



e-Social work and digital society: re-conceptualizing approaches, practices and technologies

Introduction

The digitalisation of society is changing our behaviour, our institutions and the helping professions, among them social work. Adapting to this new environment is one of the main challenges facing social work as both a scientific discipline and a helping profession. This new technological environment is not only impacting on teaching methods in higher education, but also diagnostic and social intervention techniques. At the same time, processes of social exclusion are taking place in the digital domain that require social workers to become more specialised. In introducing this themed issue of the journal, we examine how social work can benefit from e-social work to adapt to the new demands and needs of today's digital society.

Switch on to start

Internet, digital devices, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have modified many of our traditional daily practices, from leisure habits to business dealings as well as public administrations and public services worldwide. Since the 1990s, these new conditions and their possible developments and global influences have been described and forecasted in the literature (Andriole, 2005; Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Zysman & Newman, 2006). In practice, the world system has experienced a slow and deep revolution in which ICTs have modified social scenarios in all their dimensions, giving rise to new social interactions and unprecedented challenges.

The Internet is, firstly, a technological sphere and a complex system where phone networks and computers are connected using a standard of information exchange. On the one hand, this basic structure facilitates a hardware where different machines and devices operate. On the other, it creates a network of networks where different software and applications build a new level of human and social interactions. As Chang (2011) posited, although the Internet may be less important than washing machines, this 'digital revolution' has re-framed social systems. ICTs provide new options to deal with old human inequalities and achieve social development.

Tensions also arise between social exclusion and social inclusion. Nevertheless, in this framework, 'software mediated societies' (Aramburu & Marcuello-Servós, 2018) define different social conditions to advocate for social justice globally. This provides opportunities for building, researching and applying new reflections in e-social work, that is, social work developed using ICTs within this techno-social sphere. As such, e-Social Work can be defined as a social work field where individuals, communities and groups have needs and it is possible to develop intervention programmes, conduct research projects and design public policies (López-Peláez & Díaz, 2015, pp. 44–45). e-Social work includes online research, patient treatment (individual therapy, group and community dynamics), the training and teaching of social workers and the monitoring of social service programmes. In this regard, e-Social work has become the new social work frontier.

Social work and technologies: the challenge of being useful in a digital society

Digitalisation can be defined as the whole relations, structures and elements involved in the assumption of ICTs in any aspect of life. Digitalisation processes transform interactions with users, as well as

their demands and needs. These also transform the organisations where social workers engage in professional practice. And, finally, digitalisation produces a digital environment that creates its own context in which processes of exclusion are redefined, and where it is necessary to develop new strategies for diagnosis, intervention and assessment.

Then, social work is being transformed and developing new digital-based intervention strategies (Del Fresno García, 2015), which are changing the nature and practice of social intervention. A range of new digital procedures has opened up a broader dimension in research, therapies, interventions and social networks in the field. A new area of specialisation is taking shape: e-social work, which is affecting social intervention as a whole in a transversal manner. We cannot assess the needs of individuals or groups without taking into account their online behaviour, their interaction with others and with institutions, or their digital skills. New processes of inequality and exclusion are emerging in digital social networks on the Internet, while old problems are being redefined (from paedophilia to harassment).

Digital technologies have changed the way we interact with others, giving rise to new areas of specialisation, such as online interventions or diagnoses based on the analysis of user behaviour in social networks. The ability to access, adapt and create new knowledge and new social intervention methods using ICTs is a crucial challenge for the social work profession. The Web 2.0 allows users to create content, thus fostering participation and changing the traditional communication model (while redefining the hierarchical role of the social worker in professional practice). The Internet of things, Big Data, games and mobile phones provide a new window of opportunity and enable us to design social interventions using more sources of information derived from technology connections and data analysis. Our users are also digital and adapt very quickly to these new forms of communication and digital interaction.

Digitalisation is having an impact on all layers of society. It not only influences user behaviour and affects processes of social inclusion and exclusion that are redefined in a given technological domain, but also government agencies, which are in the midst of an intense digitalisation process. An increasing number of administrative procedures (applications, forms, complaints, etc.) can only be done through the Internet. Given that a significant percentage of social workers are employees in public administrative bodies, e-Social work may become an essential part of our professional practice due to users' demands and the characteristics of our employer (the public administration). In this regard, many public bodies deliver social services using ICTs and NGOs provide assistance using the Internet.

e-Social work as a new frontier

The purpose of this themed issue is to consider the challenges and opportunities created by the emerging field of e-Social Work. To do that, methodologies and experiences from a comparative perspective are explored and described. Initially, we suggested to address three key areas: theoretical approaches to e-social work; intervention experiences based on e-social work; ICT tools and competences in the social services from the paradigm of e-social work. We aimed to: (i) analyse the main features of e-social work; (ii) examine the theoretical underpinning of the convergence of technologies and social issues from an interdisciplinary approach; (iii) disseminate relevant research in the field of e-social work to provide a deeper understanding of this new approach. After the call for papers were launched, we received twenty-one abstracts and finally we accepted 14 papers. The present issue represents a selection from those, and those not included will appear in a regular issue of the journal.

Here, readers will see three aspects of this emerging field: first, research on the demands and needs of citizens using social network analysis methods; second, the analysis of intervention experiences based on ICTs and other digital technologies in various fields (elderly care and senior citizens, eating disorders, the provision of online services); and third, the training of social workers and experiences in the reorganisation of social services incorporating ICTs.

Final remarks

In our digital societies, e-Social work is rapidly becoming a new area of specialisation, while digitalisation affects all our activities transversally. In both higher education and professional practice, the digital environment has become a new frontier that may render the profession of social work obsolete (the Kodak effect) or, on the contrary, create new dynamics that put us at the forefront of technological change, thus strengthening social work as a scientific discipline and as a profession. As the research published in this special issue reveals, the academic and professional social work community is choosing to deal creatively with technological change. Adaptation and innovation, it should be stressed, also entail a profound reflection on the ethical debates surrounding digitalisation and the design of new methods of diagnosis, intervention and evaluation that are respectful of people's dignity and their right to privacy.

Given the diversity of experiences and debates that arise around e-Social work, it is impossible to address the full range of experiences that are being carried out. However, we hope that the research published here can serve as a reference for the further development of this new specialisation. We are grateful in this regard to the *European Journal of Social Work* and its editor, Suzy Braye, for the opportunity. We would also like to thank the authors and external reviewers for their dedication and scientific rigor. And, finally, we want to encourage social workers to be creative in dealing with this new digital environment. Together we can build a strong scientific community and strengthen professional practice.


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