



# EDUCATING TOWARDS DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

UNPACKING THE SOCIETAL AND CIVIC  
DIMENSIONS OF DIGITALISATION



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Let me begin by saying that over the next 15 or 20 minutes, I will present insights that are quite basic. And of course I apologize for that. But I believe that what I have to say is important, and hopefully some of you will agree with me, and maybe we can join forces in some kind of revolutionary movement – but that will be after the conference.



In my daily work here at the university, I am interested in how humanities research can be translated into practical solutions. But unfortunately, today, there will be no such specific solutions, only the identification of a significant and pressing societal challenge that arises when digitalization meets democracy.

In case the slide isn't self-explaining... The crocheted statue to the left represents democracy, while the image on the right shows one of the rankings of digitalization where Denmark is always at the top. Please don't try to find a deeper meaning in the pictures – the slides will become better as we go along.

In the presentation my unargued claim will be that universities can play a key role in solving the challenges that arise in the clash between democracy and digitalization. And the good news is that a lot of work is already happening both at Aarhus University and at other universities and institutions. I think this conference testifies to exactly that.

However, it is important to state that a fundamental premise for addressing the challenges that digitalization poses to democracy and citizenship is that we must reinvent education as a democratization project.

This idea that education has a democratic function is ofcourse well-known, but surprisingly it has been almost forgotten in education policy in recent years. So, although I believe higher education should be about employability and the labor market, it must also focus equally on the development of democracy and citizenship.

If we succeed in re-establishing the connection between education and democracy (or citizenship), it will have consequences for how we can think about education. The digital, for better or worse, has become part of our democracy, and therefore it must also be part of our education.

This was the conclusion. I also have a disclaimer: Digitalization is not a single entity but many things, and therefore it has many contradictory consequences. The business leader or high school teacher does not experience digitalization in the same way as the homeless person who constantly loses his mobile phone. This is a basic realization, which also entails that I cannot cover everything in my presentation, but only focus on a single aspect. The story I tell is true, but it is worth remembering that there are many other true stories out there.



I will start with a statue that stands in King's Garden in Copenhagen. The statue shows Viggo Hørup in all his glory. Hørup was born in 1841 and died in 1902. For those who can't recall, he was a member of the Danish Parliament for many years, and he also founded the newspaper Politiken. It is also from Hørup that we get expressions like—and now I'll switch to Danish — “hvad skal det nytte,” “del jer efter anskuelser,” “retssamfund,” and “skæg for sig og snot for sig.”

In the latter half of the 19th century, Viggo Hørup was one of the clearest voices in articulating what Danish democracy should be about, and he has essentially formulated a democratic vision that has greatly influenced how we have understood democracy and, to a large extent, still understand it today.

## The development of citizenship



However, it is not Hørup I want to talk about, but rather the pedestal he stands on. Like the rest of the statue, the pedestal was created by J.F. Willumsen in 1908. The pedestal has three sides, and on it is a frieze that shows the development of democratic citizenship in Denmark throughout history.

On one side of the pedestal, you see a peasant being punished by his lord. This represents the peasant or citizen who has no freedom, no influence, and is merely an object for the whims of the powerful.

On the second side, things get a little better. The peasant - or citizen - has gained access to technology and now owns land, which he can cultivate and earn money from.

But it is only on the third side of the pedestal that we see citizenship and democracy. As you can see the picture depicts a group of citizens gathered in order to discuss matters of common interest. The citizens have moved from being objects of others' power to becoming autonomous, self-reliant individuals who exercise power by virtue of their status as citizens of the Danish state.

I believe we are all familiar with this story, and it's not an exaggeration to say that this

is the archetype of Danish democracy, which we also find in Hal Koch, whom we often quote when praising our democracy. According to Koch, the democratic conversation is the very core of Danish democracy.

It is important to say that there is nothing wrong with the third side of the monument. Rather, the problem is that it is missing a fourth side illustrating how democracy and citizenship would unfold - or should unfold - in a highly digitalized world.

## Image analysis



1. What is happening?
2. Where are they?
3. Who are they?

Unfortunately, I cannot show you how the fourth side of the pedestal should look. I don't know and I cannot draw. But I think we will have to find out. Because the problem right now is that the ideal we have for democracy and citizenship is very far removed from the digital world we live in.

This is precisely what I would like to elaborate on: What happens when democracy and citizenship meet digitalization? My method is visual analysis, which most of you have learned in primary school. What are the actors doing? Where are they? And who are they? The last question is a bit complicated because it involves a discussion of what it even means to be a citizen and a human being.



## What is happening, and where are they?



Autonomous, independent human beings engaged in dialogue

Face-to-face, town square, the village pond



Let me start with the first two questions: What is happening in the image? And where are the actors?

This is easy. The men are engaged in a democratic conversation where they discuss topics of common interest. These men are not politicians, and their task is not to create policies. We have politicians for that. But a key pillar of democracy is that the democratic conversation is alive. But importantly the conversation only works when certain conditions are in place.

For example, it is, according to Hal Koch, necessary that participants in a democratic conversation are curious, sincere, and honest. If they are not, the conversation is destroyed. It stops being a collective exploration of problems and solutions and instead it is reduced to the use of force. Furthermore, the democratic conversation requires autonomous independent human beings who possess a certain level of knowledge about the world. It doesn't have to be expert knowledge, but opinions need to be backed by valid information.

Now to the second question... Where is the conversation taking place? It's a bit hard to see, but it could be by the village pond, in the town square, or at the parish hall -

anyway, the conversation is happening in a physical space. The good news is that these places still exist. We still have community centers, lecture associations, and political meetings. We may not use these places as often as we would like to, but they still exist.

## Implications of digitalization



Internet -> Information, but also misinformation, manipulation, overload of information etc.

Social media -> Everyone can participate, but also polarization, discrimination, hate speech etc.



With digitalization, however, there is a change in both the places where the democratic conversation happens and the challenges it faces. Please note that it's not a question of the democratic conversation suddenly being challenged by digital technologies. It has always been fragile. But still a transformation occurs. The problems become different - and thus, the solutions must be different too.

First of all, digitalization gives us access to an infinite amount of information. In principle this should strengthen democracy, and sometimes it does. But with infinite access to information also comes access to misinformation. As citizens, we must therefore have the ability to think critically and assess validity of the information we get. If we cannot do that, we risk being overwhelmed by too much information or, worse, by misinformation.

At the same time, it's not an innocent change that we now meet on Facebook or other social media platforms and not in the town square. Many of us hoped that this would democratize the democratic conversation. Everyone could now participate in the debate and express their opinions.

Unfortunately, we were too optimistic. We had too much faith in humanity. Because

what often happens is, as you know, that the conversation is polluted by polarization, discrimination, and racism. To such an extent that some people choose to opt out of the conversation entirely.

So, to put it simply: Digitalization has created new meeting places for citizens. But at the same time, we must be aware that it has created encounters that are very far from the ideal of a democratic conversation on which our democracy is built.

It is obvious that knowledge and educational institutions are crucial if we are to solve the democratic challenges posed by digitalization. This also applies to universities, which have a key role in providing high-quality knowledge to the surrounding society. That some parts of society, including some of our politicians, think they don't need to listen to experts and can do without intellectuals is, well, unfortunate.

That being said... universities should not merely act as providers of knowledge packages. On the contrary, universities must take on the role of being institutions for the formation of citizens in the digital age. Also, universities should be and create meeting places for democratic conversations. And they should take responsibility for keeping the democratic conversation on track whenever it is in danger of being derailed.

## Who are they?



Men's club, educated, people,  
human beings (body + soul)



Those were the first two questions, and now we've come to the third: Who are the actors? Here, there are two answers, and this is where things become both complicated and scary.

First: The image depicts only men, which of course reflects the view of citizenship at that time. Democracy was reserved for men - and even only for certain men. Fortunately, things are different today, but we still struggle to include all groups in the democratic conversation.

Another thing we can see in the frieze is that it is humans who are engaged in the dialogue. Humans with body and soul. If you asked Hørup or Willumsen, who made the statue, they would say that the people in the frieze are autonomous, independent individuals. They are free, knowledgeable, and reasonable. They speak, and they listen.

## Implications of digitalization



Redistribution of exclusion

Data harvesting, data doubles, genAI



And perhaps they do. But digitalization challenges these ideas about who participates in democracy.

For example, a report from the Agency of Digital Government showed that about 20% of citizens are digitally vulnerable. Being vulnerable can of course mean many things, but the figure suggests that a rather large group of citizens find that digitalization hasn't strengthened their citizenship but perhaps weakened it instead.

So, digitalization creates new groups of vulnerable citizens, but it also changes the situation for those already considered vulnerable. Being homeless in a digitalized society like Denmark is not the same as being homeless in a more analog society. The same goes for children in foster care, people with dementia, and others we usually label as vulnerable. These citizens' life situations are changing - just as the care they receive from society is changing.

The question of who participates also has a more philosophical and far-reaching dimension. The challenge is that digitalization has brought data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence into the conversation.

In the old days, one could say that a person was body + soul. Today, we might say a

person is body + soul + data. The reason this makes sense is that many of the things we do are recorded as data in public or private databases. These data can then be retrieved and combined with other data. This is how we create digital doubles. We don't need the conversation with all its questions and answers; we can simply search the databases and get answers from the digital doppelgänger.

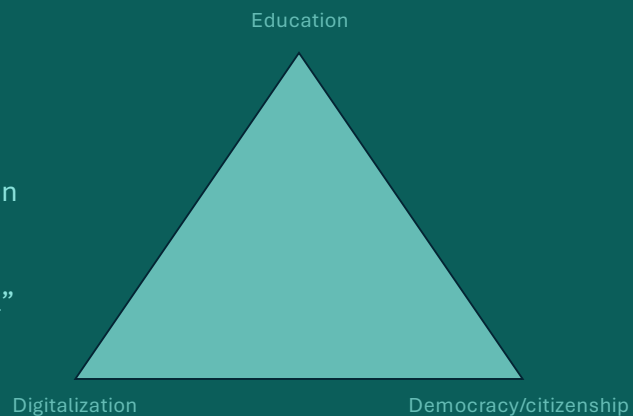
This option makes for a more efficient society in many ways, but one might still be concerned about the consequences of allowing data collection and digital doppelgängers to replace the dialogue in the town square.

But the concern should perhaps be even greater when we look at developments in artificial intelligence over the past few years. So how can we know that the people gathered in the town square aren't really artificial intelligences discussing issues of their interest and deciding the direction they think society should take?

The answer is that Chat GPT and other AIs are already participating. They have already joined the democratic conversation although they have never asked if they were invited to the party. Suddenly and unexpectedly they just showed up.

## Conclusion

1. Digitalization has changed the premises for democracy and citizenship
2. The connection between education and democracy must be restored
3. Education and democracy cannot be understood without “the digital”
4. We must decide what role “the digital” should play in our democracy



I am about to wrap up, but let me repeat the simple yet crucial point. Our idea of the core of democracy is poorly aligned with the reality we live in. And this is largely due to digitalization.

We must find some solutions to this divide. And I am proud to say that three years ago the board of Aarhus University established an interdisciplinary research center precisely to develop such solutions. The center, which has the distinguished name SHAPE – Shaping digital citizenship, is temporary, but hopefully, it will spark a more permanent interest in this important issue.

But, of course, that is not enough. Much more is needed.

First of all, we (as society) must decide what we want from our education system. Those of us who have worked at a university for years perhaps decades clearly feel how universities are now almost exclusively seen as providers of a qualified workforce. Personally, I think it's completely natural that education should prepare people for the labor market. But we also need to broaden the perspective. Education and democracy are linked, and universities play a formative role in developing citizenship, and ensuring the development - not the



decline - of democracy. Perhaps it's time we develop that connection.

Secondly, if we decide to re-establish the relationship between democracy and education, we must rethink how we educate. After years of discussion, we have now introduced technological literacy as an elective subject in primary school. This may be a step forward, but we need to integrate the digital across all levels of the education system - including universities. But this should not merely be seen as learning the students another skill or ability to use yet another tool. The digital should be a civic education project, where the ambition is not just to master technology but to educate young people to be able to shape the society they live in.

Finally: We need to have a democratic conversation about the kind of democracy we want and the role digitalization should play in that democracy. It may seem far-fetched and intangible, but digitalization is already here, and if we don't want it to run away with us, we must make an effort to control it. So, it's important not to ignore that what we call digitalization has significant consequences for democracy and citizenship. Some of these consequences are good and desirable—others are not. And that's why it's high time we equip ourselves for a conversation about digitalization - a conversation that can end with us making some good and necessary decisions.

Thank you!