

Digitalizing the welfare state: citizenship discourses in Danish digitalization strategies from 2002 to 2015

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Abstract

As governments worldwide become increasingly reliant on digital technologies and e-government, ‘digital citizenship’ has become an important topic for research and policy-makers alike. While often described as the contemporary ‘ideal’ of citizenship, research has tended to downplay the normative dimensions of digital citizenship. Counter to such depoliticized approaches, this article argues that the digital citizen is a deeply political figure. Through a discourse-theoretical analysis of Danish governmental digitalization strategies from 2002 to 2015, the article shows how these have relied on a very particular image of the digital citizen. More specifically, we showcase how this figure has reproduced neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity, concerned with efficiency, productivity, individualization and collective responsabilization. By shedding light on these novel links between neoliberal and digital citizenship, the article challenges current views on digitalization. The article foregrounds how digitalization serves to reproduce and recast already-existing political rationalities and must be considered in relation to neoliberal hegemony.

Keywords

Citizenship, neoliberalism, discourses, digitalization, Denmark, e-government

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the figure of the ‘digital citizen’ has increasingly emerged as a topic of both research and governance (Katz 1997; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Isin and Ruppert 2015). As novel forms of digitalized governance, often labeled under umbrella terms like ‘e-government’ or ‘digital era governance’ (Dunleavy et al. 2006), have been pushed to the front of political agendas worldwide, citizens have increasingly been expected to be and act digitally. Current research has thus described digital citizenship as ‘the ideal of citizenship in the twenty-first century’ (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008, 140), ‘a fundamental concept for modern democracies’ (Missingham 2009, 392), and the ‘civic responsibility enabled by digital technology’ (Papacharissi 2010, 103), meaning ‘access to online technology is as binding to digital citizenship as national geography is to citizenship’ (104). Yet, while arguments such as these are becoming common within the scholarly literature, the moral and normative dimensions of digital citizenship have all too often been forgotten or downplayed (Bjorklund 2016). Research has overlooked that digital citizenship partially functions through the production of collective ‘imaginaries’ (Isin and Ruppert 2015), concerned with articulating certain normative visions for how citizens should and ought to be. It has moreover forgotten that such visions are produced through the accumulated knowledge work done by policy-makers and politicians in dialogue with industry partners, international collaborators, and (to a lesser extent) citizens themselves (Voß and Freeman 2016). In this article, we seek to restore these political and normative dimensions to the figure of the digital citizen. More specifically, we seek to showcase how novel links are being made between existing political rationalities (Brown 2015) and the digital citizen as an increasingly important political figure. We do this through a discourse theoretical study of Danish digitalization strategies produced from 2002 to 2015, with a particular focus on the normative ideas inscribed within these documents.

November 2014, it became mandatory for all Danish citizens to communicate with the Danish state through a digital infrastructure entitled ‘Digital Post’ (Henriksen 2015). This system was designed to act as an official digital mailbox and from this point on all Danish citizens were expected to be ‘digital by default’. This meant that they were forced to adopt the system if they were to stay in contact with core parts of the public sector and maintain their social welfare benefits. ‘Being digital’ no longer constituted an optional part of the welfare state, but became a mandatory legal and symbolic component in national citizenship altogether. The mandatory implementation of Digital Post was in many ways the culmination of several decades of digitalization and e-governance initiatives. It was ‘the final goal of 15 years of digital strategies for the Danish public sector’ (145). Thus, from the middle of the 1990s and onwards, the Danish state has invested large amounts of economic resources in large-scale political efforts to fully digitalize the Danish state and public sector (Johansson 2004; Jæger and Löfgren 2010; Andersen 2007). To this end, a range of different digital technologies has been implemented within and across major parts of the public sector. Coinciding with this turn toward mandatory digitalization, the welfare state has gradually transformed into what has been labeled as the *competition state* (Pedersen 2011b; see also Jessop 2002). This turn has had important consequences for how the Danish state has perceived and governed its citizens. Instead of seeking to shelter these from the

cycles of accumulation and crises of the market, the state has instead sought to make citizens competitive, flexible, and active, relying in unprecedented ways on responsabilizing its citizenry. Yet, what has so far remained underexplored is how digitalization may play a key role in reproducing and recasting these novel forms of ‘neoliberal’ citizenship.

This article examines how the Danish state has legitimized the process of digitalization by drawing on and constructing certain discourses about how Danish citizens should and ought to act. Relying on analytical insights drawn from post-Marxist discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2014), we investigate how citizenship has been discursively constructed within Danish digitalization strategies produced during the last 15 years. Which implicit normative claims, designating particular expectations toward the ways in which citizens should and ought to act, have these discourses contained? We depart from the underlying premise, presented with such great clarity by contemporary research on neoliberalism and citizenship (Dardot and Laval 2013; Brown 2015; Ong 2006), that the figure of the citizen cannot be seen as simply a juridical category endowed to particular subjects within a given state. Instead, governmental conceptions of ‘citizenship’ can and is used to express particular ideals about how citizens should and ought to be acting (Isin and Ruppert 2015). Moreover, such ideals are actively produced by neoliberal states through governmental technologies, discourses, practices, and institutional logics (Dardot and Laval 2013). In this sense, the production of ‘proper’ citizenship is at the heart of contemporary statecraft (Wacquant 2009), while also serving as an engine for exclusion and peripheralization of those deemed outside the political community (Balibar 2015; Ong 2006). By attending to how neoliberal and digital citizenship are becoming intertwined and co-dependent political figures, we are able to open up for a broader discussion of how *neoliberalization* and *digitalization* may be seen as mutually reinforcing processes (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014). The article adds to the existing research on digital citizenship and neoliberalism by showcasing how the construction of a ‘digital society’ has relied on and served to reproduce normative conceptions of citizenship. In doing so, our account highlights how digitalization is not merely the neutral implementation of technological infrastructures, but rather the negotiation of a set of deeply political questions concerning the ‘good’ society and the contents of ‘proper’ citizenship

Neoliberalism, citizenship, and policy-making

Neoliberalism has garnered widespread academic interest during the last decades (Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013; Wacquant 2009; Davies [2015] 2017). Developing from the 1970s as a response to the perceived crisis of Keynesianism, neoliberalism has in many ways become the dominant political, economic, and normative regime in most of the western world (Springer 2016; Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism is, however, notoriously difficult to pin down as a concept, as it may refer to both ‘a political ideology, sometimes a theoretical paradigm, (...) [and sometimes] a social process’ (Jensen and Prieur 2016, 97–98). That being the case, Colin Crouch (2011, 7) has nonetheless suggested that it can be characterized by its ‘preference for the market over the state as a means of resolving problems.’ Keeping in mind that neoliberalism always becomes

transformed when it ‘goes local’ (Ban 2016), this characterization does serve to capture the most common traits ascribed to neoliberal governance. Adding to this conceptualization, scholars have highlighted how neoliberalism strives toward privatization, economic deregulation (reregulation), and a remolding of the state in terms of the market. Yet, against folk conceptions of neoliberal statecraft as the coming of ‘small government’, Wacquant (2009, 307) has argued that the neoliberal state is a highly interventionist and proactive entity, concerned with actively implementing and forging its political ideals onto the social space.

Since the release of the so-called Bangemann Report by the European Union in 1994 (Gibbs 2001; Goodwin and Spittle 2002), research has highlighted the novel links being made between neoliberalism and digitalization. This has been shown through comparative studies of information and communication technology (ICT) policies in Sweden and the EU (Verdegem and Fuchs 2013), the Digital Agenda in India (Gurumurthy, Chami, and Thomas 2016), studies of Open Government Data in the United Kingdom (Bates 2014), and data policies in Italy (Franceschetti 2016). What is yet to receive a systematic attention within this literature, however, is the underlying conception of citizenship articulated within such digitalization policies. Notwithstanding a few existing studies (Bjorklund 2016), research on digitalization has tended to overlook that at the heart of the ‘neoliberal stealth revolution’ (Brown 2015) lies the construction and subjectivation of particular images of the ‘proper’, ‘natural’, and ‘productive’ citizen.

While the concept of ‘citizenship’ has a complex historical legacy (Isin 2002; Balibar 2015), research drawing on particularly Michel Foucault’s pioneering work has shown how the crafting of an entrepreneurial citizen-subject has been at the center of contemporary neoliberal policies (Brown 2015; Lessenich [2009] 2015; Ong 2006). In *The New Way of the World*, Dardot and Laval (2013, 4) thus argue that neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a merely economic doctrine, but must rather be conceived as a normative system, a global rationality ‘that determine a new mode of government of human beings in accordance with the universal principle of competition’. This ‘universal principle’ has served as the foundation for a new conception of citizenship in the guise of the ‘neoliberal subject’. This new citizen has been modeled on the image of the individual as a personal enterprise: citizens are expected to be self-governing in order to maximize competitiveness, mimic the flexibility and attitude of modern enterprises, actively involved in self-work so as to become continuously more efficient and productive, responsabilized for the choices and risks they (are forced to) take, and portrayed as inherently entrepreneurial. As a range of scholarly interventions highlight, these emergent modalities of neoliberal citizenship have caused new forms of exclusion, stigmatization, and precarization (Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011; Standing 2011; Wacquant 2009), as individuals unable to fit within these forms of subjectivity will find themselves marginalized by the ‘rules’ of the game (Bourdieu et al. 2000).

Given that this image of the neoliberal citizen is integral to the recasting of contemporary states, the figure’s absence from research on digitalization is all the more conspicuous. Particularly as Isin and Ruppert (2015)

have recently shown that the ‘digital citizen’ has emerged as a key problem of contemporary governance. As governments increasingly turn to e-government and digital era governance (Dunleavy et al. 2006), the governance of subjects as digital citizens, and the tacit set of assumptions attached to this political figure, becomes of primary importance. Thus, if we wish to investigate how and in what ways digitalization plays a part in reproducing and reforming contemporary states, it seems to us that the figure of the citizen must be brought back into view. This article adds to existing accounts of digitalization by focusing on how the figure of the ‘digital citizen’ has been discursively constructed within governmental strategies. Departing from Isin and Ruppert’s (2015) contention that digital citizenship is necessarily tied to *imaginary* or *discursive* components, we seek to understand the claims and normative ideals attached to this figure. The article consequently contributes to existing accounts of neoliberal governance by highlighting how digitalization, a process often considered to be merely ‘technical’, forms an important part in reproducing and recasting neoliberal rationalities. In bridging an empirical policy study with emergent scholarship on the ‘digital citizen’, the article showcases how this figure has become of central political concern and invested with normative ideals already circulating within the political field.

The competition state and digitalization

The global diffusion of neoliberalism as a normative and political project can also be seen when looking at the Danish state. An influential strand of research has argued that since the 1990s, the Danish *welfare state* has increasingly been transformed into a *competition state* (Pedersen 2011b; see also Jessop 2002). This diagnosis seeks to encompass a process by which the previously known ideals and political practices making up the welfare state have gradually become reliant on competitiveness as their underlying principle. At the core of these transformations lies a renewed conception of what it means to be a proper citizen. According to Pedersen (2011b, 12, our translation), the competition state seeks to ‘mobilize its population and businesses to participate in the global competition’, while the welfare state sought to protect these from the market. This has simultaneously meant that individual responsibilities have replaced previous conceptions of moral education and participatory democracy as some of the main tasks pursued by the state. In this way, the state no longer seeks to protect its citizens collectively from the market, but to give them a new form of freedom that is ‘identical with the freedom to realize one’s own needs’ (Pedersen 2011b, 12, our translation). The emergence of the competition state thus signals a reconfiguration of the concept of citizenship. Danish citizens have increasingly been molded and portrayed in a distinctly neoliberal register concerned with imposing market-like dynamics on all spheres of public and private life. With these descriptions, we can begin to see how neoliberal ideals are becoming internalized within governmental practices, and how these have served to create a novel image and portrayal of ‘proper’ citizenship. Yet, what often goes unnoticed in this account is how the 1990s and 2000s was also a period in which digitalization, e-governance, and digital reforms increasingly came into view as a means of policy-making (Johansson 2004; Jæger and Löfgren 2010).

While being awarded an increasingly prominent position within Danish policymaking during the 1990s, the development of a fully digitalized society and public sector goes all the way back to the beginning of the 1960s (Sundbo and Lund 1986; Johansson 2004). At that point in time, the first electronic databases and archives were introduced as a replacement for so-called ‘punch cards’, which had been used as one of the main technological devices within the state (Johansson 2004). These punch cards had been used for civil registration and to store key information about Danish citizens (Krogness 2011; Pedersen et al. 2006 ; Pedersen 2011a). In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, however, a number of ‘large, standardized and central systems’ (Johansson 2004, 143, our translation) were introduced within the administrative parts of the public sector. These systems were used to manage and administer large amounts of data, such as information about citizens’ salaries and taxation. The introduction of these large databases was, as Jæger and Löfgren (2010, 257) observe, analogues to the developments found in a number of other industrial societies. It was a response to the growing complexity of the public sector, and a need to handle larger and more advanced forms of data.

From particularly the mid-1990s, a whole range of new digital technologies has been implemented within the Danish public sector. This has been both due to technological innovations, lower production and manufacturing costs, and to the increasingly widespread use of electronic communication among Danish citizens. Thus, in the 1990s, the ‘digitalization of the public sector reached the “front-office”’ (Jæger and Löfgren 2010, 257). Rather than being limited to an administrative tool used ‘within’ the Danish state, digital technologies were now employed directly within the relation between the Danish state and its citizens (Pors 2015b). From the beginning of the 2000s and onwards, there has been a major political push toward the implementation of a number of new digital technologies within and across the public sector. This has entailed the implementation of digital invoice systems and online banking; digital accounts for all citizens; public homepages with information on taxation; various forms of ‘citizen’ portals, gathering data from the different parts of the public sector within one unified framework; new digital tools for education and learning; and various forms of digital technologies used for health care, such as electronic patient journals, unified health-care portals, and telemedicine. In this sense, there has been a tremendous focus, across the various strands of the public sector, on implementing, utilizing, and incorporating new digital technologies. As Igari (2014, 118) observes, ‘the Danish government has continually taken initiatives toward promoting e-government since the 1990s’, which has resulted in Denmark being ‘a leader in ICT usage’ (116).

Expressed through a wealth of official reports, policies, and strategies (Johansson 2004), politicians and policy-makers have attached a number of ideals, dreams, and hopes to what digitalization is and ought to do. In the 1990s, policy-makers tended to see digitalization as a key means of freeing information, enhancing democracy, making government transparent, and improving the opportunities for disadvantaged citizens (Jæger and Löfgren 2010; Johansson 2004). While policy-makers were partly inspired by ideals produced by the European Union, they nonetheless foregrounded how the digitalization of the Danish society should be based on so-called ‘Danish values’. In this way, it was important for policy-makers that existing ‘welfare

state' logics were not jeopardized by the creation of a digital society. As the national policy *The Digital Denmark* from 1999 states, '[t]he Digital Denmark is about how Denmark can become a leading IT nation in the network society, while we continue the best values in the welfare society' (Forskningsministeriet 1999, 7, our translation).

From the 2000s, however, economic ideas have become increasingly more widespread within Danish digitalization strategies. This has been due to both a turn within the national government in 2001 (from a social democratic to a liberal coalition) and a consequence of the internal allocation of responsibilities within the Danish government. Thus, from 2001, the Ministry of Finance was de facto put in charge of digitalization policies (Jæger and Löfgren 2010). From this point on, the digitalization of the public sector came to be seen as a way of providing new business opportunities, making administrative processes more lean, and giving the private sector new potentials for innovation. Jæger and Löfgren (2010, 267) thus observe how there has been a shift from 'the initial years full of experiments and a trust in public agencies' capability of designing individually citizen-oriented systems' to 'a belief in economies of scale and centralisation.' This, these authors argue, has simultaneously meant a shift toward 'authority and control' rather than 'campaigns, dialogue' as the main communicative instrument and choice of policy. Adding to this last argument, Andersen (2008, 316–317) has highlighted how there has been a gradual shift from the notion that digitalization must include all citizens to a focus on first and foremost serving the group of citizens who are willing and capable of taking advantage of these new technologies.

This article adds to current historical accounts of Danish digitalization policies (Jæger and Löfgren 2010; Johansson 2004) by highlighting how the figure of the 'digital citizen' has played an important component within the discourses produced by policy-makers. In bringing the tacit normative claims attached to this political figure to the front, the article simultaneously showcases how novel links are being made between neoliberalization, the crafting of the competition state, and digitalization (Pedersen 2011b).

Research design

Theoretical framework

The analysis presented in this article is informed by insights from Ernesto Laclau's (1990, 2005) post-Marxist discourse theory. We have chosen to utilize discourse theory as it provides a particularly apt approach to study the construction and negotiation of political meaning. Within the context of critical policy studies (Fischer et al. 2015), discourse theory has increasingly been operationalized in order to investigate how particular strategies, policies, and juridical measurements contain certain implicit normativities and construct specific forms of meaning (Howarth 2010; Howarth and Torfing 2005; Hawkins 2015; Howarth and Griggs 2012). In this article, we follow these recent perspectives in order to specifically analyze how notions of citizenship have been articulated in the context of Danish governmental strategies. Discourse theory provides what

Marchart (2007) terms a *political theory of signification*, which is well suited for a qualitative and textual analysis.

The basic premise of Laclauian discourse theory is that social reality is never given meaning a priori through immanent laws or essences. Rather, meaning is produced through the practice of *articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2014), which turns *elements* into so-called *moments* given as differential positions within a structured whole. This structured whole, comprised of relational moments of meaning given in an interplay of difference, is what Laclau terms a *discourse*. A discourse is a systematized whole of individual moments that stand in a particular relation to each other. In a linguistic sense, a discourse can be viewed as a particular way of understanding and giving meaning to events, objects, institutions, and subjects inhabiting the social world. A particular discourse, then, represents a particular way of making sense of and constructing the world, it functions as a particular interpretive and symbolic system. When used as an analytical approach, discourse theory provides a framework that seeks to understand, explain, and deconstruct the particular discourses operating in certain contexts, particularly vis-à-vis how such discourses reflect certain normative ideals and power relations (Laclau 1990; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000).

Discourse theory awards a primary position to *the political* as the precarious and always lacking ground of the social. In this sense, discourses are never merely seen as neutral or simply given (Laclau 1990, 5). Instead, any given discourse is always the outcome of contingent and historical *decisions* (Laclau 1990, 34) that have distinguished between what should be included and what should be excluded. Laclau (1996, 38) maintains that discourses are always constructed in terms of exclusion, and any discourse will never be able to completely close off the construction of meaning in a self-sufficient and positive manner. Meaning, rather, is always interlaced with a *constitutive lack*, a radical negativity.

Based on these underlying premises, discourse theory offers a number of specific analytical concepts that can be used to analyze how discourses are able to partially stabilize and fixate meaning. This includes notions of nodal points, subject positions, logics of equivalence/difference, and empty signifiers. While firmly committed to a constructivist, relational, and contingent perspective on meaning, post-Marxist discourse theory simultaneously stresses the need to engage in normative questions, critically scrutinizing hegemonic forms of subordination and oppression (Howarth 2000; Schou 2016). Though any such normative investigation can never be anchored in a firmly established ground or foundation, one should not give way to what Howarth (2000, 123) terms as ‘enlightenment blackmail’, in which ‘unless one has or invokes absolute foundations to defend a political project, then one has no ground whatsoever’. Discourse theory becomes both a way of understanding how social reality is produced as meaningful and a political toolbox that can be used to engage proactively with normative questions about how social reality should or can be re-negotiated. In deconstructing the ways in which discourses operate currently, discourse theory opens up a space for thinking how things could be (and could have been) otherwise.

Data and coding

Governmental strategies form an important part in the implementation of large-scale digital infrastructures and social reforms. Rather than simply neutral means of explicating goals, governmental strategies form an active part in the negotiation and construction of particular discourses (Voß and Freeman 2016; Hjelholt and Jensen 2015; Hjelholt 2015). In the case of the Danish public sector, there has been produced a variety of digitalization strategies during the last two decades, including both long-term documents outlining strategic aims, evaluation reports assessing current trends and constructing milestones, and specific strategies aimed directly at the public health-care sector. In a similar way, strategies have been produced on national, municipal, and local levels, stretching beyond the state and into all levels of governance. Within this article, we specifically focus on large-scale strategies produced on a national level. These strategies have been produced on a two-to-three-year cycle from 2002 and onwards. In total, there has been produced four digitalization strategies, which have been used (by the shifting Danish governments) in order to outline and explicate the intentions, possibilities, and current status on the implementation and digitalization of the Danish public sector.¹ The documents were collected through the official homepage of the *Danish Agency for Digitisation* (www.digst.dk). Some of the strategies exist in both Danish and English versions. In these cases, where applicable, we quote from the English versions, while in all other cases the quotes have been translated into English by the authors. In the following analysis, we will, for the sake of simplicity, refer to each strategy by citing the period covered by the individual report. This means that we will reference each strategy in the following way: 2002–2004 (“På vej mod den digitale forvaltning”, 2002), 2004–2006 (“Strategi for digital forvaltning”, 2004), 2007–2010 (“Strategi for Digitalisering af den offentlige sektor 2007-2010”, 2007), and 2011–2015 (“The Digital Path to Future Welfare: eGovernment Strategy 2011-2015”, 2011).

The strategies were analyzed through a systematic qualitative coding using a discourse theoretical approach, as outlined earlier, and based on the guidelines proposed by Howarth (2000, 2005). Our coding entailed a two-step process in which the empirical material was first coded systematically by one of the authors using an inductive coding scheme. This part of the analysis was conducted with an emphasis on how notions of citizenship and the citizen were articulated in the strategies. At this stage, textual pieces were grouped into overall discourses and key signifiers (nodal points) were noted down. During this coding stage, three overall codes emerged, which we named *citizens as businesses*, *citizenship as homogeneity*, and *citizenship as individuality*. These three codes frame the presentation of our findings in the following section. This initial inductive stage was followed by a deductive coding stage in which the data was analyzed using the codes constructed in the first stage. In an attempt to expand and nuance our initial codes, this entailed a second in-depth textual analysis of the empirical data. It is the outcome of this final analysis that is presented in this article. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that in this article we do not seek to trace how the investigated discourses have changed over time. Instead, we have deliberately sought to analyze the discourses that have remained more or less consistent throughout the data. It is our empirical claim that when looking across the different strategies, a more or less coherent and stable image of the citizen can be found.

While this citizen has been inserted into various other discourses over time, its core features have remained more or less constant. It is this relatively stable discourse that this article is intended to investigate.

The construction of citizenship in Danish digitalization strategies

Following the three overall themes found during our coding, the following sections present our analysis of citizenship discourses within these strategies. We will argue that what emerges from this analysis is a relatively coherent image of a very particular digital citizen: a digital citizen that is constructed as an efficient and economic agent; that is part of more or less homogenous collective of ‘Danes’, each able and expected to utilize digital technologies on a daily basis; and that is highly individualized with particular needs and expectations. We will argue that what unifies these diverse claims is the adherence to and recasting of existing portrayals of the ‘neoliberal subject’.

The efficient subject: citizens as businesses

The first discursive logic used within the Danish digitalization strategies consists in articulating Danish citizens as economically driven subjects that seek to optimize both their own productivity and the efficiency of the services offered by the government. Thus, according to the 2011–2015 strategy, an exemplary articulation of this position, ‘Danes do not want to waste their valuable time on paperwork at their local government office. And taxpayers’ money must not be used on printed forms and postage when digital solutions can carry out these tasks more efficiently’ (2011–2015, 3). In this quote, ‘Danes’ are constructed as first and foremost being interested in optimizing their time. This leads to an economic rationale concerning the need to make government more effective. The coupling of the citizen’s supposed wish for efficiency with the need for more effective governance is broadly resonated in other pieces of the strategy, which states that ‘[t]he public sector needs to make sure that eGovernment results in financial benefits’ as ‘citizens continue to expect better and better public services’ in a time where the ‘global financial crisis has turned well-balanced state budgets into deficits’ (2011–2015, 4). Within these quotes, the Danish citizen is first of all articulated as an efficient subject concerned with the optimization of his or her time. Yet, at the same time, this subject is also one that expects more and better services from the state. In this sense, the citizen is articulated as demanding efficient solutions both in order to optimize their personal time and also to improve governmental practices. Digitalization is seen as a way of fulfilling these double-sided demands.

The coupling of digitalization with notions of efficiency, economic growth, and financial gains runs throughout the strategies produced by the government. In 2002–2004, it is stated that ‘[t]he ambition is to utilize the potentials of a digital society across the state, counties and municipalities in order to organize the public sector more flexibly, more efficiently, and with greater quality for citizens’ (2002–2004, 4). This is resonated in 2004–2006, where it is stated that ‘digitalization must contribute to creating an effective and coherent public sector with a high quality of service, in which citizens and businesses are at the center’ (2004–2006, 4). Similarly, in 2007–2010, it is also proclaimed that ‘[t]he Danish public sector must be among the

best in the world to utilize technology in order to make problem solving more effective' (2007–2010, 15), and, finally, in the 2011–2015 strategy, it is stated that 'public sector authorities can save resources by using channels that ensure the most cost-effective service for citizens and companies' (2011–2015, 5), while the implementation of digital welfare services will 'provide citizens with services that target individual needs while reducing expenditure' (2011–2015, 6).

In this sense, there has been and continues to be very strong economic justifications behind the digitalization of the Danish public sector. Within and throughout the strategies, digitalization and efficiency are systematically equated. Yet, what is important to note in this context is not just how the digitalization of the public sector is legitimized using economic or financial justifications. Rather, it should be stressed how these economic ideals are justified by reference to what Danish citizens 'want' or 'expect'. It is because the Danish citizen is constructed as a first and foremost economic agent – concerned with efficiency and productivity – that the Danish public sector should also be fueled by economic ideals. The articulation of the citizen as an economic agent forms a part in the legitimization of a political vision that prioritizes economic logics.

The construction of the citizen as an economic agent can also be seen in the multiple ways in which citizens and businesses are more or less equated. Hence, within the strategies, citizens and businesses are constructed as driven by the same basic motivations and incentives. Specifically, this can be seen in the way in which the signifiers *citizens* and *businesses* are often used interchangeably. In 2002–2004, for example, it is stated that 'the public sector's services must be delivered in a coherent manner with citizens and businesses at the center' (2002–2004, 7), 'the goal is to reduce the public sector's expenditures, while giving citizens and businesses better access to public service' (2002–2004, 7), and '[i]t is an essential pre-condition for digital service and electronic communication that the public sector can handle information and data from citizens, businesses, and other authorities effectively' (2002–2004, 15). In both the 2004–2006 and the 2007–2010 strategies, these statements – constructing citizens and businesses as the same agent – are continued completely unaltered. The 2007–2010 strategy thus states that it prioritizes 'digitalization in the areas that have the greatest effect on both citizens and businesses and the public sector' (2007–2010, 6) and that '[c]itizens and businesses are the starting point for the public sector's work' (2007–2010, 10). Both citizens and businesses, then, are construed as 'customers' by policy-makers: they are driven by the same basic needs and should be met with the same governmental 'offers'.

Overall, we find that Danish citizens have very consistently been articulated as economic and efficient subjects that prioritize economic justifications linked to productivity and optimization. These ideas are, moreover, linked not only to the individual, but also to his or her expectation toward the government and its administrative processes. In this sense, efficiency becomes both an individual trait, attributed to the citizen, and also a social or political imperative directed *from* the citizens *toward* government. Constructing citizens as driven by economic incentives and continuously striving to become more efficient is a core component of

neoliberal citizenship (Dardot and Laval 2013; Brown 2015). Likewise, making efficiency and productivity into almost ethical imperatives, demanded by both the individual and society, is also a common trope within the neoliberal imaginary (Lessenich [2009] 2015). In this way, the discursive equation of citizens and businesses is not just an innocent practice, but serves to import very particular normative ideas about the subject.

Homogeneity: citizenship as sameness

The second discursive logic used within the strategies consists in articulating Danish citizens as a homogenous group of subjects that share particular beliefs, everyday practices, and expectations toward the ways in which government should function. We have already, however implicitly, touched upon this in the earlier discussion, yet we will explicate its precise contents in this section. This particular logic is achieved by utilizing the signifiers ‘Danes’ and ‘Danish Citizens’ in order to designate the ‘totality’ of the Danish population. Thus, according to the 2011–2015 strategy, as quoted earlier, it is ‘Danes’ who do not want to waste time (2011–2015, 3), ‘smartphones [that] provide Danish citizens with even better opportunities for communicating online with the public sector’ (2011–2015, 13), and while ‘[t]oday, all citizens have a letter box hanging by their gates or in the entrance to their apartment building’, they will, by 2014, ‘have a digital letter box (Digital Post) where they will receive letters from public authorities’ (2011–2015, 15). As can be seen from these passages, notions of ‘citizens’ and ‘Danes’ are used more or less interchangeably. The Danish citizens are articulated as a homogenous collective of individuals: all ‘Danes’ are constructed as acting in more or less the same way and the strategies are constructed *as if* they spoke on behalf of all citizens.

The effect of this particular construction, which collapses all Danes to a uniform, collective subjectivity, is twofold. First of all, it serves to couple Danes, citizens, and citizenship with a range of other normative expectations and signifiers through what Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2014) terms a *logic of equivalence*. This means that Danes (or Danish citizens) become the *particular* signifier that is used to express a range of other signifiers. The Danish citizen becomes what Laclau terms a *tendentially empty signifier* (Laclau 1996; 2005) that is suspended between fulfilling a both universal and particular position. While still being a particular signifier, ‘it also becomes the signifier of a wider universality’ (Laclau 2005, 96).

Second, through the articulation of this logic of equivalence, the construction of the Dane as a homogenous entity also serves to exclude the forms of subjectivity that fall outside this particular constructed community. The articulation of Danes as an empty signifier serves to neutralize particular expectations toward the ways in which Danish citizens should and ought to be. This discursive logic – linking homogeneity with particular expectations – can be seen in the following quote: ‘Danish citizens use their computers, mobile phones and the Internet every day’ (2011–2015, 3). Within this passage, all Danes are articulated as using a particular set of technologies on an everyday basis. While this is articulated as a more or less factual statement concerning the empirical use of technologies, it could also be read as a normative statement concerning the ways in which

Danish citizens *should* act: Danish citizens *should* use their computers, mobile phones, and the Internet every day. This also means that this particular construction rests on an implicit demarcation between Danish citizens, as avid technology users, and a ‘constitutive outside’ made up of non-technology adopters. In this way, the signifiers Danes and Danish Citizens become directly tied to being able to participate and access particular technologies, and being a technology user is articulated as the normatively desirable option.

This discursive logic can very consistently be traced throughout the strategies. Already in the 2002–2004 strategy, it is stated that ‘Danes are among the leading in the world to take new technological opportunities into use’ (2002–2004, 4) and that ‘[c]itizens must have access to digital media and use them in all parts of society’ (2002–2004, 4). This also means that the citizens who do not fit into these categories are explicitly articulated as the target of disciplinary measurements:

We must also take citizens who have trouble with or are simply unfamiliar with using digital channels into consideration. (...) Citizens with weak IT skills, such as frail senior citizens, will be able to authorize a family member so they can access their personal Digital Post. Furthermore, many people with disabilities will be able to use digital solutions without the need for personal assistance. (2011–2015, 14)

In this quote, the citizens who do not fit within the normative parameters constructed by the state are articulated as having or being linked to ‘trouble’, ‘weak IT skills’, ‘disabilities’, and being ‘unfamiliar’, ‘unable’, and ‘frail’. They appear as subjects that should be corrected and re-integrated through a number of disciplinary measurements. The normative demarcation on which this division rests – constructing particular forms of subjectivity as desirable, while others are constructed as weak or disabled – is not only made to seem neutral, but it is also linked to a range of mechanisms that seeks to (re-) include the excluded. The disciplinary re-integration that these included exclusions are facing is first and foremost driven by economic terms: ‘[c]itizens with different disabilities or a lower capacity for work should also be given the opportunity to use their skills in the labor market’ (2011–2015, 28). Even exclusion is framed in a monetary or economic vocabulary. Thus, whenever the strategies attempt to speak on behalf of the totality of the population, they are building this particular perspective on an implicit normative demarcation between different kinds of subjectivity. In this sense, the main line of demarcation revolves around technology adoption and use. The use of the signifiers ‘Danes’ or ‘Danish Citizens’ not only serves to link a range of signifiers to and around these, giving them a universal function within the discourse, but also to implicitly exclude those falling outside these parameters. Additionally, in using the category of ‘Danish citizens’, the strategies are actively targeting subjects with an official status as citizens. This means that undocumented workers, immigrants, and other parts of the ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011) are rendered invisible within these documents. In this way, the strategies not only create an internal division between those who are counted as legitimate citizens, it also reproduces an external demarcation to those who are deemed as non-citizens or ‘denizens’ (see Anderson and Hughes 2015; Isin 2002). We can thus begin to see a series of graduations within the rights of digital citizens.

While those deemed as ‘digital’ are considered to fulfill the normative expectations of the state, ‘non-digital’ citizens are targeted through disciplinary measurements, and undocumented individuals without formal citizenship are rendered completely invisible.

Self-service, automation, and responsabilization: citizenship as individuality

The third discursive logic used in the strategies consists in constructing the citizen as an individual with particular needs and conditions. This particular logic is tied to a doublesided argument in which the public sector is constructed as having to transfer responsibilities either to the citizens themselves (making them more or less self-serving) or to automatic, digital processes. Taken very broadly, one of the primary objectives of the Danish digitalization strategies has been to transfer the responsibilities from governmental employees, such as social caseworkers and administrative personal employed at the ground level, to the citizens themselves (Pors 2015a). The digitalization of the public sector has been employed as a form of *responsibilization* (Lessenich [2009] 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013), in which the citizen should be in charge of his or her own situation. In the strategies themselves, this is stated very clearly as one of the primary goals. In 2015, the strategies states that ‘[a]ll citizens and companies use self-service on the Internet’ (2011–2015, 8). As a further milestone for this year, it is hoped that ‘all citizens are using the Internet to submit applications and correspondence to the public sector’ (2011–2015, 14). The introduction of self-service solutions cuts across a variety of governmental functions and initiatives, including welfare benefits, taxation, education, and so on. In the context of unemployed citizens, for example, the 2011–2015 strategy states that it is vital to ‘develop and improve self-service for people using Jobcenters. This includes developing self-service solutions that make it easier for unemployed people to register sick days, a return to work, and holidays’ (2011–2015, 29). And, the strategy states, ‘[o]nce these processes are digital and easy to use, both companies and Jobcenters will save time – and money’ (2011–2015, 28). Self-service is, in other ways, seen as yet another way to optimize government and make it more efficient. The articulation of citizens as self-serving, however, cannot be reduced to merely constructing them in economic terms. It also consists in articulating citizens as individualized and responsible for their own circumstances: as agents capable of being active. At the same time as citizens are increasingly expected to serve themselves through digital solutions, the strategies also articulate processes of automation:

Application forms, sworn statements, copies of pay slips, annual statements, and any printed forms required for citizens to receive benefits from the public sector, are all to be phased out. Instead, public sector authorities will use the data on citizens income already registered in central databases. Across the board, objective criteria will be used to automate as much administration as possible. (2011–2015, 28)

We argue that this signals a double-sided discursive logic in which responsibilities are transferred from *either* administration to citizens *or* from administration to automated processes. As the 2011–2015 strategy states, ‘our eGovernment initiatives have helped us transfer resources from administration to welfare and optimize

and automate work procedures throughout the public sector' (2011–2015, 8), and, going forward, '[m]ore and more procedures in the public sector will be automated and digitalized, saving resources and streamlining workflows' (2011–2015, 18). This sentiment is resonated in prior strategies. Thus, in 2007–2010, it is noted that 'it has to be made sure that the majority of administrative routines are either automated or simplified' (2007–2010, 15). As stated, this simultaneous delegation of responsibility to citizens and automated processes is fueled by an articulation of the citizen as a unique individual with particular needs, everyday practices, and expectations: '[e]-government must also make sure that the citizen is meet with more individual services that place their actual needs at the center' (2002–2004, 4); 'increased [economic] prosperity creates individual and therefore also diverse needs' (2007–2010, 15), and 'better digital service therefore means that public services increasingly must be individual and coherent in order to support the individual citizens and businesses' everyday [practices]' (2007–2010, 6).

Thus, within this third discursive logic, the citizen is constructed as an increasingly individualized subject that should be encountered on his or her own terms. At the same time, this articulation of the individual citizen is coupled with self-service solutions in which the citizen is made responsible for their own situation and circumstances. Placing the individual at the center of public service means transferring or delegating administrative tasks to citizens rather than governmental personal. This decentering of the caseworkers' responsibilities is also, on another front, achieved through the automation of particular tasks within digital systems. This, in turn, means that the responsibility for maintaining social welfare benefits, receiving annual taxation reports, and so on are at once distributed to the individual or delegated to digital systems that work autonomously from the individual. While these two movements may appear contradictory, as both delegating and taking responsibility from the citizen, they both serve the purpose of transferring responsibility from administrative staff to either an 'economic' subject or a 'productive' system. The main goal in constructing the citizen as an individual and responsible entity is to merit and legitimize processes of economic rationalization.

Discussion and conclusion

Who is the digital citizen? Which normative claims have been attached to this figure as a problem and means of contemporary governance? Through a study of Danish digitalization strategies from 2002 to 2015, this article has shown how policy-makers have very actively produced the digital citizen as a contemporary ideal of governance. Yet, rather than a neutral figure, the digital citizen has been bound up with a very specific set of normative ideals. We have thus highlighted how an individualized and responsabilized citizen, using digital technologies as a part of productive and proper form of life, has been situated at the core of Danish digitalization policy-making. Assimilating some of the most common traits ascribed to neoliberal subjectivity, this digital citizen has acted as a revamped version of the 'neoliberal' subject (Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013), linked to ideas of efficiency, flexibility, and responsabilization. Foregrounding this 'neoliberalized digital citizen' highlights how existing neoliberal tropes are being reproduced within national digitalization

strategies. It showcases how the digital citizen draws on and reproduces already existing visions of what citizenship is and ought to be

In this way, our findings add to existing accounts of neoliberal governance (Dardot and Laval 2013; Brown 2015; Wacquant 2009) by showcasing how ‘being digital’ is becoming integral to neoliberal citizenship within the eyes of governmental policymakers (Bates 2014; Ahlqvist and Moisiu 2014). At the same time, the digital citizen is recasting existing neoliberal ideas, as being able to utilize digital technologies is becoming intertwined with being able to ‘perform’ neoliberal citizenship. Our account thus foregrounds some emerging transformations of neoliberal and digital citizenship. As these two terms increasingly converge and cross-pollinate each other within governmental policies, being digital and being neoliberal starts to coalesce and serve as mutually reinforcing narratives. In this sense, Ulrich Beck’s remark from 2002 rings partially true: ‘[t]he new neoliberal crusaders preach: “You must become streamlined, downsize, flexibilize and get on the Internet”’ (2002, 40).

It seems to us that these politicized transformations in digital citizenship are all too often obscured by the existing literature. In resorting to wide-ranging and decontextualized narratives, concerned with the emergence of the digital citizen as a ubiquitous and transnational ‘ideal’, ‘concept’, or ‘responsibility’, the specific ways in which digital citizenship is both dependent on and recasting existing political ideals become forgotten. Drawing on insights from post-Marxist discourse theory (Laclau 1990), we have sought to reclaim the position of these normative dimensions. In this sense, this study gives further weight to Isin and Ruppert’s (2015, 19) assertion that ‘we cannot assume that this subject [the digital citizen] is without history or geography’. Indeed, our study empirically underlines that we must approach the digital citizen as a key political figure intermeshed with the hegemonic political narratives of our times. In order to develop this argument in-depth within this article, we have focused narrowly on the discursive components of digital citizenship. This has allowed us to carefully dissect and deconstruct the underlying rationales attached and kept within the figure of the digital citizen. While this limits our analysis, as we cannot tell the consequences of these discourses ‘in action’, it highlights the tacit normativities of policy-making.

Highlighting these novel links between neoliberal and digital citizenship, this study furthermore challenges accounts of e-government and digitalization that see these processes as primarily concerned with providing the state with novel technical or calculative possibilities. It goes against views on digitalization that primarily portray this as having an enabling or productive ‘effect’, which have been particularly adamant within the field of ‘e-government’ (Heeks and Bailur 2007; Pors 2015a). Against these de-politicized views, circulating within the realm of policy-makers and scholars alike, our account underlines the deeply politicized discourses used to justify and legitimize digitalization and digital era governance. It showcases how, at the core of digitalization and e-governmental initiatives, there lies a concern for how citizens ought to be acting, their role

in society, and the contents of proper citizenship. Beyond the technocratic surface of digital technologies, we find a whole normative microcosm concerned with the proper forms of life.

To our mind, this account opens the way for several paths of future research. First, as this article has principally focused on the discursive components of digital citizenship, there is a need for research that studies how such political discourses become inscribed, materialized, and encoded into the very fabric of digital technologies and organizational practices (Isin and Ruppert 2015). Indeed, as particularly the work done by Bowker and Star (1999), and others working within the field of Science and Technology studies, reminds us, infrastructures are not merely neutral objects, but work through their own logics of categorization and codification. In this way, citizens have been tied to the state through various forms of data collection and analysis over time (Bowker 2008; Kitchin 2014). The ‘data citizen’ is not a new invention as censuses, tax collection, and archives have relied on data practices for centuries. So how does the neoliberalized digital citizen lead to novel data practices? Are these ideas leading to new kinds of data citizenship?

Second, in studying how these governmental discourses traverse and permeate both governmental institutions and technologies, we may also begin to look at the kinds of subjectivities that are left out, excluded and marginalized. What happens when the digital citizen ‘goes local’? As shown in our analysis, so-called ‘weak’ citizens have been framed as the target of novel forms of digital disciplinary measurements. They have been supposed to be transformed into ‘proper’ citizens through the relearning of certain competences deemed necessary by the state. Yet what about the kinds of subjectivity that do not even appear as excluded? How does the neoliberal digital citizen lead to novel forms of exclusion and marginalization of those already at the fringes of the governmental system? As research has already succinctly documented, the neoliberal ‘transmogrification’ (Brown 2015) of citizenship has served as a potent engine of exclusion. Do these logics of exclusion take on new forms when neoliberal citizenship becomes intertwined with digital citizenship? It seems to us that if we wish to tackle some of the novel forms of marginalization emerging as a consequence of digitalization, scrutinizing the claim attached to the neoliberalized digital citizen is a productive starting point. It allows us to foreground the moral, political, and imaginary ideals attached to contemporary citizens, and how this leads to production of certain ‘deviant’ Others.

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ⁱ The fifth strategy was released in May 2016. However, as this was after the analysis conducted in this article, it is not included in our investigation.