

Abstract to the session “Archives, Accountability, and Democracy in the Digital Age”

Technology, Democracy and Digitalizations of Sensitive Information: Ways of Knowing Populations

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In most of the Western countries statistics are given a dominant role in the governing of public sector. This implies the construction of technology delegated the task of fulfilling the realist’s vision of neutral knowledge production, and large data archives which often contain sensitive translations of citizens’ status in society into standardized indicators of physical condition and social capability. In Norway, a remarkable controversy has arisen surrounding a statistical technology developed centrally, implemented locally. It is termed “IPLOS” - an acronym for “individual based health and care statistics”. The State presents it as a neutral counting machine yet with a policy background framework with references to citizenship and participation. Public employees shall register the function level of each person who applies for or receives local public assistance. Government defines IPLOS as a *necessity* for good steering. Others question its validity and reliability and ask how such information can be collected without consent. The most critical have compared the national IPLOS registration with the Nazi’s registration of Jews during the 1940’s. How can a database be interpreted so differently? In this paper I elaborate on tensions expressed in this case between qualitative and quantitative ways of knowing a society’s population. I ask how the digitalization of sensitive information transforms the relationship between local citizens – who can come to recognize themselves or others in the statistics – and their government. I build my arguments on STS-theory as well as on an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the implementation of statistical archives in Norway.