

ARTICLE

Social Work and Virtual Spaces: New Scenarios for Critical and Professional Intervention

Trabajo Social y espacios virtuales: nuevos escenarios para la intervención profesional crítica

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the role of digital environments as emerging contexts for professional intervention in social work, from a critical perspective, situated in the Spanish context. It proposes and analyses some of the ethical, political, and methodological challenges that arise with the growing digitalisation of the social field, while reflecting on the opportunities that these spaces offer for emancipatory action and the reconfiguration of social ties and dynamics. Based on theoretical development and a review of existing practices and

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proposals for virtual social intervention, strategies for critical, inclusive, and transformative professional practice are suggested, and underline the urgency and importance of incorporating the digital dimension as a fundamental element in the defence and dissemination of social rights. Thus, social work in the coming decades must position itself ethically in the face of the risks of digitalisation, promoting digital justice, collective participation, and interventions that, far from dehumanising, strengthen interpersonal relationships and mutual care in the new virtual scenarios. In this sense, the manuscript makes an original contribution through the systematisation of digital intervention experiences, the proposal of ethical and political principles for professional practice, and the formulation of a situated conceptual framework for social work in digital environments. It seeks to contribute to the debate through a theoretical and practical proposal for digital intervention.

Resumen

El presente artículo plantea una revisión del papel de los entornos digitales como contextos emergentes para la intervención profesional en Trabajo Social, desde una perspectiva crítica y situada en el contexto español. Se proponen y analizan algunos de los desafíos éticos, políticos y metodológicos que surgen con la creciente digitalización del campo social, a la vez que se reflexiona sobre las oportunidades que estos espacios ofrecen para la acción emancipadora y la reconfiguración de los vínculos y las dinámicas sociales. A través de un desarrollo teórico y una revisión de prácticas y propuestas de intervención social virtual existentes, el artículo presenta estrategias para una práctica profesional crítica, inclusiva y transformadora, y subraya la urgencia de incorporar la dimensión digital como un elemento fundamental en la defensa y difusión de los derechos sociales. En este sentido, el Trabajo Social de las próximas décadas debe posicionarse éticamente frente a los riesgos de la digitalización, promoviendo la justicia digital, la participación colectiva y una intervención que, lejos de deshumanizar, fortalezca las relaciones interpersonales y el cuidado mutuo en los nuevos escenarios virtuales. Asimismo, el manuscrito ofrece una contribución original mediante la sistematización de experiencias de intervención digital, la propuesta de principios ético-políticos para la práctica profesional y la formulación de un marco conceptual situado para el Trabajo Social en entornos digitales, aportando al debate a través de una propuesta teórico-práctica de intervención digital.

Palabras clave:
Trabajo
Social digital;
intervención
profesional
crítica; entornos
virtuales;
justicia digital



Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has changed all aspects of social life, including forms of relationship, communication and community organisation. In this context, social work is faced with new methodological, ethical and epistemological challenges. It is not just a matter of incorporating digital tools into professional practice, but of critically reflecting on how digitalisation affects the people we work with, especially those in vulnerable situations. As Ríos (2022) warns, digitalisation imposes forms of technical domination that must be resisted through decolonial and technopolitical approaches.

According to Castells (2006), the network society imposes new forms of social structuring, where digital exclusion becomes yet another form of structural inequality. In Spain, the National Strategy for Social Inclusion² (2021–2027) explicitly recognises the need to integrate the digital dimension into social policies (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2021). This transformation is neither neutral nor merely instrumental: it shapes new forms of subjectivation, surveillance and control and, at the same time, new possibilities for agency and resistance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

There is no doubt that digitalisation permeates all spheres of social life, profoundly affecting forms of relationship, production, subjectivity and community organisation. This transformation has generated new modes of interaction, but it has also widened existing gaps, highlighting structural inequalities in access to rights, resources and representation. In this scenario, social work faces the challenge of rethinking its practice and positioning, incorporating digital environments as legitimate and necessary fields of intervention (Castillo, 2017; Organización de las Naciones Unidas [ONU], 2022).

Over the last decade, and with particular intensity following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a clear need to update the profession's reference frameworks, including critical digital skills, ethical reflection and appropriate methodologies for technology-mediated intervention. As Morozov (2011) and Zuboff (2019) have pointed out, the design and governance of digital environments are far from neutral: they respond to economic, ideological and power logics that shape citizen participation, knowledge production and the reproduction of social inequalities.

Likewise, researchers such as Han (2012) warn that the digitisation of everyday

²“Estrategia Nacional de Inclusión Social”



experience implies an intensification of processes of self-exploitation, surveillance and social pressure, especially among young people, who are exposed to a constant demand for visibility and performance. These dynamics have a direct impact on emotional well-being, identity construction and agency. Therefore, social work must incorporate analytical and practical tools that enable it to intervene effectively, respectfully and transformatively in these contexts.

In this sense, it is essential that social work not only accompanies these processes but also actively positions itself in their transformation. Professional intervention must include analysing the impacts of the digital environment on people's lives, especially those who are vulnerable, and generating responses based on a logic of care, equity and digital justice (Pérez, 2020; Subirats, 2011). The construction of a critical and participatory digital citizenship requires a conscious, situated and politically committed professional praxis, capable of dialoguing with the new forms of relationship, subjectivation and conflict that emerge in the virtual world. From a Latin American perspective, authors such as López Peláez et al. (2018), Tibaná Ríos (2022) and Lamas (2023) have provided important insights into how digital inequalities are configured and the need for contextualised intervention.

The recognition of digital space as a constitutive dimension of social life requires us to move beyond instrumental approaches that reduce it to a mere communication tool. Digital environments must be understood as structural contexts in which identities, power relations, symbolic structures and new modes of intervention are configured. From this perspective, social work faces the challenge of incorporating this comprehensive view in dialogue with critical theory, epistemologies of the South, and social movements that have been pointing out the dangers of uncritical technification of the social sphere for years (De Sousa Santos, 2018). In this article, the central theoretical framework is based mainly on critical theory and the ethics of care, integrating elements of technopolitics and Southern epistemologies as complementary frameworks that enrich the understanding of digital social intervention.

The proposal put forward is that social work cannot be limited to adapting its practices to digital environments but must be rethought from a technopolitical perspective capable of questioning the regulatory and technical frameworks that condition network intervention.

Theoretical Basis: Digitalisation and Social Subjectivity

Digitalisation has altered the technical infrastructures of the social environment, but also the ways in which people think, relate and act. If we consider Han's (2014)

contributions on subjectivity, digital subjectivity is characterised by constant self-exposure, quantification of the self and dependence on algorithmic recognition. This transformation directly affects the populations with which social work intervenes, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities or even generating new ones.

Authors such as Zuboff (2019) have denounced the emergence of “surveillance capitalism” in which personal data is used as a basis for predicting and modelling behaviour. From this perspective, traditionally excluded groups (migrants, unemployed young people, women survivors of violence, among others) become targets of technologies that produce and reproduce biases and discrimination (Eubanks, 2018).

Furthermore, the impact of digitalisation on social structures has stirred up debate in the social sciences and, in particular, in social work. Many approaches reduce technology to a tool, without considering its structural implications or its effects on subjectivity and justice. Far from being a technical phenomenon, digitisation represents a complex process of structural transformation that affects ways of life, the configuration of subjectivities and institutional intervention frameworks. Added to this is a theoretical deficit in social work with regard to digitisation as a legitimate field of intervention. In this vein, this article proposes to overcome the existing gap through a critical and interdisciplinary reading. It is therefore necessary to articulate a theoretical foundation that allows social work to critically understand the social, cultural, and political implications of the contemporary digital ecosystem.

Social work, as a discipline committed to social justice, must take a critical stance towards this new relational and power configuration. It is not enough to be present in the digital realm; it is necessary to know and understand how technology produces exclusions, categorises bodies, automates decisions and dilutes bonds. As Haraway (1988) points out, it is therefore necessary to construct situated knowledge that takes into account the material and cultural conditions in which technology operates.

From a critical perspective, authors such as Morozov (2011) and Van Dijck (2013) have emphasised the political nature of digital technologies, understood as infrastructures that shape social relations under an extractive, neoliberal and controlling logic. These technologies not only affect and condition communication, but also structure patterns of visibility, hierarchies of knowledge and dynamics of exclusion. It is therefore essential for social work to adopt a perspective that questions the supposed neutrality of technology and explores its effects in terms of power and inequality (Coudry & Mejias, 2019).



At the theoretical level, digitalisation is linked to broader processes of individualisation, depoliticisation of social conflict and fragmentation of community ties. In this context, Byung-Chul Han (2012) warns that contemporary hyperconnectivity gives rise to forms of self-exploitation, social fatigue and emotional isolation, which must be understood as new forms of social suffering. Social work, committed to the dignity and well-being of people, must be able to recognise these manifestations and address them through interventions that integrate the emotional, relational and structural aspects.

Theories of digital justice provide a relevant framework for guiding professional practice in virtual environments. Works such as Taylor's (2017) propose an intersectional approach that highlights how inequalities of gender, race, class and ability are reconfigured in the digital realm, demanding social intervention that not only promotes access, but also agency and equitable participation in the construction of the digital environment. This also implies understanding the ways in which algorithms and platforms affect opportunities for inclusion and the reproduction of social stigmas.

In this scenario, it is proposed that the theoretical foundation of social work in the digital sphere should draw on the contributions of critical theory, feminist epistemologies and decolonial proposals, articulating a situated perspective that recognises the multiple dimensions of the digital: technical, symbolic, economic and political. Only from this approach is it possible to construct a professional intervention that does not reproduce the hegemonic logics of digital power but rather contributes to its transformation from a perspective of social justice.

Social Work and Digital Environments: a Critical Approach

Virtual spaces (social networks, forums, platforms, online environments) have established themselves as venues for socialisation and, therefore, also as possible contexts for professional intervention in social work. These spaces are not mere reflections of the offline world, but produce and respond to their own dynamics, with specific rules, risks and potentialities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated and almost imposed this change, forcing many social services to move their activity to the digital environment. According to recent studies (Parker, 2022), this digitalisation had ambivalent effects: it allowed contact with users to be maintained, but it also highlighted technological gaps, training limitations and ethical conflicts.

For social work, intervening in virtual spaces requires new professional skills: critical digital literacy, knowledge of digital communication environments, remote emotional support skills and the ability to create meaningful online communities. It is, therefore,



a new professional field that requires specific training and renewed ethical reflection (Vega & Ayala, 2020).

The recognition of digital environments as spaces for social intervention requires a profound review of the epistemological and methodological frameworks that have historically guided the practice of social work. In contrast to the traditional conception, centred on face-to-face intervention and the materiality of physical territories, there is a need to expand the concept of “territory” to include those virtual spheres in which subjectivities are now constructed, identities are configured, and both exclusion and social organisation and resistance are reproduced.

In this context, social work needs to abandon any instrumentalist or technophile vision that reduces the digital to a mere channel of communication and adopt a critical perspective that allows virtual environments to be understood as complex relational structures, conditioned by power asymmetries, algorithmic logics and dynamics of social segmentation (Pérez, 2022). In this sense, digital platforms are not neutral, un-y spaces: they constitute fields of symbolic dispute, in which values, legitimacies and rights are constantly negotiated.

The challenge for social work is twofold. On the one hand, it is about ensuring equitable access to digital environments for all citizens, combating the technological divide and promoting critical digital literacy processes. On the other hand, it is necessary to intervene in the content, relationships and practices that emerge in these spaces, especially those that reproduce hate speech, symbolic violence or marginalisation of historically oppressed groups, but also the creation of new groups that are excluded or targeted by virtual violence. Far from being homogeneous, digitalisation is experienced in an unequal and stratified manner, affecting people differently according to gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social class (García-Gutiérrez & Ruiz-Corbella, 2020).

Social work is called upon to play an active role in mediating conflicts in virtual environments and promoting community support networks developed in the digital sphere. Social networks, mutual aid forums, instant messaging groups, and virtual training spaces can be useful tools for professional intervention, provided they are based on principles of respect, ethical care, and personal autonomy (Pérez, 2022).

Therefore, digital environments must be conceived by social work as territories in which rights are exercised, bonds are formed, and social inclusion is contested. Addressing them critically involves rethinking the fundamental categories of the profession—such as need, vulnerability, community, and participation—in light of the new scenarios of contemporary connectivity.



Ethical and Political Challenges in Digital Intervention from a Social Work Perspective

The digitisation of social work practice involves highly complex ethical and political risks. As already mentioned, far from being neutral, technologies shape power relations, generate exclusions and redefine professional responsibilities. One of the main challenges is the management of privacy and confidentiality in a context marked by hyperconnectivity, data traceability and the extractivist logic of many digital platforms (Eubanks, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

From a political perspective, works such as those by Morozov (2011) and Noble (2018) warn against the “technological solution” as a hegemonic discourse: technical responses that obscure the social roots of inequality are imposed on structural problems, warning that the use of algorithms in social decision-making can perpetuate structural biases and reinforce existing inequalities, particularly in access to benefits, resources, or basic services. Therefore, social work must remain alert to the temptation to delegate its functions to technological systems without critical evaluation and democratic safeguards. Furthermore, the use of automated systems in social services can reinforce institutional biases and reduce intervention to a series of dehumanised procedures (Eubanks, 2018).

In Spain, the Code of Ethics for Social Work³ (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2020) requires respect for the privacy, dignity and self-determination of users. In virtual contexts, these principles must be reinterpreted in the face of new tensions: how can we guarantee confidentiality in video calls? What happens if the platforms used store or process data in third countries? Who is responsible if an algorithm mistakenly assigns or denies a benefit? These questions have no easy answers, but they require clear positions. As Subirats (2011) proposes, the challenge is not to adapt to digital technology, but to actively participate in its construction, defending regulatory and technical frameworks that prioritise care, equity and mutual recognition. Social work must recover its technopolitical dimension, assuming a critical role in relation to the models of society that underpin the technologies it uses.

The digitisation of social relations presents new opportunities for social intervention, but it has also generated highly complex ethical and political dilemmas. In this scenario, the profession must critically reflect on the implications of its practice in digital environments, where commercial interests, algorithmic logic and surveillance systems

³“Código Deontológico del Trabajo Social.”



converge, challenging the fundamental principles of the profession, such as self-determination, privacy, equity and social justice (Tibaná, 2022).

Informed consent, for example, takes on a new dimension in the digital environment: can users fully understand what happens to their information when they use social applications or are served by remote means? According to Taylor (2017), digital justice is not limited to the availability of technology, but involves ensuring equitable conditions of access, critical use and understanding of the implications of the digital environment. Data collection, session recording, participation in remote intervention platforms, and navigation in applications must be transparent, understandable processes that are adapted to the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity of users. Ethical professionalism requires not only compliance with legal regulations, but also the exercise of a pedagogical and critical role in the face of the opacity of the digital world.

Furthermore, it is vital to address the impact of artificial intelligence and machine learning on the professional autonomy of social work. Predictive systems used in the field of social services, such as those described by Gillingham (2019), can determine risk profiles without adequate human mediation, distorting the ethical and relational judgement inherent to the discipline. Algorithmic opacity thus becomes a threat to ethical deliberation and participatory decision-making.

Finally, social work is called upon to adopt a critical and committed stance towards the digitisation processes that affect the social field. This position involves actively participating in the design of inclusive technological tools, promoting free and community software, denouncing mass surveillance practices and defending intervention models based on care, dialogue and relationality as fundamental ethical and methodological principles. According to Subirats (2011), the challenge is not only to adapt to digital technology, but also to build a more just, pluralistic and democratic digital society. In this sense, it is essential to recover an ethic of technopolitical care that incorporates the agency of users as subjects of rights in the digital environment (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Review of Social Practices of Virtual Intervention

There are many examples that show how social work can be carried out effectively in digital environments without compromising its fundamental principles. Below are some examples of these practices. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that during the pandemic, the Official College of Social Work of Madrid⁴ (2021) launched an online social

⁴“Colegio Oficial de Trabajo Social de Madrid”



intervention platform to provide care for people in isolation, the elderly and vulnerable families. Video calls, secure chats and remote monitoring were used for urgent cases. This practice demonstrated how social work can adapt to the digital context without losing its ethical link or personalised support. On the other hand, the “Conecta Joven” programme, run by the Esplai Foundation, has enabled young people to digitally train isolated elderly people, creating intergenerational links and mutual empowerment. This practice promotes digital inclusion and also strengthens the community by creating spaces for shared recognition (Tomczyk et al., 2023).

The “Red Social Cuidando” (caring social network), an online initiative for non-professional carers, offers emotional support, social counselling and digital training. This experience demonstrates how it is possible to create safe, horizontal and emotionally sustainable environments in cyberspace by integrating the logic of care into digital architecture. For its part, the “TeAcompaño” project (ANAR Foundation and Red Cross Youth) developed closed groups on Facebook and Telegram for adolescents with mental health problems or family violence issues. Social workers moderated and guided the conversations, ensuring professional intervention and anonymity. The results show an improvement in the early detection of risk situations, as well as an increase in the participation of young people who were previously disconnected from face-to-face services. We also identified the #SinOdioEnRed (no hate online) project, coordinated by youth associations, social workers and educators in Catalonia, which used the social networks TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to counter hate speech and racial and gender discrimination. Likewise, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, in neighbourhoods such as Vallecas (Madrid) and El Raval (Barcelona), neighbourhood groups and social work professionals promoted self-managed groups on WhatsApp, Telegram and other platforms, without direct institutional intervention, to coordinate food distribution, emotional support and virtual accompaniment for the elderly, among other initiatives.

Collectives such as Feminismos Madrid and Pikara Lab have created collaborative digital environments to rethink social intervention from a feminist and anti-racist perspective. Through platforms such as Padlet, Jitsi and Etherpad, they organised spaces for the co-creation of non-normative accompaniment methodologies that are critical of institutionalism, colonialism and ableism. Other initiatives include Mapeo de Cuidados de Zaragoza (Care Mapping of Zaragoza) and Cartografía Crítica de la Desigualdad en Sevilla (Critical Cartography of Inequality in Sevilla), promoted by grassroots collectives with the support of social workers, who use collaborative digital mapping tools (such as Umap and Google MyMaps) to locate community resources, areas without social coverage, spaces of urban conflict and practices of resistance.



Finally, the PantallasAmigas (friendly screens) collective, together with social and educational intervention teams, developed a virtual support line for adolescents who are victims of sextortion, *grooming*⁵ or *doxing*.⁶ This support involved emotional support and legal guidance, working from a restorative and critical perspective, as opposed to a punitive approach.

In addition to the examples mentioned above, the development of virtual support groups for mental health or gender violence has proven effective in creating networks of emotional support and accompaniment, especially in contexts of isolation (Ornelas, 2022). In all these cases, the key is that technologies do not replace the human dimension but rather amplify it under coherent ethical frameworks.

However, these experiences must be critically evaluated: What platforms do they use? What governance model do they propose? Who owns the information generated? How are conflicts managed? These questions allow us to differentiate between digitally instrumental practices and those that build digital citizenship and collective power.

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While it is true that some of these spaces emerged to fill gaps in the public system, showing how digital technology can be a tool for empowerment, they can also reveal and generate informal privatisation of care. In addition, they faced the exclusion of people without access to smartphones or the internet. These experiences show the subversive potential of digital technology, but they also denounce how commercial platforms impose extractive logic, hinder anonymity, and reproduce gender and racial biases (Noble, 2018).

Although some are powerful participatory tools, these projects face the ethical dilemma of geolocating vulnerable populations, in response to which they must guarantee anonymity, data protection and non-instrumentalisation by institutions or companies. In some cases, the report addresses how legal and technical frameworks tend to blame victims (especially women and transgender people) rather than questioning the neoliberal digital ecosystem that promotes overexposure and the violent consumption of intimacy.

⁵ *Grooming*, from the verb *to groom*, translates into Spanish as “engaño pederasta” (paedophile deception) and refers to harassing behaviour in which an adult contacts a child or adolescent with the aim of establishing an emotional connection in order to later sexually abuse them and/or involve them in sexual activity.

⁶ *Doxing*, or *doxeo* in Spanish, comes from the English word *dox* (a colloquial way of referring to “documents”) and refers to the act of searching for and publishing private information about a particular person on the internet, usually with malicious intent.



Although these are important advances, it is noted that many tools are not designed from a universal design approach, and that technology often imposes barriers to autonomy rather than removing them, especially when developed without the direct participation of the people affected.

Based on the elements analysed, some guidelines are proposed to promote a praxis of social work in digital environments from an ethical, inclusive and critical approach. First, a critical institutionalisation of digital intervention is needed, recognising virtuality as a space for intervention that must be accompanied by the development of regulatory frameworks, ethical protocols and technical resources to ensure the quality, equity and sustainability of professional practice. Next, we propose the promotion of digital justice, as the profession must actively incorporate the principle of digital justice into its interventions, promoting public policies that reduce the digital divide, guarantee universal access to connectivity and respect people's digital rights. Likewise, there must be an ethical, technological and participatory orientation. Spaces for reflection must be created where users, professionals and technologists can co-design digital tools focused on care, inclusion and autonomy.

We also consider critical training in digital skills to be essential. Professional training in social work should include content on digital rights, digital citizenship, the ethical risks of artificial intelligence, decolonial thinking applied to technology, and virtual intervention methodologies. Finally, it is important to promote Participatory Virtual Accompaniment Communities⁷ (CAVP). As an innovative proposal, we suggest the design of virtual peer support environments, facilitated by social workers, to create safe, inclusive and reflective spaces within university campuses and other communities. These communities can contribute to the prevention of psychosocial distress, symbolic violence and digital discrimination, and enable the creation of sustainable support networks (Bárcena & Larrea, 2022).

Conclusions

Considering the approaches reviewed above, virtual environments should not be seen as alien or secondary spaces, but as an integral part of the contemporary social world. As such, they require an active, reflective and rigorous presence of social work professionals. From the protection of rights to the creation of virtual support communities, through the fight against hate speech and the promotion of digital justice, the field of action is expanding and becoming more complex.

⁷ Comunidades de Acompañamiento Virtual Participativo.



In this context, our profession needs to reclaim its commitment to a critical ethic that is not limited to deontology or technical rules but takes a position on technologies and their implications for human life. Thus, virtual professional intervention cannot be separated from the notion of expanded responsibility, where care, justice, and equity are thought of from a relational ethic rather than from a framework of procedural neutrality.

Thus, a first fundamental conclusion is that social work cannot reduce its digital intervention to an instrumental or technocratic dimension. On the contrary, it must assume the virtual environment as a relational, symbolic and political field, where new forms of vulnerability are configured—such as digital violence, algorithmic exclusion, precarious access or non-consensual overexposure—but also as a space for resistance, community organisation and the production of critical subjectivities (Fraser, 2008; hooks, 2000).

From a critical perspective, the digital must be approached in its dual dimension. On the one hand, as an extension of the systems of control and surveillance that have historically affected the most precarious sectors; and, on the other, as a space with emancipatory potential if appropriated through collective, participatory and counter-hegemonic practices. Social work is called upon to adopt an ethical stance in defence of digital justice, understood as equitable and secure access to technologies, the right to informational self-determination and the creation of virtual communities based on mutual care (Haraway, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

From this perspective, a profound revision of the epistemology of social work is required. The incorporation of technologies into intervention cannot be uncritical or neutral. It is essential to generate theoretical and methodological frameworks capable of questioning the structures of digital domination, incorporating notions such as technological justice, relational ethics and data sovereignty. As Miller et al. (2016) argue, technology not only mediates intervention, but also shapes the very possibilities of the professional-user relationship, which requires constant critical vigilance from the normative and ethical frameworks of the profession.

Another conclusion leads us to the need for professional reflexivity in the face of emerging ethical dilemmas. In this regard, the ethical dimension of social work in digital spaces requires a complex approach. Confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent must be rethought in the face of systemic surveillance, data extraction, and technological opacity (Zuboff, 2019). As Eubanks (2018) argues, the use of technologies for social management can reinforce structures of inequality, automate stigma and exclude those who do not fit the dominant algorithmic parameters.



In this sense, it is necessary to cultivate a situated and critical ethic that is not limited to complying with legal frameworks but seeks to anticipate and counteract the exclusionary effects of digital devices. Ethical professionalism cannot be separated from political awareness, as any intervention in the virtual realm has material consequences for the people we work with (Morozov, 2011).

Therefore, from this critical perspective, the ethics of social work must cease to be conceived as mere regulatory compliance and evolve towards an ethics of relationship, recognition and deliberation. Authors such as Pérez (2022) insist on the importance of a participatory ethics that incorporates the voice of users in technological processes. This approach calls for the active inclusion of those affected in decisions about the design, use and evaluation of digital tools, as Pérez (2022) also emphasises.

Ethical reflexivity also involves questioning the temporal dimension of the intervention. Virtual spaces introduce new temporalities (immediacy, asynchrony, hyperconnectivity) that affect the way in which bonds are formed, care is provided and trust is established. In this context, social work must reconfigure its criteria for professional presence, addressing not only the “where” but also the “how” and “why” of digital intervention (Teruel-Cárceles et al., 2021).

The transformation in professional intervention emerges as another relevant finding of this analysis. Far from merely transposing face-to-face practices to the digital realm, social work must generate innovative intervention formats designed specifically for virtual environments. Examples of this are the Participatory Virtual Accompaniment Communities (CAVP), online listening and care platforms, counter-narrative laboratories, and strategies for preventing hate speech on social media. These initiatives not only allow professional practice to be adapted to the current technological reality but also revalue the role of social work as a proactive agent in the promotion and defence of rights and in the transformation of the social sphere in the digital ecosystem. The practices described demonstrate how social work can influence digital transformation from a critical praxis, generating new formats of intervention based on accompaniment, mutual recognition and social justice.

However, in order for these innovations not to generate overload or dilute the professional role, it is necessary to create institutional and political conditions that support them. This implies that regulatory frameworks and social protection systems recognise and finance virtual social work as a legitimate, strategic and structural dimension of intervention. It also requires an ethical and political commitment to transparency in the technologies used, guaranteed confidentiality and respect for informed consent in every digital interaction (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2012).

The profession cannot ignore the fact that digitalisation has deepened pre-existing social divides. Accessing the internet or using an application does not guarantee the exercise of rights—since the second and third generation digital divide includes inequalities in skills—nor does it guarantee the critical appropriation of technologies or their effective use for citizen participation (Selwyn, 2004; Van Dijk, 2020).

From an intersectional perspective, it is important to recognise how ableism, digital racism, heteronormativity and poverty shape an unequal digital landscape. Interventions must go beyond access, ensuring that people feel safe, represented, and empowered in these environments (Noble, 2018). At this point, digital justice becomes relevant as an ethical and political horizon for social work in the digital age (Taylor, 2017).

One of the great challenges of social work is to address how technology can amplify forms of exclusion and inequality, since the digital divide is not limited to access to devices or connectivity, but involves cultural, symbolic, and relational aspects that shape the way people appropriate technologies (Selwyn, 2004). In this sense, digital justice becomes a guiding principle for critical intervention. It involves recognising that algorithms are not neutral, that artificial intelligence systems can reproduce racial, gender or class biases, and that the automation of social services can render the human experience behind the data invisible (Noble, 2018). Social work committed to equity must analyse the structures of domination hidden in digital infrastructures and develop strategies to democratise access, use and governance of technology.

Given this reality, it is essential to reclaim the agency of users in digital environments. Far from conceiving them as mere recipients of automated services, processes of digital empowerment, critical literacy and active participation must be promoted, understanding virtuality as a space for the construction of support networks, self-organisation and the visibility of social struggles. Achieving this requires situated intervention that is sensitive to cultural dynamics and has a clear emancipatory orientation (Taylor, 2017).

A final reflection refers to the pedagogical and transformative dimension of social work in virtual environments. Faced with a digital culture marked by individualism, the logic of performance and the fragmentation of the community fabric, the profession must foster resilient, affective and horizontal digital communities, focused on collective well-being, active listening and the creation of meaningful bonds (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2000). This means recognising the power of the virtual not only as a tool, but also as a space where new forms of citizenship, solidarity and collective action are taking shape.



There is no return to “pre-digital” intervention. The expansion of technologies has reconfigured our relationships and understanding of vulnerability. In this new scenario, social work must position itself as a key player in the fight for a more just, pluralistic and secure internet. This implies recognising that all professional practice in the virtual realm is political: the type of technology we use, the data we request, the platforms we choose, the voices we amplify or silence. This vision underscores the necessary redefinition of the professional role in these new scenarios. Intervention in virtual environments requires not only technical skills, but also critical and pedagogical ones. It is not enough to manage digital platforms or carry out remote interventions. It is necessary to understand how hate speech, algorithmic racism, forms of cyberbullying, and stigmatisation on social media operate and how they impact people, especially when they belong to historically discriminated groups (Carrillo & De-Juanas, 2020; Noble, 2018).

Consequently, digital skills in social work must be accompanied by epistemological frameworks that enable the reading of symbolic violence in online interactions, as well as methodological tools for articulating interventions that go beyond the welfare or reactive model. Critical digital training is therefore required, combining technological literacy, data analysis from a rights perspective, and relational approaches to virtual support (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Subirats, 2011).

For all these reasons, it is urgent to reconfigure the professional subjectivity of social work as a situated, reflective figure committed to digital rights and mutual care. Only then will it be possible to inhabit the virtual world without reproducing its oppressive logic and transform it into a space of solidarity, creativity and emancipation. As Subirats (2011) points out, the challenge is not only to digitise the social, but to humanise the digital. In this vein, social work must actively position itself in debates on technological governance, data policies, institutional surveillance and algorithmic democracy. We must not forget that virtual intervention is, above all, a political practice.

The notion of relational ethics, proposed by authors such as Unanue-Cuesta (2024), allows us to think of technology not as a tool external to the person, but as a constitutive part of bonds, decisions and processes of subjectivation. This ethics implies sensitivity, listening, dialogue, respect for differences and a commitment to social transformation. This perspective highlights the importance of participatory and contextualised ethics that promote autonomy and social justice.

The article has shown that, although some practices exist in virtual social work, it is necessary to move towards more participatory, inclusive, ethical and democratic



models. This implies an ethical and political commitment to be present where new forms of exclusion and vulnerability arise, but also where the possibilities for transformative action emerge. This suggests not only rethinking methodologies, devices and institutional alliances, but also reconfiguring our professional outlook: seeing the digital world not as an obstacle, but as a territory for the struggle for social rights, justice and care.

There is an urgent need to consolidate an epistemology of virtual and digital social work that is not limited to the instrumental incorporation of technologies but critically questions the social models that underpin them. In short, virtual social work is not a simple extension of face-to-face practice, but a field of action with its own specificities and challenges. This transformation requires a situated professionalism, a critical ethic and an epistemology of care that recognises the digital realm as a space for intervention and a place of dispute over the very meaning of the social. The profession is called upon to inhabit virtuality not as a trench, but as a space for care, resistance and collective construction. Only in this way will it be possible to build a profession that is equal to the challenges of the 21st century.



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