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The challenging nature of digitization of services: case studies in the areas of mobility, health and administration

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Executive Summary D.3.4

The general objective of this research is to investigate digital exclusion through the prism of general interest service providers by questioning how their digitisation policies influence their ability to offer services that are accessible to all users. This question is particularly relevant to bodies of general interest, which are founded upon the principles of equal treatment of users and continuity of service. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to question how these organisations articulate the digitisation of their services with respect to their missions. More specifically, this research aims to understand the place and the role of digital inclusion in the process of digitising services within three general interest organisations in Belgium. This research also questions the way in which professionals represent and involve users in design work.

Case studies within general interest organisations

The methodological approach is based on case studies carried out within three general interest organisations in Belgium. This approach combines documentary analysis and semi-directive interviews with ten stakeholders involved in the digitisation of services within each organisation.

A multidimensional aspect characterises the notion of general interest services. These services can take different forms across European countries according to their state model. Nevertheless, despite these variations, one can adopt a broad and functional conception of public services which encompasses a wide range of activities of different natures (e.g. public transport, health care and administrative services) and takes different organisational forms (e.g. public institutions, associations and mutual societies). However, their common basis is to pursue a mission of general interest in order to meet collective needs that evolve over time and space. This common basis requires them to respect identical principles – first and foremost, the principles of equal treatment of users and continuity of public service.

The first case study was carried out within a regional public transport company. The survey focused on two online services: a new version of the company's website and a mobile application under development at the time of the survey. The second case study took place within a mutuality. It concerned a social insurance organisation for health (e.g. illness, accident and prevention) and a social movement. The survey focused specifically on two online services: a new version of the organisation's website and the newspaper's website for affiliates, the latter of which was under development at the time of the survey. The third case study examined the organisation in charge of the digitisation of regional and municipal authorities. The survey focused on two online services: a single electronic access point for regional and local government services and a regional information portal.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews was based on the theoretical model of economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) as well as on the sociology of translation (Akrich, Callon, Latour, 2006). It aimed to capture the arguments used by the stakeholders to justify the role of digital inclusion in their digitisation of services as well as the choices made concerning the methods of user involvement implemented during the design process.

The benefits of digitising general interest services to overcome digital exclusion

As digital technologies become increasingly present in all areas of daily life, the digitisation of private and general interest services is presented as an inevitable evolution that will bring about progress.

The discourses that promote digital transition emphasise the emancipatory potential of digital uses. In particular, digitisation is supposed to empower users and citizens in their interactions with public services.

At the heart of the policy of modernising public services, digitisation is generally considered an opportunity to improve the efficiency and the quality of services provided to users through a personalised and co-constructed offer. However, recent social science research has questioned these arguments which favour digitisation. In particular, such research raises the phenomena of social exclusion and non-use of rights generated by this digital transition. In light of this, the present research questions how public organisations test the digitisation of their services against the principles of collective interest specific to their mission. The following sections present the main results of the analysis.

Plural aims of digital inclusion rather than a coordinated global strategy

The results indicate that the reason for digitising services seems to be self-evident within the three organisations studied. To some extent, digitisation has been naturalised: its legitimacy was not questioned by the actors interviewed. However, the results indicate that digitisation was not the goal of a coordinated strategy shared by all the professionals of the organisations concerned.

This fragmented vision hindered the implementation of coordinated actions that support inclusive digitisation. Beyond a consensus on the need to promote inclusive digital services, there were multiple conceptions of what digital inclusion means. These conceptions were based on three forms of justification from different spheres: the commercial, industrial and civic spheres. The juxtaposition of these different spheres explains the doubt concerning the direction to be taken in digitising general interest services. The certainty of being faced with an inevitable process leaves room for uncertainty as to the directions to be given in order to reconcile the digitisation of services with respect for the collective interest.

The progression of digitisation through multiple compromises more or less attentive to the general interest

The results revealed the emergence of compromises between the various logics – commercial, industrial and civic –, which were carried out by the stakeholders to overcome these tensions. These compromises materialised in a plurality of composite digital devices: voice call rather than video call, chat rather than chatbot, less aesthetic but more user-friendly design, etc. In the three studied organisations, digitisation is progressing through multiple trade-offs between different logics whose challenge is convergence. Digitised services must be accessible, efficient, streamlined and cost-efficient. The difficulty lies in ensuring balance between these different rationalities. At risk is the erosion of the civic principles upon which the general interest is founded to the benefit of industrial and commercial principles, which are expanding within the organisms considered in this research.

The progression of digitisation against a background of digital thoughtlessness

Beyond the discrepancies in the aims of digital inclusion, the actors agreed on a common framework for thinking (or not) about the digitisation of services and its inclusive dimension: they had few questions about the relevance of the digital transition in light of the values traditionally promoted by the civic world. The digitisation of services is considered inevitable and desirable: it offers greater personalisation of services, and it allows the user to be 'automatically included' insofar that the appropriate content automatically reaches the user. This movement is beneficial to everyone, including the non-users of digital services, who benefit from the decongestion of physical counters.

This reliance on digital technologies is a result of thoughtlessness. This discourse allows digital technologies to be exempted from any justification requirement. It leads to the idea that digitisation is an essential step for any organisation, including those of general interest. As a result, the legitimacy of this digital transformation was rarely questioned by the actors interviewed. The rationalities underlying the digital transition are not subject to justification.

However, a macro-social approach reveals that programmes for digitising services of general interest are not neutral. The strategic guidelines of these programmes are part of a specific model of society – the connexionist world – and carry a new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) that is characterised by the value of connected individualism (Flichy, 2004), flexible organisations, networking and more. These values correspond to the innovations imported by the big digital platforms Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM). Such developments go hand in hand with growing criticism of public service missions, their operating methods and their financing methods. The digitisation of services within bodies of general interest is gradually aligning with the industrial and commercial principles without raising major criticisms.

Digital thoughtlessness had two implications for the digitisation of services in the organisations studied. On the one hand, it led to a desire to align the online services with the models of big digital platform technologies – specifically, Facebook and Google. The result was a certain homogenisation of the technological 'solutions' provided to address diverse and singular needs. On the other hand, this thoughtlessness accelerated the process of hybridisation between the private and public sectors. This trend is reflected in the increased use of private providers in the digitisation of services. It is also reflected in concerns about the influence of GAFAM in the sectors of activity studied (i.e. health, transport and administration). These concerns are related to the implications of this penetration of the private sector within the commoditisation of public services. This trend raises questions about maintaining public services that are accessible to all in an equitable way.

Integrate the digitisation of services into an overall strategy aligned with the principles of general interest

Organisations of general interest should further develop their governance of the digitisation of their services which are aimed at the collective interest. Digitising public services according to the models of big digital platforms without questioning their suitability for the principles of general interest creates a risk of importing the commercial logic of these digital platforms into public services. The idea here is not to oppose the digitisation of public services, but to debate it and to question its aims openly and collectively.

It implies that public bodies should develop an ambitious, transversal and coordinated strategy, in accordance with the principles of equity and inclusion that underpin the legitimacy of their existence.

Biases in user involvement during the design process

The results reveal that the modalities of user involvement in the design work guide the configuration of digital services. Despite the rhetoric about the need to involve users in designing digital devices that are accessible to all, biases appear in the representation and involvement of target groups. Whether the methods are based on the mobilisation of spokespersons or on the direct involvement of users, they tend to underestimate the heterogeneity of usage situations, particularly the most problematic situations in relation to online services. These methods also tend to make some users invisible, especially those who use little or no Internet.

These biases are also the result of the aforementioned digital thoughtlessness. Their existence guides the choices of design actors regarding the modalities of user involvement. Their importance within the organisations studied favours the development of interfaces adapted above all to the needs of a standard 'mobile and connected' user. This occults the plurality of the users' social contexts. This thoughtlessness is particularly visible during the development of methods based on capturing users' digital footprints.

Big data and algorithms are considered to have unprecedented potential for professionals whose work lies in capturing the behaviour of their target groups. Developing online services based on these automated tracking techniques tends to make invisible the practices of those with little or no Internet connection. However, this bias of representativeness seemed to raise few questions from the stakeholders interviewed. This dynamic thus reveals the existence of an unintentional form of denial of recognition of silent online users. This phenomenon contributes to their symbolic exclusion from general interest services that are being digitised.

Consider the plurality of users' social context from the outset of the digital services design process

To understand the diversity of digital users' profiles, public interest organisations must place the understanding of these social worlds at the centre of the design process. However, it is not enough to state that the user is at the centre of the design loop for this intention to be implemented in practice. It is necessary to organise their involvement based on user-centred design methods. The aim is not to give a detailed account of them here. However, it is important to remember that there is no ready-made methodology: every legitimate methodology must consider the characteristics of users, the contexts of use and the technical characteristics of the services that are to be developed.

This statement implies a collaborative approach between stakeholders from different socio-professional backgrounds, including not only users, their representatives, designers and marketers, but also human and social sciences researchers. The role of the latter is to support the thoughts of design actors on user practices so that they understand the social context of uses. This approach limits the risk of failure insofar as it allows for the development of digital interfaces adapted to the situations of use of the various target groups concerned.

Stakeholders unequally involved in the digitisation of services

The results underline the research conducted by the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation (Akrich, Callon and Latour, 2006): innovation is not only a technical dimension, but also – and above all – a social one. Therefore, the success of inclusive digitisation depends largely on the mobilisation of a wide network of actors – including IT and marketing professionals, front-line agents and user representative associations – from the beginning of the process and on the achievement of balanced compromises between these parties.

Overall, the results reveal the dominant position of marketing and IT professionals within the network of actors involved in the digitisation process. Conversely, front-line agents have little involvement. However, the digitisation of services concerns these front-line agents first in the sense that it influences their working conditions and the nature of their relationship with users. The survey uncovered initiatives that mobilised these actors. However, these initiatives were often disparate; they did not fit into a global and coordinated strategy, which limited their scope and impact.

Engage all stakeholders in an explicit and inclusive digitisation project

The arrangements for mobilising the various stakeholders identified during the field survey are therefore best practices that should be disseminated. To ensure the deployment of a truly inclusive digitisation of general interest services, the organisations must be deploy all the necessary resources to systematise the mobilisation practices of the various stakeholders involved in the design process.

The projects that mobilise field actors who are working directly with users must be systematised. Their involvement strengthens their commitment to the digitisation project and leads to the regular involvement of front-line agents, their enhanced expertise in the design of online services, the planning of moments dedicated to testing and appropriating new services, and more.

The responsibility of public bodies in the implementation of digital services adapted to the plurality of uses

In sum, in a context where user training in the use of digital technologies is called upon as a major, if not a unique, lever in the fight against digital exclusion, the results point to the importance of the collective responsibility of public services providers to design digital services in a way that supports the general interest.

This implies placing development and design choices at the centre of the public debate on digital inclusion. It is necessary to focus on their performative nature, or in other words, on the effects of these choices regarding the development of digital services which are more or less adapted to the diverse audiences which they are intended to address.

Raise awareness and train design stakeholders in digital inclusion practices through design

To prevent these risks of exclusion through conception and design, it is important to place greater emphasis on the technological dimension of digital mediation, such as compliance with accessibility standards, the quality of ergonomics, the readability of content and the simplicity of language. Digital mediation commonly refers to human support in the appropriation of digital technologies. This is

fundamental, but its mere valuation might overlook the importance of the quality of the concrete form of the socio-technical system as an element of this mediation.

The maintenance of human mediation and various modalities of access to public services are crucial aspects in a context where digital tools are gradually becoming the single channel for access to public services.

However, these actions alone will not correct digital inequalities. To succeed, they must be articulated to actions both to raise awareness among design stakeholders and to provide training, encouragement or even requirements to implement digital inclusion practices by design.

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