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Digitalisation at Any Cost?

Critical Perspectives on Social Sustainability in Sweden's National and Municipal Digitalisation

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Abstract:

This thesis critically examines the discourses shaping Sweden's digitalisation strategies at both national and municipal levels, with a focus on how these strategies engage with principles of social sustainability. My study seeks to bridge the often-overlooked relationship between digitalisation and social justice, highlighting how efficiency-driven narratives can overshadow essential human and democratic values. Drawing on three interrelated theoretical frameworks, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2003), Rosa's Theory of Social Acceleration (2013), and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (2013) the study interrogates the textual, discursive, and social practices underpinning Sweden's National Digitalisation Strategy (2017) and the Digitalisation Strategy for the Municipality of Örnsköldsvik (2017). Through a qualitative CDA approach, the research reveals how digitalisation is predominantly framed as a tool for economic growth, competitiveness, and rapid progress, often neglecting relational, participatory, and ethical dimensions crucial for social sustainability. Key findings indicate that both strategies consistently position citizens as passive users rather than active participants, with discourses of urgency and competitiveness overshadowing democratic deliberation. The analysis highlights a pervasive neoliberal logic, where digitalisation is framed as an inevitable and desirable process that prioritises market efficiency over care, inclusion, and justice. Moreover, while terms like "inclusion" and "trust" are frequently mentioned, they lack operational clarity and meaningful frameworks for participatory engagement. This study underscores the importance of integrating more holistic, inclusive, and justice-oriented perspectives into digitalisation strategies to avoid reinforcing existing social inequalities. By clarifying the ideological underpinnings of policy discourses and their consequences for citizenship and democratic agency, this work contributes to ongoing critical conversations on digital transformation within the welfare state and beyond. Future research should explore pathways for embedding participatory mechanisms and ethical safeguards into digital governance, ensuring that digitalisation serves as a tool for human empowerment rather than control.

Key words: Digitalisation Strategies; Social Sustainability; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Capabilities Approach; Neoliberal Governance

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Introduction:

Let me introduce this research topic, by first acknowledging the intertwined nature of Learning, Digitalisation and Sustainability. While this research is primarily focused on the discursive constructions of *digitalisation* and *social sustainability*, it also contributes to the broader field of *learning* by examining how individuals and institutions are positioned to understand, adapt to, and participate in a rapidly digitalising society. Here, learning is approached not through formal educational settings, but as an informal, situated, and often implicit process of meaning-making and adaptation. Drawing on Nussbaum's (2003) Capabilities Approach, learning can be framed as the continuous process of development of critical agency, practical reason, and substantive freedom. Rosa's (2013) theory of social acceleration further underscores how societal rhythms shape the conditions for learning, what must be learned, at what speed, and with what consequences for those unable to keep pace. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (2013) supports a reflexive inquiry into how discourse becomes both a vehicle for control and a potential site for critical awareness.

Importantly, we can draw inspiration from Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning, which conceptualises learning as an outcome of participation in communities of practice rather than the passive acquisition of knowledge. As Wenger notes, "*learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning"* (Wenger, 1998:96). Policy, in this sense, becomes a kind of learning infrastructure, one that shapes not only actions but also identities and institutional understandings of what is valued, possible, or expected (Wenger, 1998:5-6). In this study, digitalisation strategies are treated as texts through which citizens and institutions are taught to relate to the state, to technology, and to one another in specific ways, thus framing learning as an embedded and ongoing social process.

Turning to the primary focus of this thesis, the relationship between digitalisation and social sustainability has received growing attention in recent scholarship. Researchers such as Dencik and Kaun (2020), Andreassen et al. (2021), and Kaun (2025) have examined how digitalisation processes are shaped by and contribute to broader social dynamics, including issues of equity, participation, and governance. Although digitalisation is widely discussed in policy and academic literature, much of the focus lean towards economic and technological aspects, such as infrastructure development,

innovation, and which could be liked to an efficiency-driven agenda (see for example European Commission (n.d.) on how and why we need to empower people within the generation of technologies especially the Digital Decade policy programme). While digital policy documents often highlight goals such as efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness, less emphasis is sometimes placed on how these strategies engage with social sustainability concerns, such as inclusion and long-term well-being. This study examines how digitalisation strategies discursively construct principles of social sustainability, and explores the extent to which they reflect or challenge existing assumptions about societal development and participation.

Furthermore, while Sweden is considered a global leader in digital transformation, and with a clear aim from the Government which state that Sweden should be **best in the world** when it comes to the utilisation of digitalisation's opportunities (Regeringskansliet, n.d.). It is crucial to examine how effectively the country is working towards this goal and to identify the priorities necessary for achieving it. Understanding how digitalisation strategies address these disparities (or fail to do so) is crucial for ensuring that technological advancements contribute to social cohesion rather than deepening inequalities. The research is attempting to take on an analysis of both Sweden's National Digitalisation Strategy (2017) at the meso level as well as the Digitalisation Strategy for the Municipality of Örnsköldsvik (2017) representing the micro level to enable a discussion where the findings can be contrasted and assessed while giving fruitful insights to the state of digitalisation and social sustainability in Sweden. To investigate this, I am employing a qualitative, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In regards to conceptualising the means to which social sustainability is used and defined in this study let me first be clear that the discourse surrounding sustainability in general is rather complex and definitely context based, hence in this particular research *social sustainability* is understood as the capacity of societies to support equitable participation, inclusion, and human development over time. Drawing on Nussbaum's (2003) Capabilities Approach, it goes beyond material access to digital tools and includes the substantive freedoms individuals need to lead lives they value, such as opportunities for voice, care, and democratic agency. In the context of digitalisation strategies, this perspective highlights the need to assess not only efficiency, but also relational well-being, dignity, and long-term inclusion.

1. Aim and research questions:

The aim of this research is to critically examine the discourses surrounding digitalisation strategies in Sweden at both the national (meso) and municipal (micro) levels. As societies increasingly have turned to digital solutions, it becomes crucial to understand how such strategies were framed in relation to social sustainability. This research sought to uncover the underlying narratives that shaped these digitalisation efforts, particularly in the context of social equity, community engagement, and the inclusive distribution of digital resources. To achieve this aim, I focused on the following overall research question: How is social sustainability discussed in Sweden's national and municipal digitalisation strategies? I also formulated two specific research questions that support my theoretical perspective and help answering my aim:

1. How are capabilities constructed within the Swedish digitalisation strategies?

This question examines how digitalisation efforts are positioned to enhance individual and community capabilities, using Nussbaum's (2003) framework. I am assessing whether these strategies promote essential capabilities, such as access to education and social participation, and identify barriers that may hinder diverse groups from achieving their full potential in the digital world.

2. How are the strategies reflecting the ideology of social acceleration?

This question explores the implications of Rosa's (2013) reasoning and thoughts on social acceleration on community dynamics. I investigate whether the strategies align with a vision that prioritises rapid digital development at the expense of social equity, or if they adopt a more measured approach that considers the effects of acceleration.

2. Previous Research:

The intersection of digitalisation, sustainability, and welfare governance has become a central topic in contemporary social science research, revealing both opportunities and critical challenges. A growing body of literature indicates that while digital transformation is often celebrated for its promises of efficiency and modernisation, it simultaneously risks worsen social inequalities, marginalising vulnerable populations,

and undermining key welfare state principles such as universalism and care. As noted while many critical scholars have emphasised the risks of digital governance, there is also a body of work highlighting the potential for digital tools to improve accessibility, streamline services, and foster innovation in welfare delivery. My study does not reject these benefits but seeks to ensure they are pursued without sacrificing equity, participation, and care and below follows discussions of literature that is representative of the risks rather than potential.

2.1 Digitalisation and Sustainability: Narrow Focus on Efficiency

Santarius and Wagner (2023) systematically review the information and communications technology (ICT) for Sustainability (ICT4S) literature and reveal a significant bias toward efficiency improvements, with sufficiency and systemic transformation receiving little attention. They argue that without broader, more holistic strategies, digitalisation risks reinforcing unsustainable patterns through rebound effects, thus undermining its own promise of contributing to sustainability goals. Here, despite their main focus on the ecological aspect of sustainability their call for integrating sufficiency and structural change within the research and politics of digitalisation it also resonates across other studies that critique the current digitalisation path as being overly focused on technical and economic optimisation, at the expense of social sustainability. Santarius and Wagner (2023) is one of several researchers that push for the need of looking over and account for risks in digitalisation, and highlights that there are more to technologies than optimisation and efficiency.

2.2 Digital Welfare States: Between Care and Control

This tension is particularly evident in the welfare state context. Zakharova et al., (2024) highlight how digitalisation within European welfare states, especially in the Nordic countries, increasingly aligns with logics of control and efficiency, often marginalising the care dimension fundamental to welfare provision. They show that although policies frame digitalisation as enhancing safety and convenience, in practice they often deepen surveillance, reduce citizen agency, and fail to account for diverse lived realities across gender, age, migration status, and geography. Moreover, this erosion results not only from systemic changes but also from our own reticence to embrace voice as a value and to challenge the rules and frameworks that actively suppress it (ibid). And Zakharova et al., (2024) highlights this as important because when systems are heavily engaged in

digitalisation, individualism emerges as a prominent pillar or a desirable moral stance. And when individualism becomes as desirable trend it ultimately supports a welfare state that embraces isolation rather than fostering the inclusive and just societies that European welfare states often claim to support (ibid).

Similarly, Dencik and Kaun (2020) discuss the political implications of datafication in welfare states, showing how algorithmic governance tends to undermine solidarity and universalism, replacing them with profiling and preemptive risk management because the citizen-state relationship is not taken care of in the times of digital transformation. For example datafication in welfare states usually refers to the introduction of automated decision-making (ADM) and refers to *"[…]when decision-making is shaped by algorithms and autonomous systems[…]"*(ibid:3). These types of digital transformations becomes part of a larger change that is happening fast and beyond citizen control which is alarming because the people "*[…] are, like users of other digital infrastructures, largely excluded from technological development at the level of governance and the design process, which limits their possibilities to deliberate on values encoded in the digital infrastructures as well as digital culture at large*" (ibid:3).

Focusing specifically on the Nordic countries, Andreassen et al. (2021) provide a nuanced and timely examination of how digitalisation has accelerated, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlight that the high levels of public trust in state institutions, a historical hallmark of the Nordic welfare states, have contributed to an uncritical acceptance of extensive data collection and automation initiatives across welfare services. This trust, they argue, has facilitated a rapid rollout of digital solutions, yet has also left critical questions around transparency, accountability, and social justice largely unexplored. Andreassen et al. (2021) describe how this ideology of dataism frames data as inherently objective and beneficial, sidelining concerns about algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the social consequences of automated decision-making (ADM).

Kaun (2025) extends this analysis by examining the temporal dimensions of welfare automation in Sweden. Examples include the use of robotic process automation in Sweden's Trelleborg model, where welfare application processing is delegated to algorithms; citizen scoring systems in the United Kingdom; automated fraud detection in the Netherlands (e.g., the SyRI system) (ibid:3-4). These are just a few cases that underscore how automation is not merely a technical intervention, but a high-stakes restructuring of welfare that can both enable and constrain, particularly when

implemented without sufficient democratic oversight or participatory design (ibid). Kaun further identifies patterns of urgency ("now or never"), perceived public sector lag ("always already late"), and endless pilot projects ("perpetual emergence") that drive automation policies, often masking unresolved ethical issues such as bias and reduced accountability. One thing that is appreciated in regards to her work is the analysis of temporality and how it captures both the urgency and the contradictions embedded in digital welfare automation. The trope of ‘now or never’ reflects the dominant narrative that automation is a necessary and inevitable step to modernize welfare services.

Complementary Lussi et al., (2024) investigate how AI ethics principles are operationalised in Swedish welfare governance. Their findings reveal that ethical guidelines are inconsistently translated into practice, and anti-discrimination safeguards often clash with the efficiency-oriented logic of automated decision-making. In digital welfare governance, AI and ADM refer to technologies used to assess, sort, or decide on welfare claims. These systems are designed to improve efficiency but can also reproduce discrimination, lack transparency, and limit individual agency (Lussi et al. (2024). While ADM can approve or deny benefits, detect suspected fraud, or determine which cases require human review such technologies carry significant ethical risks, particularly when used in contexts involving vulnerable populations and complex social needs (ibid). This inconsistency poses risks of systematic discrimination and calls for clearer, unified governance mechanisms. Together, these studies demonstrate that the promises of digitalisation are often entangled with new forms of exclusion and conditionality, challenging the ideals of social sustainability and democratic governance. In reading all the aforementioned work it is clear that there are two sides of the coin when it comes to position the data welfare state as both an opportunity and a risk. On one hand, data-driven governance offers potential improvements in service delivery; on the other, it can entrench inequalities and exclusions if not critically evaluated.

2.3 Policy Documents and the Ideology Behind Digitalisation

Beyond practice, the policy frameworks underpinning digitalisation reveal much about its ideological undercurrents. Heidlund (2024) shows that Sweden’s digitalisation policies, particularly in health and social care, are primarily driven by national competitiveness rather than citizen-centered concerns. His categorisation of nine key drivers highlights a gap between the ambitious rhetoric of becoming a "world leader" in digitalisation and the realities faced by frontline workers, whose work remains grounded

in traditional concerns like efficiency and workload reduction. Heidlund's findings align with broader critiques by Dencik and Kaun (2020) and Zakharova et al. (2024) that policy visions often prioritise economic and technological gains over social sustainability and care, contributing to a widening gap between the ideals of welfare provision and the reality of digitalised governance.

In addition to these critiques, recent research highlights how policy documents do more than just reflect technical realities, they actively shape the meaning of digitalisation itself. Germundsson (2022), drawing on Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach, shows how Swedish policy frames digital automation in social assistance as a neutral and necessary solution to welfare system which focusing on efficiency and transparency while downplaying significant risks such as algorithmic bias and privacy concerns. Germundsson (2022) empathises that this 'problem representation' shapes not only the solutions proposed but also the range of alternatives that are considered legitimate. By framing automation as both neutral and inevitable, policymakers effectively close off discussions about alternative welfare models that might prioritise care, relational work, or participatory design (ibid). Germundsson's analysis challenges us to ask: whose interests are served by representing automation as a given? And who is silenced or excluded in the process? Such representations echo the concerns raised by Zakharova et al. (2024) and Heidlund (2024), where efficiency is prioritised over care, and citizen experience is sidelined.

Similarly, Andersson, et al., (2022) delve into the impacts of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) in a Swedish municipality's social care department. They take a critical look at how digitalisation is reshaping public service work and the policies that promote it. They highlight that Swedish municipalities are under pressure to adopt digital solutions like RPA to "increase efficiency" in response to challenges such as aging populations. A key theme in their critique is the way neoliberal ideologies influence these automation efforts, prioritising market logic and efficiency over genuine care. For instance, "configuring work" refers to the process of reshaping tasks and workflows to align with technological systems, specifically in the context of automation. Andersson et al., (2022) have highlighted three key mechanisms: nudging, where policy goals influence project outcomes without clear definitions; simplifying, which reduces complex social work to fit algorithmic logic; and aligning, where technology's limitations dictate how work is redesigned, often overriding professional ethics. This process highlights the

critique of techno-neutrality, revealing that policy ideologies and power imbalances influence automation and often underscore public service values. This reflects patterns observed by both Kaun (2025) and Lussi et al. (2024), where the pace of innovation often outstrips ethical reflection.

Moving on with Couldry's (2010) central claim that neoliberalism has led to a "crisis of voice", a condition in which individuals lose the ability to meaningfully participate in shaping the decisions that govern their lives. For him "voice" is not merely about expression or consultation, but refers to "*[...] a process – giving an account of oneself and what affects one's life – is an irreducible part of what it means to be human; effective voice (the effective opportunity to have one's voice heard and taken into account) is a human good*" (ibid, 2010:vi). Yet under neoliberal governance, policy and institutional arrangements are structured in ways that deny the value of this voice, subordinating it to the imperatives of market functioning. Moreover, this loss results not only from systemic changes but also from our own reticence to embrace voice as a value and to challenge the rules and frameworks that actively suppress it (ibid). The digitalisation of welfare is a clear example, it may present itself as a neutral technological advancement, but in practice, it aligns with a broader logic that narrows participation, instrumentalises communication, and diminishes citizens' ability to narrate or shape their own conditions.

This neoliberal logic is not simply a policy preference, but, as Couldry (2010) further argues, and defines it as a dominant rationality: "*Neoliberalism, in short, is a 'hegemonic rationality' and, like all rationalities, it reduces the complexities of what it describes. The fundamental term in neoliberalism's reduction of the world is 'market': neoliberalism presents the social world as made up of markets, and spaces of potential competition that need to be organized as markets, blocking other narratives from view*" (ibid, 2010:6). Within this logic, social care is no longer a moral or democratic concern but a site for optimisation.

Carpentier's (2011) provides a valuable lens for understanding how participation is framed and operationalised in the media sphere a dimension that resonates with the ways digitalisation is implemented in welfare governance. Drawing on an interdisciplinary mapping of participation across fields such as democracy, planning, development, arts, and communication, Carpentier shows that participation is a deeply contested concept, always entangled with power relations and ideological struggles (ibid,

15). He distinguishes between minimalist and maximalist participation: minimalist participation confines citizens to consumption or symbolic involvement, while maximalist participation aspires to equal power positions in decision-making (ibid:17).

In the context of welfare digitalisation, Carpentier's analysis aligns with Couldry's (2010) thoughts on the "crisis of voice" and with Heidlund's (2024) observations on the technocratic design of Swedish digitalisation policies. While policy documents may frame citizens as users of digital tools, Carpentier's work reminds us that being able to use technology is not equivalent to having a say in how it is designed or governed. Indeed, participation must be understood and defined as a site of ideological-democratic struggle, where the meanings of participation are negotiated and often strategically narrowed by powerful actors to limit democratic agency (ibid).

2.4 Towards a Critical Perspective on Digital Transformation

Across these studies, a clear pattern emerges, digitalisation is not neutral. Whether discussed in the context of sustainability strategies (Santarius & Wagner, 2023) or welfare state reforms (Zakharova., 2024; Dencik & Kaun, 2020), digital initiatives are deeply political, embodying assumptions about efficiency, control, and modernisation. Yet, this growing literature also points to the possibility, and the necessity, of a more critical, socially attuned digitalisation. Scholars emphasise the need for holistic approaches that foreground care, justice, inclusivity, and sustainability, challenging the narrow efficiency-driven paradigms that currently dominate both research and policy.

In this light, my research seeks to build upon and contribute to these critical conversations by further investigating the social dimensions of digital transformation, particularly in Sweden's welfare state, asking: How can we steer digitalisation towards more just, caring, and sustainable futures?

3. Theoretical frameworks:

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives to critically examine how digitalisation strategies in Sweden frame and construct the concept of social sustainability. While there has been talk of social sustainability quite a lot so far, there is needed to come back to how it is used in this study. As previously introduced, social sustainability in this research is understood as the capacity of digitalisation strategies to foster inclusive, equitable, and participatory societies where all individuals can develop

and exercise their fundamental capabilities. And again drawing on Nussbaum's (2003) Capabilities Approach as a normative anchor, it involves enabling individuals to lead lives they have reason to value, through access to education, meaningful participation, voice, and democratic agency. It thus entails not only formal access to digital technologies, but also the empowerment of citizens as active co-creators of their digital environments, ensuring that digital transformation reduces inequality rather than reproducing it (ibid). Taken together, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2003) , Rosa's Theory of Social Acceleration (2013), as well as Fairclough's Critical Discourse Theory (2013), each of these frameworks are assisting me with lenses through which I view the research problem at hand.

Where Nussbaum provides a normative model of what individuals could be viewed as necessities or fundamental rights to participate in society, Rosa offers a critique of the temporal conditions under which modern institutions operate. Fairclough, in turn, enables a systematic interrogation of the language and power relations embedded in policy texts. Taken together, these frameworks guide both the orientation of the research and the structure of the analysis, allowing for a strong understanding of how digitalisation intersects with inclusion, equity, and the pace of social change.

3.1 Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2003) provides a powerful normative framework for evaluating the quality and justice of public policy. At its core, the Capabilities Approach shifts attention away from material resources or formal rights, focusing instead on what individuals are *actually able to be and* do in their substantive freedoms.

Nussbaum proposes a list of ten central human capabilities. These serve not as fixed outcomes, but as general moral entitlements that each society must work to secure. As she notes: *"[...] the language of capabilities enables us to bypass this troublesome debate. When we speak simply of what people are actually able to do and to be, we do not even give the appearance of privileging a Western idea. Ideas of activity and ability are everywhere, and there is no culture in which people do not ask themselves what they are able to do and what opportunities they have for functioning."* (Nussbaum, 2003:39)

This emphasis on choice, dignity, and opportunity is crucial when analysing whether digitalisation strategies promote genuine empowerment or simply reproduce existing inequalities through access-based rhetoric. In this study, the Capabilities

Approach functions as a normative anchor, helping to assess whether policy discourses support human rights across diverse population groups, or merely promote efficiency without social justice. The ten capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2003) include Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses, Imagination, and Thought, Emotions, Practical Reason, Affiliation, Other Species, Play and, Control over One's Environment. These are thoroughly scrutinised later on in the analysis.

3.2 Rosa's Theory of Social Acceleration

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa's (2013:71) thoughts on social acceleration offers a temporal critique of modern institutions and policies. Rosa argues that the defining condition of late modernity is not merely technological advancement but the increasing pace of social life, institutional change, and individual expectations. He distinguishes between three types of acceleration:

- Technological acceleration: faster production, communication, and transportation.
- Acceleration of social change: rapid transformations in norms, relationships, and institutions.
- Acceleration of the pace of life: the felt pressure to do more in less time, even as efficiency increases.

Rosa's (2011) theory of social acceleration provides an analytically useful lens for examining how digitalisation strategies are framed—particularly in terms of speed, innovation, and responsiveness to global developments. His framework enables an exploration of how the logic of "faster = better" may influence public discourse and institutional priorities, sometimes creating tensions with more deliberative or participatory modes of governance. This is relevant in discussions surrounding welfare, inclusion, and social sustainability, where the pace of change can affect the quality and accessibility of public services (ibid). In this study, Rosa's work is used to interrogate the temporal assumptions embedded in policy discourse. Do strategies create room for democratic deliberation and long-term social well-being, or do they privilege urgency, responsiveness, and constant adaptation? This lens allows me to critique the societal rhythms and values that underlie digital governance and how these may conflict with social sustainability.

3.3 Critical Discourse as Social Theory (Fairclough)

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) functions in this study as both a methodological tool and a theoretical framework. At the theoretical level, Fairclough conceptualises discourse not merely as language-in-use, but as a form of social practice, a means through which ideologies are reproduced, contested, and transformed in society. Discourse, in this view, is inseparable from power and is central to how institutions structure knowledge, identity, and authority.

[...]discourses, genres and styles are categories not only of textual analysis but also of analysis of orders of discourse, which are the discoursal element or moment of social practices, social organisations and social institutions. (Fairclough, 2013:6)

Fairclough (2013:131) further underscores that contemporary social changes, such as the technologisation of welfare services, require analysis at both micro and macro levels. He argues that "*[...]the investigation of change requires a combination of 'micro' forms of analysis (discourse analysis is one) and more 'macro' forms of analysis*" which is relevant as digitalisation is not only a technical shift but can also be viewed as a discursive process that shapes identities, roles, and power relations. Fairclough's insight that "*[...]technologisation of discourse is becoming increasingly prominent as a conscious and strategic intervention to reshape discursive practices[...]"* (ibid:131) is key to understanding how digitalisation is framed as inevitable and beneficial, and how it affects the influence of one's own perspective and one's own experiences of reality, in other words how the subjectivities are shaped at both national and municipal levels. In this study, subjectivities refer to the ways in which individuals are positioned within discourse, how discourses construct particular roles, identities, and modes of agency. Fairclough (2013) conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice that not only reflects but also shapes social relations and identities.

This theoretical perspective provides tools for examining how digitalisation is framed in policy discourse, what is emphasised, what is left out, and how particular values such as efficiency, innovation, or competitiveness may become naturalised. Fairclough's (2013) approach enables an exploration of how institutional language can reflect and potentially reproduce dominant ideological positions, while also highlighting the discursive mechanisms through which power and meaning are negotiated.

4. Methodology:

Moving on, this chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to analyse the discourse of digitalisation and social sustainability in Swedish national and municipal strategy documents. This study adopts a qualitative and abductive research design. The approach is qualitative in that it aims to generate in-depth, contextualised understanding of how meaning is constructed through discourse (Clark et al., 2021). It is abductive because it moves iteratively between theory and data: theoretical frameworks informed the initial orientation of the study, but categories and interpretations were also refined in dialogue with the empirical material (ibid). This reflexive, theory-informed logic aligns with CDA, which assumes that knowledge is socially situated and that discourse is both shaped by and constitutive of social reality (ibid). Here Fairclough's (2013) CDA becomes unique in that it is both a theory of discourse and a method for analysing it. This dual nature blurs traditional boundaries between theory and method. In this study, CDA provides not only a conceptual understanding of how discourse enacts power and ideology, but also a concrete three-dimensional model for analysing texts.

4.1 Methodological Approach: CDA as Research Practice

CDA as particularly developed by Fairclough (2013), provides a structured approach around a three-dimensional model, which allows for analysis at multiple levels. He states that "*[...]each discursive event has three dimensions or facets: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of text, and it is a piece of social practice*" (ibid, 2013:94). As summarised by Clark et al. (2021), Fairclough's model on three interconnected levels includes: the *textual level*, which concerns what is explicitly communicated; the *discursive practice*, which addresses how the text is produced and interpreted; and the *social practice*, which considers the broader societal and institutional contexts in which the discourse operates and the effects it may produce.

This layered framework offers a useful approach for analysing policy texts, which can be written in neutral or technical language yet may also convey underlying political or ideological assumptions. Importantly, Fairclough's CDA is inherently critical and reflexive; It assumes that discourse contributes to the reproduction (or transformation) of social structures and is thus a legitimate object of normative evaluation. This aligns with the goal of not only describing how digitalisation is framed, but also questioning the *implications* of these framings for justice, inclusion, and sustainability.

The term *subjectivities* are essential for this type of analysis and refer to the ways in which individuals and groups are positioned and come to understand themselves within discourse. Drawing on Fairclough (2013), CDA approaches subjectivity not as a fixed personal trait but as something shaped through language and social practices. Fairclough's three-dimensional model highlights that discursive events (such as policy texts on digitalisation) both reflect and shape social relations, including the subject positions they construct for different actors (e.g., citizens, professionals, patients) (ibid:41-44).

By applying CDA, I aim to deconstruct how digitalisation can be naturalised as an inevitable or beneficial process, and to critically assess the social assumptions that underpin these narratives. This aligns with the critical dimension of CDA, which seeks to uncover the power relations embedded in discourse and how they affect agency, justice, and inclusion (ibid:44).

4.2 Empirical Object:

The empirical object of this study is the discourse of social sustainability within Sweden's national and municipal digitalisation strategies. Specifically, the research investigates how social sustainability is constructed and framed in strategy texts and whether these strategies actively promote equitable digital inclusion or reinforce existing inequalities. By analysing both a national and a municipal digitalisation strategy, this study allows for a comparative perspective, assessing potential disparities between policy approaches at different governance levels

4.3 Material:

This research focuses on two key documents that serve as foundational materials for my analysis: the Swedish digitalisation strategy from 2017 (För ett hållbart digitaliserat Sverige – en digitaliseringsstrategi, Regeringskansliet) and the Municipal Digital Strategy for Örnsköldsvik (Digitaliseringsstrategi för Örnsköldsviks kommunkoncern, 2017). These strategies were selected because they reflect how digitalisation is conceptualised and governed at both national and municipal levels in Sweden. They are significant because they represent strategic frameworks that guide digitalisation efforts across different governance levels. Analysing them allowed me to assess how national digitalisation objectives are translated into local implementation practices. Both strategies focus on the overarching areas, including the environment, societal development,

businesses, and individual citizens, and they serve as governing documents that inform policy at corresponding levels.

As a Swedish citizen embedded in this governance landscape, I am directly affected by these strategies. This positionality not only legitimises my engagement with the material but also provides a grounded lens through which to critically examine their structure, language, and audiences. The particular choice of Örnsköldsvik as the municipality for this study is not based on claims of representativeness or uniqueness, but rather on its function as an example of how digitalisation strategies are articulated and enacted at the local level. The municipality was selected due to my personal familiarity and contextual knowledge, having grown up in the area, which provided both access to materials and closeness to the policy context. Importantly, the aim of this study is not to evaluate or scrutinise Örnsköldsvik as a case in itself, but to engage with its digital strategy as a site where broader discursive patterns and policy logics around digitalisation and social sustainability can be examined. While other municipalities, such as Malmö or Umeå, might yield different dynamics, the purpose here is not comparative, but exploratory and illustrative. Furthermore, these documents remained the most current versions of official strategies up until the 28th of May 2025 where a new National Digitalisation Strategy was presented (Regeringskansliet, 2025), which unfortunately was too late for me to engage with in this particular research. However, the fact that a new national and municipal strategy was planned for 2025 (Sveriges Riksdag, 2025), just eight years after the 2017 version, highlights the intensifying tempo of digital governance cycles. In previous decades, long-term policy planning typically spanned 10–20 years, take for example, Agenda 2030 which has 15 years in between its refinement (although this is not a policy but rather a general framework, I hope you get the point). This underscores why it is relevant to examine current strategies: they reflect a policy area in constant motion, shaped by the pressures and pace of technological change. These dynamics are further explored in the analysis chapter through the lens of social acceleration.

Furthermore, analysing these two strategies side by side allows me to investigate how broad national visions are translated, or not, into local realities. While the national strategy outlines overarching goals related to competitiveness, infrastructure, and individual digital competence, the Örnsköldsvik municipal strategy operationalises these aims within a specific local setting. This comparison enables a layered analysis of

discursive alignment, gaps, and silences, particularly around how social dimensions are (or are not) addressed.

The 2017 timing is also analytically productive. These strategies emerged shortly after the European Commission launched its Digital Single Market Strategy (2015), and during a period of heightened political focus on e-government across Europe and in Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag, 2015; European Commision, 2018). Institutions like DIGG, established in 2018, were tasked with realising many of the ambitions first articulated in the 2017 national strategy (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). I can better trace how institutional digital visions crystallised at a particular moment, and how those visions continue to shape practices today. even in the absence of formal updates.

4.4 Operationalisation:

In line with Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this section outlines how the theoretical frameworks are translated into analytical practice across the textual, discursive, and social levels. The goal of my analysis in line with my research aim; critically examine the policy discourse of digitalisation within the Swedish context, to determine how the strategies are engaging with social sustainability. As mentioned before, this research is done as a qualitative CDA, wherein I follow Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model of analysis to work with the written text of the strategy documents. While I am following Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model I am also incorporating Rosa (2013) and Nussbaum (2003) as an integral part of guiding this analysis. One can think of my methodological and theoretical standpoints as supporting my research through the three levels of analysis in the CDA in relation to the national and municipal strategy documents:

Textual level:

- How is acceleration encoded: Words like for example innovation, rapid, leap, progress, streamline, disrupt.
- Is there absence of capabilities language: Are terms like for example dignity, inclusion, freedom, accessibility used meaningfully, or are they tokenistic?

Discursive Practise:

- Intertextuality: Do the strategies refer to EU innovation goals, global competition? Is there a tension between social goals and market logics?

- Genre and Audience: Who are these documents addressing: tech experts, public servants, or citizens? What roles are citizens expected to play? What role has and responsibility has the state?

Social Practise:

- Rosa: How digital strategies reflects the logic of late modernity: does it prioritise speed over democratic deliberation or relational well-being?
- Nussbaum: Which capabilities are central to the strategies, and which are sidelined?

Framework	Main Contribution	My Case
Fairclough (CDA)	Analyses *how* language enacts power, ideology, and identity	Reveals how digital strategies *construct* subjects, roles, time, values
Rosa (Acceleration)	Interprets *temporal pressures* of modernity and their impact on identity, autonomy, and social cohesion	Critiques how digitalisation policies reflect the ideology of "faster = better"
Nussbaum (Capabilities)	Offers a *normative* framework for what people need as fundamental entitlements to function*:* e.g., freedom, dignity, opportunity	Helps me ask: Do the strategies promote conditions in which individuals and communities are entitled to definite, and justified, demands?

Figure 1. Theoretical Operationalisation

The two strategy documents were first read in full to gain an overall understanding of their structure, tone, and objectives. Following this, a more detailed analysis was conducted using a theory-driven coding approach, informed by the concepts from Fairclough, Rosa, and Nussbaum. Key words, phrases, and sections were highlighted based on their relevance to the research questions. The selection of terms was informed by the theoretical frameworks of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and Rosa's theory of social acceleration. Terms such as *dignity, inclusion, freedom,* and *accessibility* reflect concepts associated with human capabilities and social sustainability, and were used to

explore how these ideas are referenced or excluded in the documents. Meanwhile, terms such as *innovation, rapid, leap, progress, streamline,* and *disrupt* are associated with the logic of acceleration, and help to identify how digital change is framed in terms of urgency, modernisation, and efficiency. While the examples listed here reflect key terms guided by the theoretical framework, the analysis was not limited to these alone. Additional terms and phrases were noted where they aligned with themes of temporality, participation, digital governance, or well-being, allowing for an open engagement with the material as patterns emerged. Passages were also flagged for how they constructed the role of the citizen, the temporality of digital change, and the logic of governance.

In line with this approach, the discourse analysis does not only consider what is explicitly stated in the strategies, but also what is implicitly taught, reinforced, or naturalised through language. Terms and framings were examined not only for their thematic relevance to digitalisation and sustainability, but also for how they construct knowledge about institutional priorities, citizen roles, and the expected pace of change. In this way, the strategy documents are treated as texts through which social and institutional learning occurs, shaping how public actors come to understand digital transformation and its governance (Wenger, 1998). This iterative reading process allowed for the emergence of patterns and contradictions, which were then grouped under the three analytical levels defined by Fairclough (2013) (text, discursive practice, social practice). The abductive nature of the study meant that theoretical concepts and codes were refined in parallel with the empirical readings.

5. Analysis

Below follows an in-depth analysis of both the Municipal Digitalisation Strategy of Örnsköldsvik and the Swedish National Digitalisation Strategy (2017). These documents are examined using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA (2013), Rosa's (2013) theory of social acceleration, and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2003). The aim is to understand how digitalisation is discursively constructed, how it shapes subjectivities, and whether it supports or hinders social sustainability. The analysis is organised across three main dimensions: (5.1) Textual Level, (5.2) Discursive Practice, and (5.3) Social Practice. Within each, the similarities and divergences between the national and municipal strategies are analysed to reveal how digitalisation operates ideologically and practically.

5.1 Textual Level

5.1.1 Market-Oriented Vocabulary

From the outset, both the municipal and national strategy frame digitalisation as a clearly positive force, one associated with progress, competitiveness, and streamlined governance.

In the municipal strategy, digitalisation is introduced and frequently framed as a means to achieve progress, increase efficiency, and optimise municipal services. Terms such as "kraftfullt verktyg" (powerful tool) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:2) "effektiv resursanvändning" (efficient resource use) (ibid:2), and "digitala språnget"(the digital leap) (ibid:3) construct digitalisation not as a neutral process, but as an urgent and necessary transformation aligned with managerial logic. These phrases root the strategy in an economic rationality that prioritises speed, cost-efficiency, and competitiveness.

This discourse mirrors the pattern identified by Santarius and Wagner (2023), who argue that much of the ICT for Sustainability (ICT4S) literature, and digital policy, in general, is overwhelmingly biased toward technical optimisation. Without attending to systemic and social dimensions, digitalisation strategies often reproduce unsustainable patterns and exacerbate existing inequalities through rebound effects.

Rosa's (2013:187) concept of dynamic stabilisation is particularly relevant here. The idea that institutions must constantly innovate and accelerate just to remain stable is strikingly present in the language of the strategy. Terms like *"[...]digitala lösningar kan generera för att förbättra och effektivisera service och tjänster."* (digital solutions can act to improve and streamline services) imply that current forms of governance and care are outdated unless made faster or more technologically mediated (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:3). This framing preempts public deliberation about whether digitalisation is desirable in all contexts, instead positioning it as the only legitimate response to future challenges.

The national strategy employs a similar vocabulary, but scales it up to the level of national identity and geopolitical ambition. Terms such as "*bäst i världen*" (best in the world), "*möjligheter*" (opportunities), "innovation", (innovation) "*konkurrenskraft"* (competitiveness), and "*värdeskapande*" (value creation) recur throughout the document, constructing a discourse that equates successful digitalisation with global leadership, economic growth, and modernisation. The repetition of words like *"effektivisering"* (efficiency), "*utveckling*" (development), "*förenkling*" (simplification), and

"*produktivitet*" (productivity) reinforces an instrumental logic, where digitalisation is framed not as a social process but as a means to optimise state functions and market mechanism.

Heidlund's (2024) research provides a direct lens for interpreting this rhetoric. He identifies nine key drivers behind Swedish digitalisation policy (within health and social care), most of which revolve around economic optimisation and institutional efficiency rather than citizen empowerment or welfare enhancement. This efficiency-oriented language also corresponds to what Fairclough (2013:26) identifies as an ideological textual construction, one that naturalises certain assumptions, in this case, the national strategy is casually mentioning that digitalisation is inherently beneficial if it leads to *"högre träffsäkerhet"* (higher accuracy), "*kostnadseffektivitet*" (cost-effectiveness), and a "f*örenklad vardag"* (simplified everyday life) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:8, 14). Notably absent are words that reflect the experiential or affective dimensions of digital transformation, such as *omsorg* (care), *välbefinnande* (well-being), *tillit* (trust), or *delaktighet* (participation in its deeper, co-creative sense). When such terms do appear, they are often mentioned in vague or tokenistic ways, without elaboration on implementation or accountability for example "[…]*digital trygghet innebär att människor, företag och organisationer ska känna tillit till och förtroende i användningen av digitala tjänster samt enkelt kunna använda dem*" (digital security means that people, companies and organizations should feel trust and confidence in the use of digital services and be able to use them easily) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:16), but the national strategy does not specify how trust is to be built, who is responsible for it, or how conflicts of interest are to be resolved.

Terms and concepts associated with social sustainability, relational care, or equity are hence absent as they are only mentioned in relation to an economic logic: "*Alla ska våga lita på digitala tjänster och både vilja och kunna bidra till användningen av dessa"* (Everyone should dare to trust digital services and be both willing and able to contribute to their use) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:16), Participation is framed as instrumental, to get people to use services, not as an open-ended democratic process, just like Carpentier's (2011) statement of minimalist participation models, where citizens are positioned as passive users rather than active co-creators of digital services. Again, as Fairclough (2013:26) reminds us, ideological assumptions often operate not only through what is stated, but through what is systematically left out. The lack of a vocabulary grounded in

social values reflects and reproduces a neoliberal logic where digitalisation is framed as a neutral tool for economic enhancement, and by reducing sustainability to economic efficiency and growth, the national strategy for digitalisation reflects a selective uptake of sustainability discourse that privileges market-oriented outcomes while sidelining the democratic and ethical commitments that are central to a holistic understanding of sustainable development.

Also the competitive global mindset that national strategy and to some extent the municipal one, reveals the underlying acceleration logic described by Rosa (2013:79) as a nation that is imagined as being in a race, where success depends on keeping up with, or surpassing others. The urgency embedded in words like *"snabbt"* (quickly), *"anpassningsförmåga"* (adaptability), and "*driv*" (drive) constructs time as compressed and future-focused, leaving little space for deliberation or critical evaluation of the social consequences of digital change.

5.1.2 Citizens as Passive Users

Both the Örnsköldsvik municipal digitalisation strategy and Sweden's national strategy for digitalisation claim to prioritise inclusion, yet this inclusion can be viewed as discursively constructed in a constrained and passive manner. In the municipal strategy, the citizen is primarily referenced as a recipient of digital services, not as a participant in shaping them. For instance, the strategy states that they should "*[...]ge information och vägledning kring vilka tjänster som erbjuds, hur de används och hur de kan underlätta vardagen*" (give out information and guidance is given to residents to use digital services) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:10), which suggests a model of where the citizen is a receiver rather than included in a participatory design. This conceptualisation reflects what Zakharova et al. (2024) identify as a growing trend in digital welfare governance: citizens are framed as manageable units within a system focused on control, automation, and administrative efficiency, rather than as relational actors with agency and voice.

While there is mention of efforts to reduce exclusion, such as ensuring "*Alla [...] ska kunna att ta del av och utifrån sina egna förutsättningar kunna använda digitala verktyg och tjänster*" (everyone should be able to benefit from digitalisation) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:4), and efforts to enhance accessibility, such as providing platforms in multiple languages ("tillgängliga på flera olika språk och uttryckssätt") (ibid:6) these measures do not necessarily imply meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes or the design of digital platforms. While citizens are invited to use digital tools,

they are not invited to shape or evaluate them. This reflects a distinction that Carpentier (2011) makes between minimalist and maximalist models of participation. In a minimalist model, participation is limited to access or use, citizens are positioned as consumers or end-users of pre-designed systems. In contrast, a maximalist model involves deeper engagement, where citizens can influence decision-making processes, contribute to the design and development of technologies, or participate in the governance structures that shape digital services (ibid:17).

Furthermore, the municipal document repeatedly uses top-down language to define the citizen, for example in phrases like "*[...]servicen till medborgare[...]*" (service to citizens) (ibid:2), which again positions the municipality as the benefactor and the citizen as the dependent beneficiary. These types of phrasings align closely with Dencik and Kaun's (2020) critique of datafied welfare systems, where digital technologies contribute to a shift away from universalism and collective care toward a logic of individualisation and responsibilisation. In this model, the citizen is no longer approached as part of a shared social contract, but is instead governed through personalised data profiles, risk scores, and behavioural expectations (ibid). As they argue, this reframing situates individuals as data subjects responsible for navigating increasingly automated systems, often without meaningful avenues for democratic input or collective negotiation (ibid). In such frameworks, social entitlements can be seen as replaced by systems of pre-emptive assessment, risk categorisation, and conditional access, undermining the democratic basis of welfare services. This observation also resonates with Andreassen et al. (2021), who note that the rapid pace of digitalisation in Nordic welfare systems, particularly within high-trust governance cultures like Sweden's, often unfolds with limited ethical scrutiny and minimal democratic input. In such contexts, the absence of participatory mechanisms can be viewed as not merely incidental which reinforces a logic in which inclusion is measured by access to digital services, rather than by the capacity to influence or shape them.

The National strategy (2017) makes several explicit commitments to inclusion and equal participation. Phrases such as "*[...]delta på ett likvärdigt sätt i samhället[...]*" (participate equally in society) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:13) and that everyone in this case are "*[...]kvinnor och män, flickor och pojkar, oavsett social bakgrund, funktionsförmåga och ålder"* (women and men, girls and boys, regardless of social background, ability, and age) (ibid:13). While the national strategy speaks the language of inclusion, it lacks depth

in articulating how equal participation will be secured across Sweden's diverse population. The discourse appears normatively aligned with values of justice and accessibility, but when examined closely, it falls short in providing actionable commitments or empowering frameworks that would allow all individuals to meaningfully participate in shaping their digital futures. From Nussbaum's (2003) perspective, this has implications for the capabilities approach, which prioritises individuals' substantive freedoms to lead lives they value. If citizens are only positioned as users of predefined services, their capability for political participation, practical reasoning, and control over their environment is potentially undermined. Accessibility alone does not ensure empowerment; what is needed is participatory infrastructure, which is largely absent in this discourse.

This is particularly evident in the discussion of "*digital kompetens*" (digital competence), where individuals are expected to possess the skills needed to navigate digital society. The national strategy states that "*alla ska vara förtrogna med digitala verktyg och tjänster samt ha förmåga att följa med och delta i den digitala utvecklingen utifrån sina förutsättningar"* (everyone should be familiar with digital tools and services and be able to follow and participate in the digital development according to their conditions) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:12). Yet, how these "*förutsättningar*" (conditions) are to be supported or guaranteed remains vague. The state's role is described as offering "*[...]universellt utformade och flexibla lösningar[...]*"(universally designed and flexible solutions) (ibid, 13), but without concrete indicators or funding commitments, this can risk becoming symbolic policy language rather than actionable social strategy.

These representations can also be interpreted as part of a broader learning process. The way citizens are addressed as users of digital services rather than participants in shaping them constructs a model of learning that is largely technical and individualised. Competence, in this framing, is defined by the ability to navigate existing systems rather than to influence or question them. As Rosa (2013:187) notes, in accelerated societies, the pressure to constantly adapt becomes a normative expectation, shaping institutions and individuals alike through what he terms dynamic stabilisation. Within such a framing, learning is reduced to keeping up with technological change, rather than fostering critical engagement or collective agency.

Moreover, both strategies demonstrate a absence of mechanisms to ensure feedback or deliberation. There are no citizen panels, no participatory digital platforms,

and no references to the diverse needs of different user groups. This exclusion reflects what Fairclough (2013:27) identifies as a "restricted order of discourse," where technocratic elites dominate the terms of engagement and marginal voices are systematically excluded. Without structures for participation, the discourse of inclusion becomes performative, present in language, but absent in design.

Additionally, this discursive positioning contributes to a broader neoliberal framing, in which public service delivery is increasingly moulded after market relationships: services are "*offered*," citizens "*choose*" to use them, and success is measured by uptake rather than democratic engagement or collective agency. This is reflected in phrases like "*förenkla kommunikationen med vårdnadshavar*e" (simplify communication with guardians), (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:9) where interaction is seen primarily as a logistical function rather than a relational or ethical one.

Rosa's (2013) thoughts about social acceleration also helps illuminate the implications of this citizen-as-consumer framing. Both strategies focus on automation, connectivity, and responsiveness fosters a temporal regime where responsiveness is valued over reflectiveness. For example, digital platforms are meant to "minska handläggningstider" (reduce processing times), (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:11) reinforcing the expectation that public interaction should be fast, seamless, and depersonalised. This risks diminishing opportunities for slower, dialogical forms of engagement that are essential for genuine democratic life. While the strategy frames digitalisation as a tool to improve services for citizens, it rarely considers what digitalisation might look like with or by citizens. The result is a narrow vision of civic participation, one that risks sidelining broader notions of empowerment, dialogue, and collective agency that are central to both Nussbaum's and Rosa's questioning of modern institutions.

5.1.3 Metaphors of Urgency

In the municipal strategy, stakeholders are encouraged to "*våga tänka uppkopplat, automatiserat och digitalt*" (think connected, automated and digitally) and to embrace "*det digitala språnget*" (the digital leap) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:3). These metaphors convey digitalisation as an imperative rather than a choice, suggesting a normative future that must be accepted uncritically and urgently. The strategy promises that digitalisation will "*förbättra och effektivisera service och tjänster*" (improve and streamline services) (ibid:3). Yet, the inclusion implied in these statements tends to be

defined in terms of access to services rather than agency in shaping them. For instance, citizens are granted access to open data ("medborgare ges möjligheter att jämföra, ta ställning och dra egna slutsatser") (ibid:7) , yet there is no clear articulation of how they are supported to actually engage with or act on this data. It is unclear whether citizens are educated enough, or resourced, to use these tools meaningfully. This raises questions about informational justice and the digital divide, which are only superficially addressed in the document.

This rhetorical pattern reflects what Kaun (2025) identifies as a key feature of welfare automation in Sweden: a regime of "perpetual emergence," where policy is driven by the logic of urgency, "now or never", rather than by careful deliberation or co-creation. According to Kaun (2025), this mode of governance masks unresolved ethical issues and structural exclusion behind a facade of innovation and modernisation. It accelerates policy cycles while sidelining inclusive and reflective processes. In Örnsköldsvik's case, there is no mention of slowing down to consult vulnerable groups or to build participatory digital infrastructure.

The national strategy reinforces this temporal pressure even more explicitly. Here this first statement suits well again where the strategy declares that "*Sverige ska vara bäst i världen på att använda digitaliseringens möjligheter"* (Sweden shall be the best in the world at using the opportunities of digitalisation) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:6, 10). The strategic framing positions digitalisation as a global race, invoking metaphors of national competitiveness and temporal scarcity. Similarly, recurring verbs such as "*driva på utvecklingen*" (drive development), "*ta tillvara möjligheter*" (capitalise on opportunities), and "u*tveckla nya innovativa lösningar*" (develop new and innovative solutions) signal action-oriented, instrumental metaphors, where digitalisation is imagined as a vehicle for productivity, rather than a shared space of democratic negotiation. The citizen is not depicted as a co-navigator of this "journey," but more often as a passive beneficiary of what has been strategically pre-planned and rolled out by the state and market actors.

This discursive construction is closely aligned with Rosa's (2013:79) thoughts on technological systems as accelerating, where individuals are forced to adapt at increasing speeds, while the structures that support equitable participation remain stagnant or inaccessible. In both strategies, urgency becomes a structuring logic that overrides the slower, democratic processes required for inclusive policymaking. The risk here is not only that certain groups are left behind, but that the very definition of inclusion is

transformed, no longer about access to rights or agency, but about one's capacity to "keep up. Also if we look back to the beginning of when the material was introduced the shortening of strategic lifespans to under a decade can illustrate how digitalisation may be framed as an urgent, perpetual process, always in need of updating, refinement, and renewal. This sense of acceleration also aligns with what Rosa's (2013) thoughts where institutions struggle to keep up with the ever-faster rhythms of technological change. In this context, the lack of embeddedness of social sustainability in the strategies becomes even more pressing. When digital policies are renewed rapidly but without mechanisms for democratic engagement or community feedback, critical social dimensions, such as inclusion, equity, and long-term wellbeing, are at risk of being overlooked or treated as secondary (ibid).

Capabilities such as *practical reason* (the ability to reflect and make informed choices), *affiliation* (the ability to engage with others on equal terms), and *control over one's environment* (the ability to participate in political decision-making) are all implicitly undermined when urgency dictates policy timelines. While both strategies mention inclusion, they do not acknowledge that real inclusion requires time: time to learn, to adapt, to deliberate, and to make collective decisions. As Nussbaum (2003:39) emphasises, capabilities must not only exist formally but must be practically attainable. Yet under these strategies, the tempo of digital transformation appears to exclude those who cannot immediately meet its demands, particularly those facing structural inequalities or time poverty.

5.1.4 Tensions and Contradictions

Both the municipal and national digitalisation strategies present digitalisation as a means for progress and inclusion. However, a closer analysis reveals a consistent contradiction between their hopeful language about fairness, sustainability, and participation, and the practical approaches used to frame and justify digitalisation. These tensions highlight a fundamental divide: while the strategies express support for social sustainability, the prevailing mindset remains focused on market-driven interests, rapid change, and technocratic governance if we look though the theoretical lenses as above.

In the municipal strategy, this contradiction is clearest in the treatment of environmental sustainability. The strategy briefly mentions digitalisation as not only described as a means to enhance efficiency but also as a vehicle for ecological sustainability. This is evident in statements such as "*digitala lösningar ska leda till*

mindre handläggningstider och effektivare stöd" and "[...]ersätta miljökrävande processer [...]med digitala tjänster [...]" (digital solutions should lead to shorter processing times and replace environmentally demanding processes) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:11-12). However, these solutions are not framed in ecological terms, but as means of increasing administrative efficiency and reducing costs.

Another example is the recurring use of vague and future-oriented language to describe responsibilities. For example, the municipality promises to create "*smarta tjänster och plattformar som utgår från medborgarens behov*" (smart services and platforms based on the citizen's needs) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:7), yet there is no elaboration on how these needs are identified, who defines them, or how competing needs are balanced. The passive voice and generalised actor references serve to obscure the political nature of these decisions, presenting them as technocratic solutions rather than contested social practices. This aligns with Fairclough's (2013:33) point that powerful institutions naturalise their preferred ideologies, making them seem rational and inevitable, rather than open to debate or alternative viewpoints. That "smart services" automatically align with "citizens' needs" is presented as a neutral truth, not a political claim with competing interpretations.

This instrumental framing mirrors what Heidlund (2024) identifies in his critique of Swedish digitalisation policy: the dominant drivers are national competitiveness and productivity, not citizen well-being. Heidlund's finds that digitalisation in Sweden is enacted to serve institutional legitimacy and economic efficiency which explains why values like care, participation, and justice are often invoked rhetorically, but not substantively embedded.

The national strategy reveals similar contradictions in terms of showing a selective treatment of sustainability. While *ekonomisk hållbarhet* (economic sustainability) and *miljömässig hållbarhet* (environmental sustainability) are addressed, *social hållbarhet* (social sustainability) is often only implied. In some places, environmental concerns are celebrated, such as when intelligent transport systems are described as contributing to "*minskad klimatpåverkan"* (reduced climate impact) (ibid:32). Yet this is later contradicted by the acknowledgment of *rekyleffekter* (rebound effects), where increased efficiency could actually lead to more consumption and environmental strain. Instead of resolving this contradiction, the strategy merely notes the risk and moves on, suggesting a reluctance to challenge growth-driven paradigms. This

supports Santarius and Wagner's (2023) critique that ICT strategies too often reinforce unsustainable practices through an uncritical embrace of technological fixes. Instead of encouraging sufficiency or systemic change, the strategies in this case present sustainability as a by-product of efficiency and innovation, an orientation that limits their transformative potential.

Another important tension arises in the strategy's treatment of democracy and participation. The document emphasises that "*[...]det digitala samhället [ska] genomsyras av ett demokratiskt synsätt[...]*" (the digital society should be permeated by a democratic perspective) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:17), and that individuals must be able to "*känna tillit*" (feel trust) and "*ta del av*" (take part in) digital services. However, these democratic values are framed as outcomes to be achieved through technological solutions, rather than as processes requiring active citizen voice and deliberation. There is no mention of participatory mechanisms, public consultations, or inclusive governance in the design or implementation of digital systems. This can be viewed as a contradiction between the ideal of democracy and the technocratic, top-down framing of digitalisation.

There is a temporal tension, which reflects what Rosa (2013:21) identifies as the internal contradiction of accelerated societies. The strategy recognises that "*utvecklingen av digital teknik sker snabbt*" (the development of digital technology is happening quickly) and that this "*kräver flexibilitet och anpassningsförmåga*" (requires flexibility and adaptability) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:18). However, it never pauses to ask whether this speed is desirable, manageable, or socially sustainable. Instead, urgency and adaptability are treated as naturalised imperatives.

Nussbaum (2003) can help to illuminate the ethical implications of these contradictions. Capabilities such as affiliation, practical reason, and control over one's environment require not just access, but empowerment, something the strategy acknowledges only superficially. The individual is framed as a digitally literate, self-managing actor, rather than someone embedded in structural conditions that may enable or constrain their participation. As such, the discourse leans toward a neoliberal (negative liberty) logic of responsibilities, where individuals are expected to adapt to systemic demands with limited systemic support (ibid:38).

This is evident in how both strategies avoid confronting systemic barriers to inclusion. There are no mechanisms for ongoing feedback, citizen consultation, or participatory evaluation of digital tools. Instead, inclusion is assumed to be achieved

through access and usability. However, as Dencik and Kaun (2020) argue, inclusion in the age of datafication cannot simply mean being part of a system, it must involve agency within it. Their work shows how algorithmic systems often depoliticise governance and undermine solidarity by treating users as data subjects rather than rights-bearing citizens. This framing resonates with the strategies' silence on digital surveillance, data ethics, or institutional accountability.

5.2 Discursive Practice

5.2.1 Production

The production of both the national and municipal digitalisation strategies appears to reflect a centralised and institutionally driven process. Neither document offers explicit information about the drafting process, such as who contributed, whether consultations were held, or what mechanisms, if any were in place for public input. This absence of detail suggests a limited degree of participatory transparency, which raises questions about how these strategies are positioned in terms of audience and authorship. Rather than inviting deliberation or shared ownership, the documents present themselves as already-formed visions, ready for implementation. This framing aligns with what Fairclough (2013) describes as a technocratic mode of discourse production, where decisions are communicated as technical solutions rather than socially negotiated outcomes.

The national strategy, created by Regeringskansliet, seems to lack input from civil society organizations and marginalised communities. It does not mention any public consultations or collaborative efforts, instead focusing on aligning with broader EU frameworks and international standards, which gives it a rather technocratic feel (Regeringskansliet, 2017:6-7). Similarly, the municipal strategy appears to have been developed within the municipal organisation without outside contributions or consultations. While it aims to guide the entire municipal organisation, it primarily addresses committee's and administrations (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:3), missing the opportunity to engage frontline workers and digitally excluded groups, such as the elderly or people with disabilities, despite its noble intention to foster a society where everyone can participate.

This top-down construction aligns closely with Germundsson's (2022) analysis of Swedish digitalisation discourse, where national policy actors frame digital automation as a politically neutral solution to an overburdened welfare system. Drawing on Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach, Germundsson shows how the

problem is pre-constructed by institutional elites and then solved through automation without questioning underlying assumptions or involving frontline professionals, service users, or vulnerable populations. This mirrors the absence of civil society or community actors in the strategies examined here and reinforces a logic in which technological change is imposed rather than co-created.

Similarly, Andersson et al. (2022) find that the internal design of automation systems within municipalities often involves what they call "configuring work" a managerial and technical process that constructs the boundaries of digital tools based on organisational convenience and institutional priorities. Though some local actors are involved, their participation is constrained by the predefined frames and limitations of the technologies themselves. The strategies in this case appear to reflect the same process: public administrators and IT planners set the terms of engagement, while the broader public is excluded from shaping the vision.

As Fairclough (2013:27) argues, control over discourse production enables dominant actors to stabilise particular narratives while marginalising alternatives. In this case, the production of both strategies seems to be dominated by institutional elites who operate without accountability to the public. The absence of consultation with civil society or marginalised communities effectively narrows the discursive space and reinforces what Heidlund (2024) critiques as the "competitive-national" orientation of Swedish digital policy: a framework that privileges institutional interests over participatory democracy or social care.

5.2.2 Distribution

While both strategies are publicly available online, their modes of distribution and linguistic presentation suggest an institutional focus. The national strategy is disseminated through government websites, press releases, and digital policy portals. It is written in formal policy language, without summaries, visual aids, or explanatory material aimed at non-expert audiences. Although additional outreach may have occurred, such as media coverage, this is not clearly referenced or embedded in the strategy itself. The document appears to be directed toward institutional actors such as civil servants, policy professionals, and digital coordinators, rather than the general public or specific citizen groups.

Similarly, the Örnsköldsvik strategy is accessible on the municipality's website. While it may have been mentioned in local media or shared through internal channels, its

language and structure indicate that the primary intended audience is internal, municipal departments and administrative staff. There is little in the document that gestures toward wider public engagement or makes the strategy accessible to non-specialist readers. This raises questions about how participation is imagined in the production and circulation of such texts. Although digitalisation affects citizens broadly, strategies of this kind tend to frame the public more as users or recipients of services than as contributors to the strategic vision itself as we have seen in the textual analysis under Citizens as Passive Users. It is also worth considering that these documents are primarily written to guide institutions, which are, in turn, composed of workers, public officials, and professionals with their own forms of lived experience. Yet the question remains whether this mode of indirect representation adequately captures the perspectives of those most affected by digital transformation, particularly in a welfare context.

Germundsson (2022) argues that the discourse around digital automation in Sweden is shaped by elite actors who speak in abstract, technocratic terms, leaving little room for public contestation or diverse narrative perspectives. Even when digitalisation is framed as a collective benefit, the language and platforms used to communicate policy are tailored for insiders, administrators, developers, and policymakers, rather than citizens or communities. Andersson et al. (2022) highlight a similar disconnect in their study although automation was being introduced into welfare services with public impact, the communications surrounding it remained internally focused and exclusionary. This closed circle of distribution reinforces what Rosa (2013:254) might call the self-referential tempo of institutional acceleration: policies are written, distributed, and implemented rapidly within elite circles, while the broader public has little time or support to understand, contest, or influence them. The absence of deliberative mechanisms in distribution, such as public forums, translated summaries, or targeted engagement efforts, means that the discourse circulates within the political space rather than publicly.

Moreover, Couldry's (2010) concept of *voice*, understood as the capacity to express perspectives that are recognised as meaningful within the public sphere, is relevant when considering the distribution and accessibility of digitalisation strategies. When dissemination practices offer limited opportunities for engagement, interpretation, or response, they risk narrowing the discursive space in which affected publics might otherwise participate (ibid). In such cases, policy strategies may function less as communicative tools intended to foster public dialogue, and more as instruments of

institutional coordination. While this may reflect the administrative purpose of such documents, it also raises questions about how inclusion is framed not as dialogic engagement, but as information delivery.

5.2.3 Consumption

Given the documents' production and distribution profiles, the primary consumers of both strategies are institutional actors: public administrators, municipal planners, policy implementers, and IT developers. This is evident in the way the strategies are framed. They define how educators, businesses, and healthcare providers are expected to adapt, yet it provides no mutual structure through which these groups can shape the process or respond critically.

This echoes what Andersson et al. (2022) found out in terms of that the public sector digitalisation processes often restructure work and service delivery to fit the technological system, not the other way around. Service users and frontline workers are reimagined as passive recipients of a redefined service logic, with little space to shape or resist these changes. they resonate that participation in digitalisation is not a matter of shared decision-making but of adapting to preconfigured structures (ibid).

Dencik and Kaun's (2020) findings also resonate here, algorithmic welfare systems tend to reduce democratic participation to individual compliance, undermining solidaristic values and collective agency. The strategies examined here present a similar vision of digitalisation as a one-way flow of expectations from government to citizen, with no institutionalised feedback loops, digital democracy tools, or public forums. Couldry (2010) pushes these thoughts further by showing that what is at stake is not merely participation but the value of voice itself. When people are addressed only as data subjects or passive consumers of digital systems, their political agency is weakened (ibid). Inclusion, in this framing, is not about shaping one's future but complying with a pre-scripted one.

Moreover, there is no feedback infrastructure or participatory evaluation process evident in either strategy. There are no digital democracy tools, no forums for comment, and no reporting mechanisms for affected communities. Nussbaum's (2003:45) emphasis on *"control over one's environment"* as a key capability is therefore particularly instructive. Without the institutional space to shape or contest digitalisation processes, the public's capacity for democratic participation is systematically constrained. Inclusion

becomes a matter of compliance, the ability to consume digital services not the ability to meaningfully shape them.

5.3 Social Practice

5.3.1 Acceleration Ideology / Temporal Pressures

At the level of social practice, both the national and municipal digitalisation strategies seems to reflect a broader ideological commitment to acceleration, the belief that speed, innovation, and adaptability are essential conditions for societal progress. As conceptualised by Rosa (2013:187), this ideology of dynamic stabilisation suggests that institutions must continuously accelerate in order to maintain legitimacy and function. This is visible in the language and structuring of both policy documents, which frame digital transformation as urgent, inevitable, and universally beneficial, with little room for protest or alternative temporalities.

The municipal strategy is full of metaphors and imperatives that construct digitalisation as a non-negotiable leap forward. For example, it urges municipal actors to *"[...]våga tänka uppkopplat, automatiserat och digitalt"* (dare to think automised and digitally) and repeatedly invokes to take *"[...]det digitala språnget"* (the digital leap) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:3). This rhetoric implies that hesitation is equivalent to going backwards, and that technological adaptation must occur fast to maintain relevance. The muncicpal and national strategy justifies digitalisation through references to *"snabbare företagsetablering"* (faster business establishment), *"effektiv resursanvändning"* (efficient use of resources), and *"ökad attraktionskraft"* (increased attractiveness). These terms can all be related to a temporal logic in which legitimacy is tied to continual performance improvement and economic dynamism a classic expression of Rosa's thoughts in regards to the social acceleration (2013:21)

The national strategy amplifies this logic further on an even larger scale. Again, with the bold ambition that *"Sverige ska vara bäst i världen på att använda digitaliseringens möjligheter"* (Sweden shall be the best in the world at using the opportunities of digitalisation) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:6), immediately framing digital transformation as a competitive race as mentioned before under the textual level of analysis. The strategy calls for a society characterised by the *"snabba teknikutveckling"* (rapid technological development), *"ökad anpassningsförmåga"* (increased adaptability), and *"livslångt lärande"* (lifelong learning) (ibid:18), reinforcing the expectation that citizens, institutions, and services must evolve constantly and rapidly.

Digitalisation can be viewed not as a deliberative reform, but as an urgent imperative requiring immediate and continual action. These framings suggest that both individuals and institutions must continuously adapt and evolve, positioning learning as a response to technological acceleration. However, this construction of learning is largely oriented toward technical competence and responsiveness, rather than deliberation, reflexivity, or collective meaning-making. There is little reflection on the broader conditions that enable or constrain learning across different social groups. Rosa (2013) mentions that when societal acceleration outpaces the capacity for institutional synchronisation, democratic processes may become strained, leading to a disconnect between governance systems and citizens' lived temporalities. This concern is echoed in the absence of attention to how acceleration might intersect with temporal inequalities or cognitive burdens, issues particularly relevant for citizens with limited time or technological capital.

From a learning perspective, this highlights the limits of a policy model that equates learning with individual adaptability. While lifelong learning is presented as a goal, it is framed primarily as an instrumental task aligned with economic and technological demands. There is little acknowledgement of learning as a social, institutional, or dialogic process, or of the need for inclusive pacing and structural conditions that support critical engagement and participation over time. This contrasts with Wenger's (1998:4-5) conception of learning as fundamentally social, emerging through participation in communities of practice where identities, norms, and shared understandings are co-constructed. In this way, the strategies contribute to a model of learning that is continuous, but not necessarily transformative, a form of governance learning that prioritises speed over reflection, and adaptation over agency.

However, neither strategy reflects on the consequences of this accelerative logic, particularly how it may marginalise those who cannot keep pace. Rosa (2013:64-69) warns that acceleration without synchronisation leads to democratic erosion, where institutions operate at a tempo disconnected from citizens' lived time. This concern is evident here: while both strategies stress technological momentum, neither acknowledges the need for inclusive pacing, time for learning, or slow, participatory governance structures. There is no discussion of how acceleration might affect stress, mental health, or digital fatigue, nor how it might impact those already facing *temporal scarcity*, such as caregivers, elderly individuals, or economically disadvantaged groups.

The most personal and socially consequential form that Rosa (2013:65) investigates in involves an increase in the number of actions, tasks, and expectations per unit of time. Importantly, Rosa argues that this arises not directly from technological acceleration, but from a mismatch: when the *rate of social growth* (e.g. how much we must do) outpaces the *rate of acceleration* (e.g. how fast we can do it), time scarcity and stress intensify. Even though we can do things faster, we feel increasingly short on time. This is because we do more, not less. The strategies exemplify this logic: rather than using digitalisation to reduce workloads or increase collective temporal control, they intensify expectations across all sectors of society. This is particularly visible in how free time is not reallocated instead, the strategies multiply the number of digital tasks expected from citizens, teachers, social workers, and administrators.

5.3.2 Capabilities Gaps

To deepen the analysis of the social implications of Sweden's national and municipal digitalisation strategies, Nussbaum's (2003) Capabilities Approach offers a powerful normative lens. Her model identifies ten central human capabilities that together constitute a life worthy of human dignity. While all capabilities are relevant to assessing social sustainability, this section focuses on those most mentioned throughout the textual and discursive layer and represents those capabilities that are closely connected to digitalisation's potential to either support or undermine social well-being: Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses, Imagination, and Thought, Affiliation, Practical Reason, and Control Over One's Environment. These dimensions foreground the social side of sustainability, equity, participation, and dignity, that is often overshadowed by the strategies' emphasis on efficiency and competitiveness.

Life and Bodily Health are foundational capabilities that ground a person's ability to live a flourishing life of normal length and quality. Both the national and municipal strategies acknowledge, albeit indirectly, that digitalisation can impact daily life and health. The national strategy references digital tools improving daily life but does not directly interrogate how digital environments might also contribute to harms such as mental health strain, digital burnout, or algorithmic discrimination. Livskvalitet (quality of life) is implicitly valued, yet there is no explicit reflection on how digitalisation might degrade as well as enhance well-being. Similarly, while the national strategy references the potential of digitalisation to improve healthcare services, through AI diagnostics or digital health records, and aims to enhance access to public services via digital platforms

(Regeringskansliet, 2017:14), it offers little detail on how equitable access for elderly or digitally excluded populations will be ensured. The focus remains on system improvement, not on health justice. The municipal strategy, too, references health care in purely instrumental terms, celebrating digitalisation's potential to produce "*effektiva vårdflöden*" (efficient care flows) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:4). Here, care is reduced to a logistical challenge rather than understood as a relational process tied to human dignity and life outcomes.

Bodily Integrity, encompassing autonomy, privacy, and protection from exploitation, is similarly underdeveloped. While the national strategy mentions *säkerhet* (security) and *tillit* (trust), its approach to privacy is functional rather than rights-based. The focus on *digital identitet* (digital identity) and *cybersäkerhet (*cybersecurity) centres on operational security rather than on personal autonomy or meaningful consent (Regeringskansliet, 2017:18). The municipal strategy briefly references the importance of "*information om hur känsliga uppgifter hanteras*" (how sensitive data is handled) (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:10), but fails to specify how data rights are protected, how algorithmic biases are addressed, or how citizens can exercise control over their personal information. As Lussi et al. (2024) highlight, Sweden's uneven application of ethical standards in welfare automation undermines individual autonomy and bodily integrity.

Senses, Imagination, and Thought are capabilities central to education, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural expression. The national strategy places significant emphasis on *digital kompetens* (digital competence) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:13), particularly within schools, and notes that libraries should be part of efforts to boost digital skills nationwide. However, this focus frames digital literacy primarily in economic terms, as a job skill to enhance national competitiveness, rather than as a means to foster critical reflection, creative expression, or cultural participation. This instrumental focus subordinates imagination and freedom of thought to productivity goals. The municipal strategy reflects a similar approach, overlooking opportunities for digitalisation to enhance artistic expression or communal experiences.

Affiliation, the ability to live with others, participate in society, and be treated with dignity, is a cornerstone of social sustainability. While the national strategy uses inclusive language, such as references to "*alla människor*" (all people) and "*ta del av digitaliseringens möjligheter*" (sharing in the opportunities of digitalisation) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:12), it does not articulate how to address intersectional barriers

or to ensure meaningful participation. *Digital delaktighet* (digital inclusion) is referenced as a goal, but there is no roadmap for achieving it. Participation is framed largely as adoption, getting people to use services, rather than as a process of co-creating the digital society. The municipal strategy is similarly vague, gesturing toward inclusion without detailing mechanisms for community involvement, shared governance, or participatory decision-making.

Practical Reason, to be able to form a conception of the good and to critically plan one's life, is only superficially addressed. The national strategy assumes that individuals will make rational choices to retrain, adapt, or engage digitally, yet fails to provide the tools necessary to navigate an increasingly complex digital landscape. It references "*källkritiskt förhållningssätt*" (critical media literacy) (Regeringskansliet, 2017:13) as essential to a digital society, but confines this largely to the school context, leaving out broader adult education or community-based initiatives. The municipal strategy mentions "*vägledning*" (guidance) but does not outline how this will empower citizens with critical digital literacy (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:10). Both strategies expect citizens to interact with open data portals, automated platforms, and digital services, yet provide no support for building reflective and evaluative skills. This creates a significant capability gap: citizens may be handed digital tools but lack the epistemic freedom to use them critically or to challenge their limitations.

Control Over One's Environment, both political and material, is perhaps the most strikingly absent from the strategies. Politically, citizens have no formal role in shaping the direction of digital policy. Neither strategy mentions public consultations or participatory governance mechanisms to democratise digital decision-making. Economically, while the national strategy encourages broadband expansion, it places the responsibility on individuals to secure access, assuming that all citizens have the time, devices, and financial resources to engage with digital services. Broadband is frequently mentioned as a priority (Regeringskansliet, 2017:33), with emphasis on national, regional, and local collaboration to ensure coverage; yet how individual citizens are supposed to obtain high-speed connections is left to their own capability. As a result, citizens are doubly marginalized: excluded from decision-making processes and assumed to have the resources to participate in digital life on their own terms.

While this analysis has prioritised capabilities most obviously linked to social sustainability, some of Nussbaum's remaining capabilities also reveal unexpected

insights that deepen our understanding of the social practice dimension. Play, for example, is almost entirely absent from both national and municipal strategies. The national strategy fails to address how digital technologies might enhance leisure, artistic expression, or cultural experiences (Regeringskansliet, 2017). This exclusion reflects a narrow, utilitarian perspective on digital life, reducing it to mere productivity rather than embracing human expression, creativity, and joy, core elements of a dignified life. The municipal strategy similarly overlooks the potential of digitalisation to enrich cultural participation or support community-based leisure activities, which is significant, considering that municipalities often support such activities, like as sports and club life but instead chooses to focusing on efficiency and economic innovation (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017).

Another often-overlooked dimension is Other Species, which concerns our relationship with animals and the environment. While the national strategy briefly acknowledges the role of digitalisation in supporting environmental goals, such as *cirkulär ekonomi* (circular economy) and climate impact (Regeringskansliet, 2017:32), it also warns of *rekyleffekter* (rebound effects) that may undermine these gains. Yet these tensions are left unresolved, and nature is ultimately instrumentalised as a means to achieve growth. The municipal strategy, too, emphasises reduced emissions through digitalisation (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017:12) without considering the ecological costs of increased digital infrastructure, such as energy use, e-waste, or resource extraction. While these latter capabilities may initially appear somewhat irrelevant, their exclusion highlights a deeper challenge: digitalisation policy discourses often fail to grasp the full complexity of human, and ecological, well-being. By excluding capabilities like Play and Other Species from meaningful consideration, these strategies miss opportunities to cultivate a digital society that not only functions efficiently but also nurtures creativity, community, and ecological stewardship, core elements of any genuinely sustainable society.

Taken together, these capability gaps reveal a profound tension in how digitalisation is framed in Sweden's national and municipal strategies. While social values are nominally present, through references to inclusion, trust, and security, they can at the same time relate to an efficiency-driven, market-oriented logic. As Fairclough (2013:26) argues, ideological assumptions often operate through what is systematically left out as much as through what is stated.

6. Limitations

My position as a researcher, reflects on the limitations of the study, and clarifies the ethical considerations that have guided my work. By making my position clear and acknowledging the boundaries of my research design, I aim to ensure transparency, integrity, and adherence to the principles of good research practice (god forskningssed) as outlined by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024).

6.1 Reflexivity

Throughout this study, I have been mindful of my position as a Swedish citizen embedded in the governance landscape that my thesis seeks to critique. This positionality means that my interpretations are not neutral but shaped by my background, experiences, and values. As recommended by Vetenskapsrådet (2024, Chapter 2.2), it is essential to practice transparency and honesty in acknowledging and reflecting on the researcher's influence on the research process. Being personally affected by the digitalisation strategies I analyse has allowed me to engage critically and empathetically with the documents. This study is informed by a critical perspective on digitalisation, particularly in the context of welfare governance. My goal has not been to present a balanced or comprehensive overview of all positions on digital transformation, but to interrogate the ways in which certain values, priorities, and assumptions are embedded in strategic policy discourse. The choice of theoretical frameworks, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, Rosa's theory of social acceleration, and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis reflects this orientation. At the same time, I recognise that these perspectives represent just one way of approaching the topic, and that digitalisation in welfare states is a contested field with multiple interpretations and values at play. By making my theoretical and analytical stance explicit, my intention is not to claim objectivity, but to offer a situated and transparent contribution to the broader conversation.

6.2 Methodological Reflections

This study adopts a qualitative, abductive research design, primarily guided by Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as both a theoretical and methodological framework. The layered CDA approach, analysing textual, discursive, and social levels, has enabled me to explore the interplay between language, power, and policy discourse in Sweden's digitalisation strategies.

A limitation of this approach is the focus on only two strategy documents: the Swedish National Digitalisation Strategy (2017) and the Digitalisation Strategy for the Municipality of Örnsköldsvik (2017). While these documents provide valuable insights into policy framings, they do not encompass the full breadth of digitalisation practices across Sweden or the lived experiences of diverse stakeholders. Furthermore, my analysis is based solely on written policy texts and does not incorporate interviews or participatory methods that might have added further empirical depth.

Fairclough's (2013) CDA, although well-suited to reveal underlying power structures, is inherently interpretive and relies on the researcher's judgment in selecting excerpts and determining their significance. I have strived to mitigate this subjectivity by ensuring transparency, academic honesty, and systematic documentation of my analytical process Finally, although CDA encourages reflexivity, it does not claim neutrality. The interpretive nature of discourse analysis means that alternative readings are possible. Yet, it is precisely through this critical stance that my study offers its contribution: surfacing ideological tensions, normative assumptions, and the structural silences of policy documents (Vetenskapsrådet 2024, Chapters 2.2 and 3.1).

6.3 Ethical Considerations

This study is based on the analysis of publicly available policy documents, which means that issues such as informed consent and data confidentiality are not directly applicable, since no personal data or direct human participants were involved. However, I consider it essential to align my research with the principles of good research practice as defined by Vetenskapsrådet (2024), including honesty, transparency, respect, and responsibility (ibid, Chapter 2.2). As a Swedish citizen and stakeholder in the digitalisation strategies under investigation, I acknowledge that my proximity to the topic may carry preconceptions. In line with the principle of self-reflection emphasized by Vetenskapsrådet (2024). Throughout the research process, I have maintained a reflexive stance, recognising that my analysis is shaped by particular theoretical commitments and critical perspectives. While this study does not claim neutrality, I have aimed to approach the material with care, seeking to avoid misrepresentation or interpretations of the policy documents or the institutions behind them. Rather than offering definitive judgments, my intention has been to contribute to a broader dialogue about digitalisation and social sustainability, highlighting how certain discursive framings may influence participation, inclusion, and governance.

This approach is grounded in the belief that critical engagement can coexist with respectful analysis, and that raising questions is part of a constructive democratic process. Lastly, I have adhered to principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate citation of all sources and maintaining transparency in my analytical process, in accordance with Swedish Research Council's guidelines.

7. Conclusion and Future Research

This thesis has critically examined how digitalisation strategies in Sweden construct, include, or sideline principles of social sustainability. Through analysis of the national and municipal strategies, a consistent pattern emerged and tendencies of digitalisation being framed as a race, a competitive imperative, and a technocratic solution to societal challenges apeared. While these strategies make claims of inclusion and accessibility, their underlying logic prioritises speed, economic efficiency, and institutional optimisation over care, justice, or democratic participation. At first glance, these findings may not be surprising. In a highly digitalised country like Sweden, which openly aspires to be "the best in the world" at seizing digital opportunities, it may seem inevitable that strategies would reflect such ambition. However, it is precisely this normalisation, the idea that faster is better, that innovation is always good, and that inclusion is a matter of access rather than agency, that demands critique.

In addition to contributing to understandings of digitalisation and social sustainability, let us return to the aspect of *learning*, which was introduced at the outset as a meta-level, socially embedded process. The analysis has shown that learning, as it occurs within and through policy discourse, is often framed in terms of individual adaptability and operational efficiency. Institutional learning appears oriented toward technological innovation and alignment, with limited space for participatory reflection, critical engagement, or deliberative pacing. Citizens are largely positioned as end-users of pre-defined systems, which can reinforce a mode of governance learning that values implementation over dialogue. Returning to the broader conceptualisation of learning outlined in the introduction, drawing on Nussbaum, Rosa, Fairclough, and Wenger, a more expansive and reflexive view of learning would involve institutions not only disseminating knowledge but also engaging in processes of listening, co-construction, and identity formation. Such an approach could enable digitalisation strategies that are

more responsive to diverse lived experiences and more inclusive in shaping the futures they seek to govern.

Moreover, these strategies do not emerge in isolation. They are shaped by wider pressures: the European Union's digital transformation goals, the demands of global competition, and a broader neoliberal logic that equates progress with acceleration. But policies are not just reflections of external forces, they are also choices. And Sweden, with its long-standing commitment to democratic values, welfare equity, and social cohesion, is uniquely positioned to make different ones.

In addressing **RQ1 – How are human capabilities constructed within the strategies?** the analysis show that capabilities are often framed in a narrow, technocratic sense, focused on skills acquisition and digital literacy, rather than on substantive freedoms or agency. While both the National Digitalisation Strategy (Regeringskansliet, 2017) and the Municipal Strategy (Örnsköldsviks kommun, 2017) acknowledge inclusion and participation, these are primarily framed as ensuring access to technology and basic services, rather than fostering conditions for meaningful deliberation, collective decision-making, or the exercise of voice as defined by Couldry (2010). Couldry's concept of voice is especially illuminating here where voice is not merely the right to express oneself, but as the effective opportunity to be heard and taken into account in decisions that affect one's life. This concept reveals the limitations of the strategies' treatment of inclusion as mere access, rather than as an ongoing, dialogic process of empowerment and co-creation of the digital future.

Heidlund's (2024) empirical work can also support this finding by demonstrating that Sweden's digitalisation policies, particularly in health and social care, prioritise institutional competitiveness over the lived realities of frontline workers and service users. His categorisation of nine key drivers of digitalisation highlights a systemic bias towards efficiency and market logic, which resonates with Fairclough's (2013) critique of how dominant discourses naturalise particular ideological positions while marginalising alternatives. As this thesis shows, discourses of digitalisation often mix inclusion with technological competence, leaving little space for the relational, affective, and political dimensions of human dignity that Nussbaum (2003) identifies as fundamental entitlements.

Moving on to answering **RQ2 – How do the strategies reflect the ideology of social acceleration?** The analysis reveals a pronounced temporal orientation towards

urgency, speed, and constant innovation. This aligns closely with Rosa's (2013) thoughts on social acceleration whereby institutions must continually accelerate to maintain legitimacy. Both strategies position Sweden as a global leader in digitalisation, invoking phrases such as "*digitala språnget*" (the digital leap) and ambitions to be "*bäst i världen*" (the best in the world). These discourses create a sense of perpetual emergence (Kaun, 2025), where digital transformation is always already urgent, leaving little room for democratic deliberation or reflexive policy-making. This temporal pressure reinforces a neoliberal logic in which efficiency and competition overshadow questions of care, solidarity, and social justice, echoing Dencik and Kaun's (2020) critique of algorithmic governance in the welfare state as well as Couldry (2010) hint at the neoliberal stance diminishes the citizen voice.

This thesis suggests that there is another path. One where Sweden could choose to lead not by being the fastest or most "competitive," but by being the most *just*, *inclusive*, and *human-centred*. Digitalisation need not exclude slower, more participatory processes. In fact, social sustainability demands them. Citizens deserve more than access to services, they deserve a role in shaping them. Policies must create space for deliberation, not just implementation. Time must be seen not as a constraint, but as a condition for genuine inclusion. Do we really need to be the best in the world? Or can we lead in a new direction, one that centres people, capabilities, and democratic dialogue? This is not a question of technological capacity, but of political will.

Future research could explore these questions further through empirical studies that centre the voices of those most often excluded from digitalisation narratives. Ethnographic work on lived experiences of digital exclusion, as well as participatory policy design, could bring much-needed nuance to ongoing debates. Additionally, as new national and municipal strategies are released, critical comparative analysis will be essential to tracking whether, and how, Sweden shifts course. Building on Heidlund's (2024) participatory policy design approaches and Couldry's (2010) notion of voice and Andersson (2022) and Germundsson's (2022) call for more socially engaged digital governance, future research should prioritise ethnographic and participatory studies that foreground the experiences of those most affected by digital exclusion and algorithmic governance. Such work can challenge the dominance of efficiency-driven discourses and open up space for alternative narratives that prioritise care, justice, and collective agency. Comparative studies that track the evolution of Sweden's digitalisation strategies over

time could also reveal whether recent policy iterations incorporate more inclusive, human-centred perspectives, or whether they continue to reinforce the competitive-national logics identified in this stud

In the end, this thesis argues that digitalisation is not merely a technical journey. It is a deeply political project. And in any democracy worth its name, people, not just systems, must remain at its heart.

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