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Virtual red tape, or digital v. paper bureaucracy

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> Our everyday Camusian-existential struggle […] is played 'as if' it were unfolding within a labyrinth-like bureaucracy, as we wrestle with the increasing complexity of contemporary life, with its spider's web of rules and regulations, some often contradicting the others. (Warner, 2007: 1028)

Framing technology has changed: what about overflows?

Before I move to the main topic of my chapter, 'virtual red tape' as a new way of framing bureaucratic overflows, a few words about bureaucracy. Max Weber's (1922/1956) definition of bureaucracy as a system of administration conducted by trained professionals according to fixed rules is generally accepted; he saw it as 'a short-term good but a long-term evil' (Brown, 1978). Weber believed that bureaucracy would solve many specific societal problems, but that it would eventually contribute to the bureaucratization of whole societies, replacing affective human relations. Since then, there have been many defenders and attackers of bureaucracy, all of whom used the definition that suited their purposes.

In broad terms, I agree with Paul du Guy's general thesis, as formulated in *In praise of bureaucracy* (2000): bureaucracy can be praised for many reasons, not least for its *ethos*. Bureaucratic efficiency was to guarantee the delivery of public services according to principles of impersonality, equality, and fairness (du Gay, 1994). So I am assuming, in agreement with du Gay, that bureaucracy does serve to achieve its moral goals,[1] and am concentrating only on

1 Cordella (2007) claims, however, that e-government fails precisely at enforcing and guaranteeing the fulfillment of democratic values.

what is criticized as falling short of the original promise: its 'instrumental rationality'. How instrumental and how rational is bureaucracy in the digital era? The Gore Report (1993: 114) promised that the 'electronic government will be fairer, more secure, more responsive to the customer, and more efficient than our present, paper based systems'. The overflow of forms to complete, containing unintelligible questions demanding a multiplicity of information, was one of the problems with those systems – problems for administrators and citizens alike. In analyzing red tape in US administration, Kaufman (1977/2015: 3) reported that in 1973 one governmental agency issued 'enough documents to make a stack seventeen feet [5 m] high'. 'Cutting red tape' was one of the four principles suggested in the Gore Report. Has it happened?

Perhaps not, but digitalization did happen. As to other effects, especially concerning costs, opinions are divided (see, e.g., Clark, 2013). But there is no doubt that the machine metaphor is no longer a metaphor, but a correct description of a large part of bureaucracy in most countries. This is not a surprising development, but a realization of an ideal of 'automatic government' (Howard, 2015: xi). The red tape was not cut, but replaced by a virtual one. The framing device has been modernized, as Kaufman predicted 40 years ago:

> Even a fully wired and automated society would not be rid of red tape, though. Safeguards against abuses would be extensive. Methods of appeal from errors or abuses would have to be developed. Most of all, the machines themselves would impose an unyielding set of obligations and prohibitions on their users. (Kaufman, 1977/2015: 84)

But how does digital bureaucracy compare to paper bureaucracy in terms of its 'instrumental rationality', efficiency, and effectiveness, as judged by both the users and the officials? More specifically, how well does the digital bureaucracy fulfill the function of a framing device? After all, one of the main reasons for digitalizing public sector services was the information overload caused by the increased complexity of administrative processes (Cordella, 2007). A brief look at the history of the English expression 'red tape', which is used as a metonym for bureaucratic overflow, may be helpful in answering these questions.

A short history of red tape

The Spanish administration of Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor (1500–1558), started to use red tape to bind critical administrative dossiers requiring immediate discussion by the Council of State, in order to differentiate them from ordinary documents, which were bound with simple string (Dickson, 2015). Red tape was obviously a frame that was expected to tame the overflow: there were too many documents, and marking key documents with red tape helped to establish priority. The intention was to make the administration of the vast empire more efficient.

It was not long before the British Empire imitated the idea,[2] and by the end of the American Civil War, the practice had spread across the Western world. When Civil War veterans looked for their military records, they found them bound in a red ribbon (McAlpine, 2012). But long before that, the term acquired the opposite meaning: that of rigid conformity to formal rules that hinders or prevents action. As Charles Dickens (1849) wrote in *David Copperfield:* 'Britannia, that unfortunate female, is always before me, like a trussed fowl: skewered through and through with office-pens, and bound hand and foot with red tape.' The negative meaning was often used in relations to the British administration in India, in particular, giving rise to a new term: 'red tapism'. Indeed, as Robert Darnton (2001: 3) put it, 'The Indian Civil Service, recruited since 1853 by means of competitive examination, produced reports on everything under the subcontinental sun.' The unfavorable connotations of red tape persist, and not only in India; but it is in present-day India that anthropologist Akhil Gupta (2012) describes it so vividly:

> From the standpoint of the bureaucrat, one of the virtues of the form as a genre of writing is that it can be easily stored, compiled and organized. Here, one needs to pay attention to the technologies of search and retrieval. In the Indian bureaucracy, the key device for the storing and retrieval of information is the file. The file is the critical unit that organizes bureaucratic life. […] The importance of the file was impressed upon me by an officer who said: 'If it is not in the file, it does not exist'. […]
>
> The file is a compilation of papers of different sizes and qualities; of annotations often made on original documents by officials; and of copied of outgoing correspondence. These are bound together by two pieces of string, which go through each page, and the cover of the file. Across the width of the file goes a red tape that keeps anything from falling out. (Gupta, 2012: 145–146)

2 Though Bozeman and Feeney (2011) claim that it was Cardinal Wolsey's administrators in the time of Henry VIII (1491–1547) who started tying scrolls containing government edicts with red tape.

But the technologies of search and retrieval have changed dramatically since then. The 'file' is now a 'folder', and the folder may contain a great many files which do not need a red tape to keep them together. It may be said that virtual red tape has replaced red tape. In general, replacing paper forms with digital forms and requiring people to complete and submit them without the intervention of a human bureaucrat was supposed to be next, and a dramatic step toward the increased efficiency of bureaucracy. There is still an overflow of documents, but the technologies of managing them have advanced accordingly.

Is that so? As this question is not easy to answer via a properly designed field study, I chose to collect various self-observations of the phenomenon as my field material. In what follows, I present a set of stories, told by my colleagues and me, illustrating the actual functioning of 'virtual red tape'.[3] The overflows in digital bureaucracy may be larger in the USA than in other countries, but they are found everywhere and are not limited to the public sector.

A visa to Australia

This is my story:

> X University in Australia has invited me to spend two weeks as a Visiting Professor. I have previously been at three Australian universities, two in the same town, in a similar role. I usually gave a public lecture or a keynote at a conference, held a seminar for faculty, and advised doctoral students. All these activities fit precisely into the description of requirements for an eVisitor visa, which I had.
>
> This is exactly what I was supposed to be doing at XU. Yet an administrator – who invoked the authority of the immigration consultant – has informed me that I need to apply for a Temporary Working Visa. I presented my arguments, with quotes from the immigration website and my invitation letter, claiming that an eVisitor visa is enough. The administrator repeated the same statement several times, adding that, if in doubt, I could ask someone at the Australian Embassy in Sweden for advice. I repeated that the immigration site suggests that the closest embassy (where I can possibly be called for an interview) is in Berlin. The administrator sent me the Berlin

3 It should be added that all the narratives that follow come from people with university education – people who should be used to digital operations. Marie-Anne Dujarier (2008/2016) quoted much more dramatic experiences of retired people from the countryside trying to orient themselves in the digital jungle of Paris airport.

embassy's telephone number. Assuming that she was joking, I thanked her with a smiley face. All in all, in six days (including a weekend) she sent me six e-mails, and I have sent her eight. I was also sent the formal invitation letter, together with information about my visa a week later.

Having understood that nothing could be done, I went to the immigration website and started my visa application, as instructed by the immigration consultant. I logged onto my account (which existed from previous applications for eVisitor; this was going to be my fifth visit to Australia) and soon received information that the site would be closed for updating in a week – exactly on what I believed to be my deadline date. After 10 minutes, the website closed down, and I was instructed to return later. I did, and, interrupted by closedowns every 10 minutes, I arrived at page 6 of 20 of the application. At that time, I was required to provide details about my host, about whom I did not have a clue. I wrote to the administrator. Having received no answer, I wrote directly to my host. She contacted the administrator, who answered four days later. (In defense of the administrator, two of them were the weekend days.) The first answer repeated the same text I had received previously and ignored my specific question. I wrote again, limiting the letter to the specification of the information I needed. I received an answer that, apparently, came from the immigration consultant, although no name was ever given.

I went back to my account. The next page required even more details about my host university, and then the website went down. Totally resigned, I called the Australian Embassy in Stockholm. After the appropriate chain of choosing and pressing buttons, the automated response informed me that the Australian Embassy in Stockholm does not issue visas and does not provide information about visas.

I wrote a panicky letter to the administrator and my host. Awaiting their answers, I opened the XU website, found some of the relevant information, and returned to the immigration website. From then on, I patiently returned to the immigration website every 10 minutes after each closedown. (I eventually learned to save every completed page.) Emboldened by success, I started to omit certain information that I noticed was unnecessary (my host's mobile telephone number, for example and my fax number – we do not use faxes anymore). When some information was necessary, the page would come back with a notice in red.

On the last page, I had to swear to the Australian government that I understood all the questions in the application. I swore, although I am not so sure myself. I also said, truthfully, that the Australian nation would not suffer harm if I do not perform the activities planned. I may have ruined my chance for a visa. Who knows?

One action that did not present any problems was payment. It went smoothly, without the website closing down even for a moment. I have received the receipt and the information that the payment will not be refunded if I do not obtain a visa. Fair enough – the immigration offices need money like everybody else.

After the six-day process came to an end, I was reflecting on the difference between the paper and the digital part of the bureaucracy. Strangely enough, I became extremely angry when the website went down or when I was unable to answer questions, but I was merely amused and/or resigned when my human correspondents did not engage in dialogue with me. Furthermore, the actual time spent on the application (not counting letter-writing) was something like four hours. Recently, I went to the police to renew my passport, where I waited for four hours without impatience. I assumed that it would be a long wait and took a book along with me to read. (The rest of the application was digital as well, including the photo, and I had my new passport five working days later.)

Questions to be explored concern, among other things, the issue of habits versus expectations. Was I so angered by the Australian visa process because I assumed that a digital process would be extremely efficient, and became disappointed when it was not? Or was it because I knew there was no way of engaging in a discussion with the computer? But I would not be able to hold a discussion, in the proper sense of the word, with people either. Is it that I am so used to difficulties with paper bureaucracy, but not in digital bureaucracy, that I was more forgiving in the Swedish passport case than in the Australian visa case? One answer to this question can be constructed with the help of Marie-Anne Dujarier's (2008/2014, 2016) study of 'consumers' work': consumers currently engaged in self-service, collaborative coproduction, and the work of organizing. In self-service especially, 'service' is being separated from 'relationship', which traditionally belonged to the service, just as it belongs to what I call 'paper bureaucracy'. Thus, I can be angry with the computer, because there is nothing I can do against its failures (a feeling of helplessness) and because there are no rules of polite behavior that prevent me from being angry. (Bureaucrats may be tired, or overworked, or forced to do idiotic things by their bosses, so I am more patient and understanding with them.) It seems, however, that self-servicing consumers also require a relationship – people employed to talk to them, with slight or no connection to the job in question. When this servicing person is actually able to help the self-servicing consumer, however, the feeling of gratitude is overwhelming. And this is exactly what happened to me in my application process for the Australian visa.

A person from the immigration office called me from Australia on my mobile to explain that the kind of visa I was applying for means that I must enter Australia within six months. I applied much too early! She told me that she will now send me a request for additional information, which I need to send within one month, and then she will keep the application on hold until it is six months before my travel. In this way, the intervention of a 'paper' bureaucrat saved me from the labyrinth of computerized bureaucracy. Paradoxically, opening the frame stopped the overflow. And all in all, the turn of events ended up being funny rather than frightening, unlike the fate of the people seeking asylum in Australia, who were detained for years on Manus Island (Warner, 2007).

At the service of the researcher

A further but partial analogy between e-bureaucracy and e-commerce concerns the possibility of 'voice' – that is, feedback. To begin with a difference, digital bureaucracy can afford that which digital commerce cannot: the total prevention of feedback. One of the main Swedish research foundations, the Swedish Research Council, introduced a new digital application system, which unfortunately (given the scandal surrounding PRISM[4]), was called PRISMA. PRISMA can only be properly completed, if at all (there are many technical problems), by young researchers who obtained all their education and spent all their working lives in Sweden. No feedback is allowed. Yet some older researchers could not let it pass, as this letter to PRISMA demonstrates:

> Dear Support,
>
> I have now spent 6 to 8 hours [on getting myself] a decent profile on PRISMA. And I can tell [you] that this is the most user-hostile system that I have ever encountered. I say this as [a] regular user of Science Direct, Academia, Google Scholar Profile, SSRN, LinkedIn, CORDIS and a few other places where I regularly register my publications and whereabouts.

4 PRISM was a clandestine surveillance program under which the United States National Security Agency (NSA) collected Internet communications from at least nine major US Internet companies. PRISMA is an EU program, the designers of which did not know (or did not want to know) about the US PRISM scandal.

> The procedure for importing references seems to follow a random function: a) some of my references in My University Publications came in and others did not; b) chapters were imported as articles with the consequence that book editors become co-authors with no possibility of changing them to their rightful role; c) books became articles. And everything was registered as OA by default when the opposite is the case.
>
> The system's flexibility is zero. Can you tell me, for example, why I must register publications as yy-mm-dd when I register them properly? We out there register publications as yyyy, and that is it.
>
> The quality of the output is zero. I have been sitting for over 10 years on an appointment board where I have read over 1000 applications, and I can say that I am very used to reading CVs and publication lists. But your output makes me unsure about my own publications. So the system cannot be reader-friendly either.
>
> I have also had a huge fight to get PRISMA to accept the fact that I work at two universities. It refused to accept it the first six times. But for some reason, it did on the seventh.
>
> Now my data are in, and I am happy about it. But I really want you to understand that your system is a nightmare for users. And it cost a fortune in time for us to use. After all, it took me nearly a day's work to feed in information that I have ready 24/7 at my fingertips.
>
> I really wonder: who is PRISMA made for? Who is it good for? Does anyone believe that you would stand the test of competition if users were not forced to use PRISMA to apply for FORMAS et al.?
>
> Please, pass these questions to the head of the system, and tell her or him that I am ready to [enter into a] dialogue. You cannot simply keep wasting our time and energy as you do.
>
> Kind regards,
>
> Innocent Victim

The Swedish Research Council has probably excluded the possibility of feedback on the assumption that researchers will know very well what information to enter and how to do so. Another interpretation would suggest that it was a frame introduced in fear of an overflow of critical comments. In e-commerce this cannot be done, so in order to alleviate the difficulty, many sites have another type of frame: a set of questions and answers that rarely if ever concern the actual difficulties. As Dujarier (2008/2014) correctly observed, these would be of possible help only to users who are truly newcomers, but newcomers will probably not be able to find even those standardized questions. The average competent user will find no help there at all, as both questions and answers are automatized. The frame works, up to a point: experienced users know how to circumvent it, but are probably often too tired to undertake it.

The 'Innocent Victim' of PRISMA has not received any answer. This was in his own country – but researchers do go visiting as well.

A visiting researcher needs a connection

This is a story from a Swedish scholar visiting North America, told in an exchange of e-mails.

From: AB [fictitious name] Faculty Support

Sent: 20 July 2015 2:08 PM

To: UY Computer Help Desk

Cc: CD [home mail address]

Subject: Netlink ID for CD [fictitious name]

Good afternoon,

I approved a Netlink ID request for CD (cc'd above) on Friday, but he hasn't received his Netlink ID yet. Can you send that to him and me as soon as possible?

Thanks so much, A

AB

Faculty Support, Z School of Business

'The world looks different from here'

20 July 2015, 2:46 pm UY Computer Help Desk wrote:

Hi AB & CD,

Netlink IDs are created by clients using a valid V-Number. As C is now an affiliate, their V-Number should be available at 'sponsor' tab. To create a Netlink ID for C please utilize the 'application form' at the tool below:

https:xxxxxxx

Once he's got his Netlink ID, he should be able to see his V-Number. Don't hesitate to respond or give us a phone call if you have any questions or problems.

Regards, K [fictitious name]

Computer Help Desk, University of Y

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From: CD

Sent: 20 July 2015 2:53 PM

To: UY Computer Help Desk

Cc: AB Faculty Support

Subject: Re: Netlink ID for CD

Dear K,

thank you for your response. Am I or is AB expected to fill in the application form?

Kindly,

C

20 July 2015 at 3:03 pm UY Computer Help Desk wrote:

Hi C,

Apologies for the lack of clarity. As the holder of the V-Number, it should be you (J) creating the Netlink ID. The Netlink ID will become your primary identity (along with the V-Number) for all UY services. For example, when the Netlink ID is created, you will also have access to your account and your UY e-mail address

Please let us know if you have any outstanding questions or concerns.

Regards, K

Computer Help Desk University of Y

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From: CD

Sent: 20 July 2015 3:53 PM

To: AB Faculty Support

Subject: Re: Netlink ID for CD

Ok. But this sounds little bit weird. In order to get the Netlink ID, I obviously need a V-Number, which I don't have. So what should I do?

C

20 July 2015 at 3:58 pm Computer Help Desk wrote:

Hi C,

I just spoke with A on the phone and confirmed your V-Number. She indicated that she would pass it on to you when she got a chance.

Please let us know if we can assist with anything else.

Regards, K

Computer Help Desk University of Y.

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20 July 2015 at 3:59 pm AB Faculty Support wrote:

Hi CD,

Thanks for your patience! For some reason your V-Number wasn't showing up on your account after I sent your application through. But luckily the Computer Help Desk has passed it along to me. It is VXXXXXXX, and you will need that number when you fill in the Netlink ID application, which you can find here: https:zzzzz.

If you need any assistance please let me know.

Also, EF and I have added you to the photocopier upstairs. It is NUMBER. Once we have your Netlink ID, I will get you hooked up to the printer as well. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Talk to you soon, A

AB

Faculty Support

'The world looks different from here'

From: CD

Sent: 20 July 2015 4:15 PM

To: AB Faculty Support

Subject: Re: Netlink ID for CD

Dear A,

Thanks for this. I have now registered my Netlink ID so it should be running.

Be well,

C

20 July 2015 at 04:18 pm AB Faculty Support wrote:

Great, thank you C! I'll send a request to Computing to have someone swing by tomorrow to get you set up with the printer upstairs. F is away this week but someone will be covering for him.

Have a great evening, A

AB

Faculty Support,

'The world looks different from here'

From: CD

Sent: 20 July 2015 04:23 PM

To: AB Faculty Support

Re: Netlink ID for CD

Great – thanks!

C

Truly, the world looked quite different from over there. Yet this short story does not seem to be very dramatic. It could be interpreted as an example of misunderstandings caused by conversations in English that include non-English speakers (see Wierzbicka, 2013), or a small glitch in digital bureaucracy, resolved in three hours. But it suggests a possibility that will be explored in one of the later examples – that even personal signatures may have been produced by digital avatars, and that the actual people may not even know what is being sent in their name. Potentials for an exponential growth of overflow seem to be waiting around the corner. This story also confirms one of the main theses of this chapter: Digital glitches require paper interventions – whether they are interpreted as opening a frame or simply returning to an earlier one that is not as tight. This thesis is put to the test in the next self-observation.

Maternity leave in Denmark

This time one snail-mail letter describes the whole story in one go:

> To Whom it May Concern
>
> I am writing to complain about your decision not to pay me maternity leave financial support from June 5th 2014.
>
> I contacted you at the beginning of June (I cannot remember the exact date), saying that the six months in which my employer paid me the salary had passed and thus asking what I need to do. You said that I did not need to do anything, but that it would be my employer that would contact you and you would pay me the support. You also said that it could take quite a long time and thus I could not get the money in June, but later.
>
> Thus I waited.
>
> I waited.
>
> I waited.
>
> I waited until September, and then I called you several times. Finally you told me that you were missing the birth certificate of my daughter, who was born in Sweden. So, I sent you the birth certificate. You told me that it was the only thing you needed and then you could pay me.
>
> After a couple of weeks, I called again to ask if you had received the birth certificate and at that point you said that you needed a letter with my signature. This was apparently required in a letter that you had sent me earlier. I had not received anything of that sort from you. So, I asked you to send me the letter to sign and I would send it back to you. At that point you did NOT AT ALL mention any deadline for this. I then received the letter, signed it and sent it back to you. You say that you have received this letter on November 25th and that it was too late.
>
> I called you then on December 12th, 14th, and 16th several times a day. Every time I talked to one of you, I got a different version of the story. First, you told me that you had made the decision not to pay me any leave from June 5th because you had received the letter too late. You also told me that I could complain, but you could not explain to me in English how to do it. It was allegedly written in a paper letter that you had sent me, but it was in Danish and I could not understand what was written on it. Then I called again on Friday December 12th, and you told me that you could write my complaint directly into your system. I agreed that it was a good idea. I also asked you to send me a letter with the complaint and a letter specifying

how much money and for how long I had gotten maternity leave financial support from you. You said that you would do it the same day. I called you again on Monday the 14th to verify that the complaint was written and the letters sent. You told me that there was a complaint in the system but the letters were not sent. So, I asked you again to send me the letters, and we agreed that you would send them both in paper and into an e-box.

I was not familiar with the e-box, but I said I would try to get into the system. I did, and checked the e-box a few hours later, but I did not find anything. I thus called again on the morning of December 16th, asking why I had not received anything. You told me that it was because I had not confirmed having received letters from you, but that as soon as I had done that, it would be there. I did it, but still nothing happened.

So I called again. This time you told me that no letter had been sent to me, neither paper nor digital. You said that paper letters were not being sent because I had an e-mail, and even if I were unable to receive e-mail, you could not have sent me letters on paper. The problem with the digital post, you said, was not your problem, however, but the municipality's problem. You also said that you need one more paper from me: a paper from the Swedish Insurance Office stating how much paternity leave my husband, living in Sweden, had taken.

That was absolute news for me! Nobody had ever mentioned that before. And then you abruptly terminated the phone call without any notice and did not call back.

Apart from the extremely poor client service, the very poor level of English, and the absurd inconsistencies, I would like to point out few things that make the process I have been through outrageously unfair and abusive:

All the written communication – the paper letters – I have received from you has been in Danish. I DO NOT SPEAK DANISH, I am a [EU country] citizen and live in Sweden. This has made it impossible for me to understand what you wrote in those communications. You have been perfectly aware of the fact that I do not speak Danish, as I have tried to talk to you in English every time I have been in contact with you.

You sent me a letter to sign in October 2014. Then you said that the deadline was in July 2014. How could I have signed and returned to you a letter in July if I had received it in October? Moreover, nobody mentioned ANY DEADLINE whatsoever on the phone.

Every time I talked to you on the phone, you added a new document for me to produce. Furthermore, you promised to send letters that I then discovered you had never sent me.

> I thus protest your decision and ask you to revise it as soon as possible. I would also be very grateful if you could communicate with me in English, so that both parties can understand what is being said.
>
> Best regards,

Here, the digital and paper bureaucracies worked hand in hand to mislead the client, who became truly overwhelmed. Language differences probably played a key role, but not necessarily. It could have been yet another contemporary problem, which may be described as 'bureaucracy across the borders' or a conflict of frames: whereas EU countries are supposed to collaborate smoothly on most matters concerning their citizens, this is far from being the case. I have had a similar experience in attempting to claim my Polish pension rights while living in Sweden, but I will spare readers another of my self-observations. Instead I move to another case of digital bureaucracy, concerning pension rights within Italy.

Pension rights in Italy

INPS, Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale, Italy's National Institute for Social Insurance, has issued instructions to the citizens, informing them of the obligatory use of 'communication on line *al servizio del cittadino*', the online communication in the service of the citizen (observe the mixture of languages). All applications and questions must be sent to the INPS online only. Here is one citizen's attempt to use the site:

> *October 8, 2013* – I send online a request for supplement/adjustment (I call it 'pension adjustment' in the amount of contributions paid by my ex-employer, but INPS calls it 'supplement'). This concerns the payment of contributions for three years (2010–2013), during which I worked after my formal retirement in December 2009.
>
> *January 20, 2014* – I send online a request for information about the status of my request for supplement/adjustment of my pension because it is almost four months since I have sent it.
>
> *February 3, 2014* – I receive a letter from the INPS with the information about the amount of the supplement I will be given. The monthly payment was increased accordingly the following month.
>
> *April 9, 2015* – I receive an e-mail with a formal response from the INPS to my request from January 20, 2014:
>
> Dear Sir [Why 'Sir'? My first name is Anna, which is feminine in all countries as far as I know],

> Your request has *already* [emphasis mine] been forwarded to the office of relevant competence that is in charge of the request.
>
> Warmest regards, XXX
>
> Thank you for using INPSResponse services, and do not hesitate to contact us with further inquiries. [This is the part that really irritated me most.]
>
> Somehow the INPSResponse services were unable, or didn't bother, to find out that I had already been receiving the adjusted/supplemented pension for almost a year.

A new calculation indeed arrived, only it was completely incomprehensible to Anna, who is an accountant by profession.

> I then discovered, after many searches, that it is possible to contact the INPS in person, so I went there, which started a new episode of my INPS story, which still continues as of October 2016.

This seems to be another example of digital and paper bureaucracies working hand in hand to confuse the client, doubling the overflow. I now move to a simpler matter – that of editing special journal issues.

Lord Algorithm and his rule

I was one of the editors in question, but I asked my co-editor to describe our joint experience of editing a special issue of a Journal We Respect (JWR), with the obligatory help of Manuscript Central (Lord Algorithm, or LA):

> It has already been several hours that we have been poring over the correspondence with more than 20 reviewers. The task seemed simple: to select and contact the potential reviewers for submissions to a special issue that we were editing. This was, after all, the working purpose of our meeting. Two educated people, 'good friends' with new media, familiar with the review procedures on respected publication sites, sitting in front of two laptops and two smartphones, performing the task of guest editors.
>
> The algorithm that supports the process of reviewing, we assumed – guessed – would be a friendly help facilitating our task. After all, the procedure was relatively banal: ask for a peer review via e-mail, with an article attached. We estimated that the most careful selection of reviewers (in accordance with their competence) and sending probably more than 20 e-mails should – including the delays caused by the likely need to update addresses – take us two hours (with one coffee break).

That things turned out very differently is putting it mildly. The algorithm that was supposed to be friendly and 'intuitive' in use proved to be an obstacle, difficult to overcome. What was to have been an experience in a friendly online correspondence turned out to be frustrating, and lasted more than three months: our adventure with Lord Algorithm (LA).

To begin with, the first batch of dispatched e-mails returned a flurry of requests for postponements. We agreed to them, wondering about such a general need for an extended deadline. It was only a mail sent to us by one of the reviewers much later, outside the LA's control, that made us realize that although we saw a two-month deadline for reviews, the reviewers saw two weeks. LA did not allow us to correct the deadline for reviews. Thus, we wrote a letter to the system administrators (more about that later), and another batch of e-mails to the reviewers with a correction and an apology. While awaiting a correction in the system (we are not sure if it ever took place), we learned to make additions to the automated letters sent by LA. As a result, the correspondence was full of phrases such as:

'Digital bureaucracy can be very demanding'

'Please simply ignore the automated letters'

'If in doubt, please write to us directly'

We had read the paper for 'guest editors' carefully, and several times. Nevertheless, we had to get used to the fact that every time we pressed 'Send', and especially 'Save and Send', we could not be sure what would be the ultimate content of our correspondence. Also, we have been receiving responses to the letters sent by LA, which we have never seen before. We learned, therefore, to send additional, private e-mails, asking reviewers for tolerance and explaining our difficulties in taming LA. What was supposed to be an exchange of two – at the most three – letters (a request, an answer, and if the answer was positive, a letter with the article attached) grew into something like 10–12 letters per reviewer, most of them outside the LA. Luckily, our correspondents seemed to be quite familiar with the absurdity of this and similar situations.

Another fast-growing batch of correspondence constituted attempts to communicate with the system that allegedly controlled LA at JWR. One such letter was:

Please help. We are receiving letters from authors who are trying to submit and encounter technical errors in Manuscript Central, and from reviewers who are afraid they will be delayed past the wrongly indicated deadline. My co-editor and I have nothing against extending

> the deadline by a week or two, but will also be grateful for the possibility of giving the reviewers the same deadline as, obviously, it is the same pool of competent people who must be involved. Please answer my questions, or forward this and my previous letter to someone who can.

The point was that we were no longer sure that the person signing the letters allegedly from the JWR office was a person. The letters were signed by a real name and surname, and the e-mail address seemed to be a person's. Yet we have always received an automated answer from LA. After months of continuing correspondence, we are still not certain whether our correspondent is a person or an avatar.

We asked the system administrators for help (with a letter outside LA, of course). The answer came a week later, telling us that a proper answer would be sent after the competent person returned from vacation. Indeed, in a week we received an e-mail telling us to … re-read the part of the LA instructions that concerned the correspondence with reviewers.

We ended our efforts on the first day after six hours (coffee taken without breaks). We then worked one day more, after which we separated and continued, keeping in touch digitally. The last answers from the reviewers (real people have their disadvantages, too) arrived together with the first reviews, two months later.

This memorable adventure made us reflect upon options. Snail-mail would probably take the same time; perhaps shorter, because Swedish postal services still work relatively well.[5] For one of us, handwriting could be a pleasant experience (the other can't even read her own handwriting). Making the selection and approaching reviewers via 'private' e-mails would probably take one day, and then another two weeks for people who were on holiday, or whose addresses had changed.

Yet the algorithmic procedure for reviewing and editing (Manuscript Central) has, in the meantime, come to be seen as the guardian of credibility and 'scientificity' of the peer-review process, renowned for its clarity and reliability. It is the result of the joint work of software designers and publishers – a successive phase of the project of digitalizing publishing. Does it work as hoped for?

It needs to be added that at the time JWR had used the algorithm for only a year. Other journals have learned to customize it so that its use need not be so traumatic. So did the editors of JWR, who, as the LA was doing stranger and stranger things (sending letters we didn't write, not sending letters that we did write, putting strange

5 In 2019, this is no longer the case.

new papers in our Guest Editor box), were advising us how to the outsmart him/her/it.

But as Manuscript Centrals are everywhere now, one wonders if their designers meant for them to serve mainly as the neutral controllers of the proper ethos of the authors and editors, or also as aids and facilitators of human time- and effort-consuming tasks. If the latter, it did not work – not yet, at any rate. A fascinating – if dreary – possibility of non-humans as additional producers of overflows emerges.

Virtual red tape: a step forward or keeping up the tradition?

Before readers jump to the conclusion that virtual red tape is always worse than the original variety, or, more precisely, that the digital bureaucracy is worse than the paper one, let me insert a reminder about at least one of many unpleasantnesses related to the latter. Here is a story written by a Polish student as an illustration of the theme 'Power in organizations' (Czarniawska-Joerges and Kranas, 1991:53):

> A weeping woman was sitting in front of the desk, nervously crossing and re-crossing her legs. Behind the desk, which was entirely covered with paper, sat an official talking loudly. It appeared that the woman had an overdue bill for electricity and water which she promised to pay. However, she couldn't pay it immediately because of temporary financial problems. She promised to pay the bill in installments or next month. I thought the solution seemed acceptable, but the official reacted sharply and remarked sarcastically that his [? in original gender unclear, BC] role was collecting dues, not looking for new solutions to people's private problems.

Virtual red tape saves people this kind of humiliation; but when entangled in digital mistakes, it is only humans who can help and repair them. This is ironic, given that there was always discussion about 'human error' in the first studies of 'man–computer interactions'. Nowadays it is politically correct to speak of 'human–computer interaction', and the 'human factor', but human factor still means human error. Of course, in negative cases, the cooperation of digital and paper bureaucracy becomes a true hell for the customer. This is best visible in cases in which the automatic polite phrases ignite visible fury in customers. So, why are we so angry at the digital bureaucracy?

One possible answer is that we – the users or the customers – truly believed that 'virtual red tape' would solve most of the problems typical of the paper bureaucracy (see, e.g., Keenoy and Seijo, 2009, on hopes about the liberating power of e-mail). The forms would be completed correctly and no matter how many there would be, there would be no overflow, because there is no frame. Search and retrieval would be easy. When faced with a reality that differs from this wish, we feel helpless, powerless, and extremely frustrated. We are given no easy way of unloading our aggression on a human bureaucrat.

Additionally, it is not always easy to fill the templates correctly, yet there is no possibility of crossing the terms and replacing them with tentatively handwritten ones. Digital systems are tenacious: if you must insert 600 characters in the category 'Weaknesses of the proposal', you must insert 600 characters, whether the proposal has any weaknesses or not.[6] There is a frame, and a rigid one.

Does it have to be like that? It must be remembered that the digital administration systems are highly complex, and their complexity increases when they are supposed to function between countries with different systems.[7] Furthermore, the systems are often put to use before they have been properly tested. Indeed, one of the reasons that ObamaCare was not as appreciated as it should have been was the malfunctioning of the enrollment system (HealthCare.gov, the web portal for a federal marketplace that covers 36 states, crashed soon after its October 2013 launch). Furthermore, as in many other attempts to frame a flow, digitalization itself produced an overflow of organizational and technical initiatives, not least in the UK National Health System (Cordella, 2007).

Still, one of the problems is a resilient illusion that virtual bureaucracy saves everybody time and money. Recently, Cornell University severely criticized what it calls 'shadow work': 'administrators who want some information think nothing of sending a survey to hundreds or thousands of professors and giving them a deadline. It takes only a click from a central office, but it's one more task for professors' (Flaherty, 2016). Furthermore, 'arranging travel through […] a travel agent 15 to 20 years ago took a 15-minute phone call. Now it can take the faculty member working on his or her own up to one hour or more […] at a significant cost to the university' (Flaherty, 2016). One does not have to work at Cornell to recognize the phenomenon. In general, a staff member performing a certain

6 I thank Sabina Siebert for this suggestion.
7 I thank Agneta Ranerup for this suggestion.

task often – the digital or the analogue way – will always be more efficient than a faculty member who does it sporadically.

This is not an attempt to plant the seed of doubt into the belief that virtual red tape is potentially an effective way of managing document overflow. Yet that belief can cause cognitive overflow to both the bureaucrats and their customers – after all, the 'manual' management overflow needs to be synchronized with the digital one. One thing is certain: Weber's fears have not materialized, although repeated by Richard Harvey Brown, who related them to the 'paradigm of cybernetics' and claimed that in this paradigm 'the vocabularies of personal agency, ethical accountability, and political community have atrophied' (Brown, 1978: 375). True, the prevailing human emotions are those of irritation and anger, but the sense of humiliation has diminished, and personal agency, ethical accountability, and political community are still relevant.

Another thing is certain: there is no way back. The Swedish government informed its citizens on 16 March 2017 that they want as many as possible to contact the authorities via 'the digital mailbox'. Interestingly enough, the Minister for Civil Affairs, who transmitted this message, also said, 'If a citizen wants to communicate digitally, he or she has a right to do it,' suggesting that digital communication is a new human right. At present about 1 million out of 10 million Swedish citizens are connected to a site called 'My messages' (*Mina meddelanden*), through which they receive e-mails from the authorities (TT, 16 March 2017).

At the other end of the spectrum is a possibility that 'China invents the digital totalitarian state' (*The Economist*, 17 December 2016). Although the stated intentions are to increase transparency and diminish corruption, the envisaged scheme is also going to contain a 'social credit' project, through which citizens will be rewarded for good behavior. Frames will permit no leaks. Up until now, the pilot studies have failed; but the party, along with the central and local governments, continues to prepare the system. Sooner or later, they will succeed.

The future of virtual red tape remains assured, but its functioning as a framing device is somewhat doubtful. Still, it would not be wrong to paraphrase Kaufman's conclusion from 1977 and say that virtual red tape 'may turn out to be at the core of our institutions rather than an excrescence on them' (1977/2015: xxi). Overflow usually wins.