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COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL WORK³

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Abstract: *The digital transformation of welfare institutions is reshaping the communicative, organisational, and ethical foundations of social work across Europe. Although digital technologies promise improved accessibility, service continuity, administrative efficiency, and inter-institutional coordination, they also generate substantial challenges for a profession grounded in dialogue, trust, contextual interpretation, and relationship-based support. This paper examines the communication challenges arising in the digital transformation of social work through a critical synthesis of recent scholarly literature and official evidence from the European Union and Bulgaria published within the last five years. The analysis integrates three interconnected strands of debate: digital communication between professionals and clients, AI-supported communication, and the digital competences of social workers.*

Keywords: *digital social work; communication; AI-supported communication; digital competencies; social services*

JEL Codes: *I19, I31*

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a central framework for reforming welfare institutions and public administration across Europe. In policy discourse, digitalization is associated with efficiency, accessibility, interoperability, faster processing and more user-oriented service delivery. These aims are relevant to social work, where timely communication, accessible information, institutional coordination and continuity of support have direct consequences for the quality of intervention. However, digital transformation in social work is not only a matter of technical modernization. It affects the communicative core of the profession.

Social work is fundamentally a communicative practice. Assessment, counselling, advocacy, referral, crisis intervention, safeguarding and long-term support depend on interaction between professionals, service users, families and institutions. Social workers do not simply transfer information. They build trust, interpret vulnerability, mediate between formal systems and lived experience, negotiate uncertainty and respond to needs that are often only partly articulated. Communication is therefore not a secondary administrative function but a primary professional instrument.

For this reason, digital transformation should not be understood merely as the adoption of new tools. Online forms, digital case-management systems, video consultations, e-government portals, messaging platforms, electronic documentation, virtual inter-agency meetings and AI-supported decision aids change how clients access services, how professionals frame cases and how institutions communicate. These changes are especially important for groups most likely to use social services, including older adults, people with disabilities, low-income households, unemployed people, families in crisis, residents of remote areas and individuals facing overlapping disadvantages.

Recent scholarship shows that the accelerated use of digital practice during and after COVID-19 enabled continuity of contact and increased flexibility in many settings (Mishna et al., 2021). At the same

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time, digitally mediated communication introduced risks related to weakened non-verbal cues, privacy limitations, digital exclusion, communication fatigue, ethical uncertainty and dependence on fragmented organizational infrastructures (Hölscher., McAuliffe and Hugman., 2021; Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022; Devlieghere and Roose, 2022). The central point is not that digitalization is inherently harmful, but that it is never neutral. It changes the structure, timing and quality of professional communication.

A further layer of complexity arises from AI-supported communication. Artificial intelligence is entering welfare and public administration through triage systems, text generation, translation, classification, summarization and decision support. Even when AI does not replace professional judgement, it can shape what professionals record, prioritize and classify (Reamer, F.G., 2023). In social work, where communication is tied to ethics, power, accountability and recognition, AI raises questions about opacity, bias, explainability and procedural fairness.

The third important debate concerns the digital competence of social workers. Practitioners are expected to manage increasingly complex communicative environments, yet digital competence cannot be reduced to the basic operation of platforms. It includes ethical judgement, awareness of digital inequality, appropriate channel selection, confidentiality, professional boundaries and the ability to interpret or challenge AI-supported outputs (López Peláez, Marcuello-Servós and Castillo de Mesa, 2021; Reamer, 2023). Digital competence is thus relational, ethical and organizational rather than merely instrumental.

These issues are particularly relevant for Bulgaria. The country participates in the European Union's digital modernization agenda, but digital progress unfolds in conditions of uneven skills, social inequality, territorial disparity and different levels of institutional readiness. This paper argues that communication challenges in digital social work are best understood at the intersection of professional-client interaction, AI-supported communication and the digital competences required of practitioners. The paper first presents a critical literature review, then outlines the methodological and conceptual framework, examines the EU and Bulgarian context, discusses the principal communication challenges and concludes with policy and practice implications.

EXPOSITION

Digital social work scholarship has expanded rapidly and now covers online practice, e-government, digital inclusion, datafication, platformisation, remote counselling, ethics and artificial intelligence. A critical synthesis suggests that these themes should not be treated as isolated developments. Together, they reshape the communicative infrastructure of social work by changing professional-client interaction, institutional decision-making and the meaning of professional competence.

One of the most important developments in the literature is the move away from understanding digitalisation as simple channel substitution. Earlier debates often implied that technology changed only the medium through which existing practice occurred. Recent studies take a more critical position. Mishna et al. (2021) show that information and communication technologies enabled continuity of contact in difficult circumstances, but also changed the rhythm, boundaries and quality of interaction. Harrikari et al. (2021) similarly show that digital adaptation increased flexibility and reach while generating uncertainty, emotional strain and new communication barriers. Digital communication therefore does not transfer social work unchanged from one space to another; it reshapes the form and meaning of practice.

This matters because communication in social work is not reducible to information transfer. Professionals rely on verbal and non-verbal cues, emotional nuance, silence, pacing, environmental context and relational presence. Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2022) argue that social work is shaped by presence, place and embodied encounter, while digital settings filter interaction through devices, platforms, connectivity, privacy conditions and user confidence. Consequently, convenience and reach may be accompanied by losses in contextual depth and interpretive richness.

A central tension concerns accessibility versus relational depth. Digital communication may reduce travel time, lower logistical barriers, support flexible scheduling and increase continuity for clients with mobility limitations or concerns about stigma (Cook and Zschomler, 2020; Boddy and Dominelli, 2017). For some users, digital channels increase control and reduce the threshold for seeking help. However, easier access does not automatically produce better communication. Social workers often interpret what is not said: facial expressions, posture, family interactions, household atmosphere and environmental cues.

Remote communication weakens these resources, especially in text- or phone-based contact. Kam, (2020) notes that online helping relationships may support continuity, but also raise concerns about trust, boundaries and communication quality. In child and family work, safeguarding, domestic violence and severe mental distress, the limits of digital observation are particularly serious (Cellini and Mozzone, 2025).

Privacy and safety further complicate digital communication. A client may join a call from a shared room, unstable housing or a setting where others influence what they can safely say. Hölscher., McAuliffe and Hugman, (2021) show that digitally mediated practice creates ethical uncertainty around confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries and sensitive information. In social work, where communication frequently involves trauma, violence, debt, family conflict or mental distress, a technically completed conversation may still be substantively compromised if the client cannot speak freely.

The literature therefore shifts attention from communicative availability to communicative quality. Digital inequality is central here. Seifert, Cotton and Xie (2021) describe a “double burden of exclusion”, in which socially marginalised individuals are further disadvantaged when access to support depends on digital engagement. van Deursen (2020) and Helsper (2021) show that digital inequality concerns not only connectivity but skills, confidence, quality of use and outcomes. For social work, this means that a person may own a smartphone and use the internet daily, yet still be unable to upload documents, navigate official portals, interpret bureaucratic language or use secure communication tools. Institutional assumptions that digital access equals communicative readiness are therefore misleading.

This has implications for how institutions interpret non-response or incomplete engagement. When communication flows through portals, forms and automated notifications, missed deadlines or incomplete applications may be treated as non-compliance. A critical reading suggests that they may instead reflect exclusionary communication design. If digital systems are built around confident users, they risk reproducing inequality while appearing neutral and efficient.

Another theme concerns standardisation and categorisation. Digital systems require communication to be structured into fields, menus, templates and predefined categories. Standardisation can support consistency, coordination and auditability, but it narrows the space for narrative complexity. Devlieghere and Roose (2018) argue that digitalisation shapes what becomes visible and actionable in social work practice. Clients with complex problems often struggle to translate lived experience into administratively legible forms, while social workers may be required to condense layered situations into categories that satisfy system requirements but cannot fully capture the case.

Managerial and data-driven governance intensifies this narrowing. When digital systems are connected to performance measurement, throughput targets, risk flagging and audit cultures, communication may increasingly serve system readability rather than client intelligibility. Wilcock and van Toorn (2026) argue that datafication changes discretion and service delivery in digital welfare states. In social work, relational and interpretive work may be subordinated to standardised reporting and administrative legibility.

AI-supported communication adds a further layer. AI may draft responses, summarise notes, categorise requests, translate messages or flag urgency. These functions appear supportive, but they are not neutral. They provide interpretation, assign importance and reshape encounters before and after direct professional contact. Kvakic, and Larsson, (2024). argue that AI affects discretion, categorisation and accountability, while Reamer (2023) emphasises ethical risks related to privacy, informed consent, reliability, bias and professional judgement. Androniceanu, (2024) shows that AI in public administration has implications for discretion, accountability and citizen interaction. These implications are especially serious in social work because communication is inseparable from care, advocacy and rights.

The literature converges around three concerns: bias, opacity and accountability. Bias matters because welfare systems have histories of unequal classification and surveillance. AI systems trained on historical data may reproduce such patterns. Opacity matters because professionals and service users need to understand how communication and decision pathways are shaped. Accountability matters because responsibility can become blurred when harmful outcomes arise from AI-supported mediation. Reamer (2023) stresses that professional oversight remains essential, but oversight is insufficient if practitioners cannot understand or challenge automated outputs.

These concerns lead directly to digital competence. Recent scholarship rejects the idea that competence is merely technical proficiency. López Peláez, Marcuello-Servós and Castillo de Mesa (2021)

argue that digital social work requires professional preparation that includes ethics, participation, inclusion and critical engagement with technological systems. Digital competence involves selecting communication channels according to case complexity, identifying privacy risks, recognising digital exclusion, using accessible language, safeguarding confidentiality and maintaining boundaries. In AI-supported communication, it also includes understanding the limits of automated outputs and knowing when to reject or question them.

The literature also rejects an individualised view of competence. Organisational systems can help or hinder good communication. Poor design, fragmentation, unclear protocols, insufficient training and unrealistic managerial expectations may undermine even skilled practitioners. Harrikari et al. (2021) show that digital practice depends strongly on infrastructure, organisational support and implementation context. Thus, competence is both professional and systemic.

Overall, digital communication, AI-supported communication and digital competence form one common contradiction. Digital transformation promises accessibility, efficiency, coordination and responsiveness, yet the mechanisms used to achieve these aims - standardisation, automation, platformisation and remote delivery - may weaken the relational and context-sensitive qualities that make social work effective. This is not an argument against digitalisation, but for evaluating digital social work through communicative justice: whether people can access, understand, trust and meaningfully participate in communication with welfare institutions.

Methodological and conceptual framework

This paper is based on a critical narrative review combined with contextual analysis of official policy and statistical sources. Its purpose is not to generate new empirical field data, but to synthesise recent scholarship and official evidence in order to clarify the communication challenges shaping digital social work, with particular attention to the European Union and Bulgaria.

A critical narrative review is appropriate because the relevant literature is broad and heterogeneous, including qualitative studies, professional surveys, conceptual analyses, ethics discussions, public administration research and digital inequality studies. The aim is interpretive and analytical: to identify patterns, contradictions and implications across recent scholarship. Three principles guide the review: priority is given to literature and official sources from the last five years; peer-reviewed scientific works suitable for verification in major databases such as Web of Science and Scopus are privileged; and the discussion is grounded in official evidence from Eurostat, the European Commission's Digital Decade reporting and the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria.

The analysis uses three conceptual lenses. The first is communication as relational infrastructure: communication is not simply information exchange but the medium of trust, assessment, consent, interpretation and coordination. The second is digitalisation as socio-organisational transformation: digital tools are treated as elements of wider organisational change involving standardisation, datafication, interoperability, service design and governance. The third is AI as mediated institutional judgement: even when AI does not make final decisions, it shapes what is seen, categorised, prioritised and communicated. Together these lenses connect micro-level professional-client interaction with macro-level digital governance.

EU and Bulgarian context

The European Union provides the broader policy context for digital transformation in social work. Through the Digital Decade framework, the EU has set strategic goals related to digital skills, infrastructure, business digitalisation and digital public services. These ambitions shape the environment in which welfare services are accessed and delivered.

At EU level, the expansion of digital public services is not matched by universal digital preparedness. In 2025, 60% of people aged 16-74 had at least basic digital skills, while 71.9% used websites or apps of public authorities (Eurostat, 2025a; 2025b). This means that many citizens are expected to navigate digitalised administrative environments without equivalent competence. The European Commission's State of the Digital Decade 2024 and 2025 reports also show progress in digital public services alongside uneven performance across Member States and persistent deficits in digital skills and inclusion (European Commission, 2024b; 2025). For social work, this creates systems in which digital channels expand faster than all users' capacity to engage with them confidently.

The Bulgarian context illustrates this tension clearly. National Statistical Institute data show that digital connectivity is widespread: in 2025, 92.8% of households had internet access at home and 86.5% of individuals aged 16-74 used the internet daily or almost daily (NSI, 2025). However, the 2024 Digital Decade country snapshot reports that only 35.5% of the Bulgarian population had at least basic digital skills, compared with an EU average of 55.6% (European Commission, 2024a). The contrast between high connectivity and comparatively low digital competence is crucial.

Social work must distinguish between digital reach and digital readiness. A person may have internet access and use it regularly, but still struggle with secure logins, digital identification, online forms, document uploads, portal navigation and bureaucratic language. This difference is especially important in welfare settings, where communication often concerns rights, benefits, safety or urgent personal needs.

Bulgarian digital inequalities also overlap with broader social vulnerabilities, including age, education, income, disability, rural location and social isolation. These are also factors associated with a higher need for social support. Thus, social work may be most necessary for groups that face the greatest barriers in digitalised systems. The figures show that digital availability alone is a poor indicator of communicative accessibility. Welfare digitalisation may extend formal access while increasing dependence on professional mediation, informal support or translation between citizens and institutions.

Discussion

The analysis shows that communication challenges are not peripheral consequences of digital transformation but central professional and social effects. Digitalisation changes not only the medium of social work communication but also the conditions under which trust, assessment, participation and accountability are produced. Therefore, digital transformation cannot be evaluated only through technical or administrative indicators; it must also be assessed in terms of communicative justice.

The first challenge concerns professional-client communication in digital environments. Social work depends on embodied, relational and contextual understanding. Face-to-face encounters allow practitioners to observe hesitation, affective shifts, environmental conditions, relational tension and interaction among family members. Digital communication changes or reduces these resources. Video provides partial visibility, while text and telephone interaction narrow professional interpretation further. Routine follow-up or information exchange may work well online, but crisis intervention, child protection, domestic abuse work and trauma-related assessment may require direct, protected and richer forms of contact (Cellini and Mozzone, 2025; Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022).

The second challenge is the social distribution of communicative burden. Digital transformation often transfers work from institutions to service users, who must manage accounts, passwords, document uploads, forms, notifications and procedural tracking. For confident users this may be convenient. For vulnerable users it can become a substantial additional burden. Bulgaria's figures demonstrate why digital reach must not be confused with readiness: a connected population may still lack the skills needed to navigate complex public welfare systems (NSI, 2025). For social work, this means that digitalisation can widen formal access while deepening communicative inequality among older adults, low-income households, people with disabilities, rural populations and citizens with low administrative literacy (Seifert, Cotton and Xie, 2021; Helsper, 2021).

This burden also has professional consequences. Social workers often become translators between institutional systems and users who do not understand digital procedures. They explain notifications, help with portal use, interpret administrative language and clarify consequences. This labour is valuable but reveals a hidden cost of digitalisation: professionals spend time repairing communicative failures produced elsewhere in the system.

A third challenge concerns privacy, confidentiality and safety. Digital communication can support continuity, but confidentiality may be fragile when clients join calls from spaces where others are present or where they cannot speak freely. Hölscher., McAuliffe and Hugman, (2021) show that e-professionalism raises ethical issues around privacy, boundaries, informed consent and digital platforms. The risk is not only data breach but communicative distortion: a client may appear to participate voluntarily while actually being constrained by their environment.

A fourth challenge concerns standardisation and administrative narrowing. Digital systems translate communication into predefined categories, structured forms and measurable outputs. This can improve consistency, but it can reduce space for complexity and narrative depth. Devlieghere and Roose (2018)

show that digitalization reshapes the visibility of practice, while Wilcock and van Toorn (2026) argue that datafication changes discretion in welfare systems. In social work, the danger is that communication becomes oriented toward what systems can process rather than what clients need to express. Social workers then have to re-humanise communication within systems that standardise it.

A fifth challenge emerges through AI-supported communication. AI is often introduced as a tool for efficiency and workload reduction, which is understandable in overstretched welfare systems. However, social work must evaluate AI not only by whether it saves time but by how it mediates recognition, interpretation and accountability. If AI routes requests, summarises notes, generates first responses, translates text or classifies urgency, it has already shaped the communicative field (Kam, 2020; Reamer, 2023; Androniceanu, (2024). AI-powered translation may bridge language barriers but also dilute emotional or cultural nuance. Generated summaries may reduce documentation time but omit ambiguity essential for professional judgement. AI-supported triage may help prioritise cases but may also obscure the assumptions behind case pathways.

Bias and opacity are therefore central. Welfare systems have long histories of unequal categorisation and surveillance, and AI trained on historical records may reproduce such patterns. The issue is not only statistical bias but the normalisation of institutional assumptions that appear objective. Social workers and service users need to understand how digital and AI-supported systems influence communication. Without transparency, professional autonomy and institutional trust may weaken.

These problems make digital competence essential. Competence in digital social work combines technical, communicative, ethical and critical capacities. Practitioners must know how to choose communication channels, identify when digital contact is unsafe or inadequate, explain digital processes, protect confidentiality and evaluate AI-supported outputs (López Peláez, Marcuello-Servós and Castillo de Mesa, 2021; Reamer, 2023). However, competence is not only individual. Organisational conditions shape whether professionals can communicate well. Fragmented platforms, unclear protocols, insufficient training and excessive workloads undermine effective practice even among digitally skilled workers (Harrikari et al., 2021, Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino, and Ulmestig, (2022).

Inter-institutional communication is another major challenge. Social work intersects with health, education, employment, disability administration, child protection, local government and non-governmental organisations. Digital transformation is often presented as a means of improving coordination, yet poorly aligned systems may require users to provide the same information repeatedly, navigate multiple portals and receive inconsistent messages. Social workers then become coordinators and translators across institutional silos. From the user's perspective, communication is how the state is encountered; fragmented communication weakens institutional trust.

The Bulgarian case offers a strategic warning. Digital public development can proceed even where a substantial part of the population remains below basic digital competence benchmarks. This does not mean that digital transformation should stop, but that it must be governed around the communicative realities of those who face the greatest barriers. A communication-centred model of digital social work should rest on several principles: digital channels should complement rather than replace face-to-face practice; systems should be designed around users with the least digital confidence; AI-supported communication should be used only with transparency, auditability and professional oversight; education and continuing professional development should embed digital ethics and inclusion; and interoperability should be treated not only as a technical goal but as a communicative right of service users.

CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of social work is not simply a technical or administrative development. It changes the communicative conditions of welfare practice. This paper has argued that the most significant challenges arise where digital professional-client communication, AI-supported mediation and the digital competences of social workers intersect. These challenges affect whether social services remain accessible, intelligible, trustworthy and effective.

The reviewed literature shows that digital communication can improve continuity, flexibility and formal access, but it can also reduce relational depth, obscure contextual and non-verbal cues, weaken privacy and intensify standardisation. AI-supported communication adds risks of opacity, bias,

decontextualisation and weakened accountability. The digital competences required in contemporary social work therefore extend beyond operating software. They include ethical judgement, accessibility awareness, communicative reflexivity, critical engagement with automated systems and the ability to recognise when digital tools support inclusion and when they create new forms of exclusion.

The EU and Bulgarian evidence reinforce this argument. In 2025, 60% of people aged 16-74 in the EU had at least basic digital skills, while 71.9% used websites or apps of public authorities, showing that digital public service use is advancing faster than universal digital competence (Eurostat, 2025a; 2025b). In Bulgaria, the tension is sharper: 92.8% of households had internet access and 86.5% of individuals aged 16-74 used the internet daily or almost daily in 2025, but only 35.5% of the population had at least basic digital skills in the 2024 Digital Decade country snapshot (NSI, 2025; European Commission, 2024a). Connectivity and use therefore do not necessarily mean meaningful digital capability.

The central conclusion is that communication must become a primary category of digital welfare reform. A social work system is not inclusive simply because it is digital. It is inclusive when people can understand it, trust it, navigate it and use it without disproportionate burden. This requires hybrid service models, plain-language communication design, strong confidentiality measures, better inter-institutional coordination, transparent governance of AI-supported tools and continuous investment in the digital and ethical competence of professionals. If digital transformation is treated only as a technical or managerial process, it may weaken the relational foundations of social work. If governed as a communicative and ethical transformation, it can strengthen access, responsiveness and social justice.

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