

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

The Digital Turn in Welfare: Data, Technologies and Emerging Social Challenges

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Ergonomics of Control: Bureaucracy and Socio-Technical Risks in Digital Welfare

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The article analyses the digital transformation of welfare as a new form of administrative rationality in which the modern ideals of efficiency, predictability and transparency – inherited from the Weberian model of bureaucracy – are increasingly embedded in digital infrastructures rather than expressed through written norms. It introduces the concept of “ergonomics of control” to describe socio-technical arrangements that simplify interaction while simultaneously shaping behaviours, narrowing choices and redefining autonomy and responsibility. What was once an adaptation of the system to the person increasingly becomes an adaptation of the person to the logic of the device.

The analysis focuses on three emblematic devices. Consent interfaces tend to transform formally voluntary choices into procedural requirements for accessing services, reducing informed consent to an act of compliance rather than genuine decision. Data-quality metrics privilege completeness, accuracy and timeliness, reducing complex social situations to standardised and processable information: data may be formally correct while failing to represent the concrete situation to which they refer. Ticketing workflows translate individual needs into manageable sequences of tasks, shifting the language of care towards the language of process and translating vulnerability into an administrative risk parameter.

These mechanisms reveal the ambivalence of digital welfare. Digital systems can increase accessibility, coordination and traceability, while reducing situated discretion, relational proximity and opportunities for interpretation. More transparency does not necessarily mean greater intelligibility. Users and caseworkers can trace the status of a request without necessarily understanding the logic that produced its outcome. Digitalized welfare can thus be read as a post-documentary bureaucracy that expands access and formal accountability while narrowing the space for reciprocity and situated judgement.

The article argues that digital welfare cannot be judged only in terms of technical efficiency. Its legitimacy also depends on whether context, exception and human judgement survive translation into code. A relational conception of data quality therefore becomes a criterion for assessing whether digital infrastructures merely optimise administrative processes or remain capable of responding to the complexity of social situations.

Keywords: administrative rationality; algorithmic governance; digital platforms; socio-technical design; relational quality.

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