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INEQUALITIES AND THE FIGURE OF THE DEFAULT DIGITAL USER

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the socio-technical mechanisms underpinning the gradual standardization of the figure of the digital user during the digitisation of public services, and its impact on the production of inequalities in their use. It draws on an in-depth case study conducted within a public interest organisation in Belgium and is based on a theoretical approach at the crossroads of the sociology of digital social inequalities and an approach to public action through the prism of its instruments. By analysing the dynamics at work in the design of an online administrative counter and its actual use by people who are remote from digital technology, we will be able to see how institutional, organisational and technical constraints, coupled with a logic of prioritising the users for whom the service is intended, lead to the disqualification of categories of users whose characteristics are remote from the behaviour expected of an “ordinary” user-citizen.

Keywords: digital instrumentation, public services, digital social inequalities, case study, user figures.

The digitisation of public-service relationships is one of the recent components of a programme to modernise public services that has been underway in most European countries since the 1990s.¹ This general transformation has been based on the principles of new public management, with the aim of deploying a way of organising work that focuses on standardising procedures and boosting performance, in a bid to rationalise and even commoditise the public sector (Bezes and Musselin, 2015). The aim of this “new” public management is to improve the quality of services while meeting the expectations of citizens, who are now seen as customers, at the lowest possible cost. In this context, placing the user at the heart of the system has become the cornerstone of programmes to modernise public services (Dagiral, 2007; Weller, 2018). In the course of their digital transformation, the figure of the user has gradually evolved into that of the user of digital technologies (Dagiral, 2011), and taking account of the user’s experience in the design process has become a recurring watchword.

On the other hand, involving so-called “digitally remote” users in the process is a more recent leitmotif of digital inclusion policies. In Belgium, this imperative is gradually permeating the strategies of the departments responsible for digitising (para)public services at the various levels of government. A recent study (Brotcorne et al., 2019) on the work of designers of general-interest online services reveals the predominance of a figure of the “standard” mobile and connected user for whom these offers are configured as a priority.

The aim of this article is to extend this reflection in order to understand the socio-technical mechanisms underpinning the gradual standardisation of the figure of the digital user (Schou and Pors, 2019) during the digitisation of a public service and its impact on the production of inequalities in access to and use of this system. More specifically, the first aim is to understand the institutional, organisational and technical factors at work during the design phase, which lead to the emergence of specific predominant user figures for the future service. It then aims to identify the experiences

1. I am grateful to the reviewers of this article for their pertinent and constructive comments, which enabled me to improve successive versions. I also thank Fabien Granjon, the dossier coordinator, for his invaluable support. The French version of this article has been translated into English by Richard Nice.

and ways of doing things that are invisibilised, or even disqualified, by this process, thus delineating the categories of users considered to be “non-standard”.

To do so, the article draws on an in-depth case study conducted within a public interest organisation, an IT partner of public institutions in the Brussels-Capital Region. The analysis lies at the intersection of the sociology of social-digital inequalities (Granjon, 2022), traditionally focused on the social practices of users, and an approach to public action through the prism of its instruments (Halpern et al., 2014; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005). The latter approach shifts the focus of attention upstream of usage, in order to highlight the rationales gradually embedded in digital public-service systems as they are developed, and their effects on the (re)production of inequalities as they are used. This approach makes it possible to consider the dynamics of the design of the virtual administrative counter and its use as different moments in the same process of *digital instrumentation of public action*. This process is understood as “the set of problems [that arise] during the choice, development and use of tools – in this case, socio-technical devices – that make it possible to operationalise a particular vision of government action” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, *ibid.*, p. 12) and, more specifically in this case, to materialise a singular form of relationship between the public service and the user-citizen. The interest of this approach is therefore to be able to grasp not only the frictions and power relations that govern the choices made in the construction of these instruments, but also the way in which their design conveys a specific conception of the modes of government that structure practices and behaviour.

Thus, after presenting the empirical field on which the analysis is based, we will outline the current issues surrounding the digital instrumentation of the public-service relationship against a backdrop of digital privatisation (Jeannot and Cottin-Marx, 2022) and the evolution of the figure of the user that accompanies these transformations. The analysis will look at how this dynamic is unfolding in practice in the Brussels public institution under study. In this context, it will first show that a combination of institutional logic (positioning of the institution and the place of inclusive concerns), organisational logic (priority missions and restricted scope of work of the IT team in the face of increasing delegation of tasks to private service providers) and technical constraints contributes to blurring the figures of

the user for whom the counter is primarily intended. It will then highlight the implicit qualities expected of an ordinary citizen-user, as seen in the design of the system when used by people who are “digital outsiders”. Ultimately, this will enable us to pinpoint the user highlight figures that are, in a way, occluded by this unprecedented process of digital instrumentation of the public-service relationship.

FIELD AND METHOD

This article is based on an in-depth case study conducted in two phases, from January 2018 to June 2022, within a public interest organisation, Paradigm.brussels – formerly the Centre d’informatique pour la région bruxelloise (CIRB). These two components combine an analysis of the dynamics of designing and implementing a regional digital administrative portal with an analysis of how it is used by people who are said to be “remote” from digital technology.

Paradigm.brussels and its virtual administrative counter

Paradigm.brussels is the public interest organisation responsible for the digital transformation of the Brussels-Capital Region. It acts as the “orchestrator of the IT ecosystem” (CIRB, 2021) for the regional, local and community public institutions and public interest bodies of the region in question. Its role is to provide them with IT services and support them in speeding up their digital transformation in order to improve both the efficiency of their operations and the user-friendliness of their services. Under the supervision of the Regional Minister for Information Technology and Digital Transition, this institution is “the trusted ally of public authorities at the service of businesses and citizens.”²

As such, the institution is responsible for the deployment and management of IRISBOX, a regional digital administrative portal, the central focus of the analysis. This aims to “simplify administrative procedures for citizens, businesses and administrations” by offering more than 450 online procedures that

2. *Ibid.*

can be accessed “24 hours a day, seven days a week, without having to physically visit the offices of the administrations.”³ Its launch in 2012 was one of the first steps in the digitisation of the Brussels administration. To date, the virtual counter has been managed by a team of around twenty people – a project manager, two business analysts, four testers, two implementation managers and around ten developers. This team is made up of both employees of the institution and professionals from a private company to which part of the IT development is subcontracted. Since the end of 2018, the institution has also been home to a “Digital Inclusion” unit created when the Brussels-Capital government approved a memorandum on digital inclusion in its territory.⁴

This cell is responsible for coordinating the current Action Plan for Digital Ownership (2021-2024) as well as the forthcoming plan (2025-2029).

Empirical material

The first part of the survey ran from January 2018 to December 2020. It was part of a wider field survey conducted in parallel at two other general-interest organisations in Belgium. Taking the form of a multiple case study (Yin, 2009), the aim of this survey was to identify the place of digital inclusion in the digitisation practices of these providers of services geared towards the common good.⁵ The analysis is based on 13 individual semi-structured interviews drawn from a corpus of 40 interviews compiled during the case studies. The interviews were conducted with members of the IRISBOX design and implementation team and members of the Digital Inclusion unit.⁶ The users affected by the digitisation of the service and

3. Presentation of IRISBOX on the Paradigm website: <https://paradigm.brussels/fr/nos-services/ecitizen/faciliter-les-demarches-citoyennes/Irisbox-le-guichet-electroniqueiquedes-administrations> (accessed 27/10/2024).

4. *Note to Parliament – Digital inclusion action plan – Measures – Approval by the Council of Ministers 13/12/18*, http://weblex.brussels/data/annexes/uploads/pd20190115103042ntgv_inclusionnumriqueenparl_fr.pdf_.pdf (accessed 28/01/2025).

5. IDEALiC research, funded by the Federal Science Policy (BESLPO) in Belgium as part of the BRAIN-be programme, “Axis 5 – Major societal challenges”, 2015-2020.

6. The professionals interviewed included a project manager, two IT engineers, three developers/analysts/testers, two webmasters, a manager in charge of implementing the system, a sales department manager and two members of the ‘Digital Inclusion’ unit.

their association representatives were not interviewed at this stage. The aim of the interviews was to find out how the professionals see the role of users in the design process, particularly those who are “digitally remote”. They enable us to grasp the predominant user figures that emerge from the players’ discourse and to which they refer during the development of the socio-technical system.

The second part of the study took place between November 2021 and June 2022, when I took part as a member of the steering committee for an audit commissioned by the institution. The purpose of the audit was to analyse how people in difficulty use two online public services (see Box 1). What was interesting about the audit was that it focused on the use of the virtual administrative counter, the design dynamics of which were the subject of the interviews mentioned above. My participation in the steering committee gave me access to these results, which are used here as secondary data to enrich the analysis of the discourse of the players involved in the design of the counter with that of its use by people in vulnerable situations. Despite the inherent limitations of this secondary data, examining it enables us to identify certain recurring difficulties linked to the use of the service. The value of this analysis lies more in revealing implicit expectations in relation to supposedly “ordinary” behaviour on the platform than in revealing details of impediments linked to specific user profiles.

This participant observation was also an opportunity to gather other documentary sources (minutes of meetings, activity reports, etc.) and to conduct five additional interviews with other members of the committee (accessibility professionals, IT project manager, implementation manager, digital inclusion coordinator, user association representatives). The analysis of this material as a whole thus aims to identify a number of salient features in the creation of digital social inequalities during the process of digital instrumentation of this public-service relationship.

THE USER AT THE HEART OF THE DIGITAL INSTRUMENTATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES

The digitisation of the relationship with citizens has gained momentum over the last decade, particularly following the adoption of two successive

European action plans on e-government, which enshrined the principle of digital service by default as the dominant logic.⁷ In the early 2000s, Belgium aligned itself with the European Union's digital strategy. Since then, the federal government has pursued a policy of administrative simplification, making digitisation of public services a strategic priority. This dynamic, reinforced by the Covid-19 health crisis, has recently resulted in the adoption of multiple political action plans at the various levels of government.⁸

This recent orientation of policies in this area reveals a shift in the configuration of supply. Improving the quality of public services can no longer be envisaged in isolation from digitisation. This digital conversion of public services is one of the key features of the digital era governance model, a renewed form of new public management, which is now in crisis (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013; Guenoun and Matyjasik, 2019). This transformation is based on the production of an original form of direct contact between institutions and citizens via the digital medium. This human disintermediation nevertheless requires a new conception of the role of the user-citizen. He or she remains at the heart of the modernisation of services, no longer simply as a passive beneficiary with demands to be met, but as a co-producer of the service. They are called upon to carry out a series of tasks themselves at home in a self-service approach (Dujarier, 2014; Schou and Hjelholt, 2018). This dynamic of modernisation by the user (Weller, 2018) is thus reflected in a dual movement of rationalising the offer by “putting the user and/or his entourage to work” and personalising

7. Digital by default aims to deploy digital technology as the preferred channel for relations between citizens and public services, with a view to reducing the administrative burden on the services through faster, more efficient and less costly interactions (*European Action Plan 2011-2015*), <https://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0743:FIN:EN:PDF>; *European eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0179> (accessed 28/10/2024).

8. *Le plan pour la reprise et la résilience de la Belgique*, https://belgium.representation.ec.europa.eu/strategie-et-priorites/le-plan-de-relande-europeen-en-belgique_fr (accessed 27/10/2024); *Le plan d'action fédéral pour la simplification administrative 2022-2024*, https://www.stradalex.com/fr/sl_news/document/sl_news_breve202202010-2-fr (accessed 27/10/2024); *Le plan régional bruxellois de simplification administrative 2020-2025*.

it thanks to the ability of the most recent technologies to adjust automatically to individual needs.⁹

Box 1 – Audit of the use of the online administrative counter

The aim of the audit of the use of two digital public services was to formulate inclusive recommendations for IT developers and to propose tools and technical advice to take better account of users who are remote from digital technology.¹ It was carried out by a group of associations promoting accessibility.

The analysis focused in particular on IRISBOX. It was carried out with a panel of 55 users recruited by the group from ten target audiences considered to have difficulty with digital technology² using the snowball sampling method, a technique often used to access hard-to-reach populations.

Participants were invited to carry out functional usability tests by performing concrete actions on the platform in the presence of members of the collective – from registering to downloading documents, making appointments and consulting information. At the end of the test, they were invited to fill in a questionnaire and to talk to the organisers about their online experience.

1. *Cahier spécial des charges*, internal document, p. 3
2. The ten target groups identified are: (1) dyslexic people; (2) people with intellectual disabilities; (3) blind or partially sighted people; (4) deaf or hard of hearing people; (5) financially disadvantaged people with few qualifications; (6) people suffering from illiteracy; (7) foreign-language speakers who do not understand French; (8) people over 65 without a computer at home; (9) people who only use the keyboard to surf the internet; (10) people who only have a smartphone.

At the same time as this transfer of work to user-citizens – a phenomenon now well documented in both scientific literature (Granjon, 2022; Sorin and Mazet, 2019) and institutional literature (Défenseur des droits, 2023) – the digital instrumentation of relations with citizens is leading to another transformation that is taking place more discreetly: the gradual delegation of functions previously reserved for the public sector to external private operators. This digital privatisation of public-service missions (Jeannot and Cottin-Marx, 2022) particularly concerns activities linked to the provision

9. “Mass customisation” is the name given to this original form of service relationship that makes it possible to personalise the service without giving up the advantages of standardisation (Dujarier, 2014).

of digital services – from their production to their maintenance – thus transferring citizen relations functions to the private sector. As well as reopening the debate on the recurring problem of the lack of skills in the public sector, this delegation also raises the question of its effects on the reduction of the prerogatives of public services and the scope of action of State employees. Against this backdrop of the recomposition of the public-private divide, how is the attention paid to the user reflected in the process of digital instrumentation of an administrative counter in the Brussels region?

A time of trial and error

If there is indeed a consensus among the various players we met, it is around the centrality of a “user” approach in the design and deployment of the administrative counter. Behind this *a priori* consensual rhetoric, however, appears a vague, even dissonant, conception of the user figures for whom this system is primarily intended. The first observation concerns the recurrent invocation of the organisation’s general-interest mission as a reminder that its duty is, as a matter of principle, to address the general public. Several professionals insist on the need to satisfy an “average” need: that of the “standard user” (webmaster), the “classic user” (IT 2 project analyst) or the “general public” citizen-user (IT project manager):

“Unlike commercial sites, we design sites that are functional, simple and grey. The site has to be accessible. The average user has to be able to find the information. The aim is to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. That’s the main message we give the IT team. It shows that we’re thinking about the issue” (general service manager).

This predominant idealised figure of the average citizen, as unique as it is imprecise, is closely related to that of the “user as everybody” (Oudshoorn et al., 2004). In this case, it seems to deprive those involved in the design process of the ability to take a pragmatic view of the diversity of users and the possible situations in which the online counter can be used. During interviews, the professionals admitted that they only had a rough idea of the target audience, which could be summed up as a division into two classes of generic user:

“We don’t use a persona. Instead, we have two main types of actor depending on the needs of use: “user-citizen” and “administrative agent”. The projection stops there. We’re trying to design something that can be used easily by the general public, but we’re not really trained to think about specific users” (IT project analyst 1).

The “disabled public” category nevertheless emerges in the comments of a developer in charge of the application’s front end.

He admits to “having received guidelines from AnySurfer¹⁰ for digital accessibility to be integrated within the scope of his skills, such as the trash-can pictogram and other classic tricks.” He admits that “beyond that, there is no systematic reflection on these audiences.” The rhetorical figure of the user-citizen, whose behaviour is typical of the average user, is all the more prevalent because citizens are not involved in the successive updates of the system. Their feedback is only taken into account “via the helpdesk when things go really wrong” (implementation manager).

During the ideation phase, users appear through the projections that the professionals make of them. Several members of the team base their expectations of future users on intuitions drawn from their professional experience: “We try to put ourselves in the shoes of the average user who isn’t super comfortable with IT, using our professional perspective to ask ourselves what problems they are likely to encounter” (IT project analyst 1). Others project user needs on the basis of typical difficulties encountered by a third party. A common method is to use familiar examples to try and design a service that is suitable for as many people as possible: “My partner has sight problems. So, at each stage of the application we’re developing on IRISBOX, I ask him whether he’s coping or not. He’s a bit like my personal tester” (IT project analyst 2). The tendency of those involved in design to adopt the posture of both designer-user and user-designer is nothing new in the scientific literature (Akrich, 1998; Flichy, 2008). Nor is it foreign to Paradigm’s IT team, to whom the conclusions of a study on digital inclusion were delivered in 2019. This highlighted the propensity of

10. AnySurfer is a project of a non-profit association, *Blindenzorg Licht en Liefde*, an organisation serving blind and partially-sighted people in Flanders and Brussels. It awards a digital accessibility label that complies with European directives.

its “project” teams to consider the preferences of target audiences on the basis of their own digital practices or those of their immediate entourage (Brotcorne, et al., 2019).

Inclusion in times of IT outsourcing

It was precisely to overcome these design biases and promote digital inclusion that the recent unit dedicated to digital inclusion was created within the institution. These ethnocentric approaches, which are still common in the digital design profession (Greene, 2021), illustrate the unequal weight of the various players involved in the digital instrumentation of the public-service relationship. When we met the new coordinator of the Inclusion unit, he immediately pointed out “the technical prism of the organisation, given its role as orchestrator of the region’s IT development.” This explains the predominance of “IT specialists and other IT profiles accustomed to using digital tools,” a situation which, in his view, leads to “bias in the design of e-citizen products, which are very often seen by the general public as services made by IT specialists for IT specialists.” He also points out that he belongs “to the only non-IT centred department in the institution,” whose mission is precisely to try to “redress the balance a little by encouraging a more citizen-oriented vision.” It is in this context that he is responsible for “a new project that is likely to cause a stir internally: the launch of a project on ‘inclusion by design’ aimed at IT teams.” When asked why he expects his project to encounter resistance, his answer is eloquent:

“It’s clearly going to complicate the implementation of IT projects. Firstly, it will require additional budgets, which are the lifeblood of any project. As for the technical management, they’ll think I’m getting in their way, because it’s will slow down the process and make it more cumbersome. But I have to make them understand that the aim is to respond to public demand. Given our public interest mission, thinking of the citizen first is a priority” (coordinator, digital inclusion unit).

In addition to these palpable tensions between technical and financial constraints and inclusive ambitions, which reflect the unequal balance of power among the institution’s various departments, there are difficulties relating to the IT team’s limited scope of work. The project manager

admits that he has no control over a series of software applications, the design of which is now outsourced to private service providers. Whether it is an internal form generator developed in the United States or an identity authentication application designed by a Belgian company,¹¹ improvements to these systems are beyond the control of the designers:

“As regards the electronic identification procedure, we are well aware that a maximum of three minutes to log in is not at all sufficient for a number of groups, such as the elderly, but that’s not within our remit. It’s true that we’ve done our bit with the recommendations of the accessibility audit, focusing on modifying only those aspects over which we had control. We did what we could” (IT project manager).

This example clearly illustrates the infiltration of standards from the private sector into the relationship with citizens, over which public organisations have little control. As well as reducing the prerogatives of civil servants, this fragmentation of tasks, which evokes a form of digital Taylorism (Gautié and Perez, 2023), also leads to a dilution of responsibility for adapting the service to users, whose digital practices differ from the standards imposed by the private sector. This situation, which in this case reflects unequal power relations to the disadvantage of the in-house IT team, has led some of them to be critical: “There is sometimes a tendency to give suppliers a little too much power because THE philosophy here has become outsourcing in recent years, even though in reality it often costs more and isn’t always necessary” (head of the “Digital innovation strategy” department).

Time to enrol

If there is a prevailing lack of precision around the figure of the user, it is also due to the fact that this notion refers not only to the end user, but also to the agents of the administrations for whom the counter is deployed. Because of the institution’s specific mission to support the digital implementation of

11. The ITSME app was launched in 2017 by Belgian Mobile ID, a consortium of four major Belgian banks – Belfius, BNP Paribas Fortis, ING and KBC – and three mobile operators – Orange Belgium, Proximus and Telenet. It is officially recognised by the Federal Government as a means of connecting to public services.

public authority services, some of them even give precedence to the expectations of those they consider to be their subcontractors: “It would be nice to have a citizen-based approach, but our customers are the public authorities. The aim is for them to offer functional technological solutions that lighten their workload and promote direct contact with citizens” (IT project manager). This position justifies the lack of direct involvement of the general public [in the design stage], believing that “their expectations are reflected in those of the agents at the counter” (business analyst). Another member of the team admits that “the most effective way for citizens to report a problem on IRISBOX is to have it escalated by the administration concerned” (implementation manager).

The institution also takes particular care to satisfy the “user” experience of administrations that have opted to use the virtual counter. Two members of the IT team are specifically tasked with liaising between these administrations and the developers. As a link between the stakeholders, they organise several user clubs a year. These meetings bring together representatives of customer administrations with a view to “providing regular feedback on the problems encountered in using the portal.” The less than user-friendly design of the interface (see Figure 1) and the density of its content are in fact the result of frequent requests from public authorities “to enhance its functionalities again and again to tailor them to their specific needs” (implementation manager). As well as designing the virtual one-stop shop, the IT team’s other role is to support government departments on the path to digital transformation. It provides advice to those “who are taking the step of digitising their processes and tries to convince those who are most reluctant “to embark on the adventure,” those who fear that “the switch to digital will lead to an acceleration in the pace of work” (IT project manager). This apprehension is palpable when it comes to adopting the online appointment booking function, which they fear will lead to “an uninterrupted flow of requests” (implementation manager), undoubtedly reducing the room for manoeuvre they have in their work. To counter what the project manager calls “an imaginary fear of technological development,” their role is to encourage administrations to go digital. Like entrepreneurs in a bureaucracy (Bellon, 2021), some members of the team are tasked with “guiding them in the right direction so that they can implement change management and understand that digital technology offers

inestimable time savings that can be reinvested in welcoming people” (implementation manager).

In short, the IT team has a dual role: the obvious one of designing and maintaining the digital system – within the limits of the competences that have been delegated to the private sector – and the less expected one of teaching administrations about digital technologies. This second mission echoes the enrolment systems described by Anne-Marie Dujarier (2014). One of the aims of these is to provide support and justification for digital instrumentation with a view to ensuring that staff actually use the tools offered to them. In a context where standards from the private sector are interfering in the design of public services, how does this blurring of the contours of the figure of the user for whom the counter is intended manifest itself when it is used by people who are digitally vulnerable? This is the subject of the next section.

THE IMPLICIT QUALITIES EXPECTED OF AN ORDINARY USER-CITIZEN

To grasp the implicit representations of users crystallised during the scripting of the digital instrumentation project for this public-service relationship, attention was focused on the frustrated uses of IRISBOX’s functionalities. Its properties are seen as markers of a specific conception of the recipient users and, more broadly, of the ways in which their conduct is governed. By highlighting the difficulties of use, we are able to grasp the implicit qualities expected of a supposedly “ordinary” user and, implicitly, the practices considered to be “non-standard”.

Access to the virtual counter: a series of conditions

Access to the counter is the first form of contact with the public service. The connection procedure is carried out either via an identity card reader (eID), or via a digital identity authentication application – designed by a private external service provider – available only on smartphone. According to the results of the audit, out of the 55 participants, more than a third (35%) were unable to log in, either because of technical problems or a

lack of understanding of how it worked, or because they did not master the language used. The card reader turned out to be incompatible with certain browsers installed by default on the computers, and the digital identity application was either unknown or not mastered by the users. The latter is all the more problematic for smartphone users, as they can only connect to the counter using this application. If they do not have it, they are immediately unable to access the public service. Another source of incomprehension for many users was the default English-language setting for the login procedure, both via the ID card reader and via the application. On the counter's home page, the "Connect me" and "Citizen access" tabs also left a number of users uncertain as to which entry to use to complete the process. Once users had logged in, the display of a page for accepting the general terms and conditions, where they were required to enter an email address, blocked participants who did not have one.

Overall, almost half the users felt they had encountered difficulties registering on the platform. This high proportion may seem surprising at first. It is less so when one considers the many prerequisites for this stage. As well as having the right hardware (computer, smartphone, internet connection, ID card reader) and software (identity authentication application, web browser) and being able to install them correctly, this process requires a basic understanding of English, as well as having an email address known to the user. Those using a computer without an ID card reader need to use the online identification application, which is only available on smartphones. This procedure also requires being able to juggle quickly between the two interfaces (in under three minutes), otherwise the connection will fail. Users with only a smartphone have no choice but to use the digital identity application, which requires them to have installed it beforehand and to be familiar with how to use it.

Making an appointment with the authorities: a low-profile process

The second form of contact with the public service involves making an appointment online, without which it is not possible to meet an official at the counter. Almost half the participants (45%) had not managed to do this. The lack of visibility of the tab on the interface was the main reason

given. This finding is of particular concern given the fears expressed above by frontline agents about the increased workload that such a change could entail. It also echoes a situation described as Kafkaesque by many social workers: the obligation to use the digital channel to obtain an exchange with a face-to-face contact. This Kafkaesque dimension is particularly acute when the person in question has neither access to nor control over the internet, as this obligation means that they are *de facto* unable to access the public service on their own. More generally, the low visibility of the tab for making an appointment on the home page is just one example of the surreptitious transformation of the administrative relationship. In a digital-first approach,¹² as is the case in Belgium, although offline channels of communication are maintained, the opportunities to use them are gradually being reduced. We are thus witnessing a shift in the norm of the service relationship towards the digital mode. Access to a human interlocutor is relegated to the status of an adjunct, or even an exception. In a way, it is becoming a non-standard request requiring justification, and, in so doing, gradually transforming the administrative relationship into a “social relation without relationship” (Dujarier, 2014). This transformation echoes what other studies on digital government have already pointed out (Dagiral, 2011; Deville, 2018). With a view to streamlining flows, digital devices are invested with the function of regulating user behaviour. By shifting the burden of superfluous contacts onto remote management tools, co-managed by users, the aim is to reduce the frequency of administrative exchanges in order to promote their efficiency while reducing their costs.

Carrying out e-procedures: finding your way in a standardised environment

Two other types of administrative formality can be carried out at the online counter: downloading forms and submitting requests to the relevant departments. Nearly six out of ten users say that these two procedures are complicated to carry out. A third of them were unable to download the necessary documents, and more than four out of ten did not complete their application.

12. . In Belgium, the current dominant approach is “digital first” rather than “digital only”.

The two main reasons cited were the multiplicity of possible entries for these requests and the search engine's lack of performance when encoding misspelled terms. These difficulties are compounded by a lack of understanding of the administrative language used on the platform. Moreover, the sheer volume of data to be provided at the time of application leads many users to point out that it is tedious, which is a frequent cause of abandonment of the process and non-use of entitlements (Koubi, 2013). The encoding of data in the form of boxes to be ticked or boxes to be filled in with keywords caused concern for individuals whose particular situation did not coincide with any pre-formatted option. During our meeting, the digital accessibility expert in charge of this audit stressed the "feeling of anxiety and incompetence" expressed by the participants when faced with these procedures, "blaming themselves rather than the public service." Many of them told him that "on their own, they would certainly have given up."

In its conclusion, the audit report points out the considerable proportion of users who did not manage to complete the administrative procedures they started: 7 out of 10 participants are in this situation. According to the digital accessibility specialist, this is due to the general lack of clarity in the interface design, the multiplication of tabs and "layers of information", and the diversity of possible procedures depending on the municipality. The analysis reveals that the implicit dominant figure of the user-citizen encapsulated in the design of the interface is not only that of a user of digital technologies, who is moreover invited to be multi-connected if he/she wishes to improve his/her "user experience", but also that of an autonomous individual, capable of connecting quickly and juggling several interfaces simultaneously. They also need to be able to move nimbly in a complex technological, administrative and information environment, and to know clearly what they are looking for and how to get it. In addition to having a good command of formal and administrative written language, a basic understanding of English is a considerable advantage if they wish to carry out their administrative procedures from start to finish without the help of a third party.

In any case, the user contained in the design of the counter is neither a weak nor a non-user of digital technologies. Moreover, no secure digital entry to the interface is provided so that users can delegate their administrative tasks to a third party. As the Chief Marketing Officer of the

digital identity application points out: “Creating a ‘digital helper’ entry involves a number of requirements, including finding the right balance between maintaining an optimum level of security and lowering the accessibility threshold, which is complicated.” Over and above this technical issue, the Chief Marketing Officer justifies the absence of this entry point with an argument based on the importance of empowering users. In his view, “creating a ‘caregiver entry’ would do users a disservice [...]. The danger is that they will become increasingly dependent on a third party, and therefore even more vulnerable.” This argument aligns well with the orientations advocated by the new model of digital governance of public services (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013): a self-service offer accompanied by human disintermediation involving the engagement of citizens in these steps without bureaucratic assistance.

This vision has two consequences. The first is the disqualification of the figure of the public-service user who is unable or unwilling to access it digitally. The non-user of digital tools becomes a potential non-user of the public service. The second, less well documented, is the invisibilisation of the figure of the third-party helper, the intermediary user whose major role in effective access to essential services for many vulnerable groups is well documented today (Granjon, 2022; Sorin and Mazet, 2019). In short, it is as if the vision of government embodied in this socio-technical device consisted in establishing a privileged form of relationship with citizens with traits close to the hyper-individual – the positive side of the contemporary hypermodern individual, well described by Robert Castel (2010) – while the default individual, his negative side, is relegated to the background.

CONCLUSION

The fieldwork carried out in a Brussels-based public interest organisation in Belgium on the design and use of its virtual administrative counter outlines a process of digital instrumentation of the public-service relationship that is less accomplished than that generally described in official government modernisation programmes.

Beyond the well-worn rhetoric about the unprecedented capacity of digital systems to offer each citizen a tailor-made public service, a close

examination of the discourse of the teams involved in the design, deployment and promotion of the virtual counter reveals an ambivalent conception of the users for whom the service is primarily intended. This sometimes refers to a fantasised figure of the general public, whose features are at first unthought-through and then standardised, and at other times to that of the frontline civil servant, whose work is seen as being simplified in order to improve the quality of the service provided to users. This ambivalence is the result not only of technical and financial constraints, and of the IT team's limited scope of work due to the increasing delegation of some of their tasks to private service providers – a situation that frustrates the inclusive initiatives belatedly launched – but also of the organisation's institutional positioning, which is primarily concerned with enlisting its client administrations in this project to digitally instrument the public service. The focus is on satisfying the intermediary users – the front-office staff – rather than the user-citizens as a whole, relegating a detailed understanding of “non-standard” usage situations to the background.

Caught between multiple constraints stemming from power relations unfavourable to players defending a more inclusive conception of the counter, the IT team then falls back on a model of the “average” user prevailing in standard development processes, originating from the private sector among others. An analysis of how the virtual counter is used by people who are remote from the digital world reveals an interface with standardised functions and a host of requirements. The ordinary citizen-user embedded in its design appears not only as a user of digital technologies, but also as a multi-connected internet user, endowed with multiple dispositions, which countless quantitative and qualitative surveys both in France and in Belgium (Brotcorne and Ponnet, 2024; Granjon, 2022; Pasquier, 2018) nevertheless show to be unequally distributed within the population. They are also docile citizens who are forced to accept a disembodied way of interacting with the authorities, which now involves more or less “all-written” communication at a distance (Kesteman, 2020).

In so doing, the digital instrumentation of this public-service relationship leads to a form of reduction of the provision for citizens on the margins of the standard figure of the digital user, by invisibilising both the expectations of public-service users who are not users of technological tools, and the work of the third-party “digital helper”. However, an audit of the

use of the virtual administrative counter by people who are not digitally literate shows that increasing attention is being paid to people who are at risk of administrative exclusion because they are not digitally literate. This evaluation mission has been part of a recent policy of digital inclusion in the Brussels-Capital Region since 2021.¹³ This initiative reflects a growing awareness on the part of the regional political authorities of the need to “leave no-one by the wayside of digitisation.”

Initially unheard of in the digitisation practices of the administrative counter, these public groups with digital difficulties have then, in a way, imposed themselves on the public body as a result of the publicisation of the phenomenon of the “digital divide” since the health crisis. In other words, the growing importance given to this new public problem by the Brussels authorities has contributed to the construction of an “imposed” or “obligatory” figure of users, who are now the focus of unprecedented attention. These groups, long ignored, are now at the heart of the definition of this new public problem and the solutions to remedy it (Vatron-Steiner et al., 2022). However, the categorisation of people designated as being “at risk of digital exclusion” paints a bleak picture of these profiles. Senior citizens, the disabled, the illiterate and the disadvantaged are all seen as minorities with “special needs”, suffering from a deficit in every case. Although the audit sought to diversify the profiles beyond the traditional elderly/disabled diptych, they are still viewed in terms of a lack of access, skills or motivation. From this point of view, vulnerabilities in the digital environment are more the result of people’s own responsibilities than of unequal situations created by societal choices.

In short, the recent development of public policies on digital exclusion is helping to re-problematise the issue of the user as a recipient of public services, giving rise to the emergence of a “counter-figure” to the ordinary user: that of a “non-standard” user, whose behaviour is remote from the digital practices of the majority, who are capable of entering fully into this all-digital world.

13. The Digital Ownership Action Plan was adopted in 2019 and has been implemented from 2021. Its implementation has been entrusted to the Digital Inclusion Coordination within the CIRB, <https://cirb.brussels/fr/quoi-de-neuf/publications/cahiers/ndeg40-plan-dappropriation-numerique-1> (accessed 31/10/2024).

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