing the need for support (Kane, 2020).

This shift towards digital self-service solutions means that both service user and counsellor have to relate to several digital solutions (Breit et al., 2019). NAV's service users can communicate with their counsellor through personal meetings (or rather, face-to-face appointments scheduled in advance), phone, or emails; the personalized website "ditt NAV" [your NAV] serves as a junction between the service user and the counsellor. Nevertheless, the increasing demand for self-service solutions and digital literacy may be challenging for disadvantaged groups (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2018).

Digital interaction as a formative process in a “cyborg bureaucracy”

In this article, interaction is understood as a formative process. According to Blumer (1969), social action is a formative process. “Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5).

The digitalization process discussed in this article can itself be seen as a formative process progressing from “street level bureaucracy” to “screen bureaucracy” and then to “cyborg bureaucracy” (Breit, et al., 2019; Lipsky, 2010 [1980]; Røhnebak, 2016). The concept of “cyborg bureaucracy”, according to Haraway (1987), is the integration of human existence, nature and technology. Cyborg bureaucracy thus resists the dichotomy between human and technological work factors. “Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings” (Haraway, 1987, p. 18).

In our context, the integration, or rather the formalization of fluid social interaction, occurs between citizens (service users), the digital system and NAV counsellors. We suggest more attention should be paid to the integration of humans and technology in the provision of digital services. In other words, digitalization is not a process going on externally to the subjects in question, but rather a defining dimension of the correlation between frontline workers, citizens and technology.

Approach and methodology

We take an inductive approach inspired by Blumer’s (1969, p. 148) notion of “sensitizing concepts”. Blumer criticized attempts in social science to establish large and all-encompassing theories of how society works based on ideas drawn from the natural sciences. He warned against the devaluation of a research material’s complexity of meaning and was critical of theory reductionism. Terms like “social institutions”, “social structure” and “habits” are sensitive and, according to Blumer (1969), lack a fixed definition. Blumer describes this methodological stance, also known as symbolic interactionism, as an “examination of the empirical social world” (p. 47) and understands it as “a perspective in empirical social sciences – as an approach designed to yield verifiable knowledge of human group life and human conduct” (p. 21).

In this paper, we examine the interaction between the digital solutions in NAV and users with challenging mental health problems and users with co-occurring disorders and challenges. We focus on respondents who are in receipt of both temporary and permanent benefits, that is: social benefits, work assessment allowance (AAP) and disability benefits. All the respondents had regular interactions with NAV.

Methods

Recruitment

We chose a qualitative design with both individual interviews and focus groups. The data source consists of eleven individual interviews and four focus group interviews. Using focus groups was a strategic choice (Silverman, 2017) as they allowed us to be efficient without losing valuable information from our participants’ experiences. We gathered 3–5 partici-

pants per focus group for a conversation about their experiences and this led to dynamic discussions about different topics we wanted to highlight.

We approached several institutions to recruit participants in various age groups. It was challenging to recruit young people and people with drug abuse problems for focus groups. This challenge was addressed by offering the participants individual interviews. The changes in data collection and data sources were discussed thoroughly by the authors (Richards, 2015). The main argument for this change was to meet our aim for broad recruitment and to get as many participants as possible.

There were 25 participants in total, 11 females and 14 males, with ages ranging from 19 to 65 years. The participants were recruited through different kinds of services, namely non-governmental organizations and local mental health services. Every participant had experiences with NAV's services over time, mainly related to unemployment, work assessment allowances and disability benefits.

Ethical considerations

An important ethical consideration is our responsibility as researchers to raise awareness regarding the wrongs of society. Digitalization might contribute to a better distribution of welfare benefits, but it could also contribute to discrimination and threaten individuals' legal and social rights. Hence, by exploring marginalized service users and their experience with digital solutions in NAV, a bottom-up perspective is crucial to gaining knowledge of and insight into how users respond to this shift. Service users with co-occurring disorders are defined as a vulnerable group, and we therefore had to be attentive to the participants' health condition and ability to respond. To safeguard individuals, appointments with staff were arranged for participants who needed help coping with some of the issues we asked about in the interviews. None of the participants asked for assistance from staff during the interviews or afterwards.

Analysis

The data was analysed using an inductive approach in accordance with Blumer's (1969) bottom-up perspective and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. An inductive approach implies that the chosen themes are based on empirical data. In this case, the themes are based on the participants experiences with NAV's services.

Thematic analysis is widely used in the social sciences, but there is no common agreement on what it is or how to do it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not people-oriented, i.e. its focus is not on individuals' biography or life history. Rather, it is interested in how the production of meaning manifests itself separately from the biographical presentation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We followed the six steps for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which are as follows: becoming familiar with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, naming the themes and reporting the findings.

A theme is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). We looked for themes related to the participants' experiences with and descriptions of the digitalization of NAV services and practices. Four main themes emerged in the process of coding the data: 1) People with special needs; 2) Interactions with digital solutions: "...I love when she sends me a notice..."; 3) Digital competence and follow-up – "You end up in a circle"; 4) "The website is written in bureaucratese"; and 5) Interactions with and accessibility of counsellors.

People with special needs

Participants in this study were users with challenging mental health problems and users with co-occurring disorders and difficulties. Some participants were accommodated in municipal institutions because of their daily problems regarding co-occurring disorders, while some were young with depression and social anxiety. Overall, the participants had challenges that affected their digital interaction and communication with NAV in different ways.

One of the respondents underscored reading and writing difficulties that made it complicated to digitally record work income. The informant received income from a part-time job in addition to the disability pension, and had to register and keep accounts of the sub-income via digital solutions.

And when I started making some money during a part-time work so..... I don't know how many times I've asked for help and be referred to online calculators and all this digital stuff, but I hardly know, i.e. ... I feel that there has been such a fly in the ointment, then. So, if I hadn't had so much support around me, I wouldn't have mastered the part-time working life (respondent 1).

The respondent points to the absence of support to grasp the technical transition to digital solutions. The participant requested more individual follow-up from counsellors in NAV. The challenges posed by the participant here were specifically how to get an overview of the text base and the limits that indicated how much staff could earn beyond their pension income. This respondent had challenges related to reading numbers. The lack of support from NAV was replaced by the respondent's own private network. They helped the respondent to enter the correct numbers in the digital registrations to NAV.

One of the younger participants clarifies the need for digital solutions especially for those struggling with depression and social anxiety.

Especially for young people with depression and social anxiety, who are struggling to get out the door and show up at NAV's office. For them it would be a better idea if you could register properly via that communication base at NAV's website. In this sense, it would have been a way to get an easier communication with NAV through digital communication (respondent 2).

The respondent here points out that digital communication could be helpful for young users in NAV with depression and social anxiety who are struggling to meet up at their local NAV office. Digital solutions can help to avoid social arenas that can be perceived as difficult for the individual. However, this depends on the digital platforms being designed so that the individual can register and be given access and follow-up for their needs via the digital solutions.

The respondents in the material underline that some of the challenges were also connected with their living conditions. Some of the informants stayed in municipal institutions with long distances to their local NAV office. For some, the long distances meant that they lost insight about decisions in their cases. The decisions in their cases were not available on their personal web pages.

You can't read decisions online, it's electronic. Then they call back and say you have to come down to the NAV office to read. But, it takes 45 minutes from here and down to the local NAV office to get that piece of paper, then. I don't bother with that (respondent 3).

This respondent did not have access to decisions in his case online. In this situation it was difficult to meet up at the local NAV office. Other respondents stressed that digital commu-

nication and interaction worked better when they knew the counsellor. This familiarity was important for all the informants in this study and did make the digital communication and interaction easier.

But I think that the reason for why it has worked for me is that I actually know who my counsellor is, the times where I have got a dialogue with them at NAV in that chat thing. Then it has been very okay (respondent 2).

Knowing the counsellor seems to be important to how the respondents reflect on experiences with digital communication and interactions. For others, relations with their counsellor also meant that they did not have to engage with digital communication and interaction through the website. One of the respondents clarifies this point by saying: “I have no relationship with the digital system” (respondent 4). This respondent contacted the counsellor by telephone when he needed help from NAV. Another respondent learned the basic skills from others in the welfare system.

She taught me “basic”, how to send and report to NAV through the digital services. I have stuck to the knowledge she has taught me “basic” (respondent 4).

This respondent was transferred from Child Welfare Services to NAV and did not know how to manage the digital service in NAV. The employee of child welfare services mentioned here helped the respondent to find out how to use the digital services.

Knowing the counsellor had various meanings for the participants. Knowing the counsellor means that it is easier to navigate the website, to find the forms that they were supposed to use to apply for social services in NAV. On the other hand, knowing the counsellor also meant that some of the respondents refused to use the digital services. Their relations with the counsellor indicated that they did not have to relate to the digital systems on the website. These dimensions of relations are important because they indicate that digital services in NAV connect to a certain degree with respondents’ interactions with counsellors.

Interactions with digital solutions: “...I love when she sends me a notice...”
During the interviews, we discovered that the digital interactions regarding follow-up services, and in particular regarding the chat service, did make meaning in participants’ relations with counsellors in NAV. The chat service contributed to progress in their relations with NAV in that the corresponding usage of other technologies such as mobile telephones made it easier for them to keep in contact with the counsellor. Some of the participants enjoyed the chat service related to the website. It prevented them from checking their personal web page every day. To a certain extent, then, the chat service is an important tool in the follow-up services in NAV.

She [the counsellor] is nice and I love that when she sends me a notice, I get a message on my phone. (...) So ‘You have a message from NAV.’ Ok, great. Then I don’t have to check the site every day (respondent 5).

On the other hand, the participants experienced the website nav.no as insufficient or complicated to navigate. They wanted more information on how to proceed to find forms and request more “face-to-face” supervision with their counsellor. Faceless interaction was complicated in some respects, and the participants described different kinds of challenges, exemplified by the chat functions.

Those [message] chains are not clearly visible. The next problem is that you never know who you are writing to or talking with if you respond directly on the incoming post. One of the biggest problems, as I see it, is that the supervisor can terminate the conversation. I have experienced, several times, that they write something, and I would like to answer because what they say is incorrect or just nonsense, or I have an additional question, but I am no longer able to reply or to ask questions, and I have to open a new chat again, and again and again (respondent 6).

The participant mentions feeling insecure about making mistakes on the website. These experiences are described further by three respondents in the section below:

It has been difficult; notices of appointments for x-rays and various health examinations, and those have to go through NAV in part, or you have a notice about treatment (respondent 7).

You never know when you will get a response in the chat room. It might take a minute or three days to get an answer (respondent 8).

First, you don't get your questions answered when you are logged into [your personal page]. I haven't been there so much. But, you don't get answers at the local office either because you need an appointment. The office is open only a couple of hours a week, and if you want an answer on a critical matter, it is not simple, and then you must not use the digital solution (respondent 9).

These findings suggest a lack of response, frustrations and uncertainty, in addition to illustrating one of the effects of the channel strategy, namely that the reduction in opening hours shifts resources from general information to labour-orientated follow-up services (Breit et al., 2019). These findings show that digital solutions are not just a technical matter; they also lead to fewer options for formal follow-up interactions between users and frontline workers. Digital services lead to more uncertainty and individualization among users. On the other hand, users also found the channel strategy to be an effective information service compared to older kinds of interactions and follow-up services.

But if you are on Skype or in a chat room and are able to ask the right questions, it might take a minute and a half, and then you get an answer, rather than a three-month battle (respondent 10).

These findings indicate some of the positive aspects of digital social services. They show that digital information can be useful and effective. In this sense, digital communication can be both an effective resource and a possible channel for immediate answers.

Digital competence and follow-up – “You end up in a circle”

The participants described the transition to digital solutions in two ways. On the one hand, digitalization meant a quicker response from NAV, through the chat functions. This form of communication worked better than the telephone. Counsellors are often hard to reach and it is time consuming to get in touch with local NAV offices.

Use of the website... You have to call them up, then they have a limited processing time of two to three days to reply. But on [the] website, I wrote to my counsellor, and he took almost a week to reply. I find this solution is lousy business. The old solution was much better, you could make a phone call and get an answer. Now they can hardly say anything, you have to check the NAV website. When you get into your personal site and ask for a decision, you are not allowed to read it there (respondent 11).

The participants considered the digitalization of NAV's services to be insufficient; they called for more knowledge about both the digital solutions and their own cases.

Some participants found it challenging to follow up the progress of their case using digital solutions.

When I had to submit information about working hours related to the work assessment allowance (AAP), I read that I had seven unprocessed applications. I almost had a heart attack and thought “what is this?”. It turned out to be one application I messed up big time (respondent 12).

The channel strategy has led to fewer opening hours at the local NAV offices. In addition, both the delivery of information from different services and casework are increasingly digitalized, and there is an expectation that all service users will have mastered the digital solutions. This implies that the service users have digital competence and that they have a computer or a smartphone available.

I find it difficult to go through a process on the Internet. I don't like that. It is ok if you are searching for information, such as when you get a payment, or how much you can earn extra. That is quite easy, but not too easy, but it works. (...) Actually, looking up information [on the website] is difficult (respondent 13).

The participants found the homepage to be insufficient or complicated to use. They needed more information on how to navigate.

Of course, it is difficult to find information on the website. It is like a labyrinth. (...) You end up in a circle – you press a link, and the next, and the next, until you are back to the start with a new link (respondent 14).

This participant's experience shows the difficulties of navigating the website. The expectation is that users will know how to deal with the digital solutions offered on NAV's website. In this perspective, adapting to digitalization is seen as an individual responsibility. Moreover, being unable to navigate the website can make a person feel incompetent. One participant made the following suggestion:

Everyone new to the NAV system should have an introduction. Honestly. One hour of training to get the basic knowledge. I don't know anything. I have “failed” on these websites so many times (respondent 15).

“The website is written in bureaucratese”

The participants found the formulations and the language used on the website difficult to understand. They described the language as “bureaucratic”. A large part of what is communicated relates to legal rights of the service user. The language and content are intricate and detailed, in order to ensure that all formalities are included in the digital context. One of the respondents illustrates this by saying:

The website is written in “bureaucratese”. Not too much, but in formal language. And you don't know what to look for, so it might be a bit difficult to comprehend. I find it a bit vague, and I am not the only one (respondent 15).

One of the participants emphasized the strategy of resisting the digitalization of services by refusing to interact with them: “I demand everything in paper form, so I don't know how digitalization works in NAV” (respondent 16). This resistance to digitalization could be the result of a sense of powerlessness in the face of digital solutions, or of bad experiences with them, such as having important documents get lost in the case management process: “I am familiar with digital solutions and some programming, and I have made internet sites. Even

so, I find [NAV's website] inconvenient to navigate" (respondent 17). The respondents in this section claim that the digital platform is inconvenient. In their view, the problem was not a lack of technical knowledge and skills, but rather that the digital system was difficult to understand and navigate.

Interactions with and accessibility of counsellors

Participants reported that it was difficult to follow the progress of a case online. However, they noted that it was also difficult to reach caseworkers by telephone. Face-to-face encounters and easy access to the telephone made it easier for the participants to follow-up their own case. The channel strategy's aim – more digital encounters – narrowed the possibilities for getting in touch directly with a counsellor when participants needed information. The digital communication process seems not to be on the service users' terms.

Telephone calls are just as bad. You call a switchboard. Then you are connected to a person you don't know. You have no idea who you end up with. [...] – I should have made notes during the conversation, but you don't get through. Then you end up back in line, for an hour or more, before something happens, not much better ... The best chance is to go there in person. But if you have to work and try after 2 pm, just forget it (respondent 18).

Another theme that emerged was the competence of NAV employees. Several of the participants experienced that the counsellors lacked ICT competence.

One day a woman from NAV came and explained the services offered. It was very interesting because she had no idea about NAV's digital solutions. I asked her about how we could find different information online, but she didn't know anything. That was my first impression of NAV digital. That was two and a half years ago (respondent 19).

The implications of digital solutions were in some ways problematic with regard to accessibility to the counsellors. The "faceless interactions" did not improve accessibility and some respondents underscored the lack of progress online. The lack of progress and the lack of ICT competence among counsellors were important dimensions of the respondents' experiences. These findings indicate that accessibility in a digital context requires knowledge and skills which also include counsellors and the technical solutions which the channel strategy provides.

Discussion

Digitalization requires a new form of communication and new skills

Our analysis shows that Lindgren et al.'s (2019) definition of digital encounters is applicable in this study. The purpose of such encounters is to exchange information and provide service and control. The communication is based on digital solutions, and service users can access the service through the internet. The central actors are service users and providers; encounters may be initiated by both the service user and NAV and they are not fixed with regard to time or place. Lindgren et al. (2019, p. 231) decline to take a position as to whether or not this technological development is positive for the actors and call for further exploration of this phenomenon. Our empirical data allows for a critical examination of these digital encounters from the service users' point of view.

Lindgren et al.'s (2019) definition supports the theory of cyborg bureaucracy (Haraway, 1987; Breit, 2019). In the context of e-governance and case management, digital solutions become a supplier of terms.

For service users, the digitalization of NAV's services entails less interaction with and help from NAV employees and the expectation that service users can manage their own cases and navigate to the correct service through the website. The participants wanted to have the possibility of contacting NAV counsellors for help when the site is down or they have difficulty navigating it, or to get more information about the different services offered online.

The digital solutions were experienced as challenging in cases that required clarification or in complex cases involving several participants/actors, such as a GP and a specialist health service. Digitalization seems to work best in cases where a permanent measure, such as disability benefits, is granted. Digitalization makes these kinds of benefits more user-friendly and easier for the service user to control.

Temporary benefits or services, such as AAP or unemployment benefits, are related to a more complex and long-term process. Because they are ongoing, these cases require more contact with a counsellor, more follow-up and more engagement from both the service user and the counsellor. This implies that service users are expected to understand the service's requirements. Such expectations were experienced as demanding. Participants reported having difficulty understanding the bureaucratic language used on the website and how the different services worked. These findings suggest, in accordance with Breit et al. (2019) and Kane (2020), that digitalization can make services less accessible for certain groups. This could reinforce social differences and increase individual responsibility by creating more distant and faceless interactions between counsellors and service users.

Our sample, which contains both young and older respondents, shows some empirical aspects of digitalization and interactions between users with challenges, counsellors and technology. In a bottom-up perspective, faceless interaction is challenging, both from a technical point of view and because it increases distance from the counsellor; as a consequence, there is a digital divide between NAV service users who are able to participate in digital interactions and those without digital skills. The digital divide in our sample is not linked to social status, age or gender, but rather to whether users are familiar with and know how to navigate and interact with the more faceless and technical system imposed by NAV.

As mentioned earlier, digitalization entails the transformation of analogue action to digital solutions, such as when face-to-face meetings become video calls, telephone calls are replaced by chat services, or letters delivered by mail become emails. This alteration in communication requires solid and dependable technical solutions. In the empirical data there were many narratives about failings and errors with NAV's technical solutions that created a lack of trust in NAV as a system and which may pose challenges to individuals' digital competence and legal rights (Kane, 2020; Ledbetter et al. 2015; Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs, 2013).

Faceless cyborg bureaucracy: towards less interaction with counsellors

There was variation among the participants in terms of the complexity of their cases and their knowledge of the available digital solutions and tools. While NAV's channel strategy appears to be effective among people with co-occurring disorders and mental health challenges, its outcome is still uncertain. These findings are also relevant to a variety of interactions between service users and NAV as an organization.

From a bottom-up perspective, the "faceless cyborg bureaucracy" seems to work better in non-complex cases where there is no need for follow-up or other interactions. In more complex cases, face-to-face interaction is more urgent. These findings show that digitalization is not the main challenge; rather, the organization's channel strategy creates some dilemmas for users with mental health challenges or co-occurring disorders, when trying to interact with

their counsellor in NAV. This observation corresponds to Kane (2020), who pinpoints the challenges some users face in receiving proper help due to NAV's categorization of users.

Another challenge could be the aspect of user involvement that is regulated by law. An increased focus on providing multiple technological solutions could contribute to less face-to-face follow-up over time (Ledbetter et al., 2015; Reddick & Anthopoulos, 2014). The participants asked for confirmation of vital information regarding case management. In addition, rigid digital solutions could be an obstacle to proper user involvement and to individuals taking responsibility for their own future. In this sense, relations with counsellors seemed to be crucial in two ways. Firstly, the counsellor is important for the development of the digital interaction and communication with the users. Secondly, the users who were participants in this study underscore the need for individual response, which requires counsellors to be flexible regarding users' digital knowledge.

Conclusion

The users' experience with digitalization in NAV was both positive and negative. The study shows that digital solutions can be suitable in long-term cases that have been resolved and that they are less suitable in cases marked by their temporary nature and uncertainty. On the one hand, users seemed to prefer digital interaction to the telephone because it allowed them to know which caseworker they were communicating with. On the other hand, many users found digital interaction stressful because they were uncertain about the status of their case. These findings indicate that digital solutions have not improved NAV's provision of service in terms of ensuring that users receive correct information in a timely manner (Breit et al., 2019).

There is a need to pay more attention to individual rights. While the kind of digital developments that characterize cyborg bureaucracy might enable NAV to operate more efficiently, they could threaten individual rights. This can lead to a "faceless interaction" between users and frontline workers, which is mediated by technology. In the new digital NAV system, technology supplies the terms while humans become faceless users. The dehumanizing aspect of digitalization is an important topic for future research on the consequences of cyborg bureaucracy in NAV.

Our data indicate the need for more attention to whether technical solutions hinder or support individual service users in NAV, especially those with a need for close follow-up. These issues are important, and we suggest more attention to the consequences of digital development in social welfare systems, in terms of their organisational, technical and human frameworks.

Acknowledgement

Part of this study is linked to the project Bergum et al. (2020) Digital ledelse for synergier mellom brukermøter og digitale kanaler.

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