

# Digital social work

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## Abstract

Social interaction through technology, professional intervention through digital tools, and reorganization of public and private organizations to digitalize their procedures and work with reliable and robust data are three processes that coexist and feed off each other, giving rise to the development of what has been called digital social work. In this article, we briefly analyze some of the characteristics of digital social work, the challenges faced in digitalized societies, and the broadening of the debate on digital divide, which goes beyond access issues, and focuses on what is now considered a key challenge for social welfare: digital vulnerability.

## Keywords

Digital divide, digital social work, digital society, digital vulnerability, digital well-being

## Introduction

Digitalization, Artificial Intelligence, and electronic administration are fundamental components of our social context. The network society that Manuel Castells spoke of in the 90s of the 20th

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century has given way to a super-diverse society of digital natives (Álvarez-Pérez, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this digital transition process (Fronek and Rotabi-Casares, 2022), enhancing digital competencies (Byrne, 2023; Osburn et al., 2023) to intervene professionally in the digital age (Dali and Caidi, 2023), stimulating the technological transformation of public and private organizations (Galkin and Parfenova, 2024; López Peláez et al., 2023), and underlining the role of people in the digitalization process (Erro-Garcés and Aramendia-Muneta, 2023) and the interaction between professionals, Public Administration, and users in all areas, including social protection (Yeong-Ran, 2023).

The generation of new areas of sociability, such as the metaverse (Relinque-Medina and Álvarez-Pérez, 2024), goes hand in hand with the Artificial Intelligence and robotics revolution, in a context in which intervention strategies with young people are being redefined (Liu et al., 2023), for example, in the field of what is called digital youth work (Fernández-de-Castro et al., 2023). Aging calls for new digital care strategies that go beyond the institutionalization of the elderly in residences, domotizing homes and allowing people to live in their familiar environment for as long as possible (Kodate and Donnelly, 2023). Risks of social exclusion are redefined in the digital realm (e.g. so-called digital home-lessness; Comi et al., 2024), and social problems such as unwanted loneliness become a priority for social services (Acebes Valentin et al., 2023). At the same time, ethical debates about Artificial Intelligence (Reamer, 2023), digitalization, the use of data, and the humanization of machines force us to rethink our rights and obligations in the digital environment (Steiner, 2021).

The international social work associations (IFSW, IASSW, and ICSW) have been addressing the challenges of digitalization, the redefinition of the profession's ethical codes, and the implementation of a Global Agenda in which technology plays a fundamental role (<https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/the-global-agenda/>) for years. The UN Commission for Social Development has also addressed this issue in different sessions (<https://social.desa.un.org/csocd>). And different associations of social workers in different geographical contexts have addressed the challenges of technology and online social intervention (Pascoe, 2023). In this article, we analyze some of the current challenges, contributing to the debate rethinking the digital divide from the perspective of digital vulnerability, to expand the digital social work approach in the post COVID-19 societies.

## **Digital social work, participation and social welfare**

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalization process in which we were immersed, and has led to a paradigm shift in professional intervention in social work, reducing the resistance of professionals to the incorporation of technology. From international Social Work congresses to professional intervention in a context of confinement, many activities began to be carried out online. And the new generations of digital natives are not accessible without using the digital media in which they develop their daily lives. To energize the participation of young people, for example, it is necessary to join their environment and mobilize them from their own context (including in some cases the participation of influencers).

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that, in societies of citizens who are the subjects of their lives, participatory processes play an increasingly important role in the dynamics of our societies. From participatory design and co-creation (Pelta and López Peláez, 2021), to participatory evaluation, the digital revolution has transformed the role of the actors involved. In Web 3.0, users create content and redefine information flows, and in the current context, with the irruption of Artificial Intelligence, participatory processes, co-design, and co-creation have become an indispensable requirement for social inclusion. The well-being of citizens in democratic and digital societies is based in part on their ability to participate, on the recognition derived from

such participation, and on the evaluation of the results. At the same time, the legitimacy of welfare systems requires the active participation of citizens, who are subjects of their own lives and actors in their life trajectory.

As we were able to see at the recent World Congress of Social Work in Panama in 2024 (<https://swsd2024.org.pa/>), digitalization and Artificial Intelligence are already part of our professional interventions, and good practices are analyzed in comparative perspective. The European congresses of the European Social Network (<https://www.esn-eu.org/>) or the congresses and seminars in Asia, America, Africa, and Oceania address very diverse topics in this field, from the role played by digital tools in disaster intervention and humanitarian aid, to the mobilization of young people from digital social networks, or the design of triage systems supported by technologies and Artificial Intelligence. This is a very complex and diverse subject, since digitalization is part of our lives, of our work and of companies and public administrations in all areas of activity (including social services).

Digital social work has therefore become a cross-cutting specialty. At the same time, it has become a specific field of research, in an environment where welfare professionals need to incorporate digital competencies that enable them to develop their functions in a digital context. Users' digital skills are already a prerequisite for them to be able to successfully develop their life trajectories. Hence, in the last 5 years, there has been a significant increase in training programs in digital competencies and digital social work in many universities, and good practices are analyzed in comparative perspective (López Peláez et al., 2025).

In the field of social work and social services, the debate about the unintended consequences of digitalization and Artificial Intelligence, the debate about biases, the debate about the models from which it is implemented, the debate about priorities, and what we can call the dark side of technological innovations in this field are present from the very beginning (Reamer, 2016). Debates about digital rights, about ethics in the metaverse, or the critical analysis of the effects of digitalization on social organizations remind us of a moral and political priority in these times of technological innovation. Our current decisions about digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence will have consequences in the short, medium, and long term. And many consequences will not be easily reversible, as has previously been the case with other technological revolutions, with lasting consequences on the lives of the next generations.

The debate on digital social work therefore brings us to the debate on social welfare and personal well-being in digital societies. The alliance for social protection floors, the recent ICSW Windoek declaration on social welfare in Africa, or the Lisbon declaration on digital tools and humanitarian aid are some examples where we can see the key role that digitalization plays in social welfare (Pelaez, 2024). We already have empirical evidence that shows how the welfare of users and social service professionals increases as a function of the incorporation of digital competencies, and how social protection systems are transformed as a function of digitalization (Fisk et al., 2023). From various perspectives, digital social work has been addressed with client groups, scientific research in the digital domain, digital social work methods, digital social work ethics, the digitalization of institutions, and the challenges for social welfare (López Peláez and Kirwan, 2023).

## **From the digital divide to digital vulnerability: New challenges for digital social work**

A relevant issue in addressing the evolution of digital social work has to do with broadening the framework of analysis. In the field of technology, for decades the approach has been based on two

basic concepts: access to technology (access gap) and competencies for the use of technological advances (use gap). We speak of the digital access and use gap, and also of the access and use gap in other technologies, such as robotics (López Peláez, 2014). However, it is necessary to broaden the approach, and address digital vulnerability throughout the life course, and also the digital vulnerability of different groups, and the relationship between vulnerability and social exclusion.

We know from the study (Cesko Digital, 2023) that people who are digitally excluded and at risk often do not want to communicate with the state and related institutions online. They do not believe that someone will really solve their problem and they are worried about what will happen with the information provided. This mistrust stems, among other things, from a lack of understanding of digital practices and previous negative experiences. Not only vulnerable target groups often have low digital literacy, but also social workers themselves. Digital fraud targets people with low digital literacy because they cannot recognize or effectively counter it. In addition, low digital literacy is often related to low financial and media literacy. These target groups are thus particularly vulnerable. It is therefore necessary to reduce inequalities by designing interventions on the basis of deep understanding of the factors and mechanisms that may contribute to the vulnerability and to reduce digital exclusion of a given population and increase the accessibility of digital interventions for vulnerable groups. The Czech research project ‘Research of Excellence on Digital Technologies and Wellbeing’ submitted under the call Excellent Research and co-funded by the European Union (2023–2027) responds to this need by interdisciplinary approach. Using situational analysis and ‘cartographic tools’ (maps of social worlds/arenas, relational and positional maps), the mapping of social work interventions contributing to digital inclusion in the Czech Republic will be carried out. A preliminary model of factors contributing to digital inclusion will be developed for a group of vulnerable children and older people. Subsequently, a field survey will be carried out to identify accelerators and barriers (institutional, situational, and dispositional) to digital inclusion with the involvement of different actors (vulnerable groups, social workers, politicians, policy makers). In total, at least 100 interviews will be conducted. Based on the empirical data, a digital tool to support social work interventions aimed at reducing digital exclusion will also be developed and its effectiveness will be evaluated. Based on the findings, the requirements for modifying the training of social workers will be formulated so that they can influence the level of digital exclusion through their interventions and at the same time use the digital interventions to increase the well-being of their clients. Also, methodologies for reducing the digital divide through social work interventions and their evaluation based on feedback from the application sphere will be elaborated.

In short, digital vulnerability (a) includes access problems, includes (b) lack of skills in the use of technologies, but also (c) refers to distrust, insecurity, difficulties in relating to public institutions and digital administration, and problems of digital interaction throughout the life course. Any person throughout their life course may find themselves in a situation of vulnerability, derived from their lack of capabilities, derived from the design of the technological tools themselves, derived from the complexity of the technologies, or derived from the lack of participation and co-design in the design, implementation, and evaluation of digitalization.

## **Conclusion: A proposal to define digital social work from the perspective of digital vulnerability**

Although we have already had several definitions of Digital Social Work (Pink, 2022), recent debates on social welfare and digitalization allow us to propose a broader definition of what is considered Digital Social Work, including the concept of digital vulnerability. In this sense, four

aspects that make up Digital Social Work can be highlighted: first, digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence; second, ethical principles; third, digital vulnerability throughout the life course; and, fourth, citizen participation.

In this sense, Digital Social Work can be defined as that transversal specialty of Social Work that, both in the field of research and social intervention, uses digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence to address the problems of digital vulnerability and social exclusion, strengthening the participation of citizens in the design of technological tools, and the implementation and evaluation of projects and programs of digital intervention, from a perspective based on human rights and the ethical principles of Social Work.

Digital Social Work would therefore include online research, big data, social network analysis, Artificial Intelligence, patient treatment, participatory evaluation, education and training of social workers and users, and co-design, implementation, and monitoring of digital social services programs.

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