

Analytical perspectives on the ‘digital/digitised welfare state’: a scoping review

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Digital technologies are increasingly affecting different areas of the welfare state, including social protection systems, education, healthcare, and more. These sectors are becoming more integrated with digital tools, also producing digital data. The process of welfare digitalization, as well as its related social risks have been explored by scholars from various disciplines and perspectives. Nevertheless, although a field of studies about digitalisation processes affecting the welfare state has taken shape over the past decade, the concept ‘digital/digitised welfare state’ has been used very broadly to refer to very diverse issues - e.g. from the employment of digital technologies in social care, to the automatization of decision making in welfare services. Digitalization is a complex and fragmented process, that unfolds differently across various geographical regions and areas of welfare. For this reason, it remains challenging to clearly understand what the concept refers to and which factors scholars considers in their analyses. The objective of this paper is to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the concept of ‘digital/digitised welfare state’, by providing an overview and a critical discussion of the themes and aspects explored in the international social sciences scholarly literature on digitalisation processes affecting the welfare state. The paper is based on a scoping review conducted following Arksey and O’Malley’s methodology. It aimed at answering the following research question: How is the ‘digital/digitised welfare state’ defined, and which are the themes and aspects explored in the social sciences scholarly literature exploring the digitalisation processes that affect the welfare state? The electronic databases ProQuest Social Science, Scopus, JSTOR, SAGE Archive, and the search engine Google Scholar were searched to identify studies suitable for inclusion. Out of 804 retrieved articles, 418 met the inclusion criteria, and 98 were deemed relevant. Through the scoping review we gained an overview of the main geographical contexts and type of studies that exist since now on this broad -and still work in process -field of study. The analysis of the selected contributions shows that the concept of ‘digital/digitised welfare state’ is employed to refer to diverse issues, which can be grouped into 7 key themes: automated decision-making; digital street-level bureaucracy; co-creation and participation; trust, transparency, accountability and resistance; inequalities; the politics of welfare digitalisation; and welfare technologies. The paper presents and discusses these themes, showing how the concept of ‘digital/digitised welfare state’ is differently used in studies focused on different areas of the welfare systems. Moreover, the analysis allows new insights into how digitalisation processes are reshaping the institutionalised systems, in which the state, market and the civil society interact to maximise society’s welfare.