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The Visiocracy of the Social Security Mobile App in Australia

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Abstract

This paper examines the forms of life established through the visual governance of the Australian social security mobile app (application) – the *Express Plus Centrelink* app. It is argued that the app exceeds established accounts of juridical and administrative power. The app involves a seeing that is not public, a responding that is not writing and a de-materialisation of an institution and its disciplinary apparatus. It is argued that the app creates proto-literate subjects that are required to respond to a real-time sequence of images in a highly structured and circumscribed manner to become complicit in the digitalisation of their life.

Keywords

Visiocracy, Social Security Law, Mobile Devices, e-governance, surveillance, power

1 Introduction

Thinking the visual forms and modus of state power in modern society has tended to focus on two forms. One was juridical power known by spectacle and publicity; of justice being seen to

be done. The other was administrative power; Weber's empire of rationality and archives. Together these offered a detailed and comprehensive account of modern power. However, the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT) with the features of instantaneousness, automation and pervasiveness suggests the need to rethink the deployment and operation of power in digital societies [47, 75].

This paper considers this rethink through a remarkable yet mundane piece of digital e-governance disruption; the 2012 release in Australia of smart phone applications (apps) for social security recipients. The major app – *Express Plus Centrelink*¹ – is a primary coloured, icon driven mobile interface that reconfigures features of juridical and administrative power. With its need for a particular spatio-visual literacy to decode its 'braided' icons, in its parody of the aesthetics of a social media platform, in its direct interface into the Department of Human Service's data flow, and in its real-time notifications, the app requires a significantly different analytical schema than the established notions of state power.

What follows is in three sections. The first section looks to modernity's visual division of power; of the spectacle of the juridical and the behind the scenes of administration. It contextualises this dichotomy through considering the bifurcated existence of Australia's social security regime. The second section dives into the disruption of the *Express Plus Centrelink* app highlighting how neither juridical spectacle nor administration efficiency accounts for the forms of life and relations that it establishes. The third section attempts to unpack the visioracy of the social security app. In particular it draws upon theorisation of the visual sequence within comic theory to sketch an account of the cyborg subjectification of the smart phone equipped Australian welfare recipient; a subject that is not required to read but is required to respond to a real-time sequence of images to become complicit in the digitalisation of their life.

2 The Visual Modes of Modern Government

In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault designated the visual as a hallmark of the juridical. There was a tying together of power and spectacle in the pageantry of punishment. Justice was not just done – but was needed to be seen to be done on the very body of the offender [30: 34-71]. However, this focus on the visual of the juridical can be contrasted with the other form of

¹ Please note that this is not the only mobile app used for access to government services, but one of an expanding suit of 'MyGov' smart device applications [24].

power in modernity; that, to use Foucault term, of ‘discipline’ [30: 135-228]. Although its target was also the body, the aesthetics of its technologies and apparatuses were different. Absence from discipline was public spectacle. There was no pageantry meant to be seen by all in the workhouse or factory, rather discipline occurred in the psychological privacy of the self with routine, structure and engendering expectations. Power flowed through the self-disciplining of the individual. The visual panoptic was internalised in the mind – in other words, there was more self-reflection and somewhat less throwing of rotten vegetables at the criminal in the stocks. In discipline power become rational; it became administration, Max Weber’s empire of paper, rules, and regulation.² The physical manifestations of administration were still seen – the prison, the school, the rule-book – however, their meaning was not prescribed on their visual surface as was with manifestations of juridical power. The school, the departmental offices or prison became bland and similar looking with few visual clues to distinguish which segment of the population that institution was targeting. The rule-book, correctional guide, or departmental policy was simply writing on paper which lacked the obvious pomp and denotations of juridical power.

Foucault would later suggest that juridical power and discipline were not historically separate but coexist, both forms of power directed to ‘government’, the science of managing populations [31:102]. This dichotomy between law’s more archaic modus in the visual and administration’s behind the scenes reason and paper has informed understandings of the workings of power in modern societies [8, 18, 52, 81, 20].

The aesthetic division between the judicial and administrative power can be identified in the Australian welfare payment regime.³ The juridical elements are easy to identify. There is a series of spectacular pageants played out in the public sphere that denote law being known, seen and enforced.

Immediately, the texts of law that authorises the regime have a certain form and look. Two Acts of Commonwealth Parliament establish current the Australian welfare payment system – the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth) and the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) [9, 87]. Both are heralded with the Commonwealth of Australia’s Coat of Arms (Figure 1)⁴. This

² For more on this point see, for example, Webers work on bureaucratic legal authority,[101: 329-342].

³ On the history of the welfare payment regime see [69].

⁴ Permission to reproduce the Commonwealth Coat of Arms granted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Detail on the Coat of Arms can be found at <http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/coat-arms/index.cfm> last accessed 12 July 2016. On the evolution of the Australian Coat of Arms see [76].

Coat of Arms, a hybrid of the heraldic icons with indigenous Australian fauna and flora, demarks two specific relationships. First is the shield, shield bearers, stars and the integration of the icons of the once separate Australian colonies to project a federated whole. This shield, the protecting might of government, the imagery of celestial bodies and the demarking a one made up of a many, are classic declarations of authority [36]. Second are the imageries specific to Australia; the kangaroo, emu and wattle [97]. There is a direct telling in the construction of the Coat of Arms as a hybrid image. There is a demarking of nation with a set of quintessential Western and Northern aesthetics organising definitional antipodean icons. It says that authority and law as it has been known in the West and North governs in Great Southern Land.



Figure 1: Commonwealth of Australia Coat of Arms (Stylised) as appears in the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth)

Beyond this rather brutal visual demarking of law's empire in the Coat of Arms, there is the recurring public pageantry of social security fraud. This is played out in courts, in the media and in the official announcements of agents of government. The most law-centric event is the discipline and punishment on show in the criminal prosecutions of welfare fraud. An example is *Zaky v R* [105], the New South Wales Court of Criminal Appeal hearing of an appeal of a sentence imposed for welfare fraud. The court is told that Zaky, a middle aged woman with children, through a decade long deception defrauded the Commonwealth of \$27,374.78 and was sentenced to 20 months custodial imprisonment by the District Court of New South Wales on 28 November 2014 [105: [8-9]]. While this case is exceptional in that Zaky was able to secure funding for the appeal and was successful on appeal in having the custodial sentence overturned, it represents an everyday spectacle occurring in the lower level criminal courts throughout Australia of welfare recipients, particularly women social welfare recipients, being processed by juridical governance [61, 103, 94, 73]. Indeed, the Department of Human Services

recommended 1366 recipients to be prosecuted for the reporting period July 2014 to June 2015 [24].

Like the US and the UK the prosecution of welfare recipients in Australia has a wider public spectacle within print media reporting of fraud and punishment [56, 15]. With sensationalist headlines like ‘Blowtorch on Benefit Fraudsters’ [102], ‘Grandmother Jailed’ [39] and ‘Millionaire’s Wife Centrelink Fraud’ [16], reporting of social security prosecutions is a regular feature, particularly within the regional newspapers⁵ The framing elements of these reports are quite stable; the recipient’s actions are presented as outrageous and reprehensible and the punishment as just and fair. The reporting is complicit, with the fourth estate promoting general deterrence through staging the spectacle of welfare wrongdoing and punishment.

This spectacle of welfare wrongdoing and punishment has a further visualisation in public narratives about ‘dole-bludgers’ [2], ‘fraud crackdowns’ [100] and reducing government expenditure that features within public statements by ministers and politicians. For example in a joint media release on 3 March 2016 titled ‘Ensuring Welfare Integrity’ the Ministers for Social Services and Human Services talk of ‘[o]ne percent of Australia’s population has received money they are not entitled to and owe a debt to the other 99% of Australians’ and ‘[i]t is disturbing that individuals have in some cases deliberately cheated taxpayers out of hundreds of thousands of dollars’ [96].⁶ This bifurcation of the population into a lawful majority being swindled by a lawless minority of ‘cheats’ has a final visual and juridical manifestation in the peer surveillance regimes that encourage Australians to – as it was called when first established in 1997 – “‘dob-in” a dole bludger’ [68]. This peer surveillance of generating ‘public denunciations’ has had a shifting technological character moving from a telephone hotline in the analogue 1990s to the current interactive online form (complete with warnings not use the browser back arrows in case critical data is lost).⁷ It suggests an Australian

⁵ See for example [1, 63, 91, 88; 14].

⁶ The joint statement was directed to the recovery of overpayments process and not fraud prosecution directly. However, these processes are linked. Identification of an overpayment and the raising of a debt is the precursor process that identifies a recipient who should be further investigated to see if the overpayment arose from fraudulent conduct. Further the language of ‘deliberately cheated taxpayers’ suggests fraud. On the relations between overpayment and prosecution for fraud in Australia see [94].

⁷ There are several web pages that funnel individuals to the interactive online fraud reporting form. These are <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/contact-us/reporting-fraud> (last accessed 13 July 2016); <https://www.dss.gov.au/contact/reporting-suspected-fraud> (last accessed 13 July 2016). The entry link to the reporting form is at https://www.centrelink.gov.au/wps/portal/clk_common/TORS#stay (last accessed 13 July 2016). Also, please note that the telephone line is still operational.

society of ‘horizontal surveillance’ [41] where individuals within the body politic directly contribute to juridical governance through seeing and reporting on lawbreaking.

Parallel to these very public and visual manifestations of juridical power there is the much less seen daily administrative working of the welfare payment regime by the administering department, the Department of Human Services, trading as ‘Centrelink’⁸, where thousands of public servants and ICT/computers investigate and make decisions about entitlements, eligibility, payments rates and relationship status, many which have become automated [94]. While the Acts of Parliament that establish the welfare payment regime, the criminal prosecutions, media reporting and Ministerial statements are meant to be seen and heard, the goings-on within the Departmental offices, on the other hand, are ostensibly private between the ‘customers’⁹ and the Department.

This does not mean that there is not a visual economy associated with the administrative dimensions of the welfare payment regime; just that it has not nurtured a public face. The visual representations are more coded and opaque. Foremost are the bland office buildings and shopfronts with ‘Centrelink’ signage and logos through which the Department conducts its affairs. These do not suggest the law and justice like the Coat of Arms and criminal trials; rather some form of corporate commercial activity. See, for example, the *Guide to the Social Security Law* that the Department officers use to determine eligibility and payment rates. This, in contrast to the actual legislation, lacks many of the formal symbolism of law: a declaration of commencement and the numbered sections (See Figure 2). Rather it is technical and procedural – full of acronyms, examples and intra-textual hyperlinked references – directed to ensuring consistent and efficient decisions are made.

⁸ On the complicated mutations and transmogrification of the administering department; from Department of Social Security in the 1980s, to a separate statutory body ‘Centrelink’, to the reintegration of Centrelink into the Department of Human Services see [42].

⁹ In the most recent Annual Report the recipients of payments administered by the Department are referred to as ‘customers’ [24]. This nomenclature has its roots in neoliberal reforms of the late 1990s see [85, 11].

3.2.1.10 Qualification for NSA

Summary

This topic outlines the qualification criteria for NSA and the following subjects that relate to qualification:

- people with a partial capacity to work (1.1.P.65),
- principal carers (1.1.P.41),
- NSA SCV holders, and
- requirement for a proper claim.

Qualification (1.1.Q.10) criteria

To qualify for NSA a person must meet ALL of the criteria listed in the following table. Where more detail about a criterion is required, the second column indicates where you will find this.

Criterion	More Detail
ALL of the following	
Be unemployed (1.1.U.30), AND <i>Explanation: The term unemployed is very specifically defined for this purpose and has particular meaning in relation to qualification of people with a partial capacity to work or who are principal carers (see below table for more detail). In certain circumstances, people who are in paid work can still be considered unemployed for NSA. Because of the complexities of this criterion, it is separately detailed at 3.2.2.</i>	SS Guide 3.2.2 Who is Unemployed for NSA?
Satisfy the activity test (1.1.M.160), AND <i>Explanation: This is the legislative term used to describe a person's participation requirements and obligations to satisfy the terms of their individual EPP. Requiring job seekers to meet the activity test means that Centrelink and employment services providers can be sure that they are actively looking for work and doing everything that they can to become ready for work, or are participating in the paid labour market to the extent required.</i>	3.2.8 Mutual Obligation Requirements for NSA/YA Job Seekers, 3.2.9 Mutual Obligation Requirements for NSA/YA Job Seekers - Suitable Activities, 3.2.9.210 Suitable Activity - Principal Carer
Satisfy the terms of EPPs (1.1.J.2) they have entered into, AND <i>Explanation: All job seekers without an activity test exemption (3.2.9) receiving NSA or YA must enter into an EPP specifying what they will need to do to meet their activity test requirements and the help they will receive to get work.</i>	3.2.8 Mutual Obligation Requirements for NSA/YA Job Seekers, 3.2.11 Mutual Obligation Requirements for NSA/YA - Exemptions
Be 22 years or over but under age pension age, AND	SSAct section 23(SA) to section 23(SD)
Be an Australian resident, OR a certain SCV holder currently in Australia, AND	SS Guide 3.1.1 Residence Requirements This topic
Not be subject to an AoS <i>Explanation: An AoS is a commitment by one or more Australian residents to provide financial support to a new resident and repay the Commonwealth certain social security payments, if such payments are made to the new resident while the AoS is in force.</i>	1.1.A.310 Assuree, assurer, assurance of support, assurance of support security

Act reference: SSAct section 23(SA) Pension age, section 23(SB) A woman born before 1 July 1955 reaches pension age when..., section 23(SC) A woman born within the period specified..., section 23(SD) A woman born within the period specified..., section 593

Qualification for newstart allowance, section 7(2) An Australian resident is...

Policy reference: SS Guide 1.1.G.58 Grandfathering arrangements (NSA) pre 1 July 2012

People with a partial capacity to work

ESAs or JCAs inform whether a person has a partial capacity to work. ESAs or JCAs may also inform the types of activities a NSA recipient will be required to undertake to their capacity in order to meet activity test requirements.

For NSA purposes a recipient has a partial capacity to work if they have a physical, intellectual or psychiatric impairment and they are assessed as being unable to work, or to be trained for work of, at least 30 hours a week independently of support within the next 2 years.

A recipient's work capacity at the time of assessment and work capacity within 2 years with intervention will be determined via an ESA or JCA. Work capacity is assessed in bandwidths of 0-7 hours per week, 8-14 hours per week, 15-22 hours per week, 23-29 hours per week or 30 plus hours per week.

<http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/5/2/1/10>

1/2

Figure 2: Extract from the Guide to Social Security Law (Version 1.222 Released 1 July 2016) 3.2.1.10 Qualification for NSA available at <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/2/1/10> accessed 14 July 2016.

For the past 20 years the trajectory of reform within the juridical manifestation of Australian welfare payment regime has been the neoliberal agenda of creating active citizens through rehabilitating recipients from the dependence and passivity engendered by the older welfare state [10, 104, 67, 50, 19]. For the same time period the reform agenda within the Department has been the digitalisation of administrative systems and the automation of decision making [45, 48, 49]. Nevertheless, the visual logic separating these two aspects of the regime remained. Neoliberal reforms were framed by a juridical aesthetic of the state being seen to publically punish recipients [86], while the roll-out of ICT capacity within the Department occurred relatively unobserved [46:51-52], gradually announced after the fact in Departmental annual reports as achieving efficiencies.¹⁰

This pattern of disclosure in an annual report after implementation, along with framing the implementation as achieving efficiencies is demonstrated in the 2012-2013 Annual Report

¹⁰ For example in 2014 it was announced that 'digital forensic capability was implemented to better gather evidence held on computers and other electronic devices' [23:145], in 2011 announced it established a digital media section responsible for social media engagement [21: 45] in 2005 the then independent Centrelink reported that adoption of Windows XP as delivering 'productivity gains' though 'automation of common administrative tasks as a way of reducing set-up and ongoing support costs' [13:168].

where the Department announced that it had ‘responded to customer expectations and developed a suite of mobile apps. These apps meet a growing customer demand for convenient and flexible access to our services.’ [22: 32]. These apps become available for ‘customers’ to download via the Google Play and Apple stores in August 2012 [23: 110].¹¹ The Department immediately claimed the apps as achieving efficiencies. In response to a Commonwealth Ombudsman investigation into poor service, the Department suggested that the new apps were a better and more time effective means of engaging with its ‘customers’ than the established methods of face-to-face meetings in a ‘Centrelink’ branded office or via a telephone call centre [74: 3, 12-13, 16, 30, 63]. In the 2014-2015 Annual Report the Department herald the mobile apps as a ‘popular and convenient way for customers to engage with government services’ [24: 156] and substantiating this with the claim that: ‘Since their introduction the department’s Express Plus mobile apps have been downloaded more than 4.9 million times. In 2014–15 over 61 million transactions were completed compared to 36 million in 2013–14’ [24: 156].

The initial suite of apps, all titled ‘Express Plus’ were focused on particular payment categories such as students (ie *Express Plus Student*) and had a range of functions allowing users to undertake reporting task (such as fortnightly earnings) and basic administrative tasks (like updating personal details) [22: 33]. Many of these apps were combined into a more fully featured single *Express Plus Centrelink* app in 2014 [23].

The positive assessment of the apps by the Department has not been universal. As an app made available as digital content through third-party commercial platforms, recipients have taken full advantage of the opportunity for posting reviews. Soon after the 2014 release of *Express Plus Centrelink* apps several Australian media sites had stories that compiled posted comments [83, 92, 84]. Indeed, as at July 2016 the ‘Express Plus Centrelink’ app had a 1.5/5 rating on Apple’s iTunes store [29] and 3/5 on Google Play [28]; with a long list of reviews listing bugs and crashes. For example ‘Courting Mac’ comments:

I have tried for hours to upload a document that the department of human services called me and asked for this morning, and every time it says that this service is unavailable. If my claim gets shut down because I haven’t submitted it in time I will not sit and take it silently! This needs to be fixed ASAP! This is a pathetic excuse for an app.¹²

¹¹ On the use by the Department of the term ‘customers’ see [43, 44].

¹² Apple iTunes/App Store comment titled ‘Shocking Service’ by Courting Mac posted 7 July 2016 [29].

There is much going on in this hastily written response. At one level it sounds like the angry retort of the powerless given voice. At another it speaks to technical faults that might have serious consequences for ‘Courting Mac’s’ income support payments and it also suggests a form of compulsion from the Department to use the app. However, overarching is a new image of an individual not engaging with the welfare payment regime as a subject within the juridical frame of courts and punishment, nor as recipient within the bland administrative frame of processes and departmental offices and officers, but through a handheld device running Apple’s OS operating system. It has become trite to use the term ‘disruption’ in relation to the digital [57], however there seems something very disruptive in ‘Courting Mac’s’ seemingly coerced, but at the time of posting the comments, unsuccessful attempt to interact with the Department through taps and swipes on a small touchscreen.

3 The Disruption of the *Express Plus Centrelink* App

This section explores the disruption of the *Express Plus Centrelink* app. It begins by formally describing what it is and how welfare recipients are meant to engage with it. In doing so it will be shown how neither juridical spectacle nor administration efficiency accounts for the forms of life and relations that it establishes.

According to the Department’s own material the *Express Plus Centrelink* app is simply a way to do ‘business with us’ [27]. This ‘business’ is further defined into specific tasks and activities that a recipient can instigate:

- update your contact details
- update your participation or study details
- view your online letters
- view your payments and transaction history
- capture and upload documents
- report your employment income
- view, estimate and update your family income estimate

- manage your BasicsCard¹³ if you are income managed, including view your balances and recent transactions [27].

What is less clear are benefits and functionality to the Department from a recipient using the app. *Prima facie* the comments that the Department provided to the Ombudsman suggesting that the app improved recipients' engagement suggests the app was introduced with 'customer' care in mind [74: 3: 12-13, 16, 30, 63]. However, there is possibly more driving the production and the use of the apps than responsibility to recipients.¹⁴ In facilitating routine obligations on recipients to provide data directly into the Department's servers –bypassing expensive and fleshy officers who previously would have had to receive that data in analogue from the recipient and then entered it into the system – there are probably cost savings to the Department [51]. Further, the description of the app is not one-directional. There is a suggestion that the app allows the Department to send 'reminders to report, or requests for you to provide up to date information or documents' [27]. Indeed, immediately on downloading the app it asks permission to send push notifications and access the phone's GPS locator. This suggests not only the potential convenience of the app for recipients, but that the Department is utilising the features of the technology.

The main screen of the app visualises some of the immediate tensions identified concerning who this app is for (see Figure 3). It is split into rectangular touch sensitive icons. In the centre are two photographs. On the left there is an image of a young man seemingly helping an older woman using a tablet device; on the right an unshaven and relaxed man holds a young child. All four are not facing the camera. The three adults' faces are not widely smiling but not upset. The child looks less than happy. At the top is a blue rectangle that has the recipient's name. Underneath are four different size rectangles. To the left is an inbox linking to letters from the Department. In the centre top rectangle shows the amount of the last payment. Beneath is a rectangle detailing the number of tasks that require attention linked to the task screen. To the right is a square called appointments with a stylised lined image of a bedside alarm clock. In

¹³ The BasicCard is an electronic fund transfer card issued to recipients who are 'income managed.' The BasicCard can only be used at specific retailers and cannot be used for the purchasing of alcohol, tobacco or gambling. On the effect of the BasicCard and income management in Aboriginal communities see [80, 70].

¹⁴ Please note that we do not discount the very real improvements in access to government services for those who have limited mobility, do not have easy access to transport, or are located in region and remote Australia from the app and other ICT technologies. For example, the Department has adopted high definition video conferencing technology to conduct 'face-to-face services...focusing on customers who may find it difficult to visit a service centre' [24: 157] has much potential to support isolated individuals and families. However, critical analysis of changed nuances of power *is* our aim.

the bottom of the screen underneath the photographs are four different coloured rectangles. On the top left, underneath the photo of the young man and older woman there is a stylised icon of a single individual along with the text 'personal', linking through to where personal details can be updated. Below that, in rusty orange, is a stylised icon of two adults holding hands with a child and the text 'my family.' This links to where the details of dependents and relationships between adults can be updated. To the right, beneath the photograph of man and child, is a rectangle labelled 'my contacts' and symbolised by '@', where details of case workers, employment advisors and the like can be stored. Finally, below that in the same green hue as the boxes above the photographs, is a rectangle labelled 'my finances' with a '\$' linking to archives of past payments and notification of non-social security income as well as where present earnings can be declared.

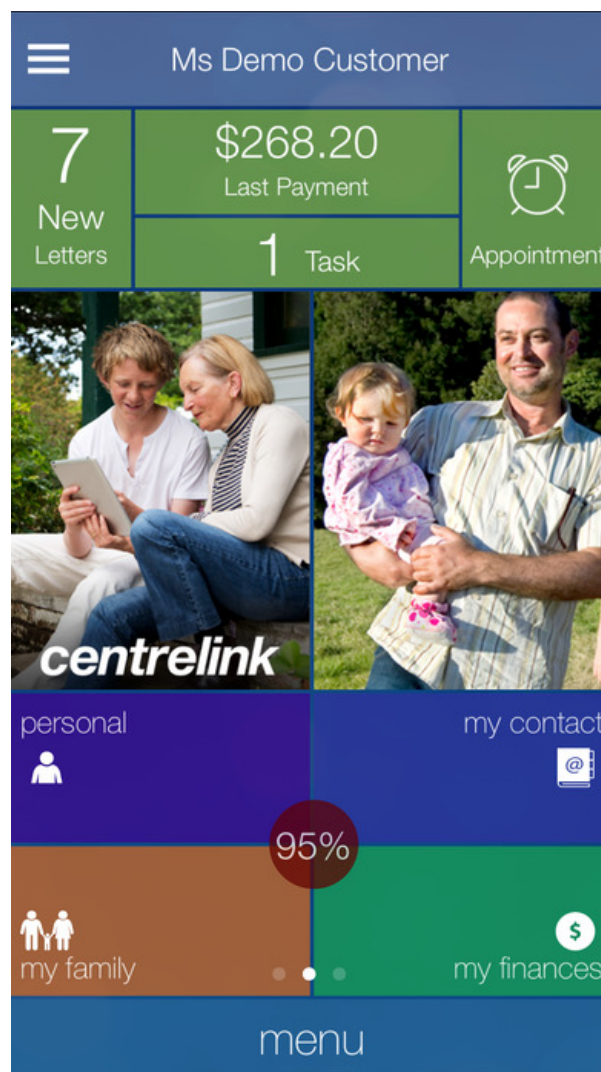


Figure 3: Main Screen of the Express Plus Centrelink App¹⁵

This screen, in its prefiguring of structured communication, highlights the ambiguity of who the app is for. By allowing recipients to meet their various statutory obligations under the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth) to report income, change of details and receive messages from the Department – activities that would have been time consuming involving telephone calls to the Department, attendance at an office, or returning a filled in form by post – the app suggests convenience for recipients. It promises that these obligations could be discharged with a simple tap. However, it is the Department’s app. It has set the perimeters of the icon-based exchange. Tellingly there is no primary coloured rectangle with a stylised unhappy face that a recipient can tap to commence an appeal of an unfavourable decision; even though the right to an appeal is enshrined in the *Social Security (Administration Act) 1999* (Cth) or an icon that lodges a request to access a copy of their data held by the Department under section 11 of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth). How the app facilitates data exchange with the Department is based on the Department’s design brief manifested into code, which when run on a smart device, generates a structured set of predetermined exchange points. There is little wonder people in the photograph are not smiling. As revealed in ‘Courting Mac’s’ negative review, if a recipient is trying to do something that does not have an icon or hits a glitch in the code, or whose smart device’s hardware or operating system is not interfacing with the app as expected, the promised data exchange halts. This is not the semi-structured flow of verbal communication between a recipient and a call centre worker, or even the analogue possibility of a recipient writing extra information on a form. It seems that the possibility of unexpected, complex and difficult matters is now programmed out.

This is where the app seems to constitute a new form of power, beyond both juridical spectacle and administrative efficiency. At one level the app is visual. It is all interactive panels and icons that are seen rather than read. It is bright and colourful. There is a palm-held spectacle when the app is launched opening to the described main screen. To use the app involves a basic and primordial combination of the eye and hand. There is a seeing of colour and shape and an impulsive reaching and taping. In many respects to use the app only a level of proto-literacy is required [93]; where there is a simple correlation between signifier and the signified. The interactive green rectangle marked with ‘my finances’ and ‘\$’ is unambiguously about payments and money transfers; the rectangle with the text ‘my family’ and the stylised icon of

¹⁵ This image is available at <https://itunes.apple.com/au/app/express-plus-centrelink/id881710955?mt=8>. Permission to reproduce granted by the Department of Human Services.

two adults and child is about dependents and relationships. This is not the reading and comprehending of sentences of yesteryear where the seeing of a combination of alphanumeric symbols had to be decoded by well-trained mental capacities to be meaningful. There is just a seeing and responding, tapping into an impulsiveness to touch the colourful button.

But it is not the sort of seeing that fits within the established notions of juridical spectacle. The seeing and responding is not public, nor passive. Showing and telling the punishing of a criminal, or the demarking of authority through the heraldic arts, was directed to a population in its totality. The eye that sees the visual of the app (and the hand that responds) is that of an individual and the precise details and data seen by the individual on their small screen relates just to them. The app uses visual techniques to display elements of an individual's Department file. What is happening in the app is the breaking of the visual from the spectacle along two lines. The first is that this seeing is personalised and intimate; a visual display specifically crafted to the individual. The device is in the palm of the recipient's hand – it is a 'personal spectacle'. The second is that in the juridical, the watcher was passive with their ethical life to be moulded through less-than-rational feelings of awe and fear generated by the spectacle. However, in the app the watcher transforms to a user proactively responding to visual prompts. In the app the forms of power that the visual facilitated through juridical spectacle have morphed; gone from public to personal and from passive to interactive.

This morphing can also be seen in relation to the administrative account of power. The app may be celebrated by the Department and recipients that get it to work as 'convenient and efficient' [24: 3, 88, 206]¹⁶, but it lacks the critical features that have usually been associated with such 'progress.' Foremost, it is less 'rational' in its use. Or more precisely requires less rationality to use. The app's structured environment does not require a high level of literacy – it does not need the reading of eligibility questions and the writing of responses as earlier eras of paper forms required – rather all that is required is the proto-literacy of icon identification. Further information gathering and decision-making has become codified and automated with servers maintained by the Department consistently sending and receiving packets of data to the apps. When and how decisions are made seemingly lacks the formality of the Weberian ideal of a professional decision-maker applying rules and guidelines to the material in a file to make a decision [55: 1158].

¹⁶ The Department also in its Annual Report repeats the phrases 'effective and efficient' [24: 7, 23] and 'prompt and effective' [24: 14].

Further, it is de-institutionalised. The recipient engages with the Department not through attendance at an office at a specific time; rather the world as a whole has been transformed into the Department. The placeless-ness and timeless-ness of the data flow is two ways. Recipients can enter data through the app to be sent to the Departmental servers whenever and wherever. Likewise, the Department is not limited when it can send push notifications to recipients or where the recipient is when they receive them. Provided the telecommunication link between the app and servers is established, then the data flows. The established geography through which administration disciplined individuals within modern society by locating them in time and space within specific institutions – such as the school, the hospital, the prison, the welfare office – appears to have become dissipated. In transmogrifying to the digital the Department has gone from an identifiable institution to a phantom panopticon whose all-seeing-eye is the seven point blue-green-yellow star set on a small black square background that is the apps' launch icon. Seemingly, in the app the limits of administration in rationality, writing and institutional location have been surpassed in its ever-present visually.

These suggest that the forms of life lived in relation to the *Express Plus Centrelink* app seemingly exceed juridical spectacle and administrative efficiency. There is a seeing that is not public and a responding that is not writing. There is decision making that is automated and alien to rational administration and a de-materialisation of an institution and its disciplinary apparatus. Indeed, in the 2014-2015 Annual Report the Department discussed the potential of 'electronic document scanning' which reduces the need for a Departmental officer to sight important documents. It is explained that '[w]ork on identifying solutions for extracting and processing information from digital documents with minimal or no intervention is underway' [24: 157]. There seems to be a hybrid form of governing that has taken the visual-ness and irrationality of spectacle and merged it with discipline that has been freed from the time and space of modern administration. This suggests the need for a new lens through which to consider power in the present, a lens that sees governing through interaction with the visual.

Peter Goodrich, in his recent examination of the heraldic art and emblems of early modern law develops the idea of 'visiocracy' to refer to the visual figures and licit symbols that establish and presented the emotion and majesty of law, authority and justice [36: 64, 37]. Goodrich's suggests is that this historical visual literacy and its affects remain, although half-forgotten, in contemporary law and legal spaces [37: 520]. The critical connection in Goodrich's provocative term visiocracy is that between the visual and governance. While, it is undisputed that past iconography of law endures – in the form and icons in the Australian Coat of Arms

for example – the *Express Plus Centrelink* app suggests is the need for a new visiocracy of the digital through which to detangle how interaction with images gives form to contemporary life.

4 The Visiocracy of the *Express Plus Centrelink* App

This section undertakes a visiocracy of the digital through looking at how the *Express Plus Centrelink* app gives form to contemporary life. It draws upon theorisation of the visual sequence within comic theory to sketch an account of the cyborg subjectification of the smart phone equipped Australian welfare recipient; a subject that responds to real-time to become complicit in the digitalisation of their life.

This begins with the visual interaction of the app; that primal link between image and action that makes a touchscreen digital device accessible. As noted this is a new, intimate engagement with the visual – beyond the seeing and feeling of spectacle or the need to decode the opaque visuality of administrative institutions and their rules and forms. The aesthetics of a digital icon goes beyond what is seen and understood; it also requires consideration of functionality. The success of an icon depends on its use, on how it facilitates navigation through to other icons. The *Express Plus Centrelink* app is more than static images but is a cascade of interconnected icons. There is a rather brutal order and logic to this structure. Specific icons open to further icons that allow designated data exchange (or not if the link to the server is down). Millions of Australian welfare recipients seem to be using the app – based on the Department’s figures. By 31 January 2015 there had been 3,597, 265 downloads of the apps and from 1 July 2014 to 31 January 2015 more than 32 million transactions mediated by the apps [25]. Assuming that most of the 32 million transactions were proper, meaningful, and satisfied the legislative obligations, it seems that Australian welfare recipients are in engaging and navigating the app.

This means that to be governed through the app a form of visual competency is required. Two layers of comprehension are required. The first is the primary recognition of each icon as a visual that connects further. The second is a sense of the chain of connection. What is needed is a notion of visual sequence.

This form of visual literacy that emphasises sequence (and a hybrid of images and text to form panels in the sequence) lies behind the comprehension of comics. Indeed, the basic definition of comic is Scott McCloud’s ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence

intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer' [64: 9]. While other comic theorists dispute McCloud's emphasis on sequence – stressing the hybridity of image and text as the uniqueness of comics – the sequential dimension remains a feature [12, 71: 97]. However as Thierry Groensteen observed comics are often more than linear sequence, but a network of 'braided panels', each panel standing apart yet drawing a multiplicity of relations from others panels; the gutters and the whole [40: 144-159]. Groensteen's concept of braiding – of seeing meaning in comics coming from beyond an analogy of the linear sequence of writing – seems apt in the context of apps. The app is functional in that its totality of interlinked squares of images and text facilitates data exchange with the Department's servers. The visual literacy developed and trained by the comic has become channelled into discharging obligations under social security law. In this context, enjoying a Marvel comic, a Tintin adventure or a Peanuts strip can be seen as something more than consumption of a low-brow cultural form [34]. It becomes training in the networked spatio-visual literacy required to discharge responsibilities vis-à-vis the state.

In this blurring of the ostensible private and public a fundamental feature of power in the digital becomes highlighted – the indistinguishableness between the state and other digital entities. Scholars have highlighted how the neoliberal reforms to the state since the 1990s have seen the state adopt corporate and consumerist facades. In the Australian welfare regime the original separation out from the then Department of Social Security of Centrelink as a standalone statutory agency and the privatisation of the previously public employment services were seen as manifestations of this trajectory [79, 7, 44, 66]. However, the app takes this blurring a step further. Richard Mohr and Francesco Contini in their examination of the Australian speeding camera notification of fine letters observe that it 'looks much like any other bill' [72: 1008]. Although it is not a debt; it is notice of a possible infringement of a statutory obligation that tells the accused to either accept the infringement by paying the fine, or contest it in a court of law. However, from a visual perspective most of the form is not text notifying of an alleged offence and rights of response, but details of the various and multiple payment methods available. The letter might formally be juridical governance, but on its visual surface it looks like a utilities bill notifying a debt and providing a range of convenient payment options.

The *Express Plus Centrelink* app takes this blurring further into the digital. In its look the app is a parody of social media aesthetics. It is a parody because in harsh function the app's code is not a peer-to-peer networking and sharing tool. In its primary colours and its images, in its capacity to upload documents and 'share' them with the Department, in the provision of a

contacts list in which ‘Friends’ can be accumulated, the template is Facebook. However, the only ‘liking’ going on in the app is a ‘sovereign [who] likes to hide’ [36: 89]. The app uses the familiar interface of a social media platform to make the ‘networked individual’ [54: 99] comfortable to disclose data. Feeding data to the Department’s servers is presented as an activity facilitated through an icon as something akin to social media use; as being casual, personal and choice orientated. Substantial research on personality types and social media disclosure suggests that many users of social media cultivate a digital persona different from their off-line person [99, 4, 78, 5, 3, 82, 53]. Social media disclosure involves tailoring to an ‘imagined audience’ [58, 62]. However, there is no imagined audience behind the app; rather there is a very real audience of one; the Australian Commonwealth government and the information disclosed could impact on a recipient’s future income, cause a debt to be raised or lead to a criminal prosecution. In short the app might look like social media but it does not act like social media. By parodying social media aesthetics the true implications of using the app are less than obvious. The state seemingly has become just another icon on a screen, another digital platform through which an individual ‘shares’ data.

This screened transformation of the state into another social media platform has further consequences. Social media is interactive. The user posts and receives. This is particularly a feature of the *Express Plus Centrelink* app. It is not just a link through which a recipient can engage with the Department; but where the Department can engage with the recipient. There are four features of the app that are significant. The first are the in-app link to letters. This is the least significant – tapping the letter icon on the main page opens to an email-like list that further tapping will open to a printed letter from the Department. This is a virtual letter box that opens digital letters. In its appearance and form, it is mostly familiar and unremarkable, confirming Cornell Vismann’s observation that often in the movement to new media the practices of the past media continue [98: 163].

The shared calendar available under the ‘Appointment’ tab is different. This feature allows the Department to schedule meetings that connects with the general calendar app on the recipient’s device. This is more than the sending of letters to be read, but a direct attempt to manage the recipient. Through this mechanism the Department is reaching through the app to demand the sort of obedience and location in time and space familiar to sociologists of ‘total institutions’ [65, 35]. This digitally mediated disciplining goes further than appointments that require a corporeal in-the-world response. The app asks recipients to allow for push notifications. These pop-up alerts include ‘reminders to report and reminders to provide up to date information or

documents' and channels the recipient to use the 'relevant option or service within the Express Plus Centrelink mobile app' [26]. Through this the app does not sit passively on the recipient's device, waiting to be opened and used, but visual reminders – chimes if that option is activated – to engage with the Department become an ever present possibility whenever the device is switched on.

The fourth is less a feature and more a potentiality. On downloading the app the recipient must give permission for the app to access the device's GPS locator, phone calls and camera. In the explanatory material, the Department assures recipients that it does not store locations and phone calls, and that allowing the app to access the camera is to facilitate the feature of photographing documents for upload [26]. What these assurances disclose is that through the app the Department is technically capable of tracking a recipient via their device in real time, that it is capable of knowing the phone calls made on the device and that the Department could peer through the device's lens. The claim is not that it cannot do these; rather there is a representation that its codes have been programmed not to. These are the classic claims of the panopticon [33, 38, 59, 60] migrated into a digital age. There is no claim of actual watching, but there is a disciplining and an engendering of a need to be self-aware and mindful that comes from a recipient knowing that they may be watched, that their location and phone calls might be recorded. Taken together these features suggest that in essence the relationship orchestrated between the recipient and the Department is not one of reading and not of seeing, but immediate responding to a cavalcade of real-time notifications within a underlying context of an awareness of the possibility of total surveillance.

A general concern with thinking the digital in the context of social media and the government has been concerns about personal privacy and how the formation of 'big data' involves compromises between privacy and usability [90, 89, 6, 17]. The concern often relates to how state surveillance apparatuses are accessing and using social media data [95: 11, 32: 10]. What is going on with *Express Plus Centrelink* app is something much more intimate and active than the image of a watching state subjecting the flow of social media data to policing and national security algorithms. Rather the Australian welfare recipient has become construed as a cyborg; a hybrid entity of human and smart device that is permanently up-linked to the Department's servers, continually responding to data requests, while potentially being monitored in real time. Early concepts of a 'data double' of a welfare recipient reconstructed and animated within the Department databases from the traces of surveillance data do not quite capture the intimacy of the relationship [41, 77]. Where the 'data-double' tended to be seen as the creation of the

Department, the routine intimacy of the app facilitated data exchange suggests complicity by the recipients in the digitalisation of their life. That this complicity is from a form of coercion as glimpsed in Courting Mac's review or borne out of 'convenience' stemming from a blasé familiarity with digital devices and social media is not that significant. What is significant is that through the icons of the app, the body in time and space that was the subject of surveillance becomes an active participant in the generation of the digital record of their life.

This is something more than the form of life constructed by juridical and administrative power. The juridical subject saw the state as a spectacle best avoided through compliance with its dictates. The administered subject was disciplined through regulation and reason within institutions that often expected reading and writing. The form of life that can be glimpsed through the *Express Plus Centrelink* app has a particular spatio-visual literacy so as to decode the hieroglyphs of 'braided' icons through which a consistent flow of data is exchanged with the state. It is a 'subject' whose subjectification is masked behind colourful convenience and a real-time need to respond to notifications. This is visioracy of the digital where power mediates and delineates through the visual; constructing a visually aware subject who responds to a flow of visual cues to share data with the state.

5 Conclusion

This paper argued that the *Express Plus Centrelink* app constitutes a visioracy of the digital; where subjects 'share' data with the state through the 'braided' icons on the app. This argument began by suggestion that existing accounts of power have differing relations with the visual. Juridical governance involved seeing and through seeing a fearing of the might of the punishing state. Administrative governance with its institutions, processes and discipline, while it had specific images and looks, did not directly govern through the visual. This paper then considered how these two forms of state power can be identified within the Australian social security system and how the emergences of the *Express Plus Centrelink* app in linking the visual to discipline manifesting elements of juridical and administrative power. The paper concludes by suggesting that the app heralds a visioracy of the digital where power mediates and delineates through the visual and in real-time; constructing a visually aware subject who can decode and use 'braided icons' to continuously data exchange with the state.

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