

Stream #26

Data, AI and Digital Infrastructure. Reshaping the Moral Economy of Welfare States

Conveners:

- Minna van Gerven, University of Helsinki
- Rune Halvorsen, OsloMet
- Jacqueline O'Reilly, University of Sussex
- Janine Leschke, Copenhagen Business School

The future of the welfare state is currently shaped by technology and data. Examples for this are digital platforms, automated decision-making, and data-sharing infrastructures of the public sector. These developments are often framed as technological modernization, yet they have profound implications for how social policy is designed, implemented and experienced by citizens and frontline workers.

Data and digital technologies are not neutral. They are embedded in societal objectives, political norms, and administrative traditions and they actively shape how social problems are identified, defined and governed. Digital systems therefore enable different – and sometimes competing – visions of welfare governance, which may have both positive and negative implications. For example, AI-assisted social security administration can support more egalitarian and universalistic approaches, such as proactive benefit granting based on administrative data, where individuals receive entitlements automatically without submitting applications. Such practices have been introduced in areas like family and child benefits and in some tax-based transfers. At the same time, data-driven technologies can facilitate increasingly targeted and conditional forms of welfare provision. Profiling tools, risk scoring systems, and predictive analytics are used in employment services and social assistance to classify clients, prioritize interventions, and detect suspected fraud. These practices may intensify surveillance, reinforce social categorization, and disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, raising concerns about fairness, transparency, and accountability.

Digitalization also reshapes welfare states through the digital workplace systems that organize service delivery. In public services such as employment support,

social assistance, and long-term care, digital tools increasingly structure daily work via scheduling, documentation, and performance dashboards. These systems can improve coordination and consistency, but they can also intensify work, narrow discretion, and shift accountability from professional judgement toward metrics. Welfare governance is thus co-produced by data infrastructures and the labour process of frontline service work, raising questions about voice, autonomy, and the distribution of risk between organisations, workers, and citizens.

Moreover, the fundamental characteristics of digital technologies tend to prioritise certain administrative practices, such as standardisation, interoperability, and performance measurement. While these features can enhance efficiency, they may also reduce space for individualised assessment, professional discretion, and contextual judgement by frontline workers. In this way, digitalisation does not merely modernise welfare states but can reconfigure their moral economy, reshaping notions of deservingness, responsibility, trust, and solidarity .

This session explores the transformative impacts of digitalization and datafication on welfare states. We invite theoretical and empirical contributions that critically examine how data-driven technologies are reshaping social policies, welfare services and the work processes therewithin, citizens' and workers experiences, and the governance of social protection and labour market policies across different institutional and national contexts.