The promises and disappointments of public services' digital transformation. Deconstructing narratives about the digitalization of local governance in Poland.

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Abstract: When it comes to the digital transformation of the state, many authors have claimed that the ICT brought a significant change in a way that policies are designed and implemented by the public administration (Dunleavy, 2005, Alston 2019, Dencik, Kaun 2020, Van Zoonen 2020, Yeung 2023, Kempeneer 2023). This rhetoric is based on the argument that automatization, algorithmic governance and datafication of the decision-making process and service delivery lead to a deep change in the instrumental logic, organizational settings, goals, and objectives behind policies (Sewerin et al., 2022). However, this holistic vision of transformation toward digital state is being contested, as researchers underline pre-existing institutional frameworks, as well as cultural factors, crucial for explaining the impact of digital technologies on the public administration (see Terlizzi, 2021). From this socio-technical point of view, digitalization of the public service does not always produce any additional public value or change, but it can be used for consolidation of the existing governance regimes and administrative practice (Bekkers 2013).

Digital transformation projects in local administrations are often followed by the promise of significant improvement in quality of services (more accessible, user-friendly and tailored to needs), efficiency of organizational management (automated, reducing the administrative burden) and inclusiveness (participation and co-design by the citizens). This overoptimistic rhetoric of the "technology as a solution to everything" is useful for building narratives about "big change" by the policy makers and implementers, while in fact, the core problems of policy or service may not be addressed by this particular solution. Moreover, actors involved in the process of design and implementation can use narratives about the digital change to suit their particular goals.

In our paper we considered digitalization projects of local public services as incremental, entangled in local policy and institutional context, where involved actors are engaged in building narratives about the "digital change" in order to justify their actions. We claim that digitalization of local public services is a result of local policy makers' and implementers' compromise which does not necessarily reflect promises built around the project.

Our goal was to deconstruct narratives concerning the digital projects by investigating how policymakers and implementers understand the change they wield on policies. We applied questions about the change (What? How? Why?) in order to reconstruct how actors built justifications toward following categories of policy project: its goals, service delivery process, organizational structure and management, monitoring and control, and citizens' role. Our research is based on five case studies (interviews with policy makers and project implementers, document analysis, media discourse analysis) of digital projects in three Polish cities in following areas: social policy, public safety, communal services, citizens participation and environmental policy.

Presented research results should help policy makers and evaluators to better understand the process of design and implementation of digital public services, and the nature of the change that technology brings into the public sector.