

DIGITALIZATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES: OPPORTUNITY OR RISK?

BEYOND FORMALISM: ALGORITHMIC
POWER, DATAFIED LIVES, AND THE
FUTURE OF THE
HELPING RELATIONSHIP

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Digitalization in social services: opportunity or risk?

- Digitalization is no longer a distant future, but part of the everyday operation of social services.
- It appears in administration, documentation, communication and increasingly also in decision support.
- It promises faster, cheaper and more transparent services.
- At the same time, it may create new barriers for people who are already in vulnerable situations.
- The main question is therefore not whether digitalization is simply good or bad.
- The real question is under what conditions it supports, and when it weakens, human-centred social work.

Opening scenario: the online application

- Imagine an elderly woman who wants to apply for housing support.
- The procedure is now mainly online, so she has to fill in a digital form.
- She has a smartphone, but she does not fully understand the legal language, the authentication process or the document upload system.
- From the institution's perspective, the system looks modern, fast and efficient.
- From her perspective, however, a new wall appears between her and the help she needs.
- This shows that digital access is not always the same as real access.

The promise of digitalization

- Digital tools can genuinely reduce administrative burdens.
- They can help professionals avoid entering the same data again and again.
- Electronic records may improve information flow between institutions.
- Online appointments and digital administration can be more convenient for many clients.
- Digital systems may also support earlier identification of needs and better allocation of resources.
- These advantages can be especially important in overloaded social service systems.

Efficiency, but for whom?

- Efficiency is never a completely neutral concept.
- A system may become faster for the institution while becoming more difficult for the client.
- What looks like simplification for the caseworker may become a new administrative task for the citizen.
- The person in need must understand the platform, upload documents and manage authentication.
- In this way, part of the institution's work can silently be shifted onto the citizen.
- This is why we always have to ask: who actually benefits from digitalization?

Datafication: when life stories become data fields

- Digital systems require structured information.
- This means that complex life situations must be translated into categories, checkboxes and data fields.
- This can support searchability, comparability and institutional coordination.
- At the same time, human reality is often much more complex than any form can capture.
- A family crisis, trauma or long-term poverty rarely fits neatly into predefined categories.
- What cannot be recorded in the system can easily become invisible to the institution.

Debate question: data point or human being?

- Suppose a family's situation can only be recorded through predefined categories.
- The system asks about income, housing, children and risk factors.
- But there is no space for fear, shame, uncertainty or informal survival strategies.
- Does this make professional work more objective?
- Or are the most important parts of the story lost?
- The question is where necessary standardization ends and dehumanization begins.

The helping relationship in digital space

- Social work is not simply the exchange of information.
- The helping relationship is also built on trust, presence, interpretation and emotional safety.
- Video calls, chat messages and online forms can support contact in certain situations.
- They are especially useful when face-to-face meetings are difficult because of distance, illness or lack of time.
- At the same time, digital communication may weaken the perception of non-verbal signals.
- A screen can connect people, but it cannot always replace personal presence.

Short scenario: the video consultation

- A young client joins a video consultation from a noisy room shared with other people.
- She says that everything is fine, but her facial expression and silences suggest something else.
- The professional feels that something important remains unsaid.
- The digital setting, however, limits what can be seen, sensed and asked.
- Formally, the conversation takes place, but the real crisis may remain partly hidden.
- This is why online support can be useful, but not always sufficient.

Assisted digital: the human bridge to the digital system

- Digitalization becomes fairer when people are not left alone with digital systems.
- Assisted digital means that the client receives human support in using online services.
- This may include telephone guidance, face-to-face customer support, digital mentoring or help from a social worker.
- For vulnerable groups, this is not a comfort service.
- In many cases, it is a basic condition of equal access.
- The hybrid model is therefore not a failure of digitalization, but its more socially responsible form.

Algorithmic decision support

- Some digital systems no longer only store data.
- They can rank cases, assess risks or prepare eligibility-related decisions.
- These tools promise more consistent and faster decision-making.
- They may help the most urgent cases reach professionals sooner.
- At the same time, they raise serious questions about transparency, responsibility and professional judgement.
- If a system influences who receives help first, it already shapes the practical operation of social policy.

The black box problem

- Many algorithmic systems are difficult for users to understand.
- Even professionals may not see exactly why the system classifies someone as high-risk or low-risk.
- For the client, it is even less clear why a particular classification was made.
- This is especially serious in child protection, housing cases or basic social benefits.
- Decisions that affect human lives must be explainable.
- Without transparency, digital decision support becomes professionally and legally risky.

Debate question: can we trust the machine?

- Imagine an algorithm that apparently predicts child protection risk with high accuracy.
- The system helps professionals identify the most urgent cases more quickly.
- However, no one can clearly explain how it weighs poverty, school absence or previous reports.
- Can such a system be used to support high-stakes decisions?
- Is statistical accuracy enough if the decision logic is not transparent?
- The answer is not only technical, but also ethical and legal.

Prediction and the reproduction of inequalities

- Predictive systems learn from past data.
- Past data, however, often contains past institutional biases.
- If some groups were monitored more often in the past, more negative data may have been produced about them.
- The system may then classify exactly these groups as higher-risk.
- This can lead to further monitoring and, as a result, even more negative data.
- Technology may therefore appear neutral while actually reproducing social inequalities.

Generative artificial intelligence in documentation

- Generative artificial intelligence can help prepare notes, summaries and templates.
- It may reduce administrative burdens if it is used carefully and under professional control.
- The risk is that machine-generated text is often too smooth, too coherent and too confident.
- In social work, uncertainty, contradiction and silence can also be important information.
- A well-written AI summary may easily hide the fragmented nature of reality.
- For this reason, AI must not take over professional interpretation and responsibility.

Short scenario: the perfect case note

- A social worker has a difficult conversation with a traumatized client.
- After the conversation, an AI tool is used to prepare a short official summary.
- The text is clear, elegant and professionally convincing.
- At the same time, uncertainty, emotional breaks and the client's ambivalence disappear from it.
- The document becomes smoother than reality itself.
- The question is whether administrative quality has improved, or whether professional truth has been damaged.

Care technologies and surveillance

- Smart home devices, fall detectors and medication dispensers can support independent living.
- For older people and people with disabilities, they may increase the feeling of safety.
- At the same time, they create new dependencies on devices, electricity and internet connection.
- In some situations, care may turn into continuous data collection and monitoring.
- Technology can therefore mean both support and control.
- The ethical question is whether the tool strengthens autonomy or slowly replaces personal attention.

Digital exclusion is more than lack of internet

- The digital divide is not only about having a device and an internet connection.
- It also includes literacy, language, confidence, disability and trust in institutions.
- A person may have a smartphone and still be unable to manage digital administration independently.
- Formal access therefore does not automatically mean real access.
- This is especially important in social services, where many clients live with complex disadvantages.
- Those who need support the most may be the least able to use digital systems alone.

Closing: human-centred digitalization

- Digitalization should not be rejected, but it should not be celebrated uncritically either.
- It can improve administration, coordination, flexibility and, in some cases, access.
- It is professionally defensible only if it does not replace human judgement and personal support.
- Its basic principles should be transparency, explainability, human oversight, hybrid access and real appeal.
- Social services must continue to support people, not merely process cases.
- The final question is this: does digitalization bring people closer to help, or does it make exclusion more efficient?

Thank you for your attention!

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