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Work of the ‘Unemployed’: A Design Fiction

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Abstract. This paper presents a design fiction: a research prototype of a platform for unemployed individuals trading their personal data. The design fiction questions the ramifications of an understanding of data as individual property by showing a near-future speculative scenario of what government-driven job placement could look like. Which are the kinds of accountability and agency that could be leveraged in the context of job placement if data of unemployed individuals are considered property that can be traded with the public sector in return for support? An algorithm classifies the performance of unemployed individuals based on the data they upload. This way the algorithm becomes the central mechanism for accountability and control instead of the caseworker, who acts as an arbitrator between the individual citizen and algorithm. Our purpose with this paper, and the speculative research prototype, is to create a space for reflection on dilemmas in relation to data property, accountability, and agency in public services.

Unemployed Individuals of Digitalization

Platform technologies are becoming a key concern for Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), including in relation to public services. Scholars now ask how to meaningfully account for the perspective of the individual (Le Dantec 2016), considering the commodification of data in government-citizen interaction

(Shklovski et al. 2015) and platform economy as point of departure for transformations of society more broadly (Light & Seravalli 2019). Computational systems for legal decision-making in public services integrate with platforms designed for interaction with the individual (Borchorst & Bødker 2011), and increasingly algorithms come into this mix.

Individuals no longer live *with* digital media and platforms but *in* digital media and platforms—in other words, we live digital lives (Lupton, 2016 *following* Deuze, 2011). Digital applications, platforms, and devices are designed to support and endorse people to self-track and monitor their lives by generating personal data about themselves (Neff & Nafus 2016). In the pursuit of profit, commercial operations use new types of data collection and prediction, but so do governments, as they search for new ways to use data of individuals to promote their version of the public good (Møller, Fitzpatrick & Le Dantec 2019).

As governments and technology designers at large increasingly turn to new uses of data and algorithmic decision-making systems, it seems equally important that we as CSCW scholars critically reflect on and develop *alternative* research prototypes of citizen-government interaction. Taking inspiration from prior research on the commodification of data and the dilemmas that arise from an understanding of data as individual property, we use a speculative and participatory approach (e.g. Baumer et al. 2018).

A Fictional Platform: “jobnettrace”

The design fiction that we provide aims to be provocative whilst at the same time familiar and recognizable. Following Auger, “in the domains where these fictions ply their wares and meet their audiences, it is preferable for the concept to pass as real”, almost as a fact – a design *faction* (Auger 2013: 19-20”).

The public sector increasingly follows an economic logic similar to that of commercial operations, Light and Seravalli argue (2019). We are interested in dilemmas in relation to data property, accountability, and agency in public services: Thus, which are the kinds of accountability and agency that could be leveraged in the context of job placement if data of unemployed individuals are considered as property that can be traded with the public sector in return for support?

In our speculative scenario, Jobnet.dk¹ is no longer the platform for caseworker and citizen interaction. Instead it is the platform “jobnettrace”. Prior to the introduction of “jobnettrace” the caseworkers focused both on the support and control of the job placement of individuals; making decisions on whether an individual is eligible for the kinds of support offered as part of job placement. An unemployed citizen still has to meet legal criteria such as the 225-hour rule (a cap on unemployment benefits). According to this rule, the citizen has to work at least

¹ <https://job.jobnet.dk/CV/frontpage>

225 hours per year to earn the right to full financial support (Law on Employment and Labour).

Now imagine the new platform—“jobnettrace” (Fig. 1)—a further development of jobnet.dk with self-tracking elements. On this platform, individuals can apply for particular services and job placement “offers”. Instead of a caseworker making decisions on eligibility, support is earned as the unemployed individual uploads self-tracking data (e.g. smartphone, web search logs, smart watches, etc.). The data are assessed by an algorithm that makes decisions on eligibility. In this near-future speculative scenario, data gathering and the application for job placement is the “work” of the unemployed individual, thus releasing more time for the caseworker to act as a support person.

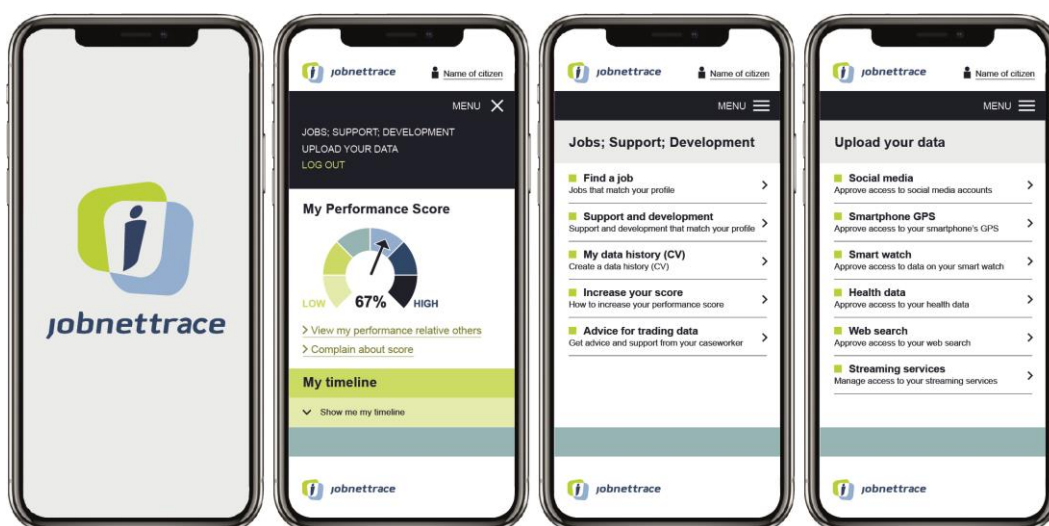


Figure 1. jobnettrace

The algorithm that we assume in the speculative scenario is similar to one already used for classifying data from different forms of tracking of employees’ performance using data on social media, location, movement, etc. (Mirjafari et al. 2019). In “jobnettrace,” unemployed “working” individuals similarly can provide their data from tracking of location, movement, etc. and in this way the platform enables new forms of accountability and agency in job placement. The algorithm assesses if the uploaded data 1) corresponds to the value of support and development, *or* 2) data confirm the individual’s job search performance in accordance with the legal criteria for eligibility. The algorithm also allows the individual to see their statistical performance score relative to others (Fig. 1).

Since the launch of “jobnettrace,” caseworkers have been acting as arbitrators, resolving the legality of decisions made by the algorithm on performance score. The caseworker still serves a critical role, ensuring citizens understand the legality of making a decision based on the performance score and their access to appeal – but also what may be the shortcoming of the algorithmic “scoring” as caseworkers observe trends across individual’s cases. A fictive unemployed individual reflects:

"I have uploaded my location data like the caseworker told me... I thought this would give me full financial support but it didn't as it turned out. The caseworker failed to explain to me how I can be sure that my location data are counted in the performance score. I mean, I know others like me that do not meet the 225h rule... their location was taken as evidence that they were undergoing treatment in that period. One even goes to the same clinic as me. So why is the algorithm scoring me differently...?"

This paper contributes a provocation and research prototype of a possible near-future speculative scenario: a platform for unemployed individuals "working" to make themselves accountable as part of job placement. The context we write in is Danish job placement, and the purpose of this design fiction is to question the ramifications of an understanding of data as individual property. The proposed fictive research prototype raises a number of questions: 1) What are the consequences of an understanding of data as individual property in public services? 2) What consequences arise from an alternative understanding of data as relational²? 3) What kinds of accountability and agency would arise from the different understandings of data as relational or individual property?

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² For example, a relational understanding of data can be understood in parallel to the donation of DNA that we can identify and point to as belonging to an individual but still it discloses information on an individual's relatives, which makes the right to trade or donate this data questionable.