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# USER DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL CHANNELS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the formal digital access channels for exercising involvement of the users in the governance of local governmental institutions. The paper is based on an analysis of web-based channels for user and citizen involvement in decision-making processes within the areas of eldercare, childcare, schools, and municipality councils. Rather than painting an idyllic picture of citizen digital access to information and interaction, our analysis of three Danish municipalities suggests that the public sector has made no or very limited digital progress along the governance avenue.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last 30 years, municipalities in Denmark have chosen to digitalize primarily internal administration and have been quite successful on this score. Digitalization of the municipalities progressed uniformly and simultaneously in supporting administrative functions. Years of experience with digitalization of administrative processes, the lack of local IT competencies and the perception of IT as a auxiliary administrative tool, forms the basis for our analysis in the sense that we explore the status of digitalizing of the governance issues.

During the 1990s, concepts of reorganization, redesigning and reengineering the processes gained popularity and — some argue — valuable impacts on the actual practices. Besides the initial articles and books (Davenport & Short, 1990; Hammer, 1990; Hammer & Champy, 1993), numerous books were published showing how IS was affecting dramatic and radical changes in an organization (e.g., Caudle, 1995; Champy, 1995; Davenport, 1993).

By contrast, the public administration community did not applaud the reengineering concepts as breaking new ground. Although, there were echoes of the BPR method (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Heeks, 1999), it was argued that BPR applied in the public sector would lead to misjudgement and actions inconsistent with the 'spirit' of the public sector (Thaens, Bekkers, & Van Duivenboden, 1995).

With its strong (US) management orientation and the idea of controlled change of the closed organizational room, the BPR faced a strong critique not only due ideological disputes but also due to the changed technology that both private and public incorporated. In the early 1990s most of the technologies were on office automation and data integration with the business partners. In the public sector, the late 1980s and the 1990s brought positive impacts of IT on capabilities (efficiency, effectiveness, data quality etc.) but few and mixed impacts on use of IT decision-making processes and interactions between citizens and government (Andersen & Danziger, 2001; Donk, Snellen, & Tops, 1995). With the massive spread of the Internet, our research is targeted towards gaining a better empirical foundation for understanding whether and possible how IT has progressed to also help support governance issues. We have only single point data observation in this paper wherefore the possible changes will be discussed at a more conceptual level.

Champy argues in his 2002-book that connectivity between the public sector and their users and that the principal benefits of using IT should be by creating benefits for the customers (Champy, 2002). We explore here if this has been done by the means of digital governance beyond the surfacing e-voting implementations (Browning, 2002).

## 2. COLLECTION OF DATA

This paper analyses digital governance mechanism in four areas: city councils and committees, education/schools, services for the elderly and day-care centers. All institutions within three Danish municipalities (Skørping, Hillerød and Aalborg) that belong in the four areas above have been examined. By simultaneously looking at institutions on the Internet within the same period, we have investigated the following variables in the areas of education, daycare and care of the elderly:

- Own homepage
- Homepage as part of the municipality's website
- Available contact information to the director
- Number of users
- Management structure
- Method of choosing management
- How often new members are voted on
- Appointment process for management members
- Agendas for future meetings
- Minutes taken of earlier meetings
- Handling of complaints
- Information about earlier complaints
- Number of people on the waiting list
- Number of transfer requests

We have not investigated the direct user democracy in education by the student council's work.

In the case of the city council we have investigated the following variables:

- List of city council members
- Committee structure
- Represented political parties
- Previous meeting agendas
- Future meeting agendas
- Council meeting minutes
- Office hours for committee chair people, as well as contact information
- Overview of committees, mandates, councils and boards
- Information about the work of the city council and committees
- Rules for Question Time

## 3. OUR FINDINGS

All three municipalities use the Internet to inform its inhabitants about general school issues but not in detail and with very little consideration for user input. By simultaneously analyzing schools, pre-schools, after school clubs and special needs schools in these three municipalities within the same period, there seems to be a correlation between the size of the municipality and information about the user management but no connection between school size (number of students) and digital information about user management. In the case of five schools in the Aalborg school system there is for example all information with regard to school board members and elections. In Hillerød there is only information available for a few schools while no school in Skørping offer any school information on the Web.

Table 1. School statistics in the three municipalities

	Skørping	Hillerød	Aalborg
No. of students	1.615	2.652	11.984
No. of schools on the Internet	2 out of 6	8 out of 10	37 out of 37
Information about school board:			
Composition	1 out of 6	5 out of 10	14 out of 37
Competencies	0 out of 6	3 out of 10	10 out of 37
Election System	0 out of 6	2 out of 10	15 out of 37
Goals	1 out of 6	5 out of 10	25 out of 37
Minutes and agendas	1 out of 6	1 out of 10	5 out of 37
Digital contact to school	3 out of 6	7 out of 10	19 out of 37
Digital contact to school board	0 out of 6	2 out of 10	3 out of 37
School schedule & operational plans	1 out of 6	6 out of 10	33 out of 37

The area of day care centers is clearly the worst represented on the Web. There is no transparency as to the decision processes here. There are no budgets for the individual institutions, no information with regard to transfers, waiting lists, etc. There is generally so little digital information and so few influence channels that the general conclusion to be drawn is that there are no or very negative indicators for digitalization in the area. There are only a few day care centers on the Web, but apart from the much-needed user influence there is also lacking information with regard to waiting lists and prioritization criteria, budgets or the number of users who reject the institution. In this area there are no indicators in the direction of cyber or user democracy.

Table 2. Day Care Center Statistics

	Skørping	Hillerød	Aalborg
No. of users/places	850	4.501	7.063
No. of institutions with own www.	0 out of 12	8 out of 69	2 out of 161
Presentation on municipality site	12 out of 12	0 out of 69	2 out of 161
Information about management			
Composition	0 out of 12	4 out of 69	2 out of 161
Election System	0 out of 12	1 out of 69	0 out of 161
Goals for Institution	0 out of 12	7 out of 69	13 out of 161
Minutes and agendas	0 out of 12	0 out of 69	0 out of 161
Digital contact with institution	0 out of 12	6 out of 69	0 out of 161
Digital contact with management	1 out of 12	0 out of 69	0 out of 161

The top scorer for available digital information channels in the area of elderly and handicapped care is Aalborg who offers comprehensive information on the following subjects.

- User influence for younger handicapped people and the elderly
- Preventative home visits
- Handicapped citizens council
- Fielding of complaints
- Instructions on how to complain

Besides Aalborg, the other two municipalities now offer digital information with regard to the fielding of complaints. In Hillerød there are 6726 inhabitants over the age of 60 where 4720 of them are retired. Other than that, there are 1516 inhabitants under the age of 60 that for one reason or another are in need of temporary homecare or to stay in a convalescent home or instruction with regard to a handicapped accessible home as well as other needs that allow citizens to continue an independent life without active daily support from this department. There are over 8300 people that are without any form of digital user information in Hillerød.

Table 3. Councils for the Elderly on the Internet

Municipality/Elderly Council	Committee	Meeting	Information	Information	
Description of goals	Composition/ (possible) user representation.	Minutes and Agendas	About the presented initiatives	About election methods	
<b>Skørping</b>					
Counseling the Elderly	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Hillerød</b>					
The handicapped advice					
Council	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	No	No
Complaint Council	Yes	Yes/No	No	No	No
Elderly Council	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	Yes	No
Elderly & Handicapped					
Committee	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Aalborg</b>					
Elderly council in each of the					
13 local areas	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Elderly and handicapped					
Forum	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Handicapped Council	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Complaint Council	Yes	Yes/Yes	No	(No)	(No)
Committee for Retirees	No	No	No	No	No
Central Council	Yes	Yes	No	(Yes)	Yes

Table 4. Elderly Councils on the Internet

Municipality/Elderly Council	Electronic contact With committee members	Fielding of Complaints
<b>Skørping</b>		
Counseling the Elderly	E-mail	Yes
<b>Hillerød</b>		
Handicapped Council	No	Yes
Complaint Council	No	Yes
Elderly Council	No	Yes
Elderly and handicapped committee	No	Yes
<b>Aalborg</b>		
Elderly council in each of the 13 local areas	(Yes)	Yes
Elderly and handicapped Forum	No	Yes
Handicapped Council	No	Yes
Complaint Council	No	Yes
Committee for Retirees	No	No
Central Council	No	No

The greatest contributor to this digitalization is the city council of these three municipalities. They are considering a one-way communication channel, yet none of them are considering developing the capacity for two-way real time communication. Functions such as chat, news groups and mail services are not implemented. Nor has voice recognition or other technologies to aid the visually impaired as well as interface with mobile Internet devices and PDA's.

Two of the municipalities do not have the technology to support an email service to send out new meeting agendas or minutes. Citizens must download them off of the website each time. Office hours or contact information for committee chair people is not given.

Table 5. Meeting schedules, news and office hours

		Skørping	Hillerød	Aalborg
Possibility for registering for email newsletters				
With new agendas and minutes		No	No	Yes
Long term meeting schedules		Yes	Yes	No
Contact information for city council members	E-mail	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Tel.nr.	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Address	Yes	Yes	Yes
Office hours for committee chair people		No	No	No
As well as contact information	E-mail	Yes	No	Yes

	Tel. Nr.	Yes	No	Yes
	Address	Yes	No	Yes
Committee members contact information	E-mail	Yes	No	Yes
	Tel nr.	Yes	No	Yes
	Address	Yes	No	Yes
Overview of * committees				
mandates, councils and initiatives	General	Yes	Yes	Yes
Information about city councils and committees	Activity			
Rules for Question Time	Description	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Work			
	Description	Yes	Yes	No
		Yes	Yes	Yes

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS RESULTS

The analysis design of this investigation focuses on the digital medium of citizens and user democracy specifically at the institutional level. There were large, medium and small municipalities used in order to illuminate this digital democratization. The effects or suitability of digitalization are not discussed. The only discussion is whether Denmark is on the road to digitalization and if this digitalization supports traditional user democratic principles.

One point made was whether citizens are developing or have other democratic communication channels that already function satisfactorily and therefore the need for other digital channels does not exist. The innovation of cyber-democracy indicates a shift towards self-administration. Many investigations of for example local councils in Copenhagen, city quarter renewal projects in the Copenhagen municipality, investigation of Nyborg and Skanderborg municipalities conclude that user involvement is a functional imperative for both local and central administration. This means that there is increasing pressure to find new channels to support this as well as increased pressure especially to find digital channels.

The other point that there is a need for further study of this in a causal way. In this paper we have not illuminated if there is the advantage of economies of scale, competencies, the need for other democratic media, traditional or institutional explanation to support that the larger municipalities utilize digitalization to a greater extent than smaller municipalities. It is in any case a rather hasty conclusion that larger municipalities are better prepared to support democratic decision channels in an information society.

The third point is with regard to the cost function. The point of view of this paper is that democracy is costly. Implementing web-based user involvement (governance) channels, results in extra workload required by administrative and core function employees in order to help to facilitate the frictionless uptake of these democratic channels. We have taken the point of view that in order to make these institutions ready, it can be a real problem to support these new digital democratic influence channels for the simple reason that it utilizes a great many resources. This is not an argument to abandon the process of democratic information, discussion and decision channels. But it highlights the need for a resource prioritization strategy discussion. Most IT resources come from each individual municipality's operations budget. Yet with more budget decentralization within more and more areas of the institutional task inventory, institutional digitalization has become apolitical. It is surprising that exactly in this field there seems to be the seeds of change of content for user involvement and self-administration. At the same time, IT politics will become a more central part of the municipal political debate, as IT will require a still larger part of the budget.



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