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Digitization and the distance between case managers and placed children in Teledialogue

Lars Bo Andersen, Peter Danholt & Peter Lauritsen

Public digitization raises concerns that the distance between social workers and citizens will increase. Concerns which are particular prominent when digital technologies are introduced directly into the communication between social workers and citizens. On this background, this article investigates two questions: What exactly constitutes being 'close' or being 'distant' in the specific practices and situations of case managers interacting with placed children. And how are these forms of distance or closeness affected when case managers and children start to communicate through video conferencing, chat and texting. With an outset in Actor-Network Theory and experiences from a research project called Teledialogue, the article illustrates how the practice of case management operates through complex combinations of being close while maintaining distance. Combinations that were transformed by the digital technologies introduced with Teledialogue. Amongst others, it is argued that the distance entailed by video conferencing created comfort for children while allowing case managers to scrutinize facial expressions. It is also argued that in some cases, digital technologies paradoxically helped to build trust by breaking down and being difficult to use. The conclusion being that the consequences of digitization is not simply a matter of either/or between closeness and distance, but rather that digitization for better or worse transforms the ways in which distance and closeness are already present in the specific situations and practices of social work.

[1] DUBU stands for 'digitization for children and youths' and is a widely used case management system in the Danish social services.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a number of projects aimed at digitizing social work in Denmark. The projects are often debated in terms of the distance they create between social workers and citizens. This has been particularly evident with the implementation of administrative systems such as DUBU.[1] These systems were developed in the late 2000s by Danish municipalities to increase the quality and efficiency of case management. But social workers have criticised them for creating too much bureaucracy and stealing time and resources from 'real' social work with citizens (Dansk Socialrådgiverforening 2015; Rigsrevisionen 2016). A central concern for social workers is thus whether continued digitization will further distance them from working with citizens (e.g. Berlau 2016). And this concern is not lessened by the most recent wave of digitization initiatives where the focus has changed from administrative processes to digitizing how social workers interact with citizens (see e.g. Kommunernes Landsforening 2016). It is thus important to research how digitization initiatives affect the distance between social workers and citizens.

The authors of this article have worked with the question of distance in the combined research and design project Teledialogue (Teledialog 2013). The project was intended to introduce digital technologies to the interaction between case managers and children[2] placed in foster care or at institutions. One motivation for doing so was a well described problem of too much distance between the Danish social services and the children under their custody (Rigsrevisionen 2016). The problem is complex, but an important part of it is that case managers have too many cases, suffer from too much bureaucracy and have too little time to visit children at their place of placement (Barkholt 2014; Rigsrevisionen 2016). The consequence

[2] For the sake of simplicity, we use the term 'children' for anyone who is not yet of age and, consequently, is subject to the parental rights and responsibilities of others. The children in Teledialogue are all between the ages of 10 and 17.

being that children placed in foster care or at institutions experience their case manager as a stranger, that they find it difficult to reach case managers in times of need, and that they do not feel included in decisions affecting their own life (Aabo et al. 2012). And since many placed children are already quite skilled in using IT to maintain close relations across distance (Rehder 2016), the simple idea of Teledialogue was to use video conferencing, chat and texting to bring them closer to their case manager in order to build trust and increase participation.

As such, this article is based on a three year long qualitative study on closeness and distance conducted while working with Teledialogue. The empirical material was collected during workshops, participant observations and semi-structured interviews with around fifty children and case managers from seven Danish municipalities. Analytically, the investigation departs from Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which is particularly suited for researching the problem of distance in digitization of social work because it suspends the idea that digitization necessarily increases distance and allows instead for an open and empirically grounded investigation of both technologies and their consequences in practice.

With this outset in ANT and the Teledialogue project, the overall question of how digitization affects the distance between social workers and citizens can be specified into two more specific research questions: Firstly, the article investigates what exactly constitutes being close or distant when case managers interact with placed children. And secondly, it is investigated how these forms of distance or closeness are affected when digital technologies such as video conferencing, chat and texting are introduced.

The analysis will show how case management operates through complex mixtures of being close while maintaining distance and how the digital technologies affect these mixtures. For instance, the closeness of talking face to face may be discomforting for some children and distance needs to be added to facilitate a good conversation – either in the form of going for a walk or talking through a screen while video conferencing. The general argument being that Teledialogue did not distance children from case managers. And neither did it bring them closer in any direct and linear way. It more precisely transformed the ways closeness and distance were folded into the interactions between case managers and children (Latour 2005).

In the end, it is discussed how ANT and the experiences from Teledialogue implicates a more exploratory approach to digitization where social workers and citizens play a central role in substantiating how digital technologies may create 'productive distances' appropriate for the ends of social work.

Digitization and the problem of distance

Denmark is considered a pioneer country when it comes to public digitization. Digital technologies have played a central role in the ongoing reorganization of public administration for at least 35 years (Greve and Ejersbo 2013). However, with the exception of the health sector, digital technologies have mainly been used for administrative purposes and it was not until the early 2000s that the so-called welfare areas responsible for the provision of welfare services to citizens became subject to digitization efforts (Socialministeriet 2006; Vækstforum 2011).

Digital technologies were seen as a possible solution to the challenges of a welfare sector under pressure from both the demographic development and rising service expectations from citizens (Regeringen et al. 2004; Socialministeriet 2006). The first digitization strategy also identified vulnerable children and youths as a strategic and exemplary 'business area' for digitization (Regeringen et al. 2004). Not only did the area represent a large and rising item of expenditure on the public budgets. It was also one of the least digitized welfare areas and, as such, the one in which digitization promised the greatest rewards (Fahnøe 2015; Regeringen et al. 2004; Socialministeriet 2006). A central promise of early digitization was thus that it

would free up time and resources from administrative tasks and provide more resources for social workers to work directly with vulnerable children and youths (Fahnøe 2015, 44).

However, the Danish Association of Social Workers (DS) has argued that contrary to the intention of freeing up resources, digitization has mostly served to distance social workers further from the citizens with which they work. In fact, DS estimates that social workers are currently spending 86 percent of their time behind computers doing administrative tasks (Barkholt 2014; see also Rigsrevisionen 2016). In an illustrative excerpt, the experienced case manager Bent from Teledialogue summarise how digitization has been part of a development, where he and his colleagues feel increasingly distanced from citizens:

> "Earlier, we had more time to talk to both children and families. But today we are writing much more than we did 25 years ago, we are doing more case files and it is also part of a development with administrative IT systems." (Bent, interview, 2015)

A central concern for social workers is thus whether continued digitization will further increase their distance to citizens or if digital technologies can be made to serve the purposes of social work (e.g. Berlau 2016).

While early efforts of digitization were focused on administration and the optimization of work processes more recent projects have started to digitize the interaction between social workers and citizens. As envisioned by Local Government Denmark, by the year 2020 digital technologies are expected to create new forms of 'intimacy' between citizens and the welfare system (Kommunernes Landsforening 2016).

A prominent example of this development is a range of projects working to introduce digital forms of home living support for vulnerable adults living on their own (Horsens Kommune 2011; Rambøll 2016; Region Midtjylland 2015; Syddjurs Kommune 2013). In general terms, these projects are aimed at supplementing physical visits by social workers with more cost efficient online visits through video conferencing. In one project, the project manager compiled a collection of the hopes and fears expressed by social workers in relation to digital home living support. And while there were many hopes of a more readily available living support, there were also prominent fears that this form of digitization will further distance social workers from citizens. As illustrated by one social worker:

> "I fear that living support will develop into a call centre where we spend the whole day at the office taking calls from citizens who we do not know." (social worker, 2013)

Similar concerns are also present within other welfare areas where nurses, for instance, fear they will not be able to do their job 'at a distance' (Pols 2011; van Hout, Pols, and Willems 2015).

Exploring distance with Actor-Network Theory

The concern over distance is warranted and relevant but, at the same time, one that is often premised on a dichotomous perception of distance as opposite to closeness and, furthermore, tied to the idea that being together physically is inherently less distant than talking through digital technologies. ANT, on the other hand, allows us to remain *uncertain* about what exactly constitutes the distance between social workers and citizens and how this distance is affected by a given technology. ANT, as such, opens new territory to study the digitization of social work and, as will be argued in the end, to debate how digital technologies may work for ends inherent to social work professions rather than only serving administrative or economic purposes.

With ANT there are no pre-established scales to analyse the distance between social workers and citizens and neither does ANT operate with any a priori differentiation between social work with humans and social work with technologies (Latour 1990; Law 1999). ANT implies that the qualities and capacities of both humans and technologies—and the worlds they inhabit and the distances they create—are relational and performative constructs called actor-networks. For instance, the actors of Teledialogue—the computers, webcams, case managers and children—are not self-contained beings that exist independently from each other but network constellations which are intimately related to each other and numerous other actor-networks such as foster parents, legal codes, internet connections, and so forth. This *symmetry* between children, case managers, technologies (and so forth)—where they are all considered under one as actor-networks—have, for instance, been used within healthcare to transgress the distinction between warm and caring work with humans on the one hand, and alienating, cold work with technologies on the other (Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010; Pols 2011). Similarly, the analysis of distance in Teledialogue departs from the appreciation that social work is always already socio-technical work and that digital technologies are as intrinsic a part of the profession as social theories, meeting rooms, human bodies or methods of intervention.

The symmetry between humans and technologies does not mean that ANT is indifferent to the impact of new technologies. To the contrary, a core tenet of ANT is that new technologies cannot be implemented in social work without changing both themselves and everyone and everything related to their use in practice. In ANT, this non-neutrality of technology is described through the notion of *translation* – a word chosen to emphasise that the price of relating people and technologies is to translate their differences into something other (Latour 1987). The concept of translation also implies that we as researchers and designers did not know beforehand the consequences of the technologies with which we worked in Teledialogue.

Researching distance while developing Teledialogue

ANT informed both the design of Teledialogue and the concurrent research on how children and case mangers interact. More specifically, ethnographic and qualitative methods were used to investigate and understand how situations and practices were being translated while methods such as inspiration cards from Participatory Design (PD) were used to intervene in these translations (Halskov & Dalsgård 2006; Teledialogue 2013; Andersen et al. 2015).

Seven municipalities partnered in Teledialogue and each of these selected three case managers to participate in the design of a concept for the use of video conferencing, chat and texting in their interaction with placed children. The case managers then, in turn, selected one or two children to participate with them. Participants were thus snowballed into the project. In the end, around 25 case managers and 25 children aged 10-17 participated in the project.

The case managers worked through pragmatic criteria of relevance to their job. They invited children into the project by taking into account their background, current life situation, geographical distance to the municipality, and what they hoped to achieve with the child (i.e. to build trust, help with a current problem, investigate their wellbeing in a foster family, or to protect them from conflicts in their biological family). Consequently, the diversity among the children was substantial. Their most important common trait was being 'placed' and, as such, being related to a case manager. As such, our analysis does not aim to make claims about placed children and case managers in general. Our ambition is to draw out traits identified in the specific context of working with Teledialogue which may inspire and be translated into other projects.

The design part of Teledialogue iterated between first workshops or experiments and then test-runs in practice. The experiments were designed to not simply build a solution to the problem of distance, but

also to collaboratively research and understand that problem together with case managers and children (Zimmerman, Forlizzi, and Evenson 2007). Card games were used to promote creative thinking and we issued assignments to case managers and children that they had to solve together (Halskov & Dalsgård 2006). Children were tasked with interviewing case managers about their work and the case managers, in turn, were tasked with interviewing children about their experiences talking to case managers. The design workshops involved either groups of case managers by themselves or case managers together with 'their' children.

Parallel with the design activities we conducted ethnographic fieldwork to 'follow the actors' in their attempt to construct a technology (Latour 1996). We conducted participant observations throughout the project – from the very first meetings with municipal managers in 2013, during workshops, at staff meetings and when children talked to case managers (it should be noted, however, that in most cases, we made an ethical decision not to be present during the formal 'personal supervisions' between case managers and children). Furthermore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with all participating children and case managers before the project, halfway through the project and then again after the project was completed. In many cases, we also had the opportunity to conduct unstructured interviews with foster parents, pedagogues, family members and others implicated in the project. The empirical data collected through these activities were continuously coded, analysed, discussed and validated at research seminars. Finally, it should be mentioned that all participants and informants have been anonymized and are referred to with invented names and distorted identities.

A practice of getting close while keeping distance

After many years with large caseloads, 'shit cases' of undetected abuse of placed and vulnerable children, and a feeling of 'putting out fires' (case manager's term) rather than preventing them, getting closer to placed children is high on the agenda for both case managers and their management at the social services departments. As one municipal manager motivated the use of Teledialogue to her team, it would potentially allow them to stay close to children from a position right in the middle of the children's everyday life:

> "The purpose [of using Teledialogue] is to meet the youths in their own life, the life they are having right now, and through their own media. And then it is also about getting closer to them, to have a more intimate dialogue and contact." (municipal manager, workshop, 2015)

During the project period, case managers felt that they indeed did come closer to the everyday life of children and found themselves in a better position to monitor their wellbeing and prevent problems from escalating. As one case manager, Karen, experienced, she came so close that she effectively became a diplomat of everyday life in a foster family. The family had been tasked with changing the unhealthy lifestyle of a newly placed girl and this, in turn, created numerous minor conflicts implicating Karen:

> The girl has been complaining about everything the foster family suggested in relation to physical exercise. And here Teledialogue has meant that I now know her better and am able to say "don't just complain, you also need to do exercise" [...] It is basically managing small problems that I am doing. (Karen, workshop, 2015)

The girl was in a difficult situation and Karen could help by being a 'neutral' third party and prevent the minor conflicts form escalating into bigger ones.

Whether such family diplomacy is within the professional borders of case management is, however, a matter of debate. In most municipalities, the daily support and supervision of placed children is not the responsibility of case managers but rather of pedagogues, foster parents and special family consultants. And when case managers participating in Teledialogue came too close to children, then both pedagogues and foster parents were concerned that they would interfere in *their* work with the child. But as Karen later argued, Teledialogue translated what was entailed by her formal responsibility to ensure a successful placement into also managing the everyday conflicts in the foster family:

> "I am drawn into these problems because the foster mother tells me that she does not want to exercise and the girl is saying the opposite to me, that she does not feel heard or included [...] I am doing this because I really want this placement to be successful." (Karen, workshop, 2015)

Teledialogue was thus fit for case manager's ambition of getting closer to placed children. However, as will be the point in this section, getting close is convoluted with forms of distance. We asked Hanne—who had a trusting relationship with the child participating with her in Teledialogue—how she would characterize a good relationship between children and case managers:

> "That they are not afraid to contact me *before* their whole world breaks down [...] But I have to be careful with the children that I have known for long [and become intimate with]. Suddenly, I can find myself becoming their mother."
>
> -- And that is not the purpose?
>
> "No, they need to become autonomous. Out into the world [...] It is a balance." (Hanne, interview, 2014)

An inherent ambiguity of case management is thus to maintain a proper balance between getting close and intimate with children, so that they are not afraid to contact the case manager, but also to maintain enough distance to avoid becoming a friend or a mother to them. And, similarly, knowing that children are frequently reassigned to other case managers, and that their relationship is only temporary, case managers felt obliged to keep enough distance that children would not experience a change of case manager as too much of a betrayal. At workshops and during interviews, case managers were thus eager to get closer to children but, at the same time, concerned about maintaining the right forms of distance.

A related ambiguity in case management is the complex relationship between authority and care. The caring case manager is intimate with children who trust him and her to represent their best interest. The person of authority, on the other hand, may have to make 'unpopular' decisions and may be challenged by both children and their family. In order to be a person of authority who makes unpopular decisions, case managers maintain a strict separation of work life and private life. They are often unlisted in phone books and are working to keep both children and their families at distance from their private life.

Teledialogue, however, translated the borders between private and professional life. For one, case managers sometime work from their home and whereas this is not a problem when writing emails and talking on the phone, some case managers felt that children came much too close when they were video conferencing from their living room The children would observe their surroundings and start asking questions. Consequently, case managers found ways to either obscure that they were in their house, divert the attention of children or simply refuse to accept calls when not in the office. But a few case managers

started to experiment with new distinctions between private and professional. For instance, in order to build trust, one case manager showcased her private hobbies and the family pets during video conferencing. Her intention was to establish a caring relationship with a child who did not know her well and who opposed her as a 'lady from the municipality' (we return to this point later).

Being distantly available

Case managers often struggle with large caseloads and it can be notoriously difficult to reach them on phone or through email. In order to manage time and reduce stress they often enforce limited calling hours and emails are only answered with long delays. Consequently, both placed children and researchers share the experience of 'not getting through' (see also Aabo et al. 2012). In an illustrative example Naya, a teenage girl, described her strategy for reaching her case manager: First Naya tries to call her case manager on the phone. But she most often does not get through. Then Naya tells her mother that she would like to talk to the case manager, and then the mother tries to call her. And if the mother fails to get through, then Naya skips school and goes to the social services in person instead (field jotting, 2015). Another teenage girl, Catherine, was less persistent and explained how she was dependent on adults to reach her case manager and, at times, gave up without trying:

> -- Do you think this [Teledialogue] is a good idea?
>
> "Yes. It is a good idea because then we can talk more often and I do not have to ask the adults [pedagogues] to get her [the case manager] to call back [...]"
> -- Has there been situations where you really needed to talk to her but you gave up because there did not seem to be any opportunity?
>
> "It has happened a few times, yes. "
>
> -- What did you do then?
>
> "I just went to my room and chilled." (Catherine, interview, 2015)

As part of Teledialogue, it was thus arranged that children could use chat or texting to reach out to their case managers, even in the evenings or during weekends. However, due to work regulations and the above-mentioned need to separate work life from private life, case managers would not write back until the following workday. But children nonetheless started to write case managers text messages, complaining about problems in their foster family or, in more pressing cases, signalling for urgent help like one girl texting her case manager "I am feeling very down and yesterday I was cutting" (relayed by the case manager during a workshop, 2015). In this way, texting and chat messages provided a passage point to an otherwise distant social system thus drawing children nearer to their case manager, although in ways that also reminded them that they were, in fact, distant and could only expect an answer back during office hours.

Situations of intimacy through distance

Talking undisturbed in a room can be difficult for both children and case managers. With children, the discomfort of talking about sensitive and difficult matters with a case manager comes across as evasive responses to questions, nervous body language and avoidance of eye contact. In these situations, case managers and researchers alike are sometimes forced into a 'fishing' practice – i.e. trying all possible ways to 'fish out' some responses from the child. As voiced by a consultant—and experienced case manager—during a workshop, these are really quite challenging situations for case managers and awkward or even hurtful for children (workshop, 2015). It was the prospect of

remedying these situations which motivated her involvement in Teledialogue. Similarly, in another municipality, the participating children were diagnosed with various behavioural problems and many of them found 'meeting situations' stressful. As one case manager explained, creating comfortable situations for these children involved a lot of other activities than just talking:

> "It [talking] involves a lot of walking around, smoking and playing football. They are fidgety and if they are sitting [in a room] when they get infuriated they will start throwing things around. But if they are out walking they can better control themselves." (Marianne, interview, 2014)

In our current terminology, smoking and playing football is a way of distancing children from a difficult situation while, at the same time, facilitating a conversation about difficult matters. A practice known as 'side-talking' or talking by means of 'common thirds'.

Teledialogue was translated into such side-talking practices. Children were doing their make-up, walking around their room and one boy was even playing computer while talking to his case manager. Not being physically together allowed these children to do other and relaxing things while talking. The technical mediation also allowed children to express their frustration and anger in new ways which, often, involved creating new forms of distance to their case manager. They turned the webcam into the wall, pointed it at posters, filmed into their mouth or turned the camera off altogether. All acts of slight resistance which did not terminate the interaction but instead conditioned it in accordance with the children's feelings of frustration, anger, opposition or sadness.

Similarly, due to the position of the camera slightly off from the screen, it is impossible to achieve eye contact when video conferencing. As voiced by the case manager Line during a workshop, talking without eye contact and over physical distance makes it easier for some children to 'open up' because it shields them from the reactions of the case manager (workshop, 2015). One child, Brian, described the Teledialogue sessions as talking through an 'invisible wall':

> "You know, in some ways it is easier to talk with her through Skype than it would have been physically […] you have more comfort. If she gets mad, then it is more nice and easy."
>
> -- There is some distance?
>
> "Yes, there is like a wall. An invisible wall." (Brian, interview, 2016)

Importantly, Brian has a very trusting relationship with his case manager. He has known her for many years and is comfortable being physically present with her. But for some conversations, the screen allows him to express himself with greater comfort about things which may upset the case manager. At the time of this interview, for instance, he was building up courage to inform his case manager that he planned to move back home to his biological mother.

The comforting distance was also used by case managers to 'read' the welfare of children. Case managers are skilled in reading surroundings, physical appearances and facial expressions in order to decide on the wellbeing of children (see also Pols 2011; van Hout, Pols, and Willems 2015 for similar 'reading practices' in telecare). This practice translated into Teledialogue as an undisturbed reading of faces without ever achieving eye contact. Again, Line could elaborate on her face reading.

> -- Can you tell what she wants by looking at her [on video]?
>
> "Yes, I can."

-- How does it look?

> "Well, her eyes are flickering. And then she is smiling but I can see that she is thinking 'how do I handle this, I do not want to hurt anyone'" [...] (Line, workshop, 2015)

As such, while the distance entailed by Teledialogue kept case managers from 'reading' the surroundings of the child e.g. the tidiness of their room, it did enable a focused study of their facial expressions.

Becoming more than a 'lady from the municipality'

Placed children may struggle to relate to their case manager. Sometimes, they consider him or her a stranger who they do not know or trust. Sometimes, they oppose her because of the decisions he or she makes. And sometimes, he or she is accused by the child and the child's biological parents for being the cause of everything that has gone wrong in the family.

In an experiment conducted as part of Teledialogue, case managers interviewed children about who they perceived a case manager to be. Although responses varied greatly, there were many instances of children who considered case managers as 'ladies from the municipality' or even as 'the municipality' itself. The 'lady from the municipality' is not an authentic person. He or she is a personification of the social system and, as such, not someone children may relate to in trusting ways. In one example, Kristian was assigned to a new case manager much against his will and we asked him if he liked this new person:

> "No, she is simply old and boring. She does not joke, and when we are talking in my room, she is looking out the window. And then she simply makes strange and bad decisions."

-- If you were to decide, how often should you talk to her?

> "I don't know. Never!" (Kristian, interview, 2015)

Kristian was very fond of his former case manager. He had known her for very long and she was more than a case manager to him. But the new case manager was just some lady from the municipality.

A principal problem for case managers is thus to build a working relationship to the children under their custody. Teledialogue could be used for this end. Not because it made it easy to talk. On the contrary, the first few conversations in Teledialogue could be rather awkward and often there were technical difficulties. But because it provided a different territory to build a working relationship in addition to the physical meetings. Another case manager, Karen, provides an illustrative example of how a series of technical problems actually turned out to be very productive for building a better relationship with a boy who otherwise opposed her:

> "I was so frustrated about all these IT-problems. And then when I opened the software I totally forgot that I needed to wear my headset. And I simply cannot understand why I can't hear [the boy]. And when I realised that I needed my headset then I discovered that it had not been charged. And then I could not get bluetooth to work." (Karen, workshop, 2015)

The struggle of Karen fighting with her headset was live transmitted to the boy who took on a 'patient' and 'overbearing' role. As he laughingly told us during a subsequent interview: "she always forgets to put on her headset and all sorts of things" (interview, 2015). The point being that through the duration of the project, Karen went from

being a lady from the municipality to someone he can laugh at and, in comparison to whom, *he* is the expert:

> "He is also correcting me if I am unable to pronounce 'Instagram' or 'platsnap'. I know it is a joke. He is even spelling it for me." (Karen, workshop, 2015)

Paradoxically, in this case, technology contributed to social work by not working well in a strict technical sense. As Karen explained at the end of her project involvement, while the Teledialogue sessions could be difficult and awkward, the children had become much more comfortable with her as a person:

> "I have definitely gotten a better relationship to the children through this project. I am getting closer to them. Even to the boy who never says anything. He is no longer as insecure when we meet in person, there is more comfort around the situation." (Karen, workshop, 2015)

During a workshop, a municipal consultant offered a good analysis of this situation which resonated well with case managers and ANT researchers alike: that to her, using Teledialogue was comparable to taking the children for a ride in an old broken car while purposely getting lost (workshop, 2015). The consultant was comparing video conferencing to working through 'common thirds', a notion developed by, amongst other, Benny Lihme (1988) and Michael Husen (1996) on the importance of *mediators* in social work. The common third designates something 'other' which brings social workers and citizens together in a shared process without being premised by either one. In ANT terminology, the common third is the recognition that for people to be together, to relate to each other, they need the mediation and translation of other things. This was one of the principal points of Teledialogue: to provide children and case managers with a means of establishing 'authentic' relationships through a distancing 'other' such as their collective struggle with digital technologies.

Meanwhile, the distance entailed by using Teledialogue was not always productive. In many cases, for instance, Teledialogue made it too easy for children and case managers alike to skip talks if they were busy or had other plans as it was considered 'less' binding than physical meetings. And if the relationship between case managers and children was too weak, or the children was in a 'bad situation', then Teledialogue simply did not work. A few case managers, in fact, failed to include any children into the project in spite of numerous attempts. As in the somewhat caricatured example emailed to us by a frustrated case manager:

> "I have to realise that this is not going to work – at all! She is simply not in a position to talk to me like this. We tried but then she sold the iPad to get money for hash..." (case manager, email, 2014)

As also argued by Jeanette Pols (2011, 463) in relation to telecare, the lack of bodily proximity places certain demands on the relationship if the distance of mediation is to be productive.

Discussion

Digitization promises to create more opportunities for social workers to engage with citizens. Either by freeing up time and resources from administrative tasks or by offering new ways of being together such as Teledialogue. But, at the same time, digitization raises great concern that it will only serve to further the distance between social workers and citizens. Accordingly, our aim in this article has been to investigate what exactly constitutes being 'close' or being 'distant' in the specific practices and situations of case managers interacting with

placed children and, secondly, to study how these practices and situations were affected by the technologies of Teledialogue.

In the best of cases, Teledialogue indeed did bring case managers closer to children through frequent talks using video conferencing. Talks that took place right in the middle of all the little ups and downs of everyday life in placement. Similarly, text messaging and chats enabled a more accessible and available social system. These forms of closeness, however, were folded with forms of distance. First of all, case managers were careful to maintain enough distance that they would not become 'friends' with children. So that they would remain persons of authority. Similarly, in order to maintain a work-life balance, case managers would not answer chats and text messages received in the evening or during weekends until the following workday (unless in cases of emergency). And when working from home, they would try their best to camouflage their surroundings and divert attention away from their family.

Another interesting finding was that while Teledialogue indeed was experienced as more distant than being physically together, this distance came with new forms of intimacy. First of all, video conferencing enabled what case managers called 'side talking'. It allowed children to roam around their room, do their makeup or play computer games while talking to case managers. Other children described talking through webcams as talking though an 'invisible wall' because it breaks eye contact and entails physical distance. This made them more comfortable communicating difficult or sensitive matters – ranging from things that are hurtful to things which may anger the case manager. Teledialogue also enabled the visual 'reading' of children's welfare through facial expressions. Line, for instance, studied how a girl's eyes were reacting to certain topics without having to look away or make the girl feel uncomfortable. In other cases, however, the distance entailed by Teledialogue proved too great and communications broke down – if it was established in the first case.

Teledialogue illustrates how technologies may work for social work in rather surprising ways. Video conferencing, chat and texting did not optimize (or undermine) things as they were. But, on the contrary, they were used to facilitate a process of transformation and translation where case managers could become someone more tangible to children than 'ladies from the municipality'. Teledialogue worked for this end by tasking children and case workers to do experiments, by granting more freedom to talk about something other than the case and by creating technical difficulties to undermine unproductive forms of authority and distance.

In summary, we may thus argue that Teledialogue was about exploring how new arrangements of humans and technologies may strengthen the relationship between case managers and placed children by translating the distance between them into forms of unexpected intimacy. And while the aim was to get closer, to become more intimate, this was achieved by adding some distance, by folding the two with each other. Returning to the debate over digitization this implicates a move away from a dichotomized debate where digitization will either optimize or alienate. And that we embrace instead that the impact of technologies is only fully known and substantiated when translated into the practices and situations of social work (see also Berg 1998; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010). From this outset, digitization is cast as an open and experimental process where social workers and citizens play an important part in exploring and investigating how a given technology may work for social work.

There are indeed some indications that social workers and other welfare professionals are becoming more centrally positioned in digitization initiatives. In the most recent project on home living support, for instance, it is emphasised that implementing IT is in fact a complex and challenging process of implementing a social work method (Rambøll 2016, 2). And, similarly, in the most recent strategy for digitization in the public sector, welfare professionals are mentioned as important instructors and motivators, in contrast to earlier strategies where they were not considered at all (Regeringen, Kommunernes Landsforening, and Danske regioner 2013). However, in both cases,

the challenge of digitization is still considered one of 'implementation' and the role of social workers is reduced to either supporting this process or, conversely, opposing it. An approach to digitization more attuned to the relational and hybrid nature of both technology and social work would include social workers, not only as users or motivators, but as designers, developers and *substantiators* of the technology. An approach which would embrace outcomes which are neither optimization nor alienation, but always transformed and translated practices and situations.

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