

Editorial

Special Issue: What is going on? Digitalization in social work

by

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Special Issue: What is going on? Digitalization in social work

It is impossible to comprehend the many different ways in which digitalization is transforming our world. The increased development and use of digital technologies in almost all aspects of life influences and transforms social structures, interactions and cultural norms. In this special issue, we focus on how social work practice is impacted and transformed by digitalization in several significant ways. Digitalization of social work, or the practice of digital social work, can be defined as the use of new information and communication technologies in social work practice, and includes a wide range of technologies and activities, such as digital contact with clients and the implementation of digital administrative system (Peláez & Kirwan, 2023).

As pointed out by Boddy and Dominelli (2017), there are many ethical issues associated with digital practice related to, for instance, confidentiality blurring between public and private boundaries, and 'disembodied' communication in digital spaces. Digital skills and knowledge are becoming a transversal specialization, when most of the public administration has been digitized, and interactions with clients are increasingly digital (Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). The Internet, and increasingly artificial intelligence (AI) assisted tools, are becoming a natural part of everyday life, providing both learning and social opportunities. When it comes to social work, AI is being increasingly used to conduct risk assessments, support people in crisis, identify systemic biases in the delivery of social services and provide social work education, among other uses (Reamer 2023). However, increased digitalization, in the form of AI, social media and digital networks, can also put safety, privacy and the physical and mental health of individuals at risk, and therefore demands reflexive implementation and use. Yet, there is lack of clarity about how to deal with such ethical implications of practitioners' use of digital technology.

With this issue, we wish to argue for greater attention to, and acknowledgement of, the influential role digitalization, digital media and technologies already have in social work. Covering a wide area of technologies, digitalization processes are becoming an integral part of everyday life for many professions, calling for social work researchers to find ways to examine how and in what ways digitalization is continually re-shaping everyday life and professional practice. As argued by Antonio López Peláez and

Gloria Kirwan (2023; 2), 'It is not possible to strengthen the social inclusion of citizens, nor to address their demands and problems, without taking into account the technological context'. Thus, digitalization changes and reshapes social work practice, and needs to be understood as an inevitable and necessary element of all social work practice. While digitalization holds many possibilities for making social work practice more adaptable and responsive, it also holds significant challenges for securing an ethical and transparent practice.

For this issue, we invited researchers from different social work fields to submit a wide range of papers, focusing on how to investigate and understand digitalization in and around social work practices. The result is four novel contributions that focus on the changes, challenges and possibilities digitalization creates for social work. All the articles are based on data from the Nordic countries, and although not at the centre of the analysis, the welfare state context is important for understanding the specificities of their findings.

Kvakic and Larsson's article 'Caseworkers on the digital streets: Discretion in the digital decision-making process', explores the process of decision-making in Norwegian child welfare services when digital technology is introduced. They use qualitative focus groups with social caseworkers to challenge how previous research often emphasize that the use of digital technologies leads to a standardization of work processes and the removal of direct client interaction with the risk of limiting the need for- and use of professional discretion. Their findings show a nuanced picture, in which digital technology creates new needs for social caseworkers' discretion in decision-making.

Scaramuzzino, Nordesjö and Ulmestig's article 'E-applications for social assistance: Automated decision-making from users' perspectives' is based on research situated in Sweden, exploring citizens' experiences using e-applications in two municipal social assistance agencies. Their study is based on qualitative interviews with 11 citizens who applied for social assistance in two Swedish social assistance agencies. The paper explores both the advantages and barriers to using e-applications in social assistance. The advantages they identify are that e-applications were easy to use, fast and flexible, and that it made the citizens feel more in control. At the same time,

the findings highlight barriers, such as the lack of digital skills, language difficulties, insufficient access to technology and users' lack of patience in learning and using new technology. The results provide important knowledge for the field of social work on how to avoid excluding citizens through the design of the digital technology used in the services, what the authors call 'exclusion by design'.

Larsson and Haldar's article, 'Activation by technology: Young people's use of digital tools provided by the government' builds on a study with a quantitative design, investigating how citizens under the age of 30 use public digital services, compared to those over 30. Their focus has been on the use of the digital activity plan provided by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The digital activity plan was implemented by NAV to better enable user involvement. They find that younger people were generally less likely to make registrations by themselves in the digital activity plan. Maybe surprisingly, even 60-year-olds were slightly more active in making registrations in the activity plan than those 24 years of age. Consequently, the clients' caseworkers make registrations during meetings. This raises important concerns on whether the investments made into digital activity plans to increase user involvement are benefiting young people.

Villumsen, Rosholm, Bodilsen, Toft, Berg and Nirmalarajan contribute with the article, 'Ethical considerations for using predictive risk modelling in child and family welfare' that highlights the ethical issues and implications arising in research when building a predictive risk model for potential use in Danish child and family welfare services. Their study has an innovative and explorative design, in which they have developed a predicting risk model (PRM), and tested whether PRMs can support decision-making in social work practice within the context of Danish child and family welfare services. They stress the importance of ethical considerations, not only when PRMs are tested or implemented in social work practice, but also when the PRM is designed, especially because the design process is often not transparent, and subjected to clear demands of transparency.

Empirically informed reflexivity

Increased reflexivity is needed at all levels of social work practice as the consequences of digitalization are multifaceted and often not straightforward, which vary depending on where we direct our research focus. The implications, advantages and disadvantages of the same digitalization process can therefore look very different depending on whether it is the professionals, the clients, the politicians or the organizational level that we involve. This complexity moves the research debate away from merely pointing out advantages or disadvantages of digitalization processes to focus more on understanding the wider implications of digitalization at different levels, including both the individual and the structural consequences thereof.

One significant factor identified as driving change in the digitalization of social work is shifts in social interaction. Traditionally, encounters between social workers and clients have been characterized by face-to-face interactions (Lipsky, 1980); however, alternative digital communication methods reshape the relationship between social workers and clients (Lindgren et al., 2019). As shown in several of the articles in this special issue, the digitalization of social work influences relationships, and places new demands on both professionals and clients. For example, Larsson and Haldar show in their article for this special issue how clients may have the opportunity to better contribute to the support process, but that there is a danger that the ability to make these contributions is unequally distributed among the clients. Caseworkers are found to often help their clients, indicating that the shortcomings of digital participation may be remedied by the priorities of the non-digital part of the organization.

We argue that the empirical grounding of the articles in this special issue helps us to increase reflexivity (understood as processes of reflection as knowledge building (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007)). All the articles demonstrate how digitalization processes are part of a social work practice, and what their prevalent consequences might be. A new focus of attention that comes into sight is how digitalization is not only developing and altering social work, but also how social work practice is influencing digitalization. We need to empirically account for the specificities of how people interact with digitalization, the contingent circumstances of

everyday life and its entanglement with other areas of human life (Pink, Ferguson, & Kelly, 2022). All four articles in this special issue contribute to this agenda by actively addressing how digitalization in practice intersects with social work practice.

Digital skills

While there is a clear need for enhancing our understanding of digitalization, it is important that our interests are not detached from the physical elements of social work. The digital and the physical are part of the same reality (Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). As demonstrated by Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2021), social workers' use of digital technologies, such as video calls, are used alongside traditional in-person interactions. They suggest the use of the term hybrid social work to capture how social workers combine the benefits of both digital and face-to-face, and to create methods more adaptable and effective in practice. In a review looking at digital communication and child participation in child welfare services, Pedersen and Kirkegaard (2024) find that the various digitalization technologies introduced into practice, like emails, text messages, video calls and social media, require both clients and social workers to develop digital skills. While these digital technologies offer convenience and new ways to communicate, they also present technical challenges and limitations. Digitalization has led to an increased standardization of work processes and the removal of direct client interaction. Nonetheless, these changes have not, according to the Kvakic and Larsson article in this special issue, limited the need for professional discretion. Instead, they demonstrate how technology has created new needs for caseworkers' discretion in decision-making, and how caseworkers are continually left with choices regarding how to use digital possibilities when making decisions.

Digital communication has also made possible new forms of contact between social workers and clients in the child welfare service, such as making it easier for children to reach out independently (Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2024). This development can strengthen relationships, but also risks overstepping personal and professional boundaries. With accelerated digitization processes, the need for both professionals and clients to obtain new digital skills continues. A lack of digital skills and reflexivity may unintendedly accelerate other processes, such as increased social exclusion

and the reproduction of social inequalities (Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). These insights are supported by Scaramuzzino, Nordesjö and Ulmestig's article in this special issue. While they show that most citizens have positive experiences with using e-applications for social assistance, the increased digitalization of welfare services also seems to push towards a blend of digital and social rights. They further argue that social workers play a key role in countering new types of inequalities that emerge with the increased use of online solutions for citizens seeking social assistance organizations.

Hence, the generally improved technical access and increased digitalization is not enough to secure digital inclusion and overcome the digital divide (van Dijk, 2020). Unequal access to social services is not merely created by a lack of technical skills, but also in the divide in knowledge, such as about legislation and the logic and workings of public organizations providing social assistance. Being able to access and take part in public welfare services continues to require governmental literacy (Steiner, 2021).

Ethical challenges

It remains a key challenge for research to supply knowledge on how social work practitioners can navigate complexities when they are increasingly challenged to use new digital technologies. This is not only to meet the diverse wishes and needs of their clients but also to ethically conform to demands from new policies and management to secure the continuous implementation of new IT systems and platforms. While these diverse processes of digitalization are often seen as a way to enhance quality and productivity, they are often either highly regulated or lacking clear guide-lines. Social workers are thus to often left with the responsibility of securing meaningful implementations of digital technologies.

Research has shown that AI as a new digital technology using algorithmic systems in the area welfare services can be used to monitor, profile and sanction socially vulnerable citizens (Eubanks, 2018; Ratner & Schröder, 2023). For example, in the Netherlands, an algorithm was developed to assess the risk of social fraud, and here

the algorithms turned out to be discriminatory, as it automatically identified citizens with either dual nationality or low income, as being at high risk (Ranchordas, 2021).

While other attempts of applying AI have not been fully implemented or cancelled because of ethical challenges, the development of improving decision-making models continues. These models are often perceived as more objective and precise than the caseworker's human judgments, as they are based on a statistical analysis of extensive datasets. However, neither the models nor the algorithms behind this are neutral, error-free, or independent of human influence, as they are dependent on the quality of the data they draw on (Ratner & Schröder, 2023). If the algorithm in the model is incorrectly trained, it can lead to algorithmic bias, so we need to better understand how AI models are not objective, but instead dependent on the coexistence of multiple logics and constructions (Ratner & Elmholdt, 2023). Ranchordas (2021) points out that a move away from human discretion to AI models is a threat to empathy, on which particularly vulnerable citizens are dependent to be able to exercise their rights.

In their article on Predictive Risk Modelling (PRM) in this special issue, Villumsen, Rosholm, Bodilsen, Toft, Berg and Nirmalarajan also discuss in detail the ethical implications of building a machine-learning model for potential use in Danish child and family welfare decision-making. One of their key suggestions is to secure close collaboration between model builders, social work practice and children and families to ensure that the model is adapting to the needs of children and families, and not children and families adapting to the model. They further suggest that independent research is integrated in all parts of the processes when designing, constructing and implementing such models in highly sensitive fields, such as social work with children and families. Independent research can help create evidence for both the potential benefits and risks, including addressing complex ethical issues. The authors strongly argue that if research on digitalization fails to address these ethical issues, the risk is the erosion of public trust, while also potentially putting children and families at harm.

Whereas the use of AI and machine-learning in social work raises new forms of ethical awareness, Schmidt's (2024) study of phone mediation in social workers' and clients' role performances in welfare encounters show that traditional technologies

should also continually be examined to not overlook the ethical issues connected to them. One of these is how everyday technologies continue to potentially produce inequality. Phone mediation may provide confidential distance, which can be used to support clients, but also runs the risk of being insignificant for client trajectories, and restrict the roles of social workers and clients. Everyday technologies, such as phones, are important for the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery and clients' welfare trajectories; therefore, these older forms of technologies continue to be important for our understanding of social work practice.

About 60 years ago, Marshall McLuhan (1964) argued that technology is an extension of the human, meaning that technology, whether media, devices or tools, extends human capacity and potential. This can perhaps sum up our main points in this editorial. As shown in this editorial, the four contributions and in previous research; digital technology enhances and changes the physical, mental and social abilities of social workers' and service users' abilities in several ways. For instance, they allow us to communicate beyond physical spaces, to make decisions with support from machines containing much more information than our own minds can encompass, and to manage cases much faster than before. Digitalized and mediated encounters in social work are not neutral, but carry both potential and risk. They impact almost all aspects of social work practice, such as the social worker-client relationship, professional deliberation, welfare delivery and welfare trajectories. With this issue, we argue for further attention to all aspects of digitalization in social work, including the importance of everyday use and ethical complexity. Hence, there is a need for continuously updated research on the impact of digitalization on social work, which this issue of JCSW seeks to contribute to.

The four articles in the special issue

Kvakic et al., 'Caseworkers on the digital streets: Discretion in the digital decision-making process',

Scaramuzzino et al., 'E-applications for social assistance: Automated decision-making from users' perspectives.'

Larsson et al., 'Activation by technology: Young people's use of digital tools provided by the government.'

Villumsen et al., 'Ethical considerations for using predictive risk modelling in child and family welfare'.

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