



Imprisoned in an analogue bubble in digital society: Re/integration work in Norwegian high security prisons

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Abstract

This article explores how the rise of the digital society affects re/integration work in prisons. In this context, we examine how employees involved in this work handle the disparity between the almost entirely analogue world of prison and the digital welfare state in their re/integration efforts. The study draws on interviews with employees in Norwegian correctional services in and outside of prisons, and municipal welfare services, as well as men currently serving or having previously served a sentence in Norwegian high security prisons. We employ thematic analysis of the interviews, aligning them with the theoretical framework of street-level bureaucracy. Our main findings are that the rise of the digital society challenges re/integration efforts and increases the workload of prison employees. Compensating for incarcerated persons' lack of digital access requires time, commitment and technical skills, and depends on individual employees' discretion, leading to inconsistency in the provision of services.

Keywords

Norwegian prisons, prison in digital society, reintegration, street-level bureaucracy, coping strategies

Introduction

That's the most abnormal thing – we [the Norwegian Correctional Service] are standing still while society's running away from us.

Prison officer

This study is part of a project exploring the re/integration of incarcerated persons into society after their release from prison. The project examines narratives and reflections from people involved in this work with individuals serving sentences of more than two years¹ in Norwegian high security prisons. In this article, we analyse re/integration work in Norwegian high security prisons in the digital age (Lupton, 2015). We use the term 're/integration work' to refer to the practical professional work carried out during imprisonment to prepare the incarcerated person for reintegration into society. The specific term 're/integration' is used to underline the fact that individuals serving a prison sentence may

not have been fully integrated into society prior to their imprisonment. In addition, a person's circumstances as a former inmate are not necessarily the same as they were before the imprisonment, for example in terms of family relationships, finances, work and connection to society.

Imprisonment in Scandinavia has been characterised as *exceptional* in comparison with other countries (Pratt, 2008a, 2008b; Pratt & Eriksson, 2012). The Nordic countries' penal policies are known for their emphasis on humane treatment and rehabilitation of incarcerated persons (Bruhn et al., 2017). In line with the Mandela Rules (United Nations, 2015, rule 5:1), Norwegian prison policy centres on the idea that life in prison should resemble life outside to the greatest extent possible (the principle of normality), with incarcerated individuals retaining their rights as citizens (the principle of rights) (White Paper 39 (2020–2021), 2021). In Norwegian policy documents, punishment by incarceration is defined as deprivation of liberty (White Paper 39, 2021, p. 14), but the way this punishment is experienced by incarcerated persons is an empirical question.

The twin goals of preventing further crimes and successfully reintegrating incarcerated individuals into society on completion of their sentence are considered key components of the execution of the sentence (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021). The correctional service is expected to help inmates “adjust to society”, and to “make suitable arrangements” to help them avoid committing further offences following their release from prison (Execution of Sentences Act, 2001, § 3).

The tension between punishment by deprivation of liberty and the parallel aim of rehabilitation during imprisonment is not new and has been discussed at length by many scholars (Christie, 2007; Foucault, 1995; Mathiesen, 2006). Ploeg (2017) argues that the expansion of digital communication outside prison has added to the punitive character of imprisonment. Electronic devices, such as mobile phones, laptops and computers, and Internet use are generally banned in Norwegian prisons (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2020a). Thus, imprisonment means being excluded from digital contact with outside society, making prisons into ‘analogue bubbles’ in an increasingly digitalised society. One of the incarcerated persons interviewed in this study described imprisonment as a “journey back in time”, implying that release would be like “coming back to the future”.

There are a few exceptions to the ban on electronic devices, and some Norwegian prisons use new digital solutions. For example, a system exists for allowing students in prison limited access to the Internet (Norwegian Correctional Service and Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, ‘digital visits’ via tablets were implemented to compensate for restrictions on physical visits (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2020b). Similarly, prior to the pandemic, incarcerated persons in special circumstances, such as those with children and those who did not regularly receive visits from relatives, could apply for video calls using the prison's video conferencing equipment (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2017).

Nevertheless, according to the participants in this study, Norwegian high security prisons are generally out of step with the rapid digitalisation of society and welfare services. The Office of the Auditor General of Norway (2022) states that the Norwegian Correctional Service has done little to compensate for inmates' lack of access to digital services. This digital lag challenges the principle of normality and impedes incarcerated individuals' ability to exercise their rights as citizens. It also raises the more fundamental question of what imprisonment and re/integration mean in digital society.

For many, re/integration into society on release from prison involves interaction with several welfare services. In line with the digital strategy for the public sector in Norway

(Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2021), communication between public authorities and their users should be largely digital, with previous non-digital solutions being phased out. This presupposes access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and an understanding of how to use those technologies.² The Correctional Service ICT and Digitalisation Strategy 2022–2026 (2022, p. 13) states that imprisoned persons should use digital solutions, participate in the digital development of society, use digital community solutions to enhance their digital citizenship, and be sufficiently ICT-literate to be able to use public services before and after their release. The tension between the official policy objectives of effective rehabilitation into digital society on the one hand, and, in practice, the severely limited access to electronic devices on the other, needs to be better understood empirically, which this article sets out to do.

Reisdorf et al. (2021) argue that lack of access to ICT during imprisonment deprives prisoners of the digital skills needed in various areas of life in today's digital society. This creates barriers for reintegration into society post-release (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018), thus making an already demanding situation even more difficult (Andvig et al., 2020). In addition, studies have shown that digital access in prison may promote social rehabilitation and reintegration (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Knight & Van De Steene, 2017) and a smoother transition back into society (Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022). Having digital access while imprisoned supports 'digital literacy' and increases access to digital welfare services to which imprisoned persons are entitled (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020).

The question of giving incarcerated persons access to ICT, however, is controversial. In a study assessing the challenges of digital inclusion in Finnish prisons, Järveläinen and Rantanen (2020) found a complex relationship between trust and conditions for digital inclusion, associated with a lack of trust within the prison community. Often the introduction and application of new technologies in prisons are rejected because of their potential or imagined security risk (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). This general mistrust of incarcerated individuals presents a mindset that McNeill (2019) refers to as a "malopticon": "The penal subject is seen badly, is seen as bad and is projected and represented as bad" (p. 207).

Despite the growing field of research on the consequences of digital exclusion, and on the possible benefits of facilitating digital access and skills in prison, there remains a great deal to be learned about re/integration work in prison in this context. The question our research seeks to address is: How does the rise of digital society affect re/integration work in prisons? In this context, we examine how employees involved in re/integration work in prisons handle the disconnect between the almost completely analogue prison world and the digital welfare state in their re/integration efforts.

To examine this question, we draw on 23 interviews with 58 persons (12 currently or formerly incarcerated men, 27 prison employees, 10 probation employees and nine welfare service employees) with experience in re/integration work in Norwegian high security prisons.

Street-level bureaucracy

We use the analytical framework of street-level bureaucracy to discuss the prison employees' coping strategies and the ways in which they handle the disparity between the almost entirely analogue prison world and the digital welfare state in their re/integration work. Street-level bureaucrats typically work in direct interaction with the public through various public service roles, such as teachers, social workers, police officers and other law enforcement personnel (Lipsky, 2010). Professional discretion is a critical dimension of this interaction. Typically, these professionals work in contexts of conflicting goals that have never been resolved and have been passed on to the administrative level (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky

refers specifically to the conflicting goals of client-centred rehabilitation of convicts, deterrence, and the convicts' isolation from the rest of society.

People's lives and opportunities are structured and delimited by how the street-level bureaucrats define, influence and determine benefits and sanctions (Lipsky, 2010), and the work of these professionals requires them to be responsive to each specific case. However, Lipsky argues, unclear or conflicting goals, combined with limited resources, such as time or information, may shape responses to individual cases and prevent high-quality performance. Lipsky (2010, p. xiii) states that "the decisions of the street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressure, effectively become the public policies they carry out". To manage pressure and competing expectations, the street-level bureaucrats employ coping strategies such as rationalising and focusing on particular aspects of their work, while de-prioritising others (Lipsky, 2010).

Studying state policy from a bottom-up perspective is essential for understanding and deciphering policy in action (Zacka, 2017). It is when executed, through street-level bureaucrats and bureaucracies, that policy is delivered and experienced (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). Zacka (2017) argues that to understand how street-level bureaucrats inhabit their professional role, cope with conflicting goals and use discretion, we should also consider their moral dispositions. Specifically, he suggests three dispositions: *indifferent*, *caregiver* and *enforcer*. 'Indifferent' refers to disinterested bureaucrats not interacting with the client as an individual, but rather as a routine case. 'Caregiver' means being attentive to the particularities in each individual's circumstances, treating him or her with compassion and trying to be responsive. 'Enforcer' implies taking responsibility for preserving and protecting the trustworthiness of the institution and striving to thwart those who seek to take advantage of public services. These three dispositions can be visualised on two scales: 1) level of involvement, from withdrawal (indifferent) to a high level of involvement (caregiver and enforcer); and 2) the nature of involvement, from regulation (enforcement) to service provision (caregiving) (Zacka, 2017, p. 88). The dispositions develop over time, like a professional identity, and colour the manner in which bureaucrats approach new cases. Bureaucrats are not necessarily aware of their own dispositions. Moreover, they can and do change over time, and in interactions with certain clients a bureaucrat may 'act out of character' (Zacka, 2017).

Prison employees, such as prison officers, employees providing work programs, reintegration coordinators and environmental therapists, participate in everyday prison life and are expected to motivate and enable incarcerated individuals to 'change'. Prison officers function as security guards, with the right to intervene physically, and at the same time as contact officers, i.e. having responsibility for following up the individual inmate and being a mediator between the inmate and the outside world. They all must find a balance between security concerns and the care and welfare of the incarcerated persons.

This study addresses the narratives of street-level bureaucrats, both prison officers and other employees in and outside prisons, who are involved in re/integration work in Norwegian high security prisons. In addition, men with experience of incarceration in a high security setting provide reflections about how re/integration work in prison is affected by the increasing digitalisation of society.

Method

Design and data collection

Between June 2019 and February 2021, 23 interviews were conducted by the first author with a total of 58 participants.

Table 1. Number of participants and type of interview

Participants	Number of participants	Type of interview and type of institution
Persons serving a prison sentence in high security prison	8	Individual interviews conducted in two prisons
Persons serving the last part of their sentence outside prison	4	Individual interviews conducted in two probation offices
Prison officers working shifts	10	Focus group interview, one group, conducted in one prison
Employees providing work programmes in prison	8	Focus group interviews, two groups, conducted in two prisons
Prison employees not working shifts, such as reintegration coordinators, environmental therapists	9	Focus group interviews, two groups, conducted in two prisons
Employees of the probation office of the correctional service	10	Focus group interviews, two groups and one individual interview, conducted in two probation offices
Employees of NAV (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration) outside prison, or municipal employees	9	Focus group interviews, three groups, conducted in welfare institutions in two different municipalities
Total	58 participants, 12 who had served a sentence in Norwegian high security prisons and 46 employees	23 interviews: 13 individual and 10 group interviews conducted in two prisons, three probation offices and three welfare institutions in two municipalities

The participants were recruited from two high security men's prisons, three probation offices³ and two large municipalities, all in the same correctional service region. Inclusion criteria for the incarcerated individuals were that they were serving a sentence of over two years in a high security prison and due for release within six months of the time of the interview. Inclusion criteria for the formerly incarcerated persons were that they had been released on probation from a similar sentence and were obliged to meet the probation service or had electronic monitoring as the last part of their sentence. These 12 currently and formerly incarcerated persons ranged in age from 20 to 71 years (average: 43). Five of them stated that this was their first prison sentence, while two had been convicted more than 10 times. In total, these 12 had experience from 30 Norwegian prisons, and when interviewed, they referred to both their current and previous sentences.

The prison staff participating in this study were employed by the Norwegian Correctional Service and had various functions. The prison officers working shifts were trained prison officers and were contact officers. The employees involved in work programmes had relevant professional competence, such as carpenter, cook etc. The prison employees who did not work shifts, for instance reintegration coordinators, programme workers and environmental therapists, had educational backgrounds such as social work or prison officer training. Employees outside prison worked in the probation office of the correctional service, in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), or in municipal welfare services. Some of the probation office staff were trained prison officers, however the majority had a bachelor's degree in social work or health and welfare studies. Half of the employees of the probation office had previously worked in high security prisons and discussed both their previous and current work experiences.

The intention of the focus group interviews with the employees involved in reintegration work was to capture their practices and their discussions regarding re/integration into

society (Halkier, 2016). The inmates were interviewed individually with the aim of capturing their narratives in context.

All of the participants were asked what it takes to make the best possible transition from prison to society, how inmates are prepared for life after release, what factors can constrain and enable reintegration, who is responsible for reintegration into society, and what reintegration involves. They were not asked about digital aspects of reintegration into society. However, in the interviews the participants themselves emphasised various aspects of ‘the digital society’ as being important to reintegration, describing both obstacles and opportunities. This forms the empirical basis for the present study.

Conducting the analysis

The interviews were analysed based on reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), focusing on ‘the digital society’. After transcribing, reading and rereading the interviews, preliminary codes, such as digital access, digital communication and digital competence, were created. These codes were used when coding the interviews in NVivo, capturing the digital aspect of re/integration. The next step was collating codes into potential themes to “consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). In this article, we zero in on passages in our interview data that concern a) the disparity between the almost completely analogue prison world and the highly digitalised welfare state; b) the disparity between re/integration policy and the realities of practice; c) the employees’ attempts to cope with this analogue/digital disparity; and d) what we interpreted as ‘untapped opportunities’. These themes are elaborated further in the results section.

Ethical considerations

To ensure privacy, initial contact with the participants took place through contact persons who had received information about the project from the first author. When people showed interest in participating, before they gave written consent the first author provided further information about the project, its purpose and the possibility to withdraw consent at any time, orally or in writing. The participants were guaranteed anonymity. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (No. 939840) and by the correctional services in the region where the study was conducted.

Results

This section examines four themes in the participants’ narratives. First, we address the disparity between the prison environment and the digitalisation of society in terms of preparation for re/integration, stemming from the absence of digital access in prisons. Secondly, we explore the disconnect between official policies promoting rehabilitation and preparation for re/integration and the narratives about the reality of practice as a consequence of the digitalisation of society. Thirdly, we investigate how prison employees handle these disparities. Lastly, we uncover what appear to be untapped opportunities regarding incarcerated persons’ access to ICT. While the four themes are not mutually exclusive, for analytical purposes they are presented here one by one.

The disparity between the analogue prison world and the digitalised welfare state

According to the participants in this study, the discrepancy between the analogue prison bubble and digital society ‘outside’ has created several challenges in respect of preparation

for re/integration within prison. One problem concerns contact with NAV and other welfare services. One incarcerated person summed it up as follows:

The thing is, it's almost impossible for NAV to communicate with someone who's inside and vice versa. It's not easy. We'd rather still use letters. And NAV would rather have everything digital.

According to our interviewed prison employees and individuals currently or formerly serving prison sentences, welfare services outside prisons are often unfamiliar with inmates' lack of access to phones, Internet and digital devices. They found this to be a source of frustration. One of the prison officers said:

And then there's ignorance, and you can see that when you call and they say, 'Can't he just log in to FINN.no [a Norwegian website used to find housing and work]?' Then you say, 'But did you hear where I was calling from?'

One incarcerated person put it this way:

NAV thinks we have the Internet and everything in there. They can't understand why not... It's completely crazy. They can't understand why we can't just send the application online ... or call them.

A prison social worker elaborated:

Service is getting worse and worse on the outside. You're told to use a BankID [digital identification] more and more. ... It's so hard without it now. ... When we need to contact public services, you know ... It takes time and it's a bit difficult, and they need a BankID. If you have it, it's quick. If not, it stops. And it's really overwhelming for very, very many of them.

These quotes exemplify important aspects of how the rise of digital society affects re/integration work in prisons and the problems prison employees have to contend with. Incarcerated persons' lack of digital access deprives them of the possibility of being proactive subjects in their own lives, which is a stated policy aim. Efforts to resolve this lack of digital access are also time-consuming. From a prison perspective, the existing lack of digital access is the norm, whereas employees and welfare services such as NAV outside the correctional service seem to take for granted that everyone has digital access.

Following Ploeg (2017), the digital 'travelling back in time' while incarcerated creates new hindrances and becomes an extra burden. One of the prison officers reflected:

I think they're becoming technologically illiterate, the inmates we have over long periods of time. It's a pity to see that. I think we can say that they should have them too (non-digital solutions outside prison) but, at the same time, we too (the correctional service) must move in sync with society. We see that society has moved on. So, we actually have to come up with solutions for the correctional service that allow us to maintain a certain normality inside as well.

Incarcerated persons also described challenges in keeping track of their debts and paying bills, since many creditors send bills by email and debt collection agencies send text messages. One incarcerated person elaborated:

I can't check something like that in here. ... I know who I owe money to, and I call them up and say, 'Excuse me, but you must send me paper invoices.' Then I get, 'Yes, but we've sent them to you by email and SMS.' 'OK, but I'm in prison.' 'OK, but you'll have to pay for it.' So then it costs 100 or 50 extra per bill. If you don't tackle this on your own ... you have no idea what's happening to your life. ... You're in prison. You don't have access to a telephone. You can't access your email. You don't even know if the debt collector's coming after you. You can't find out what's going on. ... You get an email and then they say, 'You have to log on to "my page" on...' But I haven't got a BankID. So how can I do it? ... I try to say, 'Listen, you must understand. You must fix this problem.' Prison makes people debt slaves.

It is well-known that many incarcerated persons in Norway have debt problems (Friestad & Hansen, 2004; Revold, 2015), and that debt increases the risk of recidivism (Todd-Kvam, 2019; Aaltonen et al., 2016). An unintended consequence of being unable to keep track of one's debts during imprisonment is an increased risk of further crime.

The Execution of Sentences Act (2001, § 3) clearly states that security takes priority. Due to the security concerns surrounding inmates' access to ICT in prison, prison employees' ability to meet their needs to keep in touch with the outside world, such as contacting NAV or paying bills, appears severely limited. Some of the prison employees we interviewed stated that for some inmates, the totality of obstacles piling up due to lack of contact with the digital outside world, such as keeping finances in order or finding housing and work, is so frustrating that they simply give up.

Addressing the disparity between life within the prison walls and the highly digitalised society outside requires extra time and effort in a situation where the resources of prisons and welfare providers are already under pressure. To resolve the conflict between security concerns and the need to solve specific problems, employees in this study, both in and outside prisons, use discretion, inhabiting the role of 'caregivers' (Zacka, 2017). However, this role is constantly negotiated with that of the 'enforcer' or being 'indifferent'.

The disparity between re/integration policy and the realities of prison in digital society

Despite the aim of rehabilitation (White Paper 39 (2020–2021), 2021; Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021) and giving incarcerated persons the tools they need to be able to take responsibility for their own lives (Execution of Sentences Act, 2001, § 3), our data reveal several obstacles to helping individuals serving prison sentences prepare for a crime-free life after their release. Some of these obstacles relate to digital exclusion during incarceration, which becomes an impediment to re/integration. A number of prison employees gave examples such as the following:

So, I think we're a bit behind the times in terms of re/integration and the digital world. Because it's all about making them responsible for doing things themselves. Paying a bill. Paying off debts and so on. Now we do help them with that, but I'm thinking about being able to do everything online by themselves. Because everything's based on using the Internet in today's digital world. And when they don't have access to anything in here, it's very difficult to give them responsibility for doing those things.

White paper 39 (2020–2021) (2021, p. 47) emphasises: "As contact officers, the prison officers shall be in close dialogue with inmates, and they shall motivate for change". This goal competes with other priorities, such as security measures. However, according to

our participants, reduced personnel resources accompanied by increased demands for documentation within a new public management dynamic, further reinforced by digital reporting routines, have reduced the time available for prison staff to engage in relational, motivational and practical work with inmates. One prison officer described it in this way:

So it's not a positive thing, at least not for re/integration, that we get less time with the inmates. Our everyday work is more routine, with different tasks that take a lot of our time. ... All these routines mean we don't have time to sit down with the inmates and look at their problems and resources and things like that. That's what disappears when the officers don't have time. They have other tasks to do, such as searching [the incarcerated persons and the correction facilities] ... So there are a lot of positive things we just have to leave out.

The work of street-level bureaucrats is based on professional expertise and discretion but is also regulated by rules and perceived expectations (Lipsky, 2010). How the prison officers understand their role has a direct impact on re/integration work in practice. To use the terminology of Zacka (2017), when prison officers' time is under pressure, the caring disposition of their role seems to give way to the 'enforcing' or 'indifferent' dimension of the role. Choosing one way of understanding the role, he argues, makes certain actions probable and excludes others.

The acknowledgement of the importance of being and becoming 'digital citizens' to navigate the digital landscape (Toreld et al., 2018) found in policy documents (White Paper 39 (2020–2021), 2021, p. 15) does not yet seem to be reflected in practice in prisons. The descriptions above highlight the gap between actual practice as experienced by the participants in this study and the stated policy goal of enabling incarcerated persons to master activities of daily living, take responsibility for their lives and become 'digital citizens' (White Paper 39 (2020–2021), 2021, p. 15). They also illustrate the contradiction inherent in making incarcerated persons accountable for changing their behaviour in order to prevent recidivism while at the same time failing to provide the support necessary to do so in the context of an increasingly digitalised society. These dilemmas are handed down to the prison employees, involving what Lipsky (2010) refers to as conflicting goals of client-centred rehabilitation of convicts.

Coping with the disparities

Prison employees in our study presented several examples of how they did their best to address the discrepancy between the analogue bubble of prison and the digitalised welfare state outside. The image of "street-level bureaucrats doing their best" corresponds well with findings in a systematic literature review of street-level bureaucracy in public administration (Chan & Brewer, 2022). Applying for housing was an example of prison employees attempting to bridge the gap to prepare for incarcerated persons' release and re/integration into society. One prison officer said:

I'm just thinking of housing. If you go to FINN.no. We sit with them and look for housing. The problem is that when you contact a landlord, their mobile number is no longer indicated. You must contact them by email. It must be done from my email address, which is kriminalomsorgen.no. Not many landlords reply to that.

Contact with welfare services such as NAV was another example. One of the employees in NAV shared this experience:

I understand that it can be difficult for people in high security prisons when there are no digital tools there. We haven't... or at least I haven't found or heard about so many problems with that. Some prison employees have said, 'But they have no possibility to send report cards', for example, 'because they don't have access to a computer, but we can arrange it in my office one day'. Then they kind of fixed it anyway.

Because the prison employees compensated for the incarcerated persons' lack of access to ICT, their digital exclusion did not appear to be a big problem to this NAV employee. The focus appeared to be on solving tasks here and now instead of enabling inmates to manage these tasks by themselves. However helpful, this focus does not consider a long-term perspective of making a person self-reliant, which is important for the desistance process and re/integration following release (Andvig et al., 2020).

The interviews also demonstrate that the digitalisation of application processes for municipal services makes it difficult to contact the municipality and hence prevents incarcerated persons from accessing services to which they may be entitled. Prison employees were asked to use digital solutions when they called welfare providers to apply for services on behalf of incarcerated persons. A prison social worker gave the following example:

I was sitting with an inmate who was going to apply for services in his home municipality. Those were services he may be entitled to. And there was only a digital application with a BankID login. So, I called and said, 'But these are services that the municipality is required to provide for its citizens. It must be possible to apply without applying digitally with a BankID'. No! They no longer had that. ... Then I had to be very stern, and it took quite a few rounds of phone calls until I found someone who said, 'You know what? I have the old one (paper form) lying here somewhere. I'll scan it and send it'.

There appears to be a battle between street-level bureaucrats about what is possible, important and right: to maintain the goal of full digitalisation of the application process, or to ensure that all citizens, even 'non-digital' service users, have access to services. In this case the social worker did not give up and was eventually able to reach a municipal employee who arranged a customised solution. The availability of services thus depends arbitrarily on the individual employees' competence and resources, their room for discretion, and how they understand their mandate and inhabit their role.

Untapped opportunities for re/integration work in prison in digital society

Both prison and probation service employees and individuals with experience of serving a prison sentence described what they perceived as an incomprehensible digital prison practice, namely the security regime relating to access to digital platforms and tools. Neither inmates nor staff fully understood the rationale for the general rule of no access, although the employees in practice appeared to be loyal to it. One of the prison officers shared this reflection:

But the security aspect is one of the things that makes it difficult here, you know. The fact that we don't have... that inmates can't send emails. It could be done... you could check it all the time.

This sentiment reflects similar descriptions given by others in the study, both inmates and staff. Here, the participant envisioned that email could be checked in the same way as letters, and could therefore be allowed within the current security regime. However, it is already

possible to grant inmates permission to use computers and other electronic equipment to communicate by email if such communications are monitored, in line with the rules that apply to the control of letters (Execution of Sentences Regulations, 2002, § 3–27). Despite this, in practice, incarcerated persons' access to email appears to be non-existent. The fact that there are no formal regulations preventing emails being monitored in the same way as letters makes it incomprehensible why the current security regime does not allow email access.

Regarding access to the Internet, one prison officer had the following reflection:

Read the news, go online. In prison, you must be a student to get that Internet access, you sign a contract that you have restricted access. Everyone else can forget it. That's really strange.

The system for giving students as a select group limited access to the Internet (Norwegian Correctional Service and Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2009) shows that, despite strict security measures, there is room for professional discretion, and that a system is already in place for handling inmates' Internet access.

Our study illustrates that there is room, albeit limited, for discretion and more flexible practices regarding incarcerated persons' access to the Internet, email and digital contact with the outside world within the framework of current security regulations, indicating the existence of untapped opportunities. This appears to be a matter of how existing rules and regulations are understood and interpreted by individual employees and at the system level when exercising discretion. One prison officer shared the following reflection:

There's no great desire for renewal in Norwegian prisons either. Like all legislation, the laws we deal with are open to interpretation. But interpretations of the law are used in a very restrictive way. In a high security prison, we do it in one way, and in low security prisons, it's been interpreted in quite the opposite way. I don't know why it's like that. It seems there is very little willingness to do anything about it. There are legal professionals who work at the University College of the Norwegian Correctional Service, and many others who make efforts to show that this is completely the wrong way of interpreting it and doing it. But, well, we have procedures that they clearly feel comfortable with, the people in charge.

According to the street-level bureaucrats working in prisons in our study, the video conferencing equipment mentioned earlier, already used to facilitate 'digital visits' for certain inmates in special circumstances, can also be used for meetings with welfare services outside prison, court hearings and other types of meetings. This could translate into easier access to services, for instance to NAV, and thus save travel time for inmates and accompanying prison officers. 'Digital visits' and digital communication are one illustration of the potential that exists in currently untapped opportunities in re/integration work.

Discussion

This article illuminates how the rise of the digital society affects re/integration work in prisons. According to the study participants, lack of digital access creates a series of problems regarding re/integration work, not only for the incarcerated persons and the employees involved, both in and outside prison, but also in terms of achieving policy ambitions of re/integration into digital society.

The rise of the digital society increases the workload of prison employees. Compensating for inmates' lack of digital access requires time, commitment and technical skills and

depends on the individual employee's discretion, resulting in arbitrary services. In addition, our research suggests that a preoccupation with the potential security risks inherent in giving incarcerated individuals digital access – in other words, a focus on 'worst-case scenarios' – risks promoting the 'enforcing' dimension of prison employees' role at the expense of the caregiving one.

The examples provided in this study show how incarcerated persons' lack of access to ICT creates barriers in an increasingly digitalised society. The lack of access impedes their ability to remain connected to their lives outside the prison walls, and for those who have served long sentences, digital exclusion during their sentence may lead to deep, long-term social exclusion, including deprivation of digital skills (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016).

Civil life has changed, and, as illustrated by the participants in this study, the different pace of digital changes and developments in and outside prisons challenges the principle of normality in prison and re/integration aims. Poor coordination between the correctional services and various state and local actors is seen in re/integration, and so-called 'back-sliding zones' between prison and society (e.g. the particularly vulnerable immediate post-release period) may emerge, creating areas of potential recidivism (Falck, 2015; Ministries, 2017).

The narratives presented by the participants in this study contrast with the aims and descriptions in policy documents regarding the focus on successful re/integration and the use of digital solutions in rehabilitation and re/integration (White Paper 39 (2020–2021), 2021; Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021).

Denying incarcerated persons access to ICT on the basis of security concerns has been noted in previous research (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016) and testifies to a general mistrust of incarcerated individuals stemming a focus on potential worst-case scenarios. With reference to prisons as street-level bureaucracies, organisational constraints seem to promote coping practices anchored in the role of prison staff as *enforcers* (Zacka, 2017): a high degree of involvement with the institution, a feeling of responsibility for preserving and protecting its trustworthiness, and striving to hinder those who seek to take advantage. This contrasts with the stated goal of a high degree of user involvement in close dialogue with inmates to motivate them to change (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021; White Paper 39, 2021), which is more in line with the *caregiver* role (Zacka, 2017). Both of the ideal types, enforcer and caregiver, have elements from key policy guidelines, i.e. the objectives of control and security on the one hand and support and re/integration on the other.

In line with previous research on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), this study demonstrates that staff involved in re/integration work in prisons find themselves pulled between several conflicting goals. The gap between digital society and the analogue bubble of prison seems to be increasing, and the room for discretion on the part of prison employees in how they carry out their role in the rehabilitation of incarcerated persons is shrinking. Since security measures will always take priority in high security prisons, there is a danger that the enforcer role will eclipse that of the caregiver in the increasingly pressured street-level bureaucracy of the 'analogue bubble' of prison.

Prison employees set priorities in accordance with what they perceive as the most important management signals and controls (Chan & Brewer, 2022). This is consistent with Brodtkin's (2012, p. 946) statement that "Street-level bureaucrats do not necessarily do what they want, they do what they can". Our analysis indicates that the individual employee's perception of his or her role is of great importance for whether or not the incarcerated person receives compensatory support related to the consequences of a lack of digital access.

One significant finding in this study is that the current regulations regarding incarcerated persons' access to ICT were felt to be incomprehensible by both inmates and employees in prison and probation. Even though the prison employees in this study expressed criticism of the security regulations, their narratives about coping practices indicate that they are nonetheless loyal to core organisational rules, such as not giving incarcerated persons access to ICT, albeit that they also make efforts to compensate for the consequences of these rules.

Incarcerated persons are dependent upon encounters with street-level bureaucrats who put extra effort into bridging the gaps and helping them to overcome the obstacles created by the digital divide in prison. This requires the staff members' time, commitment and technical skills, and will thus depend on the individual staff member's personal determination. It also presupposes a high degree of involvement in the incarcerated person's situation, where the bureaucrat is more of a caregiver than an enforcer. There is limited scope for discretion in prisons, but the prison employees interviewed for this study nonetheless reported using their discretion to solve problems, use creativity and sometimes push boundaries, such as using their own email address to overcome obstacles.

According to the participants in this study, the rise of digital society also presents hitherto untapped opportunities for digital contact with the outside world, such as enabling incarcerated individuals to carry out practical tasks like paying bills, finding housing and maintaining contact with welfare services and family members. This indicates a need for further exploration of the ways in which rules and regulations regarding digital contact with outside society are interpreted and implemented by prisons as street-level bureaucracies. Our study indicates that the existing regulations around ICT in prisons can allow for more flexibility and professional discretion in their execution than the currently prevailing practice.

The hasty initiative of implementing 'digital visits' in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 has been described as a "quantum leap" in the use of digital tools in Norwegian prisons (Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021, p. 3). Existing rules and practices regarding digital contact with the outside world were open to reinterpretation, offering new opportunities, and things that had previously been unthinkable within the existing security paradigm could be achieved.

Despite untapped opportunities for digital contact and thus easier re/integration into digital society, digitalisation does not only bring benefits. All communication has both analogue and digital components (Bateson, 1973), and an emphasis on the digital at the expense of the analogue components, such as body language, will render communication less complex and rich. Digitalised communication will therefore never be able to fully substitute for face-to-face interaction. Although digital communication with the outside world may add a 'digital crack' in the prison wall, if 'digital visits' were shown to be a way of saving resources within strained prison budgets and hence come to replace physical visits, rather than complementing them, this would not be without negative consequences.

Another critical point to make is that the digitalisation of welfare society is part of a process of standardisation and individualisation of welfare services (Lupton, 2015; Fugletveit & Sørhaug, 2023). On the one hand, more digital contact between incarcerated persons and public welfare services may solve many practical problems, such as contact with NAV or financial institutions. On the other hand, we also know that the ongoing standardisation of welfare services, which for many of us is timesaving and greatly welcomed, may create new obstacles for those of us who need non-standardised solutions.

Concluding remarks

Even though digitalisation of the welfare state has created new, unintended obstacles to re/integration efforts in prisons, many of these problems were already in existence long before the widespread digitalisation of the last few decades. What might appear as new problems, such as seeking post-release employment and housing, and accessing welfare services in general, are not new, but rather familiar problems in a new context. The dilemmas revealed in this study run much deeper than digitalisation of welfare services and society in general. The inherent tension between simultaneous punishment, security and rehabilitation (Foucault, 1995; Mathiesen, 2006) means that street-level bureaucrats in prisons need to find ways of addressing coexisting goals.

The status quo of very limited digital access in high security prisons clearly hinders re/integration and causes additional pain and problems for the sentenced offender (Ploeg, 2017), as well as increasing the workload of prison employees, for whom managing competing pressures and expectations is already a challenge.

The desired future situation presented in the Norwegian Correctional Service's operational strategy (Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021, p. 19) stands in stark contrast to the realities of practice within the analogue prison bubble. We argue that fulfilling the objective of enabling imprisoned persons to become or remain digital citizens, as laid out in the Correctional Service ICT and Digitalisation Strategy (Norwegian Correctional Service, 2022), will require changes in policy, as well as in the way street-level bureaucrats apply existing rules and regulations regarding incarcerated persons' access to ICT. However, this requires rethinking trust and mistrust regarding incarcerated persons' access to ICT.

We suggest that the contrast between the prison bubble and the outside world in relation to access to, and hence competence in, ICT, exacerbates the backsliding problem.

At the same time, it is also true that expanded access to ICT during incarceration obviously does not solve every problem connected to re/integration, and, moreover, that replacing direct human contact with digital solutions creates new challenges of its own, drawing attention to the importance of face-to-face interaction.

In conclusion, the article calls for a re-evaluation of the understanding of what serving a prison sentence in a digital society should look like. In sum, it advocates for policy changes, emphasising the importance of trust, room for professional discretion, and opportunities for incarcerated persons to have digital access to the welfare state and contact with family members and others of importance in reintegration efforts.

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Notes

1. "The Norwegian Correctional Service shall consider whether a convicted person may be committed directly to a prison with a lower security level if he or she is sentenced to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years" (The Execution of Sentences Act, 2002, § 11).
2. UNESCO (n.d.) defines ICT as a diverse set of technological tools and resources such as computers, telephony (fixed or mobile, satellite, videoconferencing, etc.), and the Internet (websites, blogs and e-mail), etc., used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information.
3. One probation office provided only employees for the interview, a second office only persons serving the last part of their sentence outside prison, and the third office both.

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