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# Technology Mediated Citizenship: What can we learn from library practices

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**Abstract.** Advanced digital societies in democratic societies are conceived to be sustained by informed, active and responsible citizens. While internet and information technologies are both hailed for their empowering potential for the citizens to express their civic and political rights, they also pose considerable literacy and usage challenges, and thus can raise exclusionary thresholds for these same aspirations. Digital skills and information literacy as preconditions for tapping into such technology potential, can thus affect the way citizenship is practiced and conceived by the members of society. Based on an extensive field study at Swedish libraries practices with helping and educating clients with a wide diversity of questions relating to digital technologies and e-services, we examine both empirically and conceptually how citizenship is practiced in an advanced digital society, in a universal welfare state. The analysis focused on citizenship practices in daily activities when technologies mediate participation and interaction among the public, civic and market actors. The conclusions contribute to the conceptualization of citizenship act and agency and elaborates on citizenship as a performative process.

**Keywords:** Digital citizenship, public digital services, agency, library

## 1 Background and Research Problem

In advanced digital societies, such as the in the Scandinavian countries, it is the responsibility of the ‘active and informed citizen’ to manage daily needs and activities, by accessing public services, communicating with authorities and businesses, or engaging in social or political acts [1]. These practices can be highly empowering and effective for the individual person. But an important precondition for empowerment to happen, she needs to be knowledgeable and skillful to use an array of different digital technologies that are mediating pretty much every relation and service in society [2]. For individual citizens to fulfil these requirements, in the current process of a swift digitalisation of public societal services, this is not easy, but requires various forms of support [3, 4]. There are policy ambitions to promote increased digitalisation and call for harnessing of digitalisation opportunities for economic growth and citizen well-being [2, 5-7]. ‘People must have the opportunity to develop personally, to choose freely and safely, to engage in society, regardless of their age, gender or professional background’ the European Commission writes in a recent communication [5]. Furthermore, they state: ‘Citizens should be empowered to make better decisions based on insights

gleaned from non-personal data’, thus calling for technologies that make a difference and work for people in their daily lives [5].

OECD calls for immediacy of policies that target digital literacy for effective use of technologies, and emphasize that these shall: ‘empower people with the mix of skills needed to succeed, improve social protection to ensure no one is left behind’ [8]. While finding proved effects of digitalisation on human productivity and accessibility to knowledge [7], they stress the risks of disinformation, insecurity and the digital divides that are inherent to the process of transformation in society [8]. Normative analyses have depicted the good citizenship implied in being an informed participant in democratic practices [9], while digital divide research showed that digital technologies empowered those already politically engaged and highly educated [3, 4].

The case of Sweden should be understood as an advanced and rather digitalized welfare state, rather than a universal welfare state. In this context we include in the concept of citizenship not only the right to vote (political citizenship), but also social, economic and civic engagement [10]. In this study, we focus on citizenship from a performative perspective, that involves what individuals actually do when they live in society, in their daily lives - solving mundane problems, fulfilling their different needs - civic, political, educational, financial. As Hintz, Dencik [11] clarify, participation in society is conditioned by receiving of citizen status, in contrast to enacting citizenship through engagement in social and political activities. In advanced information societies these activities are often digitalized, something which brings to the fore how digital access and skills condition the performing of citizenship (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2018). Swedish research shows that digital diversity involves always exclusionary potential and that citizenship should be examined as an entanglement of human and technology relations [12-15].

Libraries present valuable fora used increasingly by citizens to learn about and get help with digital technologies. The library as an institution is fundamental for the lively, engaged, inclusive and rooted democracy [16, 17]. The public libraries play a central function in the building of democratic and inclusive local communities, being increasingly relied upon by governments to deliver access and support for e-services [18]. In particular local public libraries have played a crucial role for deliberation, literacy and democratic inclusion during the building of the Scandinavian welfare states [19].

The Library Act in Sweden stipulates today that every municipality shall have a local library open for every citizen and adapted to their needs [20]. Public libraries are managed under the municipalities in Sweden and they are currently developing their organizations and services to meet the new and increasing demands on digital information and e-services. Eight out of ten libraries in Sweden are currently offering services targeting citizens’ needs for digital information and services [21]. Through the libraries, citizens are supposed to get improved access to information, culture and values – which are preconditions for informed, active and engaged citizens in the civic realm. By providing access and qualified support to all citizens, the libraries are expected to promote access to information and knowledge resources for all individuals in society regardless of their economic and social resources. Hence, libraries and library employees work to support citizens’ everyday activities in terms of digitalized relations with

authorities and other organizations, as well as private matters,. In these terms the library employees become mediators and enablers of citizenship agency.

On this background, this paper will discuss how digitalization affects citizenship as performative enactment, viewed through the lens of Swedish library employees and their practices of supporting visitors with questions relating to access, understanding and acting upon digital services, digital information and technologies. The focus is the image of citizenship which emerges in the stories told and the observations of library practices to provide support for the visitors. These visitors come to the library because they need help with enacting their rights and obligations as citizens. Thus, citizens who are invoked in the empirical material is a limited group of citizens in different vulnerable positions due to lack of knowledge and/or ability to use information technologies, rather than representative for the whole population. Our main argument is that through digital mediation of social activities, the boundaries of what individuals can do in the frame of their citizen rights, responsibilities and duties are shifting depending on how they manage digital technologies and thereby digitalization re-frames the meaning of citizenship.

### **1.1 The Aim and the Research Questions**

In this paper we aim to explore practices of citizenship in an advanced digital society as they are supported in library practices. Based on our findings and analyses we aim to open for a discussion on re-assessing the meaning of citizenship when its practicing is mediated by digital technologies. To pursue this aim, the paper will focus on three research questions:

- How is citizenship practiced in daily life activities through digital technologies?
- How do digital technologies affect the practice of citizenship and how are they supported by the library staff?
- What implications do technology mediated citizenship practices have upon citizenship acts and citizenship agency?

## **2 Literature Insights and Theoretical Framework**

Digital citizenship has been described in terms of the ability of the individuals to participate in society through access and use of digital technologies as a critical medium for ‘individual expression, democratization, economic opportunity, community and education’ [22, 23]. The term is not new, it emerged at the same time as Internet became widely accessible for the public. This development resulted in a reflection of – and a challenge to rights, obligations and freedoms in the physical polities – democratic or authoritarian alike.

More recently, when digitalisation has permeated the depths of both public and private spheres - digital literacy, in addition to government knowledge is to drive the ability to participate online in society and politics [24]. Building on different literacies and technology affordances, the individuals engage in activities of ‘becoming’ digital

citizens, by negotiating new ways of living their rights and freedoms [25, 26]. Critical analyses on digital citizenship from a governing perspective argue that through the popular education and the lifelong learning ideal, policies work to re-include citizens in a society that they already were part of, but were excluded by computerization [27].

## **2.1 Performative Citizenship in a Sociotechnical Landscape**

When access and use of public services is increasingly digital, as well as online participation, deliberation and interaction with elected politicians and public servants, when digital infrastructure for e-legitimation and signature is systemically built – the institutional arrangements for democratic citizenship should be considered as socio-technical arrangements [28-31]. Consequently, there is a need to address these arrangements that make up the digital citizenship.

Current digital infrastructure in public sector that requires to perform digital acts can be compared with Winner [32] analysis of Moser bridges in '20s New York, as well as Chandler and Hikino [33] studies of large scale energy technology infrastructure and their early arguments about the political properties – intrinsic or by design, of technologies. The analogy in the citizenship case is to reflect upon what information technologies and digital (and automated) infrastructures in public services require or condition in terms of practicing citizenship acts and how human agency is affected by these.

## **2.2 Digital Citizenship as Performative Enactment**

Studies of citizenship as practice - 'the doing of citizenship' – draw on theories of performativity that seek to understand how people manifest their citizenship through their activities [25, 34, 35] while claiming rights and implementing responsibilities [36]. Citizenship as practice comprise individuals' decisions and actions when claiming rights and implementing responsibilities as members of society. The practice should be seen in relation to the different statuses a person can have, where the citizenship establishes the belonging of the individual to a nation state, their legal and political regimes and entitlement to welfare. By acquiring the status of 'citizen', the person acquires a legal identity and a subjectivity in the frame of the national jurisdiction, with full rights and responsibilities towards the national state.

However, not all members in a society are 'citizens', as for example persons with rights to work and study, persons with residence rights, refugees or asylum seekers. Depending on these statuses, these people will have more or less limited access to rights, responsibilities and welfare services and thus their practices will involve different activities [37, 38]. In these terms the agency associated with citizenship is always conditioned, circumscribed by a number of regulations.

## **2.3 Citizen Acts and Citizen Agency**

A performative perspective of citizenship will thus have 'citizen acts' and 'citizen agency' among the main units of analysis [35]. A citizen act is here broadly defined as intentional actions of individual subjects to engage with society (ibid.). Isin [35]

proposed to shift the focus from the institution of citizenship and the citizen as an individual actor to acts of citizenship. Isin defined acts of citizenship as '*individual deeds that rupture social-historical patterns*'. According to Isin, acts are not passively given, nor are they coming from a natural order. Citizenship acts are not simply the exercise of rights and obligations, '*as if these neutral forms of individual choice could be sanctioned outside multiple networks of authority*'..., *such practices like voting, paying taxes or learning languages appear passive and one-sided in mass democracies, whereas acts of citizenship break with repetition of the same...*' [35]. Citizenship shall thus also include acts of solving daily needs.

In a digital society, many of such citizen acts will be mediated by digital technologies, which will have an effect upon how citizens perform more advanced activities in society: how they live their rights, freedoms and obligations. How knowledgeable citizens are about their living conditions, how able they are to fulfill their daily needs and act upon them using technologies, will have effects upon their ability to participate in society, politically, socially and economically, in a more informed and timely manner. We argue that if a person has difficulties to act upon her daily needs by being restrained by technology, she will also be limited in her ability to engage in more advanced activities.

Along with rights and responsibilities granted by formal citizenship status - digital literacy, technology access and the abilities of the person to use such technologies will make up an important part of her citizenship agency. Citizen agency will thus consist of the ability of the person to perform citizen acts to fulfill the individual's social, political, cultural and financial needs. Importantly, citizenship agency is relational as it builds abilities based on the relations that the individual cultivates with technologies, authorities, and other supporting or mediating actors. Thus, practicing citizenship by using digital technologies daily becomes an important medium through which citizens enact their role in society [11]. Daily activities that involve purposefully using Internet to search for, access and use digital platforms of governmental authorities, public and private services providers - make up the agency with which the person performs and positions herself as a citizen in society. Such an agency builds on knowledge about the services and their providers, literacy of rights and obligations, the experience of solving problems through digital and other technologies and the relations with other members in the community. However, when the person lacks literacy, other actors supporting or mediating knowledge become important in building and sustaining citizenship agency, which is the case of library employees in this study.

### 3 Method

This study follows the path of 'library studies' and builds on our interest to follow the process of advancing digitalization of society and the implications for citizens' participation in democratic practices [12, 39]. The public library as an institution is framed as a democracy arena that works for broad folk literacy and digital inclusions [40-42]. The study focused on library activities occurring at a main public library in a medium sized municipality in Sweden, at one of its local branches in a housing area and at the regional

library program for Introduction of asylum seekers to society, where social communicators work.

Acts of citizenship and agency were studied through the stories of the library employees, and in our observations at the library information desk. Through these main sources we learned about the visitors' individual needs and challenges when attempting to perform citizenship acts. These visitors can be understood as a vulnerable group of citizens, rather than representative of all Swedish citizens. Compared to the average in Sweden, the citizens in this municipality had a slightly lower level of education, lower level of income, and shorter average lifespan [43]. A relatively high number of immigrants lived in the municipality, which also showed in their attendance of the libraries in focus.

The study was designed as a qualitative, interpretive study with included elements of ethnographic studies. Besides documentary information, the empirical material was collected through seven semi-structured interviews, about an hour in length, with library employees and managers (all were librarians), 29 documented observation visits during daily activities at the library information desk, IT-tutorials and courses, events such as e-Citizen week, All Digital Week, and two focus groups with social communicators. The observations range from one to several hours in length, and the focus groups comprised two hours each.

This material was corroborated with our empirical findings from our previous library studies [13, 39]. This interpretive analysis employed an abductive procedure and connected the concepts of 'citizenship acts', 'digital acts' and 'agency' to the empirical content, which was in its turn ground for assessing the theoretical concepts [44, 45]. Our interest lies in both explaining the empirical questions of citizenship practices and hoping that these findings would contribute to refine theory of citizenship. The material was coded in NVIVO, in this case by focusing on citizenship. The codes 'need', 'knowledge', 'technology', 'support', 'challenge' were included in the analysis, but also grounded theory approach allowing for themes such as 'concern', 'boundaries', 'responsibility' to emerge from the material..

## **4 Findings from Library Practices**

To embed the discussion in practical situations, we will use critical situations as we have identified in the field studies that illustrate examples of activities mediated by digital technologies, and later to relate them to acts of citizenship.

### **4.1 Daily Digital Acts that Make the Practice of Citizenship**

As we argued above, members of society practice their rights and responsibilities daily – in more or less obvious forms and based on a diversity of needs that arise from lived experiences. Confirming earlier studies, we find that library visitors increasingly address questions and ask for assistance to manage access and exchange of information with authorities in the public and private sector. It is through the lens of their challenges that we shall understand their citizen acts and their agency in the digital society.

Printing papers or digitizing paper records present the most popular kind of assistance at the library: activity reports for unemployment benefits, monthly account statement and receipts for municipality income support services, records asked by banking services. Not so seldom, the person who is not able to manage the entire communication via e-services, chooses to present them on paper. So far some of these authorities still accept papers. We observed and got confirmed by the interviewed staff at the branch library that in the areas inhabited by immigrants, non-speakers of Swedish and socially vulnerable households, such questions and assistance is much more frequent than at the central library. Some more examples follow on public transportation, when buses are not accepting cash or paper tickets:

Two young women asking for help to print bus tickets QR code, when staff 2, wonders why she cannot just show it on her mobile. It turns out the women's mobile does not have internet connection and the women was unsure whether she could use her QR-app to show the code to the ticket scanner. She prints a huge QR-code on paper and leaves (Obsr. Branch 7, Ref 1).

One of the visitors turned out to have a smartphone without internet connection, which hindered her to handle the ticket app and use the ticket scanner on the bus. A similar case, almost anecdotal, occurred when another library visitor had two different mobiles which he could not use (ex. google maps) to find the address and the route to the specific store he needed. Pursuing without hinder such elementary acts will facilitate or sometimes pre-condition the persons contacts with the authorities, the employers or health care. A house rental situation was observed as follows:

An older lady needs help to post an ad on Internet about renting her apartment: "Where would you like to place your ad?", she is asked. She replied "I don't know, anywhere. I don't know where to post ads. I don't have my own computer". She is curious about computers, but afraid to become dependent on them, she admits. After explaining her intention, she gets the advice to contact the local rental housing company. But she explained that she had tried but has not got any help. Finally, the alternative was suggested to post the ad in the local newspaper, but for that she needed to have an email account. (Obsr. Main 2, Ref 1)

Here again, we witness several elementary acts that the person needs to know and manage digitally. Even when an alternative to use the print newspaper, it turns out she needed to mail them her request online, for which she needed to have an email account and know the password for login. Knowing about the service, knowing the language is in many cases not enough anymore. Handling logins to email, passwords, mobiles, websites and computers become mediators of elementary digital acts of the citizen.

## 4.2 Digital Acts and Challenges Connecting to Welfare Services

Our field studies suggest that more advanced activities, like accessing and using public e-services to solve daily needs involve more digital acts and higher citizenship agency



abilities. To recall, her agency will thus be her ability to perform citizen acts based on her knowledge and understanding of the services, knowing of her rights and responsibilities entitling her to social, cultural, and political benefits, but also her relation with the respective authorities and communication abilities through digital technologies.

A specific case that illustrates a challenge of agency concerns the decision of the local public schools in to introduce paper free communication policies. Certain parents with daycare or school children, had difficulties communicating with the schools through basic digital means such as emails or through the municipality school platform. These parents needed much more assistance to use the digital platforms at the transmit the information about the pupil, but more often they needed support when the services did not function based on wrong or missing information. The observation below describes a typical situation occurring at the library:

A woman around 40 y.o. approaches the library reception. She tells the library staff that since her children's school recently has become paper-free and she needed help to report special diet for one of her children. The woman is annoyed. Staff 1 replies that [the municipal] contact centers will attend libraries during specific hours to assist parents with such issues. The woman admits she can't attend during those hours. She replies: "why should it be so damn hard and take such a damn time [for the staff to help her]". The class teacher and the school administration advised her to use the library help desk for the purpose. (Obsr. Branch 10, Ref 2)

Another common support activity is counseling on IT problems, both on spot when the questions are posed in the reception and in booked sessions, as illustrated by the following examples:

Woman, 50 years old, who has recently become a custodian needs to buy a new computer to be able to manage the custodee's economy. [Earlier] she was hesitant to use new computers, but now as she needed to use Internet banking, she will need a more secure computer. She asks the staff for advice on the type of computer, the software and the broadband security. She seems to know many of the answers but asks to get confirmation (Obsr. Main 1, Ref 1).

Or, missing the communication with the authorities, as witnessed by one of the librarians:

[it's] various contacts with authorities, like the National Insurance Office, The Swedish Employment Service, this way you should fill in an activity report. You shall fill in time reports, [ed. asking himself] "how should I do? what should I do?" My husband just received a payment from the unemployment fund, several months after he had applied and he did not understand how it worked at all and he had not seen that he had a message in his inbox in the system (Interview Librarian 2).

And the list of such queries is long, as all the interviewed staff confirmed: activity reports for social services as bank account statements, check ins to flights or printing.

Many of them have difficulties understanding the Swedish language on the websites or computer programs, as discussed in interviews and seen during observations.

So, what do these cases have in common? In each of these examples, we see persons who have challenges to act upon their rights to use the e-services, both in public and in private sector. For them to use most of the services (banks, shops, schools, authorities), they need to access the information, understand it and act upon it to fulfill a diversity of needs arising in their daily life. As they seem to have limited agency in daily activities, these persons will experience more exclusions and difficulties to reach out. Their citizenship agency is increasingly depending on support and assistance with different digital technologies. We argue that such acts present elementary citizenship acts that underlie more advanced acts and make up for an autonomous citizen's agency. A person's integration in the labor market, her balance of work-life activities, her social or political affordances for engagement and influence in society is now mediated by technologies and conditioned by her information literacy.

When a library visitor turns to the library information desk with her questions – they usually seem as rather simple questions – ‘please help me to print my bank statement’, ‘I can't log in to the employment agency's website’, all related to some kind of device and with the purpose of solving an issue with the authorities or banks. For certain clients – usually old, immigrants or with functional disabilities, but not only – these are not easy tasks. These mundane tasks of reporting to the insurance agency, or activity reporting to the social assistance services, or booking a visit to the doctor, or checking out the balance on the bank account – are difficult if not impossible for them to solve independently through digital systems.

Our study finds that the library staff experience this at the counter and in IT-guidance meetings daily. The practice is similar for the society communicators who work with asylum seekers: what seems to be a very basic task for most of the clients – it may turn a rather difficult challenge for the certain individuals. Such seemingly simple tasks pursued by the client should be seen as assemblages of entangled questions (what do I need to do in order to solve my problem), information (what do I need to know), devices (why can't I log in to this computer or webpage, why is this app not opening) and concerns (will I ever get employed, will I get my income by the end of this month), requirements (of a personal security number, passwords) and signatures (e-ID).

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study focused on the doing of citizenship in daily practices in the context of an advanced welfare society and concerned a limited group of citizens who were in different vulnerable positions. Based on the study of this particular group we argue that along with rights and responsibilities granted by formal citizenship status - digital literacy, technology access and the abilities of the person to use such technologies will make up an important part of her citizenship agency. Her citizen agency is proven in practice and builds on knowledge about the services and their providers, literacy of rights and obligations, the experience of solving problems through digital and other technologies and the relations with other members and authorities in the community. Such agency,

based on Isin and Ruppert [46] argument, makes up the citizen's role and position in society, serving as claims to the right to act 'freely' in both digital environments and physical environments [11].

This study shows that the activity of citizenship involves an entanglement of artifacts (technology), people and concerns, information, and knowledge. The agency of citizenship is made up of such entanglements of people with authorities, technology, and information. It points at the importance of studying such entanglements to understand how citizenship evolves when practiced through digital acts and mediated by technology.

In daily situations when the technology does not work or is not available, or the information available to the person is limited or misunderstood - the agency for citizenship is also limited and that results in hindering her participation in society, her relationship with the authorities, and with other community actors. With such limited agency, the person will have a limited de facto access to the benefits of the digital society, will experience more exclusion and will be less able to act upon her social and political rights, responsibilities, and economic opportunities. Such examples of limited agency for citizenship are abounding in library practices. The library staff in such cases are supporting to restore and untangle such assemblages.

However, while they play an important supporting role, the citizen's autonomy and the scope of her opportunities to engage in society will be affected. In certain cases, when the person will acquire literacy and skills, they will empower her agency, while in other cases – when the citizen becomes dependent on such support, it will have opposite effects. Such effects of different actors and technologies upon citizenship agency should be carefully studied and need further research. Finally, a re-assessment of institutional arrangements for citizenship in information societies, increasingly mediated by technologies is critical in order to understand how citizenship agency evolves and how these are negotiated to reflect the actual challenges and conditions for social and political engagement.

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