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Directing Digital Citizenship: How Librarians Mediate the Dutch Digital Welfare State

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Abstract

Digital citizenship has emerged as a prominent concept in policy and academic discourse, broadly referring to individuals' ability to access and use digital tools for public engagement. However, because its meaning varies between actors and across societal contexts, it is still an ambiguous term. This article considers how digital citizenship takes shape in practice by examining the everyday practices of librarians, the key mediators between citizens and the digital welfare state, and analysing how these contrast with conceptualizations of digital citizenship promoted by the Dutch national Digital Inclusion programme. Governments worldwide are adopting "digital-by-default" models, emphasizing ICT-driven public service solutions. While promising greater efficiency and accessibility, this transition exacerbates challenges for individuals lacking access to ICT resources or digital literacy, reinforcing social inequalities. Using the Netherlands as a case study, this research highlights the challenges of digital inclusion in highly digitalized societies. Despite high digitalization rankings, many Dutch citizens face difficulties using digital tools and accessing digital public services. To address this issue, the Dutch government launched the Digital Inclusion programme in 2019, establishing information points and digital skills courses in libraries. Based on ethnographic research in three public libraries, this study reveals a disconnect between policymakers' conceptualisations of digital citizenship, defining what competencies citizens should possess and what participatory practices are supported, and the lived reality of digital citizenship in public libraries. By highlighting the tensions and misalignments between policy and practice, this article aims to contribute to more inclusive conceptualizations of digital citizenship, to inform digital inclusion initiatives that foster equitable participation in digital societies.

Keywords

digital citizenship; digital government; digital inclusion; digital literacy; digital welfare state; public libraries; self-service solutions; social inequality

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly digital world, governments worldwide are adopting digital technologies to enhance governance and public service delivery (Liu & Yuan, 2015). The Netherlands is a pioneer in this transition (United Nations E-government Knowledgebase, n.d.) and has prioritised the introduction of digital government services and online identity verification (e.g., the DigiD identification tool) since the early 2000s (Digitale Overheid, 2020). Over the past two decades, numerous government websites and apps have been developed to enable citizens' access to a wide range of online public services, including tax filing, benefit applications, and study financing.

Like in other countries, digitalization here has involved the implementation of "self-service solutions" (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018), shifting the responsibility for accessing public services from public servants to citizens themselves. Henman (2010, pp. 216–217) argues that this reflects a neoliberal approach to state restructuring, emphasizing cost reduction and active citizen engagement over the passive dependency characteristic of paternalistic welfare states. Citizens are thus held accountable for acquiring the skills and resources needed to navigate online public services effectively.

However, this digital transformation comes with significant challenges, particularly for citizens who lack the necessary resources, skills, or confidence to navigate these systems effectively. While the Netherlands boasts relatively high internet coverage and literacy rates (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2020), a significant portion of the population struggles to participate in the digital society (Digitale Overheid, 2020). An estimated 2.5 million of the 17 million people lack basic digital skills, and up to 5 million lack critical competencies. Additionally, approximately 4.5 million adults face challenges interacting with government services (Hoevenagel & Joossen, 2022).

To address these issues, in 2019, the Dutch government initiated the Digital Inclusion programme in collaboration with the National Library of the Netherlands and eight public service organizations, collectively referred to as the Manifestgroep ("Manifesto Group"). The programme aims to provide training and support for individuals lacking the skills needed to effectively use digital public services and participate in the digital society. As part of this initiative, 15 public libraries across the country expanded their existing offerings of free digital skills courses and courses for navigating digital public services. They also introduced information points ("IDOs") with walk-in consultation hours to provide information and guidance on the services of the participating parties (Staatscourant, 2019), making public libraries important sites for citizen-state interaction and librarians key intermediaries in the relationship between citizens and the digital welfare state.

This article explores this evolving role of librarians as digital care workers (Kaun & Forsman, 2022) by asking: How do the practices of librarians as key mediators between citizens and the digital welfare state contrast with conceptualizations of digital citizenship promoted by the Dutch national Digital Inclusion programme?

Our findings provide critical insights into the complexities of digital citizenship, highlighting persistent gaps between policy visions and the practical reality of digital inclusion policy. Moreover, it emphasizes the pivotal role of librarians in bridging divides in the digital welfare state, showing the barriers they face in supporting citizens' digital civic practices. Consequently, our study provides crucial insights to rethink digital inclusion initiatives, to more effectively address the structural challenges citizens face in increasingly digital societies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Citizenship in the Digital Society

Since the mid-1990s, the concept of "digital citizenship" has emerged as a pivotal framework within academic and governance discourse, addressing the evolving relationship between digital technologies and civic participation (Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Katz, 1997; Mossberger et al., 2008). At its core, digitalization has reconfigured citizenship, providing new modalities for engagement in democratic and societal processes while challenging traditional boundaries of public and private spheres (Hintz et al., 2019). Despite its prevalence in public discussions, however, "digital citizenship" remains a contested and multifaceted concept, shaped by diverse interpretations and enacted differently across disciplines and practices, with no clear consensus or definition (cf. Mol, 2002).

Theorizing digital citizenship involves understanding it as a dynamic interplay of rights, responsibilities, and practices. Moving beyond a static legal status, citizenship emerges from participatory practices that construct agency within political, social, and cultural contexts (Lister & Campling, 1997). This performative dimension is further nuanced in digital environments, where actions such as "liking, coding, clicking, downloading, sorting, blocking, and querying" (Isin & Ruppert, 2015, p. 12) support novel participatory practices. Digital infrastructures afford empowerment and constraint simultaneously, where opportunities for agency coexist with regulatory mechanisms (Vivienne et al., 2016, p. 4).

Initial conceptualizations, such as Katz's (1997), imbued digital citizenship with a techno-optimistic ethos, envisioning it as a catalyst for democratization, community building, and individual empowerment. Subsequent critiques, however, revealed that digital citizenship is a more complex phenomenon. Scholars like Mossberger et al. (2007) emphasize the socio-economic stratifications that shape access and literacy, asserting that digital citizenship disproportionately benefits individuals with greater resources and competencies. This underscores the inequities inherent to digital systems and illustrates that targeted interventions are necessary to address systemic barriers.

In the Dutch political context, the promotion of digital citizenship has been a topic of discussion since the late 1990s, although a clear definition of the concept remained elusive for a long time. Wagenaar of the Labour Party (PvdA) was among the few to address this issue in depth during that period, connecting digital citizenship with equitable access to information during a parliamentary debate:

> The 21st century can develop into an information society or an infocracy, where information becomes a costly commodity accessible only to the economically strong. The PvdA chooses to support the development of an information society, where new media and related technologies are employed to promote accessibility to knowledge and information. (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1999)

During the next two decades, conceptualizations of digital citizenship widened to include a more comprehensive agenda. For example, a report of the Parliamentary System State Commission in 2018 emphasized civic participation and the mitigation of digital risks, such as disinformation and news avoidance (Staatscommissie Parlementair Stelsel, 2018). Suggestions for curricular reforms in primary and secondary education in 2019 further operationalized digital citizenship, focusing on two themes: the "digital citizen"

and "digital identity" (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2019). These "pillars" linked digital skills to awareness and critical reflection on the role of digital technologies in society, aiming to foster active and responsible participation.

By situating digital citizenship within a broader ecosystem of competencies, including self-regulation, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, contemporary Dutch policy advances a model that reconciles individual agency with collective welfare. This understanding of digital citizenship has further been implemented through the Digital Inclusion programme, which aims to empower citizens by teaching digital skills through courses and providing information on digital government services via the IDOs in public libraries. How librarians enact and understand this newly assigned role as key intermediaries in the increasingly digital-by-default citizen-state relationship, however, remains underexplored.

2.2. Transitioning to Digital-by-Default

During the past two decades, the Dutch government has shifted towards a digital-by-default model, prioritizing digital over traditional paper alternatives. Since the early 2000s, alongside the growing public use of the internet, the Netherlands has focused on developing digital "self-service solutions" (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018), where citizens with access to digital technologies manage their own affairs to reduce bureaucracy and costs. Recent amendments to Dutch legislation have even made it possible to make digital communication obligatory for certain matters (Kerssies & Wijngaards, 2022). This development is part of a broader global trend, where governments around the world have gradually implemented ICTs to digitize public services, with the aim of making administrative processes more efficient, cost-effective, and accessible (Liu & Yuan, 2015). This transition is generally encouraged by a strong belief in technological innovation and the desire to bring the government closer to citizens.

This "digital-by-default" strategy has received broad support in the Netherlands with a techno-solutionist consensus amongst the administrations of the past two decades, based on the belief that digital technologies improve state-citizen relations through more efficient, user-friendly, and reliable public services. However, while the digitalisation of the Dutch welfare state has indeed resulted in more efficient public service delivery for most, it has also created new challenges for disadvantaged groups. While digitally literate citizens benefit from the ease of use and speed of access to digital services, disadvantaged citizens face exclusion. Those without access to digital technologies or the necessary skills encounter barriers to participation, deepening existing inequalities and placing greater responsibility on individuals often without adequate support.

Scholars have highlighted that digital inequality is a complex issue intertwined with broader social, economic, and cultural inequalities (Hargittai, 2022; Helsper, 2021; Van Dijk, 2020). They point out that digital inequality and social inequality are interlinked, reinforcing one another (Helsper, 2021). A substantial body of research on digital inclusion in the Netherlands underscores this perspective, highlighting the connection between digital inequality and broader social disparities, such as socio-economic disadvantage (Goedhart et al., 2019), low literacy (Smit et al., 2023), and poverty (Boerkamp et al., 2025). To address these disparities, the responsibility of supporting disadvantaged groups has increasingly been delegated to public libraries. Librarians, thus, have come to play a pivotal role in providing citizens with access to and support with digital government services, especially as analogue means for communication with the government increasingly disappear.

2.3. The Rise of Digital Care Work

In Western democracies like the United States (Greene, 2021) and Finland (Kaun & Forsman, 2022), public libraries increasingly act as intermediaries between citizens and digital government services. In the Netherlands, this shift reflects broader efforts to redefine public libraries' role amid declining memberships, austerity measures, and reduced staffing since the 1980s (Huysmans & Oomes, 2018). These challenges prompted public libraries to reposition as "socio-educational living rooms" offering diverse services, including providing access to information, education, fostering debate, and cultural engagement (Huysmans & Oomes, 2018).

Dutch public libraries have embraced digital literacy as central to their transformation, paralleling global trends of "bootstrapping," where public libraries secure funding by offering access to technology and training services (Greene, 2021). In 2019, they integrated the national Digital Inclusion programme, hosting digital skills courses and IDOs to assist citizens with tasks like taxes, benefits, and digital identity management. The programme was financed through a multi-year subsidy with per capita subsidies increasing from EUR 0.03 in 2019 to EUR 0.98 in 2022. Additional funds, up to EUR 200,000, were allocated for training, knowledge sharing, and network building, contingent on the National Library's annual budget (Wetten.nl, 2022).

Since 2019, the programme's core focus has remained steady, but the number of IDOs has surged dramatically from 15 in 2019 to 741 by 2025 (Bibliotheeknetwerk, n.d.). Additionally, the Manifestgroep now consists of 17 government agencies and other participating organisations (Manifestgroep, n.d.). This growth reflects the objectives outlined in the 2020 Library Covenant, which emphasizes the vital role of libraries in fostering digital citizenship:

> The public library is a key partner alongside the education sector in promoting digital citizenship and literacy from an early age. Libraries empower individuals by offering courses and assisting citizens with questions about the (digital) government. They also serve as a referral point to local organizations that can address specific individual concerns. (Staatscourant, 2020)

The covenant emphasized their efforts in fostering self-reliance, offering courses, and guiding citizens in navigating digital government systems.

While public libraries have embraced this expanded role to enhance their societal relevance, Kaun and Forsman (2022) found that librarians are not always adequately equipped for their new position as "digital care worker[s]," pointing to shortcomings in current funding and training. They show how library staff are often required to provide support that exceeds their available resources, skills, and expertise, including offering technical assistance, addressing emotional barriers such as frustration, mistrust, and uncertainty, and referring individuals to social support organizations.

This article builds upon these findings by examining Dutch librarians' experiences of supporting digital citizenship, to highlight the tensions between conceptualizations of digital citizenship as embedded in digital inclusion initiatives versus librarians' everyday practices as digital care workers. Underscoring the need for more nuanced understandings of how digital citizenship policy is practiced, our findings illustrate how current digital inclusion policy falls short in addressing the digital divide effectively.

3. Methodology

To examine how librarians navigate the gap between top-down imposed governmental digital inclusion policies and citizens' everyday support needs and questions around digital citizenship, our study employed an institutional ethnographic approach (Smith, 1987). This method is particularly relevant for analysing librarians' mediating role in supporting digital citizenship, as it aims to explicate how people's everyday activities are organized and coordinated through institutionalized processes and practices, what Smith (2005, p. 10) calls "ruling relations." To capture both librarians' practices of supporting people's digital citizenship as well as how they discuss and understand these behaviours in light of the complex institutional context they are part of, we combined longitudinal, weekly participant observations of walk-in consultation hours and digital literacy courses (99 hours in total) with in-depth interviews with staff (N = 24), in libraries in three cities geographically spread across the Netherlands.

We selected libraries that participated as "forerunners" in the Digital Inclusion programme. Based in one of the largest cities in the Netherlands with an ethnically diverse population, Library A is a large multifunctional city library, with one major hub in the city centre and 19 smaller libraries in different neighbourhoods. In addition to lending books and offering digital support, it frequently hosts exhibitions, offers language and financial support, organizes workshops and courses, and provides a meeting space. Staff at mid-sized Library B explicitly described themselves as "community librarians," positioning their library as a warm environment offering a "socio-educational living room" to all citizens in the mid-sized town. In contrast, location C was a small library with a more traditional focus as an information provider and book lender, in a small town with a relatively low-income and low-educated population.

Observations and interviews took place from September to November 2020 during the second peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Netherlands, when vaccines were not yet available, and during the second half of the research period a partial lockdown was in place. Paradoxically, the growing need for digital support to stay engaged in social life coincided with a decline in library visits, especially by vulnerable groups, due to infection risks, even though libraries were among the few places that remained open. Due to the circumstances, our ability to study librarians' direct engagement with citizens was limited, resulting in fewer opportunities to observe interactions. Instead, we focused on understanding how library workers talked about their practices and their evolving role, from information providers to educators fostering digital inclusion, as well as their insights into the challenges citizens face. More importantly, library workers provide a valuable perspective for examining the institutional order, including its social relations and power dynamics (DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Greene, 2021; Smith, 2005), making their viewpoints a crucial lens for this study.

Team members each visited one of the libraries once or twice a week, on fixed mornings or afternoons, not just to attend the scheduled walk-in hours and digital literacy courses, but also to build rapport with library staff and volunteers who typically worked there part-time. We used an observation protocol to guide our observations and recorded them by writing fieldnotes, drawing floor plans, and taking pictures. First, we focused on mapping social, spatial, and temporal structures and dynamics, such as recurring activities, returning visitors to consultation hours, and the position of technological resources and materials. We then gradually shifted our attention to the interactions between library workers and visitors. The role of the observers, likewise, changed over time: Whereas during the earlier observations, researchers listened and watched carefully while taking detailed notes, with minimal engagement as to capture the research setting

without steering the activities going on, over the course of the study, researchers would approach librarians and visitors actively and ask detailed questions. While we were careful to introduce and identify ourselves as researchers, including wearing name badges, occasionally visitors would approach us for help with digital questions; we then always referred them to the library staff, having the librarian take the lead on providing support while we observed the interaction. Fieldnotes were structured chronologically and reflect researchers' personal perspectives on the observed events and their role when observing. Every two weeks, all members of the research team met to share and reflect on the observations.

After our first month of observations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a selection of the librarians and volunteers at each location. This allowed us to probe for details about the patterns and events that we observed and to gain an in-depth understanding of staff's perceptions and experiences of the library as a digital literacy supporter. We selected staff ($N = 24$) across the three locations, using maximum variation sampling to account for possible diversity in viewpoints on the interplay between librarians, digital citizenship, and their institutional frameworks. Participants ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-60s. We interviewed librarians with different roles, years of experience, and levels of involvement in the library's digital inclusion-related tasks, including community librarians, domain specialists, project officers, and volunteers, until the point when additional interviews would no longer yield novel patterns or themes. Using an interview guide, the interviews discussed participants' tasks within the library, types of digital support requested, referral to other institutions offering support for digital or related issues, and the role of public libraries for digital inclusion. All interviews were audio recorded and then fully transcribed for qualitative thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and informants gave consent for pseudonymized quotes to be included in the study.

All field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti, applying a grounded theory-inspired, iterative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In a first round of descriptive open coding, the data were analysed line-by-line by the research team. We focused on library staff's practices, knowledge, skills, motivations, emotions, and perceived facilitators and barriers related to digital support and inclusion, in addition to mapping social, temporal, spatial, and technological structures. Second, aided by individual memo writing and regular discussion meetings within the research team, these open codes were compared in order for the research team to be able to merge them into overarching categories that identify similarities between situations and/or locations. Considering the specific purpose of this article, field notes excerpts and interview quotes related to the categories of "digital citizenship" have consequently been re-analysed in a final round of coding.

4. Results

4.1. Defining the Digital Citizen

Our observations and interviews reveal that the Digital Inclusion programme expects citizens to possess a combination of resources, skills, knowledge, and qualities to effectively use digital government services and their support systems. This is paradoxical, as those who can meet these expectations are typically already self-sufficient in the digital society. In contrast, we see that citizens and public service users who are already vulnerable to digital exclusion often struggle to meet the requirements embedded in the digital government and its support structures, putting them at risk of further marginalization and exclusion from digital public services.

4.1.1. The Requisites of Digital Citizenship: Access, Skills, and Literacy

Our observations and interviews indicate that citizens are assumed to have access to the necessary physical and technological resources to use digital public services. This includes equipment such as a computer, tablet, or smartphone, a stable and secure internet connection, and the ability to print forms or confirmations. In practice, we found that many people do not have access to these resources, or the ones they do have are difficult to use, broken, or outdated, which greatly limits their ability to utilize digital services. Sam, a 27-year-old community librarian at Library B, said:

> You do see significantly more people who still have a simple Nokia, or sometimes don't have a phone at all, which makes it very difficult because if you want to create a DigiD, you have to provide either an email address or a phone number, and some people don't have either.

All three libraries provided public computers with internet access, which were frequently used by citizens during our observations. At Library C, for instance, we observed two young men entering the library and requesting a computer, though communication was difficult due to language barriers. When asked, one of the men explained they were from Eritrea, speaking Tigrinya, and used the computer for work and to practice Dutch. As they did not have computers at home, they visited the library nearly every day to use the computer (fieldnotes, 23-10-2020, Library C). During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, the use of computers was limited as part of measures to curb the spread of the virus. This presented a major challenge for all three libraries, as their role as providers of digital resources (often the sole means of accessing public services during this period) became significantly more difficult due to these restrictions.

Beyond access, citizens are expected to possess an increasing level of digital competencies to effectively use digital government services. These include operating computers, tablets, or smartphones, navigating the internet to find government websites, and performing basic digital tasks such as logging in with e-identifiers, sending emails, or filling out online forms, while managing privacy and security risks such as phishing attempts or identity fraud. If any technical issues occur, citizens are expected to solve these independently or know where to seek help.

In practice, however, these demands sometimes appeared difficult to meet. At Library C, we observed a woman who struggled to submit a damage report. Alex, the 63-year-old facility and volunteer coordinator helping her, was unsure how to proceed and asked the researcher for help. The woman had completed the form digitally with the intention of printing and scanning it, unaware that she could have submitted it electronically right away. While trying to figure out how to print the form, she was logged out of her account for security reasons, losing her data in the process. Frustrated with the system she was using, she insisted she hadn't taken that long. The researcher therefore offered a slower-paced alternative that better matched the woman's digital skills: printing a blank form for her to fill out by hand, then assisting her in scanning and emailing it later (fieldnotes, 23-10-2020, Library C).

In addition to technological skills, using digital government services in the Netherlands requires a high level of Dutch language proficiency. Citizens are expected to understand official letters, forms, and instructions written in formal Dutch. In practice, however, even for native speakers, this can be a major barrier. Max, a 58-year-old community librarian at Library B, explained that many visitors had limited digital experience and faced additional difficulties when confronted with complex bureaucratic language:

> You pass them on to courses like Klik&Tik, because they really still have to learn the basics. And the people who then come to Digisterker can handle the computer, but they get stuck on the official language used by the government and forms that are sometimes complicated and that you have to do everything securely with DigiD and with passwords and things like that.

We observed how elderly citizens struggled to find information and navigate complex government websites due to a lack of digital literacy skills. According to our interviewees, this issue also affects other groups, including low-literate adults and young people. As librarian Robin (Library A) explained:

> Young people are often very skilled with buttons and technology and learn quickly, but they often overlook safety or the simplest ways to look things up. It's not self-evident that they know all of that.

According to our informants, the Digital Inclusion programme was inadequately designed and insufficiently promoted to address the needs of these groups, further restricting their access to digital public services.

4.1.2. Self-Reliance, the Golden Standard for Digital Citizenship

Alongside the emphasis on access, skills, and literacy as important requisites for digital inclusion, the Digital Inclusion programme places significant focus on pursuing self-sufficiency, linking individual self-reliance to collective prosperity. This approach shifts responsibility to citizens, requiring them to proactively address their needs and navigate support structures to effectively access public services rather than the system adapting to their circumstances.

For instance, citizens are expected to understand which government agencies, such as the Belastingdienst (Tax and Customs Administration), the UWV (Employee Insurance Agency), or the municipality, handle which matters. They should know the required documents for applications like allowances or benefits, and must be proficient with digital tools like DigiD and MijnOverheid (MyGovernment). According to Jessie, a librarian at Library A, many visitors were unable to meet such demands:

> People with lower incomes are the ones who need the most help. The people who often receive various benefits or extra welfare from the government. Because they already have so much contact with government services, they naturally require more assistance. I believe that especially people with lower incomes who struggle with the Dutch language would benefit the most, as they tend to leave important matters unattended. They may not be aware of their rights or the information they need. Typically, people come in with a specific question, but not many ask, "What can I get?"

Finally, citizens are assumed to know where to go for assistance when they get stuck. This includes knowledge of available support structures in public libraries, such as the IDOs and digital skills courses, and awareness of how, where, and when this help is provided. A certain level of willingness and mobility is also expected to physically visit a public library for assistance. Both in Library A and C, however, the information points were poorly sought out due to a combination of factors, including the ongoing pandemic and limited visibility of this new service. Jip, a 34-year-old domain specialist for "Language as a Basis" at Library C, said: "I have the feeling that they simply don't know. I think it's also a target group that doesn't come to the library on their own." They explained:

> I had a neighbour who was also a bit in that target group, and he heard that I worked at the library and literally asked, "Wow, does that still exist?" Well, I was actually quite shocked by that. You see, if you don't come to the library, you don't know that changes have taken place and what else you can do besides borrowing books.

As a result, "the people who need the help the most can find it the hardest," they noted. This underscores the paradox of the initiative, demonstrating how well-intentioned policies can inadvertently exacerbate existing societal disparities.

Thus, the set of qualities, skills and attitudes comprising the baseline for citizens' participation in the Digital Inclusion programme appeared to be far from self-evident, for disadvantaged groups. This not only hindered citizens' interaction with the digital government, but also resulted in feelings of fear, uncertainty, shame, frustration, and a lack of confidence in their own skills and in digital systems and the government more broadly, as highlighted by our observations and interviews. Jip, for instance, explained that people in the local community were often hesitant to seek help due to fear of stigmatization, especially due to the vulnerability associated with asking for assistance in a public setting. They noted:

> That's a certain culture: People don't easily show the back of their tongues. They are sometimes a bit reserved and narrow-minded. And also, a bit of the culture of "keep everything behind closed doors," especially when things aren't going well….That is a piece of pride that they, actually very unfortunate, do not get over….If you then have to go to the library to ask for help, yes, I think that can be a barrier for a lot of people.

Due to the inflexibility of current support structures, a divergence from the expected qualities and attitudes of citizenship resulted, at best, in long-term dependence on support systems such as one's social network, and at worst, in complete disengagement. Bo, a volunteer at Library C, explained:

> I think that is more of a fatalism, of "okay, this isn't it anymore, I give up." These are people who have experienced significant innovations in their lives….And now, suddenly, the bank buildings are closing, post offices are gone. All such things, it comes over them. And one learns to deal with it, and the other closes himself off from it.

These barriers prevented citizens from engaging with digital government services, illustrating how the programme's failure to accommodate a multimodal understanding of citizenship can result in exclusion.

4.2. Navigating Practices of Digital Citizenship

Our observations and interviews revealed the ongoing efforts of public libraries in assisting citizens with basic digital skills training and digital government services through the Digital Inclusion programme. While each library had its own approach, all three featured digital skills courses and IDOs where citizens could inquire about the participating digital government services. As public libraries have become a key mediator between citizens and digital government services, librarians play a crucial role in facilitating the interaction between citizens and the digital government.

According to our informants, many of the questions they address revolve around navigating government websites, such as logging in with DigiD, completing tax forms, or applying for benefits. Additionally, librarians assist with questions about specific government documents, including unclear letters, tax returns, and driver's licences, helping citizens understand and act on these matters. While this support is essential for enabling participation in the digital society, it addresses only a fraction of the broader demand for assistance. The information points were set up to provide basic information or guidance. When citizens face greater challenges or require more in-depth support, librarians are instructed to refer them to relevant courses or external partners.

In practice, librarians frequently faced situations that extended beyond the scope of their official duties. Questions from visitors did not only pertain to digital government services, but often addressed broader cultural, social, and economic needs. This underscores the complexities of offering comprehensive support for the multifaceted challenges of digital citizenship. As Max pointed out:

> It is a drop in the ocean, right?...The questions you get are often not from IDO partners. They are websites from a government, or a semi-government, or an organization....That patch is so much bigger than just the [participating] government agencies.

For example, cultural participation is an integral part of the digital society, enabling people to access digital resources for personal enrichment. Our informants regularly received questions about online library services, such as downloading e-books and audiobooks, using e-readers or platforms like YouTube, as well as using library computers to learn Dutch and gain a deeper understanding of the local culture. In Library B, for instance, we observed how a couple signed up for a library subscription and, with a staff member's guidance, learned how to download an app for reading e-books (fieldnotes, 15-10-2020, Library B).

In the context of social participation, librarians helped citizens stay connected through digital tools like email, social media, and video calling software. In Library C, Sacha, a 59-year-old volunteer, shared the story of an elderly woman who sought help after losing her husband, who had previously managed their digital needs. According to our informants, many citizens in similar situations rely on librarians to navigate technology for maintaining social connections. Furthermore, librarians promoted the social participation of citizens by offering digital skills courses, which typically had a strong social component. Jamie, a 45-year-old volunteer at Library C, said: "There are many people who visit us who are often alone and truly enjoy spending a morning at the library." Indy, a 44-year-old programme officer, noted: "It is the social [aspect] that is the starting point, not really because they want to become more digitally proficient."

Finally, economic participation in the digital welfare state increasingly relies on digital components. Librarians assist citizens with processes such as online banking, managing finances, creating CVs, and starting businesses. As Chris, a 39-year-old basic skills advisor at library A, noted:

> It is not just about language or digital skills; it is about empowering self-reliance and addressing specific questions, like, indeed, "how to become self-employed."

Our findings show that to effectively support the wide range of participatory practices displayed in the public library, librarians must go beyond simply providing information on government services and offer

practical help, such as navigating websites or correctly filling out forms. Such support is vital for citizens who cannot independently use digital services that are not covered by the Digital Inclusion programme. Based on our observations and interviews, librarians are dedicated to meeting the needs of citizens by providing support and guidance in navigating digital services. However, they also faced four major challenges that make fulfilling these responsibilities difficult: limited resources, gaps in required skills, regulatory barriers, and issues with referrals.

In all three public libraries, ongoing austerity policies have led to a shortage of resources, such as suitable equipment, spaces for courses and consultation, and staff shortages. This has resulted in the overburdening of permanent staff and an increased dependence on volunteers, which has affected the quality of service delivery. Billie, a 63-year-old domain specialist at Library C, explained:

> The cuts went so far that the only thing left to reduce was the permanent staff, and as a result, volunteers have been recruited who are now heavily involved in day-to-day operations. And you can really feel the effect now, as there are very few well-trained professionals on the floor to address these issues.

In the same library, we observed that the central desk was largely understaffed. Staff were only briefly present when they needed to attend to something at the desk, leaving visitors waiting for help. Many considered pressing the bell on the desk but hesitated and ultimately decided against it, likely due to the quiet atmosphere in the library (fieldnotes, 05-10-2020, Library C).

A lack of skills and expertise is another major challenge for public libraries, especially as the sector is aging and has undergone significant changes in recent years. Jip noted: "Many colleagues came to work at the library when we still had our old role, and [they] do not know very well whether they have the expertise for this new position." Dominique, a project officer at library A, said: "There is a very big shift involved…and that is scary for many people. Because now, after so many years, they are asked to do something quite different." Although training is provided through the Digital Inclusion programme to prepare librarians to support citizens, librarians note that they often lack digital literacy, technical knowledge, and practical experience, which prevents them from addressing citizens' needs. In Library C, for instance, one staff member mentioned that they sometimes receive questions when they are near the printers or computers. Recently, they were asked about donor registration, but they felt unqualified to help, as it was something they weren't familiar with. (fieldnotes, 05-10-2020, Library C)

Thirdly, privacy regulations, such as the GDPR, can severely limit direct assistance, as librarians are not authorized to handle inquiries involving personal information. Librarians told us they felt conflicted in cases where citizens needed help but were prohibited from providing assistance despite being able to do so. Dominique said:

> That is one of the main issues I'm still dealing with, actually, privacy. When people come in with a letter saying, "Look, I've received this," you're immediately faced with: "Sorry, I can't help you."

This leads to frustration, as Kim, a 41-year-old librarian from Library A pointed out: "We are not allowed to do anything at all. It is really hard to work like that."

Finally, although librarians were expected to refer citizens to other institutions when questions went beyond their formal duties, in practice, these referrals were challenging. Librarians mentioned that citizens often face urgent deadlines and need immediate assistance. As Remy explained:

> There is someone in front of you who is often completely desperate, and it is always something that they would prefer to solve today or yesterday, and otherwise they really need it tomorrow. So, there is always pressure behind it.

Billie (63, Library C) explained that local collaborators "fish in the same pond, as they must also guarantee their right to exist" to receive funding. According to the librarians, this competition, driven by limited government resources and overlapping service scopes, led to strained relationships between public librarians and local social domain collaborators. Staff also mentioned poor communication and ineffective collaboration between organizations as major reasons for inadequate referrals. Jip said that, as a result, people have "been sent from pillar to post," leading to frustration and declining trust among citizens. To prevent this, librarians often preferred to handle questions internally, as Noah, a librarian from Library A, explained: "You want to help from start to finish and answer the question completely."

5. Discussion

Conceptualisations of digital citizenship embedded in the Dutch national Digital Inclusion programme conflict with the practices of librarians, as key mediators between citizens and the digital welfare state. The programme envisions an idealized citizen who is capable, self-reliant, and fully equipped to navigate a digital society. This meritocratic vision links shared prosperity in society to individual self-sufficiency, leaving little room for those unable to meet these expectations due to a range of intersectional and structural factors that are often beyond the individual's control. By applying this normative, one-size-fits-all approach to citizenship, the programme risks excluding the people it aims to support. Moreover, the programme's limited focus on digital government services overlooks the broader spectrum of practices that support citizens' participatory capacities. This limits the programme's potential for citizens to enrich their digital citizenship through the Digital Inclusion programme. Consequently, the digital citizenship conceptualisations embedded in the programme run the risk of hindering its goal of bridging the digital divide, and in some cases, may even deepen societal marginalization for those who are already disadvantaged.

Librarians play a critical role in bridging gaps in digital citizenship in the Netherlands, offering support that goes beyond the transactional and instrumental focus of the programme. In essence, the involvement of public libraries in digital support is a fairly innovative idea, building on the renewed social relevance and contemporary purpose public libraries have been seeking due to a decline in traditional readership. Historically, libraries have been associated with access to information and literacy, making the shift to becoming a digital literacy supporter a logical extension of their role. However, it is important to note that although libraries are framed by the programme as low-threshold, trusted, and informal spaces associated with accessibility and public support, this new image has not yet fully taken hold in broader society. Moreover, as a public institution, the library is not necessarily well-equipped to handle sensitive information or to guarantee the protection of personal privacy.

We find that the efforts of the programme are particularly hampered by systemic constraints in its implementation, such as resource shortages, inadequate digital expertise, and limited collaboration with other organizations in the social domain. These limitations make it challenging to provide the comprehensive assistance necessary for meaningful participation in the digital society. The rigid expectations of the programme fail to account for the diverse social, cultural, and economic contexts in which citizens operate, highlighting the inadequacy of a one-dimensional and one-size-fits-all model of digital citizenship. Instead, digital citizenship must be reimagined as a dynamic, intersectional, inclusive concept, one that acknowledges and addresses the differences, inequities, and complex realities of citizens' lives and enables a more equitable and participatory digital society.

Paradoxically, current Dutch digital inclusion policy lacks explicit definitions of digital citizenship, yet embeds high expectations of an idealized citizen. Our observations show that this is problematic, as it fails to address and may even exacerbate marginalization in initiatives meant to promote inclusion and bridge societal divides. The experiences of our interviewees show that true self-reliance is a myth: All citizens depend, to varying degrees, on structures beyond themselves. This interdependence should be acknowledged and integrated into policies and practices. Consequently, our study demonstrates an urgent need for redefining digital citizenship in a way that adequately reflects the complexities, differences, and inequalities among citizens to enable effective interventions. We propose that a reconceptualization of digital citizenship must take an intersectional approach, designing interventions with the most vulnerable citizens (those facing multiple, compounding disadvantages) as the starting point to ensure that all citizens can benefit from digital inclusion initiatives. This shift requires viewing digital inclusion not as a technical or instrumental issue, but as a social challenge, where dismantling structural barriers requires addressing social inequalities.

The design and implementation of the Dutch digital inclusion policy serve as a cautionary example for digital inclusion initiatives worldwide. As one of the forerunners in digitalization across the globe, the Netherlands demonstrates a rising tension between technological advancement on one hand, and the challenge of social inclusion on the other. While leveraging and repurposing public libraries for digital support is a smart way of using existing infrastructures and repurposing them to fit a new role in an advancing welfare state, there leaves much to be desired in terms of implementation to ensure that public libraries are adequately equipped to take on their new role as intermediaries of the digital welfare state.

The observations across the three libraries were largely consistent, with the notable exception of the job title and role of the librarians at Library B. These librarians were designated as "community librarians," and their role was deliberately situated at the intersection of library work and social work. In contrast to the other two libraries, where staff adhered more closely to traditional forms of librarianship, the employees at Library B appeared more aware of the competencies required for their evolving role and were better equipped to fulfil it. While this study provides insights into the realities of digital citizenship policies, it was subject to several limitations due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions imposed during this period significantly reduced opportunities for direct observations of interactions between citizens and librarians, as fewer citizens accessed library services due to public health measures. This also hindered our efforts to gather input from citizens themselves, as researchers sought to avoid putting visitors at risk. Post-pandemic research can explore citizens' own conceptualizations of digital citizenship more directly.

6. Conclusion

This article contributes to the digital divide literature by advancing two key arguments. First, it underscores the pivotal role of librarians as intermediaries in increasingly digitalized welfare states. These digital care workers not only assist individuals in navigating digital services but also embody the human infrastructure required to make digital inclusion a reality. Second, the article critiques prevailing conceptions of digital citizenship, revealing their limitations in everyday practice. Current policies often presuppose an idealized, self-sufficient citizen, which risks excluding precisely those populations that digital inclusion initiatives are meant to support. A more effective approach requires reimagining digital citizenship in ways that acknowledge social interdependence, structural inequalities, and the varied realities of everyday digital engagement.

As welfare states become digital-by-default, digital citizenship plays an increasingly important role. The relationship between the digital welfare state and digital citizenship shapes access to rights and services, and increasingly defines what it means to participate fully in digital societies. It is vital that both academic research and policymaking pay close attention to the reciprocity of this relationship. On one hand, access to technology, digital literacy, and online public services has become essential for full participation in public life. On the other hand, active engagement in public life and access to public services can, in turn, strengthen an individual's development as a citizen and their inclusion in society. As a result, these two dimensions reinforce each other (both positively and negatively). Understanding how digital citizenship and welfare structures interact enables the development of initiatives and programmes that foster mutual reinforcement, ultimately promoting social inclusion. Enhancing digital support for citizens requires a comprehensive and equity-focused approach that addresses both structural and individual barriers. Based on the experiences of librarians as human interfaces of the digital welfare state, key areas for improvement include better access to technological resources, such as user-friendly public devices, private rooms for handling personal information, and well-equipped course spaces. Equally important is the ongoing development of digital competencies and language skills, supported by trained staff with both technical knowledge and the agency to guide citizens through challenging digital environments.

The authorization function of national identification and verification systems should also be redesigned to allow citizens to easily and securely authorize others to manage their administrative tasks, ideally through non-digital methods. This would enable digital care workers to provide practical, secure, and privacy-friendly support to individuals who struggle with digital services.

To make support truly inclusive, it must be flexible and extend beyond rigid frameworks, offering personalized assistance, support closer to home, and programmes tailored to specific users, with content, formats, and availability that match their needs. Alternative forms of support must be developed for citizens who are not mobile enough to visit public spaces, preferably through home visits to ensure a private and safe environment with all documents available. Information should be made available in multiple accessible formats, with simpler language and greater language support for individuals with low literacy or limited Dutch proficiency.

Crucially, digital inclusion policy must recognize that not everyone will achieve full digital independence; for some, ongoing support will be necessary. This support should build on strong social ties, trust, and positive reinforcement, and offer meaningful alternatives to purely digital participation. Moreover, digital inclusion

efforts should expand beyond access to digital government services to promote broader forms of digital citizenship, including social, cultural, economic, and political practices.

To realize these goals, sustained investment is needed in hiring trained professionals (besides volunteers), in purchasing appropriate equipment, and in building strong local networks and referral systems. Finally, to ensure these interventions are truly effective, more research is needed into citizens' own perspectives, experiences, and needs (especially those in disadvantaged positions) to inform just and responsive digital inclusion policy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data related to this article is not available in an open data repository.

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