

## **Digital welfare: advantages and disadvantages of the algorithm**

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"The digital world is constantly expanding and has transformed human relationships and productive sectors in recent decades. Digital technologies have penetrated the private and professional lives of each individual without much resistance, increasingly involving the social dimension. The revolution we are experiencing is based on the convergence of multiple factors and complex systems of interrelation, characterized by the attributes of speed and ubiquity (Castells, 2015).

Among the sectors that have been deeply involved in the digital revolution is that of social-facing policies; in fact, the management of practices, once exclusively paper-based, thanks to information technology and increasingly to AI, now, takes place through platforms (Eichhorn et al., 2022; Schou, Pors, 2019).

Despite the great change taking place, we do not notice a global debate that actively involves communities and individual social actors. The narratives associated with these tools are often descriptive in nature and related to progress: the idea offered of technological instruments is often accompanied by existential simplification. There is hardly any allusion to the risks incurred in outsourcing the construction of complex algorithmic architectures, including those dedicated to welfare, to private companies.

The digital divide problem affects not only the vulnerable segments of the population, but also those who simply lack the required digital skills (Halford and Savage 2010).

The questions that emerge are many: are we able to tolerate an algorithm deciding for us? What can be the benefits related to this new and imminent technological revolution that will increasingly interpenetrate our existences?

We know that algorithms are sociotechnical tools, understood as a system composed of various technical and social apparatuses that are inextricably intertwined and go to define data production (Burrell, 2015; Campo, Martella, et al. 2018). It appears diriment, then, not only the distributional dimension of data and its assembly, but also the design issue. Indeed, every choice is inevitably oriented according to cultural and social logics. The process of constructing an algorithm is not linear; it depends precisely on these logics, on the actors who provide for its conception.

Algorithmic decision-making processes entrusted to Machine Learning technologies that are increasingly present in country administrations cannot be considered mere neutral technical tools. Although their use can genuinely facilitate and improve the responsiveness of administrations, there are often several problems with transparency on the operability of the data.

Today, the spending review is forcing European states to review public spending; the principles of cost-effectiveness; service remodeling and spending reduction are the main coordinates of different governments:

thus the process of “welfare platformization” becomes well suited to achieving the reductionist goal at the economic level.

While we are seeing a “consumerist model” of welfare, some academics a few years back were already emphasizing the importance of individual actors in the co-production of services, with the NPG (New Public Governance) model: they were essentially proposing a “cooperative model” of welfare, as an alternative to the consumerist model (Osborne, 2010). Only more recently have sociologists and economists begun to question the risks and drawbacks of the platforming process in the area of social welfare and care services (Fosti, 2016; 2018), focusing on welfare sharing; and cooperative platforms (Longo & Maino, 2021). The latest among the revolutions that concern us closely is that of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The integration of voice technologies makes it possible to develop text-based generative AI in the form of a conversational interface, which is at least in part a way of overcoming the problem of the digital divide in access to digital welfare systems.

In recent years, scientific research has also focused on exploring the risk dimension underlying the digitization of welfare; in this case, economic, political, and social conflict risks have been found. In fact, the increased power of U.S. and Chinese majors within the global platformization process, could trigger social, economic, and political conflicts, (Fosti, 2016-2018; Longo, Maino, 2021; Pasquinelli, 2017; Visentin, 2018) in the coming years. Odiernally, the competition for control of the world market is between the U.S. and CHINA, which are also the only ones with the infrastructure to compete in the conception and construction of new AI-mediated tools: the world is literally split in two.

The process of AI-mediated acculturation could lead to the loss of the cultural distinctiveness of each people, and cultural flattening. Today we are already witnessing the exposure of a powerful ethical-political filter in the use of generative AI; in fact, if we question ChatGPT on morally relevant issues, such as gender equality or racism, we notice that the answers are always strongly connoted by “politically correct” filters: the tendency is Anglo-Saxon. Thus, the disadvantages are multiple. Our contribution aims to investigate the phenomenon at the macro level, problematizing the data; exploring the cognitive scope of the major trends; as well as analyzing the structuring processes present in our territory.