Digital resignation and the datafied welfare state

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Abstract
This commentary calls for further research into digital resignation within non-market contexts, particularly in relation to the datafied welfare state, as distinct from commercial big tech platforms. We aim to nuance the concept of digital resignation by relating it to the digitization of institutions and public services upholding the Danish welfare state, including health services, childcare, and news consumption. These cases illustrate that datafication stimulates citizens’ discomfort by registering privacy-intrusive information and setting new standards for being a good citizen, which resignation research can help us understand. We use the case examples to propose new avenues for digital resignation research and question whether organizations, institutions, and governments themselves can be digitally resigned. As such, the usefulness of digital resignation as a concept can be expanded.

Keywords
Digital resignation, datafied welfare state, health datafication, private–public cooperation, datafied parenting, audience datafication

Digital resignation in the commercial and commodified arena
Scholarship on “digital resignation” has produced crucial research contributions to explain the absence of user resistance despite widespread unease toward datafication. Notably, these contributions usually focus on empirical settings that strongly emphasize the role of markets rather than public institutions as part of a national welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), and studies often focus on individual consumers interacting with corporations (Table 1).

In this commentary, we argue for the applicability of digital resignation as a concept in other contexts and relations. It is not just in commercial exchanges that resignation occurs, nor even necessarily just at the level of the individual. Resignation may happen when citizens face the welfare state institutions and may even happen to the welfare state itself. We exemplify this with reference to existing scholarship and ongoing research based at the Center for Tracking and Society at the University of Copenhagen, focusing on the empirical context of Denmark. Here, we seek to understand the entanglement of datafication with people’s everyday lives and societal institutions.

Denmark, along with its Nordic neighbors, is considered a model for highly digitalized and datafied welfare states (Andreassen et al., 2021). The burgeoning automation in public welfare services depends on the pervasive datafication of citizens across domains of everyday life (Kaun et al., 2023). While opting out of commercial digital and
Table 1. Overview of key terms and studies in digital resignation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key term</th>
<th>Key text</th>
<th>Framing of user</th>
<th>Recipient of resignation</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Digital Resignation”</td>
<td>Draper and Turow (2019)</td>
<td>Consumers</td>
<td>“Marketers” and “corporations” (1830)</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Privacy Apathy”</td>
<td>Hargittai and Marwick (2016)</td>
<td>Students in higher ed.</td>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Privacy helplessness”</td>
<td>Cho (2021)</td>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Surveillance Realism”</td>
<td>Dencik and Cable (2017)</td>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>“State-corporate surveillance programs” (763)</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Privacy Cynicism”</td>
<td>Hoffmann et al. (2016)</td>
<td>“Internet users”</td>
<td>“Commercial service providers […]”, such as Google, Facebook or Apple,” (para 3)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Privacy fatigue”</td>
<td>Choi et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Consumers</td>
<td>“Online vendors” (44)</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

datafying media is arguably possible, if cumbersome (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), citizens’ opting out of a (datafied) relationship with the welfare state may be far more difficult.

To be sure, the coerced usage of specific digital media does not necessarily imply digital resignation. However, given that the social contract between state and citizen exchanges personal data for welfare, we argue that it is well worth exploring how resignation applies in such contexts.

**Digital resignation and the datafied welfare state**

We use examples from our own and others’ research across three domains integral to the functioning of democratic society in a welfare state: The first two domains (1) childcare and education and (2) healthcare are usually considered to be at the core of the universal welfare state, which is concerned with the health, wellbeing, and education of its citizens (Jensen, 2011: 17). We also turn to the domain of (3) news consumption, which is not usually considered part of the workings of the welfare state. However, as several authors have argued the editorially independent—yet often government-subsidized—news press and reading public are a key feature of Nordic welfare states (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

While the types of datafication or digital media discussed here are not unique to Denmark, the country does represent a context of highly coerced citizen digitization (Bagger, 2018). This means, as we will show, that the digital and datafied Danish welfare state itself becomes both a cultivator of resignation and perhaps digitally resigns itself (Fourcade and Gordon, 2020).

Firstly, digital systems have become inextricably integrated into Danish public schools and childcare institutions. This makes them almost unavoidable for parents, teachers, and children in Nordic welfare states (Akselvoll, 2022). Most prominently, parents, teachers, and children in Denmark are expected to communicate using a mobile application called Aula, which defines itself as “the overall entrance to information regarding daily life in school and daycare” (Aula, n.d.). Like so many Danish school-related apps (Lai et al., 2023), Aula is developed by a private company.

Using Aula, parents, teachers, and children are all expected to comply with the provision of data—including sensitive data such as a child’s health status. The datafied welfare state is thus present from a very early age. Hence, digital resignation research needs to study such cases where systems (such as Aula) are pushed by the welfare state.

In our ongoing research with Danish parents, some participants explicitly equated checking Aula with good parenting. When parents tried to skip the app and share some information with caretakers in person, they were required by the staff to do it through the system. Parents play a large role in school life as well as their children’s education, with schools demanding participation and responsiveness from parents on the platform (Andelsman Alvarez and Meleschko, 2023; Bach et al., 2016).

Here, good parents are those who are continually following, responding, and acting upon what is communicated through parent-school platforms (Akselvoll, 2022). These practices where people are forced to comply with digital systems and provide their data to avoid social and personal consequences are what is termed “coerced digital participation” (Barassi, 2019). Hence, the datafied welfare state is not just cultivating resignation but also mandating digital participation through the requirement to provide personal data through platforms such as Aula.

Secondly, coerced digital participation is also evident in the healthcare sector. As a welfare state in the Nordic tradition, Denmark has a universal healthcare system. This sector is also increasingly reliant upon digital healthcare solutions, often promoted through public–private innovation partnerships. Such healthcare solutions are developed both with the aim of securing efficiency through patient self-care, as well as developing these tools for export to the global market (Schwennesen, 2019: 179). Patients and healthcare professionals alike have thus gradually been coerced into digital healthcare ecosystems relying on consumer devices such as the FitBit (Lomborg et al., 2020) and public–private innovative technologies such as the patient portal app MyChart or the app Live with inflammatory bowel disease (Klausen, 2024).

For patients as for parents, opting out of digital and datafying systems is generally not perceived as an option. As
suggested in other research (Lupton, 2013), being a “good patient” is equated with being a digital patient. However, attempts at resistance surfaced for instance when patients steered clear of downloading specific health-tracking apps to track health-related issues. Informed by the healthcare professional that there are apps for such purposes, some patients preferred to track by using pre-installed notetaking or tracking apps, if not pen and paper.

For the patients who are subjected to the expertise, procedures, and recommendations of the healthcare system, this raises significant questions about their trust in the integrity of this system. We see this in our ongoing research by participants expressing a great degree of trust in Danish physicians and healthcare providers, while also expressing a worry that their medical data might be shared with either private actors or non-Danish public actors. As researchers, we have yet to bridge the fields of critical digital health studies and digital resignation. This would mean empirically uncovering how and for whom digital resignation emerges as part of welfare state patienthood and how different types of patienthood (e.g., chronic, multimorbid, or psychiatric) intersect with different levels of resignation and (lack of) opportunities to opt out.

Finally, we turn to a discussion of news consumption. In the Danish welfare state, most news media organizations hold a two-fold societal role: on the one hand, they act as commercial companies operating on market conditions while, on the other hand, being government-subsidized democratic institutions devoted to informing a fair, critical, and nuanced public debate (Allern and Blach-Ørsten, 2011). Digital journalism offers citizens access to continuously updated news interfaces. In return, news media organizations receive a constant flow of audience behavioral data used to optimize content, formats, and revenue streams (Christin, 2020) and develop personalized news services (Thurman et al., 2019). These data-intensive operations arguably constitute a move toward positioning publicly subsidized news media organizations as platforms in their own right. While they are thus at arm’s length from the coercive power of the government itself, the refusal to consume news is generally viewed as a democratic problem (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020), just as an informed public is often viewed as a prerequisite for the welfare state (Søvvertsen et al., 2014).

In our ongoing research, capitalization of audience data is considered somewhat uncontroversial by the news readers themselves, who have grown used to personalized advertisements and might even expect that their data is used to improve content and services. Our interviews with news readers about the experience of news recommender systems revealed that users manage their data flows by declining or deleting cookies or choosing when to be logged in. Some even consider their clicks as a form of currency that they distribute with care by, for instance, categorically declining to support violent or click-bait content. Conversely, others merely describe their data as a condition for participation used to optimize the commercial conditions. Not only does this mirror existing notions of digital resignation, but it also suggests a shifting balance between the democratic and commercial commitments of news media.

Our examples illustrate that datafication of public service and welfare domains introduces new demands on citizens, creates new ambivalences, and opens paths for commercial technology companies, possibly further stimulating citizens’ feeling of resignation (see also Dencik and Cable, 2017). Resignation, arguably, plays a more profound part in contemporary digital society.

Digital resignation reimagined

From our examples above, we wish to highlight one central insight: It matters who is resigning and in what capacity they are doing it. Hence, we see the possibility for a greater emphasis on the many ways in which digital resignation is cultivated, coerced, and experienced. Previous research has argued for the applicability of resignation in commercial exchanges (Draper and Turow, 2019) and professional settings (Bagger, 2021).

As we can see from the above examples, the coercion of digital participation, and the ensuing datafication of people, extends beyond these domains. Digitally resigning can mean very different things depending upon whether one is a parent, a patient, or a citizen of a public, and whether one resigns to a public welfare institution or a private corporation.

Resigning in the face of a corporation may have a very different valence than resigning to a public welfare institution. Some studies suggest that Danish citizens generally trust their government with handling sensitive data about them (see, e.g., Jørgensen, 2019). This becomes pertinent when the distinction between welfare state and market actors is not necessarily clear-cut (Morozov and Bria, 2018), and when datafication itself may be poised to reconfigure the relationship between states and citizens (Fourcade, 2021). While it remains an empirical question to what extent states are extracting data, and how private actors figure in this practice (Dencik and Cable, 2017) it nevertheless matters to whom, with what kind of power over our lives and data, we are resigned.

Lastly, this leads us to question whether digital resignation is always bound to an individual at all. Thus far, digital resignation is mainly framed as an expression of legitimate powerlessness by individuals, who are limited in their potential actions (Draper and Turow, 2019), and our own examples only show limited amounts of individualized resistance toward datafication. As other research has suggested, private companies outside the tech sector are also hesitant to unplug from digital platforms (Pelletier et al., 2021), and the same seems to be true for institutions across welfare sectors (Schwennesen, 2019), and for
states themselves (Fourcade and Gordon, 2020). While states can thus be said to be potential drivers of datafication and resignation, we suggest that this also implies they are resigned to market-specific logics and values of datafication such as efficiency and optimization (Dencik, 2022). Our claim is not that this is the cause of any increase in resignation, but merely that it opens new lines of questioning. Future studies might fruitfully illuminate the justifications and legitimacies of such resignation on the part of agents which are ostensibly more powerful than individuals. After all, if even governments might be digitally resigned, what does this say about the chances of resistance of any individual?

Digital resignation remains a promising explanation for a prevalent empirical phenomenon: Peoples’ reported unease with pervasive datafication, and the ensuing concerted—collective, public—efforts at imagining or attempting to mitigate this unease. As we have argued in this commentary, this explanation can be brought into several other arenas. This underlines the value of digital resignation research in understanding the broader impact of digitalization and datafication on people’s daily lives.

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