The digital public encounter

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Abstract. The digitalization of the public sector impacts nearly all aspects of public service provision, including the interaction between citizens and public officials, also known as public encounter. This traditionally face-to-face interaction is being replaced by digital platforms, chat-bots, and self-services. Public encounters can be highly collaborative processes, e.g. in the provision of welfare services, that involve multiple stakeholders. The use of digital tools in these processes poses opportunities as well as challenges to the collaborative process and the public service provision in general. This workshop aims to bring together researchers and practitioners with a common interest in the collaborative aspects of digital public encounter, how public officials and citizens communicate and cooperate through digital tools, and the long-term impact of these technological transformations. Topics include but are not limited to communication and collaboration processes in the digital public encounter, analysis of digital tools in the public encounter and theories and case-studies on how public encounters happen. We invite researchers as well as practitioners to participate in the workshop.

Theme of the Workshop

Digital technology such as self-services and automatization have become an integral part in nearly all societal aspects, from healthcare to education and banking to traveling. While the digital tools applied vary from field to field, all of them have in common that they alter or completely replace human-to-human interactions (Hassani et al., 2021; Sætra & Fosch-Villaronga, 2021). Yet, research on the societal impacts of digitalisation is still scarce (see for example (Alsos et al., 2012; Brands & van Doorn, 2020; Sharma et al., 2021)).

Digitalisation also takes place in the public sector and becomes most visible in the digitalisation of public service provision. The application of digital tools and the accompanying organisational and social changes are described under the term digital government (Alshehri & Drew, 2010; Haveri & Anttiroiko, 2021). Digital government is meant to increase well-being, democratic values, transparency, participation, and accountability (OECD, 2003; Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019; Worldbank, 2015).

One important aspect that has received little attention in the digital government literature is the interaction or contact between public officials or the state and citizens – also known as *public encounter* – and how this encounter is altered by digitalisation. The public encounter includes citizen-state interaction within the context of public service provision as well as interactions such as voting, lobbying, and asking citizens for advice (Lindgren et al., 2019). Traditionally, the term public encounter described the face-to-face contact in a physical environment (Bartels, 2013). The introduction of digital tools in public government services has shifted the public encounter away from face-to-face contact into digital environments, such as websites and mobile applications. While public service provision mostly makes use of webpages, digital platforms, and chatbots, other areas such as citizen participation in urban planning processes apply 3D-models (static, animated or virtual reality models), communication platforms, and computer games to facilitate citizen interaction (Hanzl, 2007). Virtual and augmented reality are also being tested for collaboration and meeting situations. These digital applications open up new opportunities but also challenges in the collaboration between citizens and public officials.

From a CSCW perspective public encounter can be regarded as a collaborative practice involving citizens and government officials. In our view public encounter makes for an interesting case for CSCW researchers as it is an example of practices that cross organizational boundaries and involved multiple stakeholders. Earlier CSCW literature has investigated these "boundary practices" in healthcare services (Gui et al., 2018), home-based care services (Procter et al., 2014), online labour platforms and crowdwork (Martin et al., 2014) etc. Our workshop proposal aims to build on this line of CSCW research and it can in this way be seen as an attempt to

build empirical evidence and theory about multi-stakeholder and boundary practices.

From a digital government perspective, and utilizing a government-as-a-platform view, the public encounter can be described with the boundary resources model developed by (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013). Boundary resources are defined as "the software tools that serve as the interface for the arm's-length relationship between the platform owner and the application developer" (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013). (Gong & Li, 2023) have adapted this model to define e-government platforms where boundary resources "enable and stimulate collaboration among government agencies". Thus, the boundary resource model can also be used to define the interface for the relationship between citizens and public officials. These boundary resources ought to be designed to enable collaboration.

While the public encounter in political discourse and citizen engagement has been subject to CSCW literature (Kou et al., 2017; Saldivar et al., 2019; Weise et al., 2017), the public encounter within the public service provision has received little attention in the CSCW literature. The complexity of the public encounter poses a number of challenges to the deployed digital tools to enable high quality service delivery.

Borchorst et al. (2012) identified an digital tool' rigidness as challenge to collaboration between case workers and citizens as well as to the citizens ability to perform an identity that is compatible with the bureaucratic administrative processes. Döring (2019) identifies three different perspectives of the public encounter. (1) a transaction perspective where the exchange of information and imposed transaction costs are in focus, (2) a social interaction perspective where the public encounter is characterized by a power asymmetry between the public official and the client, as well as social norms and processes, and (3) a service interaction perspective where citizens are understood as customers and service delivery is at the centre. This service failure and service recovery become important aspects of the public encounter (Döring, 2019). This diversity in perspectives and therefore expectations towards an interaction and collaboration process needs to be considered when designing digital tools to support this interaction.

Further is the nature of the public encounter influenced by changing the when, where, and how of the interaction as well as what each actor does and the skills that are required to perform the task (Lindgren et al., 2019). The shift from physical to digital public encounter introduces such a change.

Through this workshop we want to investigate how digital public encounters are experienced by the different actors and the challenges but also benefits connected to a digital interaction. Sharing and collecting first- and second-hand experiences from researchers as well as practitioners will help participants to gain a wider

understanding of the deployment of different digital tools in public encounters and the effects on communication and collaboration processes.

Workshop topics include but are not limited to the following:
- The traditional view of public encounter, i.e. client – case-worker communication and collaboration in digital public service provision.
- More complex boundary practices in public services involving multiple stakeholders.
- Analysis of digital boundary resources such as chatbots, AI, virtual reality, and call centers in the implementation of the public encounter.
- Exploring new interaction arenas – including hybrid physical-digital meeting spaces.
- Theories and case studies about how public encounter happens.
- Application of multidisciplinarity to public encounters.

Workshop activities and goals

Our goal is to bring together researchers and practitioners with a common interest in the digital public encounter, how public officials and citizens communicate and cooperate through digital tools, and the long-term impact of these technological transformations. Each participant will have 10 minutes to present their work which will be followed by a 20 minute discussion. The discussion will be led by a discussant.

Duration of the Workshop

We plan to organize a half-day workshop. The workshop will include short presentations from each participants, followed by discussions.

Workshop organizers

Michaela Schmidt is a PhD candidate at the Department for Computer Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Her research interest concerns the impact of digitalisation on society and on the societal aspects of sustainability.

Babak Farshchian is an associate professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Babak's interests include sociotechnical practice studies, public sector, healthcare and social services, and digital transformation.

Sara Hofmann is an associate professor at the Department of Information Systems at the University of Agder. In her research, she has focused on the interaction between citizens and public sector organizations and how this has been altered by digitalization. Currently she is leading two research projects that analyze what public services should be digitalized.

Maximum number of participants expected

We expect 10-15 participants.

Means of recruiting and selecting participants

We will prepare a call for papers that will be distributed through mailing lists and social media. We might also invite researchers and practitioners directly.

We will have a selection process and participants who submit position papers of 2-4 pages will be prioritized. The submission deadline will be 1. May 2023. A web page for the workshop will be available under the following link:

- https://digipub.idi.ntnu.no/digital-public-encounters/

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