

The Emergence of Digital Institutions

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Abstract

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Pervasive digitalization reshapes identities and processes of public sector providers, ranging from healthcare to education and justice. Recently, significant research attention has been given to such transformations, but still, there is more to learn about the mechanisms that may lead to the establishment of “digital institutions”. My dissertation seeks to provide empirical and theoretical insights into the dialectic between stability and change that many contemporary institutions encounter. Empirically, the research builds on a nine-year longitudinal interpretative case study of the Swedish Transport Administration (STA) and its efforts to grapple with emerging digital technology. Theoretically, I draw on Zietsma and Lawrence’s (2010) model of institutional work to investigate the purposeful actions of actors to deploy such technology for creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutional boundaries and practices. As such, my research is guided by the following research question: *how do digital institutions emerge and come into being through the interplay of boundary work and practice work?*

Based on the theoretical model and the empirical analysis, I engage in theorizing that contributes to the current understanding of ways to organize digitally induced transformation of institutions and with what effects. First, it identifies and demonstrates exogenous and endogenous digital innovation as a key trigger of transitions between cycles of institutional stability and change. Second, it conceptualizes and illustrates a transformative trajectory in which organizational responses first revolved around entrepreneurial initiatives, then manifested through the creation of a platform solution, and finally focused on the formation of digital strategies. These insights provide a theoretically grounded conceptualization of evolving digital institutions with a particular emphasis on the nature of boundary work, practice work, and their recursive relationships. The recursiveness is the outcome of novel micro-level practices – arising in response to blurred boundaries – that traverse hierarchical levels, ultimately growing the scope and scale of institutional arrangements. At STA, the increasing distribution of innovation agency accelerated the change process whereby the carriers of the institution – artifacts, activities, relational systems, and symbolic systems – gradually became intrinsically interwoven with digital technology. As such, it tells an important story about what the emergence of digital institutions might entail.