JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY & SOCIAL WELFARE

Volume XLVIII • September, 2021 • Number 3

SPECIAL ISSUE
Digital Social Work: Challenges, Trends and Best Practices

Introduction to the Special Issue: Digital Social Work: Challenges, Trends and Best Practices 5
Antonio López Peláez, Héctor Luis Díaz, Chaime Marcuello Servós, and Joaquín Castillo de Mesa

Digital Intervention, COVID-19, and Critical Realism: Toward a Science of Digital Social Work 10
Antonio López Peláez and Chaime Marcuello Servós

Could WhatsApp be an Intervention Tool for Digital Social Work? A Case Study 29
Antonio Eito Mateo, María José Gómez Poyato, and Antonio Matías Solanilla

Home Visit Training in Social Work with Virtual Reality 53
Mª Ángeles Minguela Recover, Pedro Hernández Lafuente, and José Miguel Mota Macias

Using Big Data to Manage Social Inclusion Programs 74
Esther Raya Diez, Manuel Trujillo Carmona, and Domingo Carbonero Muñoz

Bridging the Gaps: Literacy, Media Literacy Education, and Critical Digital Social Work 99
Gianna Cappello

Digital Social Work: Towards Digital Disruption in Social Work 117
Joaquín Castillo de Mesa

Social Work and Participation in the Digital Environment 134
Rafael Acebes Valentín

Technologies and Social Intervention: Ethical Considerations 153
Sandra Barros and Gonzalo Bossetti

Corresponding Authors 164

An Introduction to the Special Issue

Special Issue Editors:

Antonio López Peláez
National University for Distance Education, Spain

Héctor Luis Díaz
New México State University, USA

Chaime Marcuello Servós
University of Zaragoza, Spain

Joaquín Castillo de Mesa
University of Málaga, Spain

One of the greatest effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to bring digitalization to a position of prominence in all areas of life. Social workers as well as social work service recipients suddenly found themselves in confinement and were forced to socialize, work and support each other through available communication and information technologies.

Telework, telehealth, and the transformation of homes into work areas have become the norm, and these practices are likely to stay with us for a long time. Now, we rely on virtual profesional conferences, distance education, and restructured profesional organizations such as the IFTS, IASSW, and the ICSW. Without a doubt, the rest of the 21st century will be very different from our life experiences so far.

Within this context, the editors of this special issue organized a series of online Social Work seminars during the months of April and May 2020, with the purpose of sharing best practices in digital Social Work. They created a Youtube channel dealing with this topic and subsequently organized the First International Conference

on Digital Social Work. This conference took place in Spain in September 2020 (López Peláez et al., 2020). From conferences presentations, we learned that the effects of the unprecedented digitalization of our profession can be grouped into four major areas:

1. *The protection of citizens' rights*, which more and more are being decided in the digital world. Citizens' rights may be linked to the personal or institutional dimensions however an increasingly large proportion of our personal lives takes place in the online world. The face-to-face and virtual worlds are both part of our experience on a continuum. Our usual problems, biases and footprints are all recorded in the digital world. From there we may choose to delete and forget them or to leave a digital legacy. Furthermore, our well-being and self-esteem are linked to our digital competencies, given that the virtual dimension is a key element of our social lives. Additionally, our institutions are becoming increasingly digitalized. Every day social benefits and services are accessed and delivered digitally. For this reason, digital competencies are becoming more and more important to social workers and citizens in general.

2. *The services we provide*. Our clients are citizens who are often deprived of their freedom. For this reason, we need to develop new ways of interviewing, conducting home visits, assessing, and intervening through new technologies and the internet. Instead of shying away from technology, we must turn digitalization into an opportunity to improve our professional and academic performance.

3. *Digital rights, interventions, and competencies.* Digital rights, interventions, and competencies must become part of academic curricula in universities to prepare social workers to intervene in this new and very unique practice setting. Digital social work practice is substantively different from in-person social work practice. For this reason, it requires a very particular education and competencies.

4. *The value of scientific knowledge generated by social workers.* In a context of populism, radical movements, "fake news," and challenges to scientists and experts, we must highlight our right to be well informed. We must also emphasize the importance of a rigorous education and professional decision-making based on facts, scientific knowledge, and social work expertise.

The articles in this special issue address many of the previously-mentioned issues. At the same time, they can be grouped

into three categories: technological, conceptual, and philosophical. In the first article, professors López Peláez and Marcuello Servós highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up the pace of digital transformation in which we are immersed. As a result, e-social work, or digital social work, has gone from being an emerging specialization to becoming a critical specialization across organizations and disciplines. The article examines basic scientific and methodological foundations to develop a science of social work from the perspective of critical realism, with special attention to digitalization.

Articles two to four deal with best practices in the use of new technologies. The article "Could WhatsApp be an intervention tool for Digital Social Work? A case study," by Eito Mateo, José Gómez Poyato, and Matías Solanilla, highlights lessons learned from an ongoing research project based on a case study of the Spanish Red Cross, as it responded to the COVID-19 crisis. The Spanish Red Cross was a leader in providing and managing health, social, and technology services during COVID-19. This study showcases scenarios and tools employed to respond to user needs within a process of digital convergence facilitated by the use of interactive applications.

The article "Home Visit Training in Social Work with Virtual Reality," by Mª Angeles Minguela Recover, Hernandez Lafuente, and Miguel Mota Macias presents the iSWAPP© application. This application was created to help social work students develop complex skills such as observation, active listening, and interviewing through virtual home visits.

The article "Using Big Data to manage social inclusion programs," by Raya Diez, Trujillo Carmona, and Carbonero Muño discusses how technological developments based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and empirical science can promote social inclusion. The article outlines the characteristics of Big Data and describes the process of designing a tool for diagnosing social exclusion, the SiSo scale. This scale has the potential to advance the design of a Big Data system for social inclusion programs. The study analyzes the suitability of the SiSo tool for measuring situations of social difficulty by conducting a Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA) and a Linear Principal Component Analysis.

Articles five to eight are more conceptual and philosophical in nature. Cappello's article, "Bridging the Gaps. Literacy, Media

Literacy Education and Critical Digital Social Work," contends that a series of conceptual gaps need to be bridged in order to have a better understanding of how literacy studies and research in media literacy education can contribute to redefining the field of digital social work.

Castillo de Mesa's article, "Digital Social Work: Towards Digital Disruption in Social Work," reviews three digital solution models Social Work has been gradually adopting: adaptation, transition, and digital disruption. It proposes the use of reflective analysis of our past and current professional experiences with the goal of shedding light on our future path. The article proposes the need for digital social work as an academic specialization and the promotion of digital disruption as a radical approach to digital education. Acebes Valentín's article "Social Work and Participation in the Digital Environment," presents a set of communication strategies aimed at creating both online and offline communities based on an analysis of communication and participation in digital environments. Such strategies seek to enhance convergence and congregation with the aim of achieving the best possible outcome from a thesis-antithesis-synthesis approach, a priority of digital social work.

Finally, Barros and Bossetti's article "Technologies and Social Intervention: Ethical Considerations," discusses the use of Information and Communication Technologies within the Social Work profession. It highlights the necessity to reanalyze and reconceptualize our intervention strategies, due to the widespread use of digital technologies, and the importance of having academic study plans that include the necessary digital skills. It proposes that the challenges associated with the use of Information and Communication Technologies within the current historical-social context mandate the adoption of a critical ethical attitude.

The editors of this special issue express their gratitude to all the authors that contributed to it. Digitalization is already part of our profesional practice and daily lives. For this reason it deserves to be studied rigorously and ethically. We have no doubt that Digital Social Work or e-Social Work will become one of our profession's main areas of study and practice during the rest of the 21st century and beyond.

References

1st International Congress of Digital Social Work. (2020, September 28-30) https://congresos.uned.es/w22568

López Peláez, A., Marcuello-Servós, Ch., Castillo de Mesa, J., & Almaguer-Calixto, P. (2020). The more you know, the less you fear: Reflexive social work practices in times of COVID-19. *International Social Work, 63*(6) 746-752. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0020872820959365

Trabajo Social Digita—Digital Social Work. (2020, April 30). *Respuestas al post-Covid19: Buenas prácticas en tiempos de confinamiento. Transferencia e innovación* [Responses to post-COVID19: Good practices in times of confinement. Transfer and innovation]. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoCCcc_4bQ4&list=PL5nu99sbf1yyewR3Tgn1q6i5XVZn4Y09y