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Adaptation(s) to the Digital Society

Abstract

In this study, the author explores the influence of the digital space on social sciences, focusing on sociology, cultural anthropology, and social work. The central theme is how these disciplines find opportunities in the digital world while adapting to the digital society. Two main aspects are highlighted: the digital presence of these fields and the tools available within the digital space to achieve disciplinary goals.

While the digital space enhances knowledge access, it also leads to new forms of deprivation, brings new social problems into the digital sphere, which are not only location-shifting but also introduce new characteristics. Social scientists like sociologists and social workers play a crucial role in supporting marginalized groups, facilitating smoother access to information, and ensuring that digital platforms promote social inclusion. They can also contribute to decision-making processes by using data-driven strategies to benefit communities, emphasizing the positive aspects of the digital transformation.

This study highlights how digital technologies have expanded participatory methods, enhancing communication, collaboration, and goal-setting in both digital and in-person contexts. Additionally, the study investigates the potential of fintech solutions for community-based fundraising and resource mobilization, underscoring the growing reliance on digital tools for achieving social and economic goals. The findings indicate that, despite ethical and practical challenges, there are significant opportunities to advance digital social work, fostering greater community engagement and development through digital innovations. The paper concludes by emphasizing that the social sciences are still in the early stages of adapting to the digital space, presenting opportunities to refine practices and better serve professional goals in the evolving digital age.

Keywords

digital society, digital space, digital social work, fintech solutions, data-driven strategy

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1. Brief Introduction

In my study, I would focus on the trio of social sciences which are observe that society spending a significant amount of time in the digital space. More specifically, I will explore how sociology, cultural anthropology, and social work take advantage the opportunities provided by the digital space and how they should shift towards these possibilities. Overall, two major areas are identified: the presence in the digital space and the use of tools provided by the digital space for achieving disciplinary goals. However, we observe that we approach both aspects cautiously and uncertainly, while discussing that, along with society, problems have also moved into the digital sphere, with new issues emerging.

2. Boundaries and Development of the Digital Space

We have long argued that the internet has changed the world, and it is a sociological fact that it has brought change in many areas but I highlight just the knowledge production, interpersonal relationships, information flow, information bubbles, as well as the characteristics of behavior in the digital space and the social problems that arise there. It goes along with the changes, the role of information (and misinformation) has increased, the role of knowledge has been enhanced, but parallel to this, a new type of deprivation has also emerged, which concerns the various limitations of access to knowledge. The processes of the information society have broadened with the spread of the internet, and we capture increasingly diverse aspects or further problematize them (cf. Z. Karvalics 2021). Thus, we highlight two dimensions of the digital world that will be critically important for the digital social scientist: (1) the provision of information and data in the digital space, the strengthening of real-world helping activities through the use of the digital space, and helping on platforms, and (2) the social problems that have moved into the digital space, which not only have changed location but have also incorporated new characteristics (both beneficial and disadvantageous) and are volatile.

We do not wish to emphasize the unfavorable aspects of this changing world, as we see how information impacts the resources, cooperation, networkedness of communities and how it is play an important role on finding a critical voice, and ultimately social participation of communities. The role of sociologists, social workers or digital social consultants is not negligible: they aid the marginalized people and facilitate their integration, thus making the pathway to access

smoother, reducing information noise, and these social scientists can enter into decision-making processes by supporting data-based strategies, and ultimately utilizing the potentials available in the digital space for the benefit of communities.

The metaverse offers an authentic, attractive space full of opportunities for younger generations. For digital natives, it represents a currently developing, varied, „island-like" world that combines technologies of virtual and augmented reality for higher user experience. However, participation entails entering with a constructed (fictional) character, which also provides a chance for hiding or emerging.

2.1 The Digital Space as a New Field for Social Sciences

Research on the digital space is continuous from the outside and on the sidelines: we observe the study of social platforms, comments, information bubbles, we sense and describe the emerging issues, and utilize the society's accessibility: we deal with arising texts, and conduct surveys to reach those who are appearing in the digital sphere. Only recently has the problematic nature of researchers' entry been examined: what is the role of the digital research persona, where does the boundary of the digital space lie, and how does it differ from real social space in everyday digital practices?

The digital space is not merely technology or a communication tool; it is an environment where human (and culture) converges with the information space (cf: Dodge 2001). It is not just virtual reality, nor merely a collection of immaterial elements. The representations of culture appear in the form of entities manifested as characters and actions (cf. Jakobi 2007). We see the reactions and doubts of digital sociology in response to this.

Bauman repeatedly emphasized – even before the emergence of the virtual world – that we need to think differently about space: while modern individuals lived in a structured time, where there was an established past and a progressive, enduring future with a clear direction of progression but postmodern individuals no longer have these reference points (Bauman, 1999). Discussing postmodern life strategies, Bauman anticipated the experiences of individuals (and researchers) navigating the digital space: avoiding fixation is the cornerstone (Bauman, 1999). He makes this statement while mentioning elements that remain equally relevant today: the fluidity of rules, transience, rejection of responsibility, perpetual presentism, and the necessity of staying in motion. These factors were already crucial for understanding contemporary society, even before the digital space became integral to everyday life. However, as we see today, the evolution of digital space has amplified presentism, intensified transience, and fragmented future perspectives. The digital space is not only the stage for these phenomena but also a catalyst for them.

Moreover, digital space is difficult to delineate: links and hyperlinks continuously lead to new details (as cited by Landow in Nagy, 2016), formerly in a planned and conceptual manner, but today, under the influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence, with even fewer defined boundaries. This alone introduces a perspective in which networks, connections, and distances demand new interpretations.

Yet, alongside uncertainties, there are also opportunities. The foremost advantage of digital space is its research potential: Big Data studies, the use of large language models (LLM), and access to society through virtual spaces. Another opportunity lies in researchers' ability to

conduct real-time digital fieldwork, observe collective (or connective) actions and movements, analyze context-dependent texts, and study the dynamics of opinions.

It is essential to consider knowledge production, intertextuality, and reflexive practices, while also viewing digital space as a synergistic, dynamic, innovative, and inclusive space offering numerous possibilities. When we are discussing digital or virtual space, or examining distinctions between digital and electronic spheres, a crucial aspect emerges: has our activity simply shifted into a virtual environment, or has the digital world become an integrated part of our daily practices? Pink and their colleagues regard the former as a form of hybridity (Pink et al., 2022), however, many scholars go beyond viewing digital work as mere ICT-based communication or predictive modeling and even extend beyond social science research. Instead, they see integration into networks and relational structures as the future direction of development. The use of virtual space is currently unimaginable in the form that is beginning to take shape and which is in the long run, it may enable virtual characters (possibly avatars) to participate, develop, experience personality, and engage in social activities. This will necessitate changes in social science practice, requiring adaptation to virtual social practices that will become accessible following methodological advancements (Relinque-Medina & Álvarez-Pérez, 2024).

3. Digital Social Problems and Challenges

A significant part of society is engaged in the digital space: participating in different segments with varying levels of activity as well as while utilizing digital platforms, users encounter that space is simultaneously more liberated and more unregulated. Many social problems have migrated to the digital sphere, where they continue to expand: debates over self-presentation and representation, an abundance of comments, reactions to one another's opinions – these are widely familiar and have become an integral part of everyday life. Although not everyone has directly encountered explicit sexual or erotic content or violence, most are aware of their presence, just as they are of the various forms of online fraud. However, awareness often remains superficial, and only a small fraction of users possess sufficient knowledge of the risks, leading to a general lack of digital consciousness.

This uncertainty, combined with vague and fragmented knowledge about digital security, provides fertile ground for many problems. Cyber fraud, harassment, and the misuse of data and images are pervasive threats. Additionally, certain digital content and platforms reflect the adaptation of real-world crime into the virtual space – such as the illegal trade of drugs, organs, or weapons, the distribution of pedophilic content, or other activities on the dark web. Furthermore, a not negligible part of the feature of digital space is that how participants communicate, organize themselves, form groups, keep a distance from others, exclude them, and engage in verbal attacks or harm one another. This is a brief summary of how people treat freely, without restrictions, often facelessly, each other and their opinions in digital space, or engage with aspects of each other's lives in virtual sphere. The most striking consequence of this phenomenon as the digital space has become a sphere of performance-based self-presentation, exerting a profound impact on societal reference points and individual self-esteem.

Social problems have not merely transitioned into the digital space; they have also acquired new forms and tools, reshaping their nature and amplifying their effects.

4. Digital Social Sciences

4.1 Ethical Concerns and Uncertainty in the Digital Space

Beyond the uncharted digital territories and the uncertainties in digital platform usage, there are numerous ethical concerns also hinder progress in the digitalization of the social sciences. At every level, issues arise concerning privacy protection, the challenges of maintaining confidentiality, and occasionally emerge the difficulties in interpreting the relevant legal framework. Additionally, collecting and organizing data on vulnerable groups presents further ethical dilemmas. This issue becomes particularly sensitive in social science research focused on illegal or „gray zone" activities.

Beyond ethical concerns, social scientists also face ethical risks in their work. For instance, digital environments can lead to situations where some social workers, who use uncertainly the digital space, allow access to their personal content – in the absence of appropriate regulations and guidelines. This can „violate professional codes and risk self-disclosure towards clients with problems maintaining boundaries themselves" (Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino & Ulmestig, 2021).

The other side is equally complex: researchers and practitioners often gain access to sensitive personal data, yet full and informed consent must be obtained before usage. The difficulty in ensuring such informed consent frequently discourages researchers and professionals from even initiating studies. Even at the stage of reaching out to participants, challenges emerge, as traditional analytical categories — such as gender, ethnicity, and social class — shape research frameworks. However, categories such as disabilities or victimhood require careful handling, often necessitating their transformation into emic (insider-defined) concepts.

Ethical digital conduct, defining boundaries and responsibilities, presents challenges not only for social researchers but also for the target groups and clients involved. This adds an additional burden on professionals, who themselves are often still in the early stages of adapting to digital literacy and competence.

Digital social workers critically examine the impersonality of digital spaces. The anonymity of the digital space and the performance-based nature of self-representation are perceived as significant challenges, leading to questions about the authenticity of working with real experiences. For field social workers and anthropologists, the difficulty extends to relationship-building and establishing the foundations for collaboration. They recognize the need for new communication strategies (Lopez, 2015) and a redefinition of presence, perception of the other, and the dynamics of cooperation.

Although this issue extends far beyond its immediate implications, it is essential to note that legal scholars discuss the rights, violations, and ownership aspects of digital identity. As the metaverse develops, these concerns become increasingly tangible, even if individuals do not yet personally consider blockchain technology or NFTs (non-fungible tokens) in their daily lives (see Z. Karvalics & Nagy, 2017; Kőhidi, 2022). Digital identity is not merely subject to rights and suffer violations (cyberbullying, cyber fraud etc.) — it also emerges as an active participant in the digital world. It is both dependent and autonomous, shaped by algorithmically generated aspirations, preferences, consumption patterns, values, and responsibilities. These characteristics necessitate viewing digital identity as an independent entity and an active agent in the digital ecosystem.

4.2 Reconsidered and New Methods in Research

While the digital space is evolving dynamically, the social sciences are gradually catching up in terms of methodology. Researchers are beginning to adapt methodological tools that enhance the understanding of society, incorporating various information and communication technologies or adapting the capabilities of artificial intelligence.

Online data collection remains a convenient, effective, and widely accepted method within digital research. However, data mining techniques, language model adaptations, and text mining are steadily gaining traction.

Within this transformation, survey methodologies are also being reconsidered: (1) the methodological aspects of conducting surveys in digital spaces, such as how to formulate effective questions without the support of field interviewers; and (2) the challenges of working with unstructured data. The disciplinary ambitions of data science align with the social sciences' increasing reliance on interpretations derived from big data processing (see Kmetty, 2018). Traditional approaches are ineffective in handling unstructured datasets, on the contrary, they contain information from a source and in a quality that was not previously available, so the social sciences are renewing themselves, incorporating and adapting the tools that are already available, thus tools used in the field of data and text mining appear, primarily for recognizing patterns and trends in large amounts of data.

Additionally, sophisticated data visualizations and infographics are emerging as valuable tools for shaping opinions and enhancing comprehension, making social science knowledge more accessible and engaging.

4.3 Digital Fieldwork

For practitioners of digital anthropology, the discipline begins when anthropology designates digital technologies as subjects of study and when fieldwork takes place (also) within digital spaces. It is crucial to recognize that technologies — ranging from virtual reality to streaming services, social platforms to robotics, fake news to cyberbullying — simultaneously reflect the defining characteristics of digital space. While all digital interactions can ultimately be reduced to binary code, they also engage with both material and immaterial realities. The ethics and norms of digital spaces are evolving at a rapid pace, influencing everyday practices in the physical world. Yet, for a long time, digital culture remained an overlooked subject of study. Digital cultural spaces are inherently human constructs, and this has hindered digital fieldwork — historically, researchers have examined digital spaces from the perspective of the physical world, much like interviewing a traveler about their journey from the comfort of their home. However, because people actively shape digital culture, bring their existing cultural frameworks into online spaces, and later integrate these digital experiences into their offline lives, a new perspective is required.

Do the experiences of digital fieldwork differ from those of traditional fieldwork? The nature of field engagement differs: with proper connectivity, digital fieldwork can be conducted from anywhere, even from the comfort of home. The initial phase of arrival and adaptation may feel similar — challenging and full of uncertainties — raising fundamental questions such as: who

am I? what am I doing? where do the boundaries of ethical research lie? However, the ecstatic, immersive presence often associated with fieldwork (see Régi, 2016) may be absent, as may initiation rituals, the sense of communal experience, and the physical dimension of engagement. Nonetheless, the knowledge production process through presence still unfolds, following the same spiral of interpretation and experience. While Régi discusses field experiences in a different context, emphasizing access through personal experience (Régi, 2016. 307), when applied to digital fieldwork, this notion acquires an additional or altered meaning — one that speaks to the accessibility of digital content and the persistence of relationships. This reflection is valid, yet it ultimately echoes concerns inherent in all forms of fieldwork.

What fundamentally distinguishes digital fieldwork is the position of the participant observer, which can be described as self-representation (Zimmermann, Wehler & Kaspar, 2022). This concept encapsulates an individual's characterization, the presentation of their actual and aspirational self, and the practice of self-representation as both a methodological tool and a form of artistic expression.

5. Adapting the Opportunities of Digital Space to Participatory Methods

The digital space does not merely introduce new possibilities for research or facilitate communication; it also expands the scope of participatory methods. It enhances digital and in-person group organization, supports goal development and achievement, and enables resource generation.

5.1 Communication in and with the Field

With the advancement of information and communication technologies and the entry of younger social scientists into the field, the role of digital communication has significantly expanded. It has evolved beyond data management to encompass the flow of information and broader communication strategies. Maintaining contact with local actors, clients, community members, and networks of information — through direct messaging, digital interactions, and even memes — has become an integrated part of everyday practice. However, previously mentioned ethical concerns persist: where do the boundaries of ethical communication lie? How much access to personal spaces should be granted? How can boundary transgressions be prevented? And how can digital communication be effectively incorporated into everyday professional operations? While these questions remain unresolved, the prevalence of online communication continues to grow, facilitating interaction across spatial and temporal distances, both individually and in groups.

During participatory methods the information and communication technologies not only to improve communication efficiency but also to integrate digital tools that aid the communities in task- and time management. Digital resources also support goal-setting processes through visual representation tools such as posters and infographics, while an increasing number of applications facilitate collaborative teamwork. The implementation of participatory methods unfolds in multiple phases — planning and implementation — where digital tools create new opportunities for engagement, opening communication spaces both within and beyond the immediate field.

5.2 From Digital Social Work to Fintech

5.2.1 Digital Social Work in the Digital Space

Digital social work manifests in two primary ways within the digital space: first, as a service provider catering to the needs of clients through direct and indirect interactions; second, as an observational tool for professionals working with the digital-native generation, who mainly passively monitor social activities, digital creations, and interactions taking place online. The former one includes the development of digital platforms that bridge social connection gaps or expand the accessibility of services — primarily through algorithm-driven communication and, increasingly, the integration of large language models that enhance communication and mitigate feelings of isolation.

However, I see even greater potential in the latter. A well-trained social worker can transition into an active participant, utilizing the possibilities of the digital space to address emerging and expanding digital social issues with efficiency and effectiveness.

A digital social worker can engage in online counseling, establish groups, and facilitate group work. They can also become present in digital spaces frequented by their real-world clients, whether in virtual gaming environments, social platforms, or broader digital spaces where users interact and attempt to resolve their issues. This presence allows social workers to reclaim an active role in prevention efforts, knowledge dissemination, and assistance — employing both traditional social work skills and newly acquired digital competencies.

Digital social work entails a proactive approach to understanding and navigating the dynamics of the digital space, utilizing the opportunities provided by cyberspace. Digital social workers connect with individuals, comprehend local digital landscapes and norms, and participate in interactions. Through their presence, they foster safety, knowledge-sharing, and social connectivity, and they contribute to community activities. Importantly, this role is distinct from gamification; beyond using game-based tools, social workers in virtual spaces must operate independently while remaining anchored in their professional role, guided by ethical principles, and strategically engaging with the virtual segments most relevant to their target groups.

5.2.2 Utilization of Digital Space in Social Work

The use of digital space in social work primarily manifests in maintaining communication and providing information to local communities and individuals. This is an intuitive aspect of social work, as practitioners engage with digital tools to stay connected. Additionally, information gathering plays a crucial role, encompassing reading academic journals and articles, participating in forums, engaging in online communities, attending virtual conferences, and exploring information about the field.

A significant yet ethically complex aspect of digital social work is passive engagement on social platforms, where practitioners observe the digital lives of community members. While this provides valuable supplementary insights, it also raises critical ethical questions: is passive observation acceptable, and to what extent? How should acquired information be used? Should social workers actively investigate their clients' digital lives? What actions should be taken if

they encounter evidence of a client's vulnerability, abuse, or involvement in illegal activities? These ethical dilemmas generate ongoing discussions and lead to the sharing of best practices among professionals.

Upon closer examination of digital space utilization, two major areas can be distinguished (see Csoba & Diebel, 2021; Berzin et al. 2015): (1) the practical application of digital technologies across different target groups and (2) the monitoring of social services.

The first category includes practices that replace in-person client interactions with digital alternatives, such as virtual meetings, AI-powered services, and algorithm-driven support mechanisms. This also extends to crisis-response solutions that emerged during COVID-19, such as virtual counseling spaces, online group meetings, and social media-based communication channels.

However, fully professionalized technological solutions specifically designed for the social work profession have yet to emerge. Future developments — though met with skepticism by some — may include virtual reality-based consultations or professional avatars engaging in preventive interventions and counseling within the metaverse.

But on the one hand, the integration of the experiences of COVID-19 (cf. Csoba – Diebel, 2021; Pink et al., 2020), on the other hand, the digitalisation of welfare services (EC 2020) efforts, as well as the findings of organisations dealing with futures research, allow us to conclude that there will be place and opportunity for digitalisation and that representatives of the social care profession will not only be its sufferers or passive users, but also its active participants. I would like to point out that the professional use of virtual spaces with digitally accessible clients and target groups will be an expected development. (We will not mention the significant groups of digital laggards now, the digital divide can be the basis for another study.)

Furthermore, data-driven decision-making is expected to become an essential component of social work. The expansion of digital service offerings will increasingly rely on structured data collection, incorporating big data analysis, artificial intelligence, and traditional or participatory research methods. These approaches will reshape how social workers reach and engage with their client base.

Another critical area is community-driven fundraising. While traditional social work efforts focus on professional support within a community, digital solutions for community financing often reach beyond the immediate target group. Various methods, including crowdfunding and social investment initiatives, adapt digital platforms to secure resources for community projects and social initiatives. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of social work strategies, positioning digital tools as key facilitators in community development and financial sustainability.

5.2.3 Implementing Fintech Solutions for Achieving Community Goals

The realization of community goals often requires external support to foster development, stabilize socio-economic conditions, or introduce tools and opportunities that enhance everyday life. However, fundraising in the digital space increasingly faces trust-related challenges, such as fraud, deception, and misdirection. Despite the low levels of trust in both online donation systems and digital platforms, effective messaging, content development, and engagement strategies can still persuade donors to invest in initiatives that transform into sustainable capital or

long-term solutions for small communities (e.g., water purification systems or renewable energy installations).

Unlike traditional fundraising efforts that rely on expanding personal networks at a local level, digital financing solutions can reach a much broader audience. This is where fintech solutions become increasingly crucial in digital social work: they enable individuals who share common goals and values to connect and contribute to a cause, and while personal participation does not take place, they are still an active part of how a local (even distant, but local) problem is solved.

In today's interconnected world, multiple strategies exist for mobilizing financial support. Diverse causes — such as early childhood education, sexual health awareness, sustainable farming, small-scale business development, and technological access — can resonate with potential donors worldwide. For them, the results (and progress) can be tracked in real time from anywhere in the world. The challenge lies in defining clear, communicable, and documentable objectives with tangible social or environmental benefits that create long-term opportunities for local communities. Additionally, messaging strategies must be reconsidered to ensure visual and textual clarity, consistent feedback mechanisms, and incentives such as discounts, local engagement opportunities, or personalized acknowledgments for donors from locals.

By utilize digital space, social development projects can be realized in physical spaces. Beyond online donation campaigns, crowdfunding and peer-to-peer (P2P) lending models play an integral role. Crowdfunding involves targeted capital injections to address specific local challenges or support ideas, often offering transparency through personal connections, the implementation and the increase of locals' well-being become traceable. A digital social worker can contribute by providing expertise, maintaining a presence on crowdfunding platforms, and crafting compelling messages to attract financial support. Successful campaigns can strengthen communities and generate further opportunities for growth.

The community loan (peer-to-peer lending, P2P lending) follows a similar principle but differs in one key aspect: the funds provided must be repaid after the project's completion — sometimes with interest, sometimes in installments, depending on the agreement. The case on the center is support a livelihood development process. These means that projects funded through P2P lending must generate profit over time to enable repayment. In societies with higher levels of trust, this financing model is accessible and operable, although it remains underutilized in the social sector.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to present the current state of three social science disciplines — sociology, cultural anthropology, and social work — in adapting to the opportunities offered by the digital space and to identify the areas where initial attempts at adaptation have begun. It also explored how digital uncertainty and ethical concerns hinder these processes while, at the same time, pushing these disciplines to reconsider their professional practices under the influence of digital transformations.

Two primary perspectives emerge regarding the presence of the digital world: first, as a research and practice environment, and second, as a source of tools increasingly integrated into

professional activities. These include data collection and analysis, data visualization, communication strategies, and financing mechanisms for community projects.

The study sought to illustrate the expanding scope of digital social sciences and reinforce an underlying message: we are still in the early stages of this transition. There remains ample opportunity to define our place within the digital space and to further develop approaches that better serve our disciplinary goals.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my colleagues, Viktória Herczeg and Dr. Péter Miszlai, whose contributions to our digital social work (digital social consultant) curriculum development project provided invaluable inspiration for reflecting on the significance of digital fieldwork and forming the foundation of this study.

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