Brief Note

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The more you know, the less you fear: Reflexive social work practices in times of COVID-19

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Abstract

In this article, we present the results of a strategy to disseminate best social work practices during periods of social lockdown in Spain, in a climate characterised by post-truth, misinformation and fake news. Social work is challenged with the task of delivering reliable and quality information aimed at building a better society. At the time of writing, Spain was one of the countries most affected by COVID-19, with one of the highest numbers of deaths per million inhabitants in the world. With the population in lockdown, our strategy was to design a series of innovative web seminars on both the subject and the procedures involved in social work, with the aim of sharing information and best practices to counter disinformation campaigns on social media. The results show the growing demand – both by citizens in general and students and professionals in particular – for reliable information in the field of professional practice. One of the priorities of digital social work must be to disseminate its results in the digital environment.

Keywords

Digital social work, fake news, lockdown

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Introduction

Despite cultural, political and socioeconomic differences, the entire institutional architecture of every welfare system, including social work and social services, relies on the scientific skills of experts from various fields of knowledge. Health, welfare and social service professionals form the backbone of our support systems. Accurate diagnosis, rigorous planning, transfer of best practices and the evaluation of results are essential to the science and profession of social work (Brekke and Anastas, 2019).

However, as with other dimensions of daily life, our profession and discipline are not immune to the now common 'communication' process which aims to undermine scientific knowledge and professional practice (Weatherall et al., 2018). In this article, we present the results of a reflexive practice in the field of social work, which focuses on providing reliable information and disseminating best practices during periods of lockdown with the aim of reducing fear and misinformation in a climate characterised by partisan debate and criticism of experts (Gorrell et al., 2019). Our objective is to provide quality data and information so that anyone interested can critically develop their own reflections, while at the same time disseminate the professional work of social workers during pandemics. This is an old challenge that was evoked in the Latin dictum *sapere aude*, reiterated on numerous occasions by Kant (1981).

Post-truth and fear during the post-COVID-19 crisis

Scientific and statistical data are used by the elite in their propaganda strategies with the aim of reducing the scientific and political debate to a war of ideas. This issue has been addressed by several authors on numerous occasions, and is linked to the discussion on the reliability of knowledge that Jürgen Habermas (1989: 11) raised in his fight against 'scientism', which he defines as 'science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science'. However, we need to go even deeper and contemplate the partisan dynamics that are fostered by the very structure of digital social networks themselves (Davies, 2019).

Objective facts are considered less important than feelings and, in many cases, feelings responding to anger, fear and resentment are targeted at the elite and populism. Feelings mobilise political movements and create social bubbles in which we live by affirming our beliefs through the denial of the other (Hochschild, 2016). Without a space for reflexivity and critique, with clear, consensual rules to confirm facts independently of our emotions – a 17th-century scientific ideal – we cannot achieve consensus. This propels us into a state of perpetual war, in which verified facts are pitched against so-called 'alternative facts' (Barrera et al., 2020). This situation exists despite the knowledge that

> a fact is always the product of a composition between a part furnished by the objects and another constructed by the subject. The part played by the subject can be important enough to lead to the deformation, even the repression, of the observable so that the fact is distorted by interpretation. (Piaget and García, 1989: 18)

Political dynamics, especially in environments that enjoy a certain level of economic well-being, often focus on this partisan war between different actors, as long as everyday social life is not drastically affected. And this is precisely what has happened with the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike catastrophes such as Chernobyl, Fukushima and others (Takahashi, 2019), this pandemic is global. SARS-Cov2 has disrupted the healthcare systems of every country in the world and forced entire populations into lockdown; a response backed by scientific and expert arguments. The war

over the origin story of the virus (i.e. animal-borne versus lab-made), protection strategies (yes-mask versus no-mask, lockdown versus herd immunity) and policy measures implemented by individual governments is being raged against the tangible background of thousands of deaths and has overwhelmed healthcare and social services systems, while hope has been placed in strategic planning and the development of a vaccine by the reviled scientists.

The volume of contradictory information produces feelings of defencelessness, fear and anguish among the population. In some groups, this reinforces the impulse to control, while in others it leads them to underestimate the risk of contagion by assuming that 'alternative' explanations about the virus and its lethal capacity are true.

Reflexive practices during lockdown: Digital social work in Spain

Social services in Spain have become an essential part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to what is already being predicted as a post-pandemic effect. Consequently, during lockdown we need to determine how we can contribute to the debate, disseminate reliable information, present best practices, and create spaces for participation and debate. From a perspective based on co-design and co-creation, all stakeholders must participate in developing an adequate interaction dynamic. Citizens in general, and users of social services in particular, are concerned about the care they receive and their prospects for the immediate future. Social workers are concerned about both the viability of the welfare system and best practices that can be shared. And academics and researchers in social work are interested in the debate about design, intervention and assessment in humanitarian crisis settings.

Taking into account these concerns, and the lockdown situation, we designed three free-of-charge web seminars[1] with the participation of relevant stakeholders in the fight against the pandemic from the perspective of social work and social services. The three seminars respond to citizens' concerns that we had previously detected in our research on social work in crisis situations (Castillo de Mesa and López Peláez, 2018). In the first seminar, 'Anticipating post-COVID-19 scenarios and responses: Diagnostics in times of lockdown' (16 April 2020), we analysed the situation in Spain.[2] In the second one, 'Anticipating post-COVID-19 scenarios and responses. Good practices in times of lockdown: Transference and innovation' (30 April 2020),[3] we presented best practices currently being implemented by social workers in various professional fields. And in the third, 'Anticipating post-COVID-19 scenarios and responses. Future challenges and trends: Digital social work' (7 May 2020),[4] we discussed future trends, focusing on how to design social services in a pandemic, how to address the situation of the so-called 'abandoned' rural Spain, and on new computer applications that can facilitate the transition to digitalisation (in situations of lockdown). In all three seminars – held under full lockdown because of the COVID pandemic – we encouraged the participation of those registered in the debates through the chat option. Based on this experience, we created a YouTube channel titled *Digital Social Work*[5] and a website[6] which contributes to the dissemination of reliable information and best practices in the field of social work and social services.

The experience has been an unexpected success. In the first webinar, which we designed with an audience of 40–50 participants in mind, 1612 people registered, which forced us to redefine the dynamics of participation. Currently, this seminar has received more than 3600 views on YouTube. In the second seminar, more than 1000 people registered, as in the third, and both also have thousands of views on YouTube. In a climate of fake news, misinformation and highly polarised political debate, the results of this experience demonstrate that citizens demand reliable information. There is a genuine interest in the type of rigorous communication that gives visibility to experts and professionals. Its effects are to reduce the population's insecurity, disseminate knowledge and
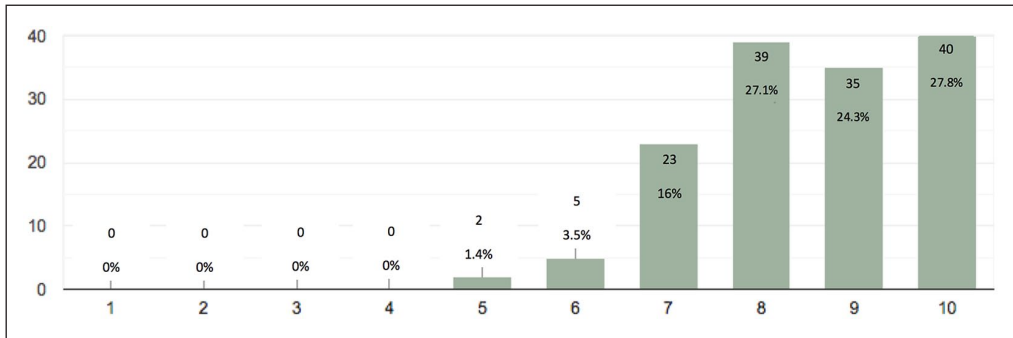
Figure 1. What did you think of the seminar content?
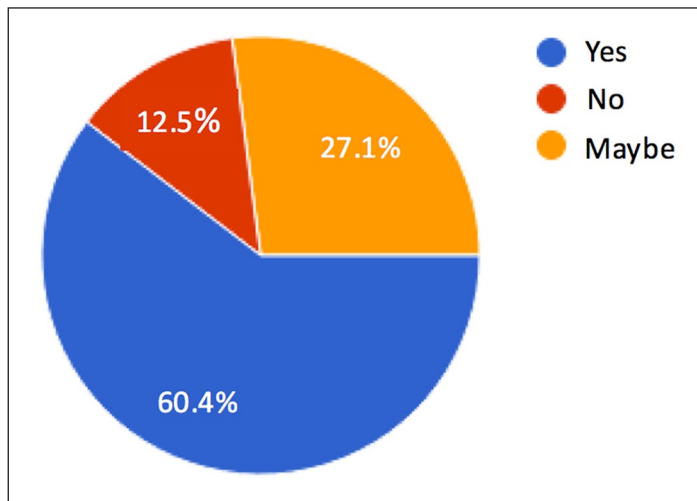

Figure 2. Was the seminar time managed efficiently?

reduce the risk of underestimating the danger posed by COVID-19. In each of the seminars, participants could also collaborate by completing a questionnaire.

The main results[7] of the questionnaires indicated, first, that most participants thought the webinar content was appropriate (Figure 1), as well as the seminar format and how participation was handled (Figures 2 and 3). The participants also stated that they would be interested in consulting the seminars again (Figure 4) and would recommend them to colleagues and friends, thus contributing to the dissemination of good practices and expert knowledge (Figure 5). These responses corroborate the relevance and acceptance of our initiative during the lockdown.

Conclusion

It is important to highlight our success in disseminating best practices and spreading expert knowledge among citizens while confined to our own homes. The enormous number of participants in the seminars and the numerous subsequent views bring us to an initial conclusion: there is a real demand for information about social work and professional social work practice. And even more importantly, this overwhelming demand opens a window of opportunity to disseminate knowledge
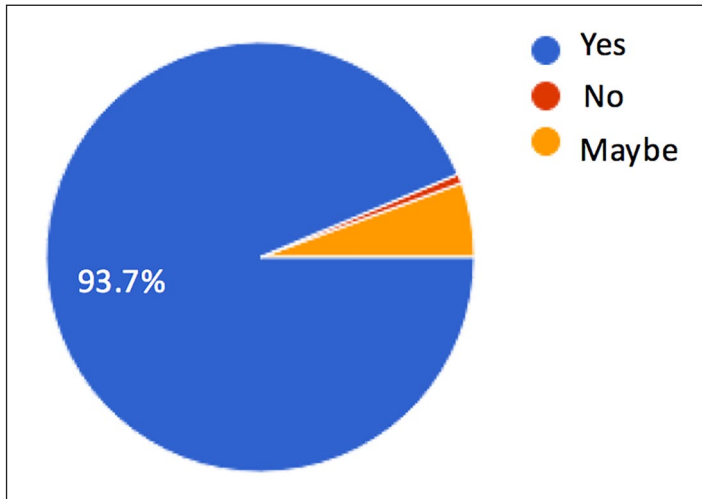
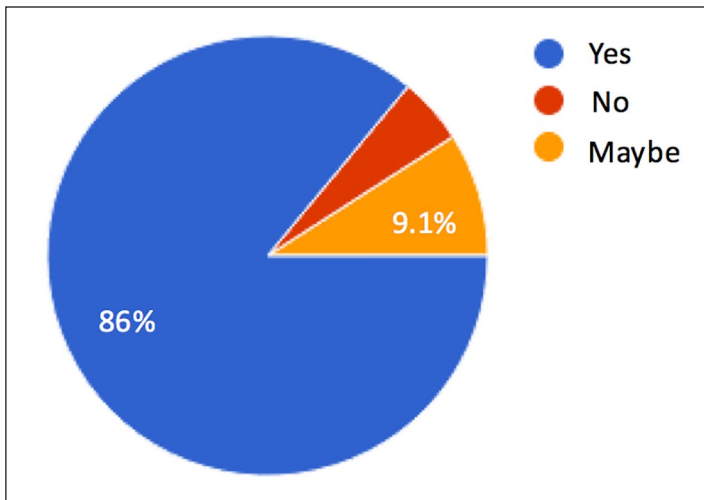**Figure 3.** Was the format appropriate?

Figure 4. Would you consult this content in platforms such as YouTube to watch it more than once?

and best practices among the population through digital social networks. Based on this experience, for example, we have organised the *International Conference on Digital Social Work*.[8] By using interventions of this type, digital social work will enable us to contribute to the public debate in the knowledge that, as more scientific information is disseminated, the influence of fear on collective behaviour will be overcome.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic is global, so is digitalisation, and how we address situations of confinement such as the one we have experienced in Spain can provide useful ideas for social workers in other countries. Indeed, we all share a common diagnosis: the spread of fake news, the discrediting of experts and misinformation have become global issues in our digital societies. In light of this, three main conclusions can be drawn from our work that serve to guide social work practice in a variety of social contexts:
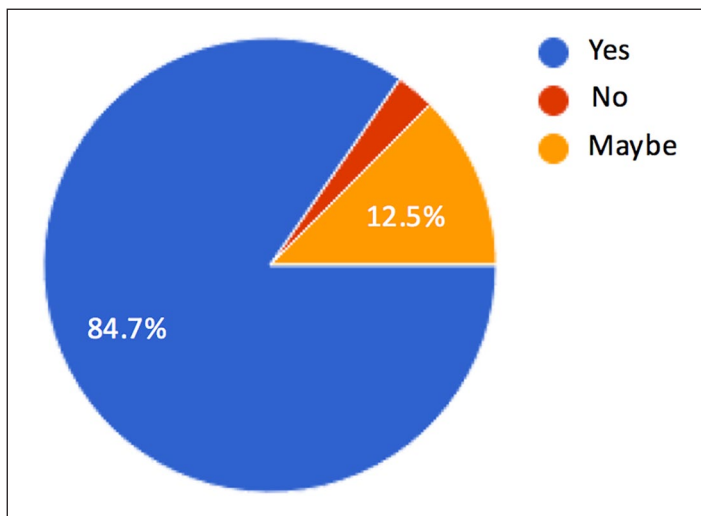
Figure 5. Would you recommend this initiative to other professionals and friends?

1. Citizens and social workers alike demand rigorous information.
2. Social workers can contribute to the dissemination of expertise anywhere in the world.
3. Based on our own experience, information that is disseminated should be easily accessible online, free, focused on sharing good practices, easily exchanged on social networks and be supported in the expertise of prestigious professionals.

Digital social work (or e-social work; López Peláez et al., 2018) offers us an opportunity to enhance the role of social workers confronted with social emergencies and situations of pandemic in what is today a digital society. And, to be effective, one of the priorities of digital social work must be to disseminate its results in this digital environment (López Peláez and Marcuello-Servós, 2018).

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpdTSMvRgo8&t=37s.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4mQDXzeiXU&t=40s.
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoCCcc_4bQ4&t=1801s.
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MDKxO1tmiw.
5. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcAObaBXhjB4CM-Q3XyPddw.
6. http://trabajosocialdigital.es/.
7. Research materials related to our article can be accessed upon request: alopez@der.uned.es.
8. The conference will be held online on 28–30 September 2020 with working sessions in Spanish, English, Italian and Portuguese (https://congresos.uned.es/w22568).

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