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Shaping the new world of work – The impacts of digitalisation and robotisation

Panel 3: Digitalisation – more democracy in public services and public service workplaces?

Participants:

- Jane Lethbridge, Public Services International Research Unit
- Peter Raben, HK Stat, Denmark
- Andrea Halmos, European Commission, DG Connect
- Peter Wieser, City of Vienna

Discussant: Jan Willem Goudriaan, EPSU

Moderator: Christine Jakob, EPSU

Reporter: Patrick Orr, EPSU

Optimists hail digitalisation as a cure to all the perceived evils of cumbersome and old-fashioned public services. But is it so simple? New technology often brings with it new ways of working, yet these consequences of digitalisation are often overlooked amid the enthusiasm to ‘modernise’. This was the central question posed in this panel, which consisted of four speakers from different backgrounds, but all well versed in the effects of digitalisation on public services.

First, Jane Lethbridge, Director of the Public Services International Research Unit at the University of Greenwich, presented her research paper ‘Public Services, Democracy and Digitalisation’ into digitalisation in local and regional government in Europe. She focussed on the impact on the workforce in terms of information and consultation and occupational health and safety. The research demonstrates the need for workers to be an integral part of the planning and implementation of new technologies if digitalisation is to lead to better services for citizens. Dr Lethbridge also highlighted the problems posed by the introduction of mandatory digital interaction between citizens and services, often leading to exclusion of the most vulnerable.

This was a point later taken up by Andrea Halmos of DG Connect at the European Commission, who set out the Commission’s recently published eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020. The overarching objective is to encourage public administrations to become more ‘open, flexible and collaborative.’ For the Commission, ‘digital by default’, where citizens and public authorities interact with one and other digitally unless opting otherwise, is central to eGovernment. However, Ms Halmos emphasised that the Commission explicitly calls for non-digital alternatives to be provided for those who cannot or do not want to access digital ones.

Peter Raben, vice president of Danish central government union HK Stat, talked about some of the problems encountered when rolling out these digital services. He focussed on the example of the digitalisation of the tax authority in Denmark where a new IT system for tax collection, costing €90 million, was so poor that it had to be scrapped, to the tune of a further €60 million. Meanwhile jobs were lost and the amount of unpaid tax owed to the Danish state skyrocketed.

As an alternative to cuts-led digitalisation, HK stat has elaborated ten good principles for the digitalisation of public administrations, which aims to put the citizen at the centre of the process based on access, equality and a holistic approach to each case.

A concrete example of eGovernment at municipal level was presented by Peter Wieser, Deputy Head of the Department for Economic Affairs, Labour and Statistics at the City of Vienna. Vienna has already begun to open up its data, now accessible to anyone in a machine-readable format as a strategy to improve communication with citizens and to foster innovation. Ms Halmos also highlighted that the Commission is supporting this opening up of public data across Europe.

Although such data should not include personal information, there are concerns about 'back-door privatisation' by allowing private companies to provide services base on publicly collected and held data, as voiced by EPSU General Secretary, Jan Willem Goudriaan. There are also fears about the possibility of combining open data from various sources to potentially de-anonymise personal details. However, clear advantages, not least in providing more transparency to improve democratic decision making and accountability, exist. Vienna has used digitalisation as a tool to increase citizen engagement. This does not only mean providing municipal services online, but extending democracy through online tools, including the creation of an online platform where citizens can contribute to municipal decision making.

Mr Wieser, also highlighted the challenges of enforcing tax and labour regulation when faced with the rapid expansion of the 'collaborative economy' in the form of platforms like Uber and AirBnB. He cited the example of Amsterdam where the city authorities are now provided data by the rental site in order to ensure that providers are paying the relevant city taxes. The City of Vienna is now attempting to do the same.

Solutions to the challenges posed by digitalisation are possible, but worker involvement and democratic accountability is key if it is to lead to improved services and access.