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Social Work on line: a recognition of experiences and practices in Italy

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Social Work online: a recognition of experiences and practices in Italy

“The Internet is the fabric of our lives” (Castells 2001, 1) - but which are the weaves that nowadays connect Italian social workers into such a fabric? Herein we aim at answering this question through a survey of on-line resources, nodes and practices of e-Social Work in Italy. We will assess the ICT impact on the Italian context, in comparison with the European trends, deriving a plausible scenario for the current exploitation levels of these emerging tools within the professional community. A review of the major on-line professional gathering places, identifying their key features and peculiarities, will be also reported. We will conclude with a perspective synopsis on criticalities and opportunities related to e-Social Work in Italy. In general, this study will be an opportunity to explore to which extent in Italy the use of the web can become a useful strategy for bringing key welfare issues in the public debate, stimulating and spreading social innovations (products, services and models) that address the social needs and at the same time create new social relationships and partnerships.

Keywords: e-social work, ICT, Italy, Technology, Critical perspectives

Servizio sociale online: una ricognizione di esperienze e pratiche in Italia

“Internet è il tessuto delle nostre vite” (Castells 2001, 1) – ma quali sono oggi le trame che collegano gli assistenti sociali a questo tessuto? Con questo contributo ci proponiamo di rispondere a questa domanda attraverso un’indagine sulle risorse on-line, sui nodi e sulle pratiche di e-social work in Italia. Valuteremo l’impatto delle ICT nel contesto italiano, in confronto con le tendenze europee, derivando uno scenario plausibile sul livello di utilizzo di queste tecnologie emergenti nell’ambito della comunità professionale italiana. Verrà inoltre presentata una

rassegna dei principali luoghi e punti di aggregazione del servizio sociale italiano on-line, individuandone le caratteristiche e peculiarità. Concluderemo con l'analisi di punti critici e possibilità connesse con l'e-social work in Italia. Lo studio rappresenta un'opportunità di riflessione generale su a che punto, in Italia, l'utilizzo del web possa diventare un'opportunità strategica per portare nel dibattito pubblico le problematiche chiave del welfare, stimolando e promuovendo la diffusione di innovazioni sociali (prodotti, servizi, modelli) che rispondano alle necessità sociali e, allo stesso tempo, creino nuove relazioni e occasioni di cooperazione.

Parole chiave: e-social work, ICT, Italia, Tecnologia, Prospettive critiche

Introduction

The impact of new technology is being felt in every area of everyday life. The onset of the third industrial revolution has prompted a series of processes of transformation, which have been corroborated by informational technology and by involving and transforming every sphere of human existence (Pasotti, 2008), have generated extensive cultural change. Until a few years ago the emerging phenomena were the object of theories by scholars in various disciplines, coining novel expressions, such as 'net economy' (Shapiro & Varian, 1999), 'e-democracy' (Barber, 2003), "information society" (Mattelart, 2001), and "digital revolution" (Coyle, 2008); these have now taken on a significance that has entailed their becoming an integral and inevitable part of contemporary society.

Within this scenario, the social work have "naturally" become involved and incorporated into the processes of change and sedimentation induced by ICT (Rideout, 2008), albeit inspecific and peculiar areas of interest.

Communication and information technology have presented, for social work, a series of new opportunities, challenges and, at the same time, potential critical areas that

have affected, or might affect, every aspect of work: integrating communication technology can revolutionize social work practice (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole & Rishchynski., 2006; Hill & Ferguson, 2014; Mishna, Bogo, Root & Fantus, 2014). One need merely think of the way in which the public administrations, in which many of these professionals are employed, have for decades been promoting the employment and utilization of new IT tools, in line with international approaches.

The social workers are being invited to acknowledge the regulations and new digital procedures introduced in public administration; at the same time, the professional mission demands their attentiveness to new forms of political and civil participation deriving from theories of e-government, digital citizenship and open government, as well as to new ways of aggregation, mobilization and collective action, which find their natural promoter on the internet (Reamer, 2015). There is a need for extensive commitment to play an active role in experimenting, at all organizational levels, innovative forms of collective support, such as e.g. advocacy advertising (Gadotti, 1993).

In professional practice the speed of communication and the countless opportunities for potential interaction between subject and professional, have facilitated and optimized the individuation and exchange of information, rendering it easier to work on-line and with networks. Thus, the social worker has increasing opportunities to transform him/herself from a single spot with limited links, to a “hub operator”, augmenting his/her role of intermediary and manager between the nodes of the network (be they persons, institutions, communities) to levels that were unthinkable a decade ago.

The social worker needs to know the potential and critical areas offered up by the digital scenario in every area of professional intervention; here we need to remember the extent to which working with other people has been influenced by the arrival of IT, from the possibility of modulating and dematerializing interventions by adopting new and

innovative forms of support based on ICT on the Internet of the Things (IoT) to on-line work opportunities with other professionals, not in their physical presence.

New forms of on-line aggregation between professionals have also sprung up with regard to the professional community; reinforced by the numerous innovative, synchronic, communicative possibilities, these have consented the emergence of community spaces for interaction, comparison, association and sharing.

With regard to training ICTs have opened up new frontiers with the implementation of distance-training and supervision platforms, the creation of forums and on-line group chats, in which students, teachers and professionals can interact, and opportunities for experimentation in innovative modalities of transferring knowledge (Alessandrini, 2001).

For these reasons, after outlining certain contextual elements, we present a synthetic overview of certain Italian 'e-best practices', with the aim of surveying mode and functions of internet usage on the part of social worker.

The impact of ICT on the Italian scenario

Before proceeding to an analysis of how ICTs concern social work in Italy and, more specifically, how Italian social workers make use of them, it is necessary to provide several essential elements to outline the context in relation to the utilization of information technology.

Analysing the present scenario, it is possible to observe a clear initial trend where all the indicators that concur in tracing the overall picture are unfavourable to Italy, which proves to be recursively penalized in almost all statistics emerging from the ICT sector, as we shall endeavour to demonstrate subsequently. The reasons for this phenomenon are multiple and complicated and should be sought, first of all, in the marked lack of attention

on the part of both government policy and Italian industry. At the beginnings of the IT revolution (1970-1980), in the same period in which the first experimentation in computerization was launched and applied in other countries, Italy was unable to stimulate its birth and development. In other states of the European Community things happened differently, but in Italy, in fact, there was a gradual sensitising, not without difficulty, towards new forms of technology at the beginning of the 1990s.

About the theme of computerization, precisely because of its transversal nature, countless dynamics interact, ranging from computer literacy in training to the creation and access to services and infrastructure that facilitate the spread of technology, from the perception of the utility of digital tools in society to the digital divide, etc. It will not be possible in this paper to examine in detail the aspects relating to this phenomenon (Sartori, 2006; Iannone, 2007; Caio, Marcus & Pogorel, 2014; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2015), but, by way of explanation, we might mention the DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index), statistics used by the European Commission (2017) to grasp the complexity of determined factors in a country's process of digitalization. DESI puts together a series of indicators regarding five key themes: connectivity; human capital/digital skills; use of internet; integration of digital technology; public services. The latest figures published by the European Commission for 2017, underline the considerable gap among the 28 countries under examination. The average figure among all the nations stands at 0.53 and, when compared with the figure ranging from 0.60 to 0.70 registered by the more digitalized countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, Italy is fourth from last, with a figure of about 0.40, followed only by Greece (0.38), Bulgaria (0.37) and Romania (0.34). These figures appear even more disconcerting when we consider the historic series (European Commission, 2017), which show that the Italian scenario has, in fact, remained

unchanged over the last ten years, or, at least, has not managed to keep pace with growth achieved at the European level.

Thus, Italy is revealed to be a country with poor computer literacy, where only 64% of Italian families possess a computer; of these 62.7% have access to internet and a very small percentage, 29.3%, use the web to accede to public administration assets and services (ISTAT, 2014). There is a considerable imbalance in access to new technology; the North is more highly-digitalized when compared to the South (53.7%). Young people in the 15-24 digital-native age-group are more accustomed to ICT (89% use a computer) when compared to the elderly, aged over 65 (17.8%): 59.3% of males use a computer compared with 50.2% of females (ibidem).

Knowledge and Utilization of ICT among Italian social workers: a hypothesis regarding skills

Thus, all the data indicates that Italy is not a "digitalized country", so where do Italian social workers fit into this context? With what skills and abilities do they address their "techno-habitat"? (Dyer-Witthford, 1999; Ryan & Garrett, 2017). In Italy, recent studies regarding e-social work are not easy to find, in the form of structured analyses that indicate the level of diffusion, knowledge and utilization of ICT on the part of social workers. We can, however, proceed to a deductive analysis that enables us to formulate certain hypotheses. In Italy, up to December 2016, there were 42,021 social workers, when compared to a total population of 60,665, 551: one for every 1,144 inhabitants (CNOAS, 2016). The geographical division, however, reveals a territorial imbalance, as can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Number of social worker vs Italian population.

Geographical area	Population	Number of social worker	Number of inhabitants per social worker
North	27,754,578	15,409	1,801.19
Centre	12,067,803	7,186	1,679.34
South	20,843,170	19,426	1,072.95
Total	60,665,551	42,021	1,443.69

Analysing the data, a greater presence of social workers in the regions of southern Italy can be noted and the gap increases further with the number of residents with whom professionals deal. To this can be added a marked difference in gender: of 42,021 social workers, 93% are females (39,127) and only 7% males (2,894). There are also differences in age: over all, 12,436 social workers are under the age of 40, against 14,315 over 40, and the figure increases noticeably in the regions of the South, where the mean age of professionals is shown, on average, to be higher.

In an attempt to outline the “average Italian social workers” an extreme synthesis might lead us to the hypothesis of a female, aged over 40, working mainly in the south of the country.

On the strength of this definition it might prove useful to look at ISTAT (2014) data regarding levels of computerization among Italian citizens. The “average digital Italian citizen” seems to be the antithesis of the Italian social worker, represented by a male, aged under 40, living mainly in the centre-north. If we supplement this with data from the ONU (2016), in which Italy is highlighted as having among the lowest levels of public administration computerization (where most Italian social workers work), the overall framework that emerges is rather disconcerting. In conclusion, though aware of the limitations of this thesis, many elements concur to indicate that Italian social workers

do not appear to be “2.0 digital professionals” who know, exploit and apply ICT as a back-up to their own professional activity. The hypothesis is that Banzato’s (2002) preoccupations regarding the belatedness and limited familiarity of Italian social workers with information technology, have seemingly not been overcome, although there have been considerable advances.

The presence of the Social work on the internet: a survey of the Italian scene.

In Italy, when we look for the word “social worker” on google.it, using an anonymous browser so as to avoid the effects of the filter bubble (Pariser, 2012), the first page provides many references to Italian universities or public services in which these professionals operate. In order to find the first link to a portal specific to the world of this profession one has to move to the second page, while the first site created autonomously by social workers only appears on the third page, i.e. among the last results proposed. The situation is the same if terms such as ‘social work, ‘social worker’ or ‘professional social work’ are googled. With more specific references, results change if one adds to the search query a word associated with web 2.0 tools (e.g. Facebook, blogs, Twitter, etc.) with a fall, for example, from 2,840,000 for “social worker” to 192,000 for “social worker blog”.

The social work in Italy have principally started to deal with the internet over the last ten years and still today, the number of on-line aggregation sites is rather limited if compared with other countries. In an attempt to represent the present Italian scenario, we might say that the virtual spaces taken by social work can be divided into three types:

1. sites and social pages of public bodies of self-government and representation of the profession at a national and local level.
2. sites and pages of universities engaged in social work education. blogs, sites and social pages of associative bodies or private professionals (single or group) belonging to the world of social work.

Italian portals of social work are analysed in the overview that we are presenting here, which provides information about their historical progression, their aims and quality. In particular, in order to describe their quality, parameters deriving from theories of the user-friendliness of the web are taken into consideration (Nielsen, 2000; Norman & Draper, 1986), along with those indicated by international regulations on the subject (ISO 9241-210, 2015), which define user-friendliness as “the degree to which a product can be used by specific users in order to achieve certain objectives effectively, efficiently and satisfactorily in a specific context of use”. Lastly, the degree of interactivity of web-sites is analysed, as are the frequency of up-dating, the number of hits (when made public) and the utilization (or not) of the typical tools of what is known as web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005).

The portals of the institutional organ for representation and self-government of the profession are to be found in the first type: the Order of social workers (CNOAS), instituted through Law 23 March, 1993, no.84, is organized at the national level with the National Council and on a territorial basis with 20 Regional councils.

The domain of the national site www.cnoas.it was registered in 1999, whilst the launching of the sites of the Regional councils took place in the following decade. Most of the portals are kept well-up-to-date and this implies particular attention to the communicative, on-line component of the medium. A wide range of information of use to professionals is to be found among the contents (presentation, list of registered members, notices, training opportunities, reviews of regulations, work opportunities etc.), with a high degree of user-friendliness and accessibility. These sites, on the other hand, are characterized by their purely informative character and a low level of interactivity; often the only possibilities for contact are via telephone or e-mail.

Some Regional Orders have compensated for this lack through recourse to typical tools of web 2.0 (Facebook, Twitter, etc), but so far, the utilization of interactive tools (on-line chats, forums, group discussions) appears to be a limited phenomenon.

Fondazione Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali, instituted in 2016 by CNOAS, is also present in the site, “promoting study and scientific research directly and via external collaboration, it carries out investigations and surveys with the aim of acquiring and spreading knowledge integral to the profession and sectors of interest to the social work”. The site <http://www.fondazioneassistentsociali.it/> presents general information, a news area and the Statute. No provision is made for interactive mode and the only means of contact is through e-mail. Web 2.0 tools are present as icons on the homepage but have not been activated.

There are 71 portals for university institutions (37 regarding three-year degree courses and 34 for the master’s degree), which have been open since the early 21st century, a period corresponding to the institution of these university courses. Since they are geared towards communication with and for students, they are characterized by a purely informative nature and by contents relative to the course of study (aims, programmes and courses, lecture times etc.). The communicative modalities are, in this case, one-directional and, except in a few cases, envisage only the use of e-mail as a means of contact. Their degree of accessibility and user-friendliness is quite high and, in direct contrast to those of a previous typology, these portals often also provide a version with improved legibility for the visually impaired. In certain universities, portals for comparison and aggregation have been created by lecturers and students, who use platforms principally to create and manage forums, blogs and group discussions, which, because of their informal nature, do not often find space on institutional sites.

The third type proposes a multi-faceted scenario, comprising a series of portals, published on-line over the last twenty years, belonging to entities that in various ways operate in the world of social work and which are mainly characterized by a form of association. It is not possible here to propose tracing in detail the history of each of these bodies, so mention will only be made of the most representative per national relevance and/or the number of hits, indicating them by year of activation of web domain.

- *Servizio sociale su internet* (ASit). The domain www.serviziosociale.com registered in 1999, today boasts a notable average for its type, numbering 6,000 hits per month. ASit is characterized by being the first “digital native” association. In its first version, the web portal appeared in 1995 on the personal initiative of an Italian social workers, with the aim of setting up an aggregative hub and a resource for the professional network. The number of visitors and users registered with the site has increased over the years (more than 1,100 in 2010) and the number of collaborators who handle and add to the contents of the pages, has also grown. In 2016, following the resourcefulness of 11 founding members a cultural association called ASit Servizio Sociale su Internet was set up, with the goal of encouraging and spreading knowledge and encouraging the utilization of modern telecommunications and IT tools, to foster an exchange of experiences and, via internet initiatives, to disseminate the culture of social work.

On the homepage visitors have access to information and in-depth thematic examination. What has always characterized the portal is the high level of interactivity, also via the active requests for involvement from its users; the slogan at the head of the homepage is emblematic: “Do not ask what this site can do for you, ask what you can do for this site!”. Typical tools of web 2.0, such as forums, are present (with over 1,400 registered members and over 6,000 open discussions for a total of 38,000 messages); mailing lists (over 100 monthly e-mails) and a Facebook group with more than 8,000

members. The frequency of up-dating of the pages is among the highest recorded so far, also as a result of the active involvement of users in the shape of suppliers of information and content; every day dozens of contributions are posted in the Facebook group. Lastly, we should mention that the site contents are subject to the Creative Commons licences.

- *Ente italiano di Servizio sociale* (EISS). Set up in 1964 for the purpose of fostering research and studies in the sphere of social work, it also carries out roles of training and consultancy and, ever since its foundation, has been the editor of numerous publications of national importance. Its pioneering domain, www.eiss.it, was registered in 2000, revealing a precocious attention to the transfer of on-line information. The homepage, which has a good level of user-friendliness and is well-arranged in key sections (general information, specific documentation, training courses, publications, historical archives, etc.). Unfortunately, the page-updating of the portal is rather out-of-date and for the most part goes back to 2006. The contents are static and no interactive tools or web 2.0 tools are present.

- *Associazione nazionale assistenti sociali* (ASSNAS) was set up in 1948 and has played a leading role in Italian associations, providing a significant contribution to the profession's juridical recognition, while nowadays it organizes training and cultural activities aimed at all social workers. Since 2002 it has had an active internet domain - www.assnas.it – through which it communicates with the outside world, mainly providing static contents. The site receives about 200 monthly hits and does not have a higher legibility version; the level of user-friendliness is average. For a few years now there has been a Facebook page with 1,500 followers, but the rate of updating is very low and counts one post per month.

- *Istituto per gli studi di servizio sociale* (ISTISS). It was started up in 1960 by a group of social workers and researchers with the objective of fostering debate and

the dissemination of social work studies and research in Italy. It has been publishing the review *Rivista di Servizio sociale* since 1961. The domain www.istisss.it was registered in 2002 and the portal provides information about the association and the afore-mentioned review, with telephone and e-mail as the only forms of interaction. User-friendliness is sound, but the portal is rarely updated and contains dated material. The various Facebook account, youtube and googleplus have been activated but are seldom updated.

- *SocialNet*. www.socialnet.it was registered in 2004 and is the portal through which one of the first private experiences of social work in Italy deals with the general public. The agency has been active since 2000 and proposes a series of services for social workers; it invests massively in the use of technology deriving from ICT. Over a period of time this enterprise has organized itself into countless thematic portals and services aimed at private bodies, enterprises and professionals. On the internet site www.socislnet.it it publicizes a series of web solutions, dedicated software, book sales, etc. Lastly, through the site '*Sociale in formazione*' www.socialeinformazione.it, it promotes, organizes and implements training/supervision courses aimed at professionals both in physical presence and using the e-learning platform. The sites mentioned have a fair level of user-friendliness and considerable energy is invested in web 2.0 tools: updated accounts for every social platform are present: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Linked-in, Instagram.

- *Sindacato Unitario Nazionale Assistenti Sociali* (SUNAS) was set up in 1990 and, among its objectives, it has the defence, promotion and extension of the rights of social worker in the work-place. The web portal www.sunas.it was registered in 2005 and presents static contents of an informative character (who we are, organization, regulations etc.). The level of interactivity is reasonably high, thanks to the offers of consultancy regarding unions and legal aspects placed at the disposal of its registered

members. The possibility of on-line interactivity with ordinary users seems to be rather limited. There is a Facebook account (not linked on the homepage) that is frequently updated with news and reports regarding activities.

- *Centro studi di Servizio sociale (CEDISS)* was founded in 1989 to promote study, research, documentation and training for social workers. Since 1991 it has published a review *La professione sociale*". Its domain www.cesdiss.org, was registered in 2005 and serves as a window on to the Centro Studi. On the homepage there is information about the association, the review, news about training opportunities and modalities of contact regarding requests for consultancy. The page-updating rate and the level of interactivity are low and there are no web 2.0 tools.

- *Assistenti Sociali Senza Frontiere* – The portal www.assistentisocialisenzafrontiere.it was registered in 2006, whereas the registration of the Association of volunteers that promotes international co-operation through the building of initiative for dialogue and intercultural communication between the northern and southern hemispheres, dates back to 2009, The site has a good level of user-friendliness, presents information useful to visitors (who we are, projects, archives, documentation, video clips etc.), but does not include interactive tools. As in other cases, this lack has been offset by the creation of a Facebook page, which boasts over 1,000 “likes” and is regularly updated.

- *Assistentisociali.org* – The URL www.assistentisociali.org was registered in 2006 on the private initiative of a social Workers. It is one of the most frequently-visited portals devoted to the social work in Italy, quite user-friendly and with sporadic updating of contents. As in the case of ASit, there has been considerable investment in the active participation of users in creating contents. The site is divided principally in accordance with thematic sections coinciding with the areas of social intervention, thus

favouring the swift individuation of information. Are used extensively: newsletters, blogs, forum (more than 4,500 registered users) and a Facebook page, which has attracted over 10,000 members. The portal is self-financed thanks to advertising, donations from visitors and a shopping area, where it is possible to purchase texts about the social work at reasonable prices. The contents of the site are subject to a Creative Common.

- *Società per la storia del servizio sociale (SOSTOSS)* was founded in 1991, with the aim of promoting a historiographical analysis of Italian social work. The site www.sostoss.it was registered in 2007 and its contents comprise (mainly) static information about the life of the Company. E-mail is the only means of contact; there are no web 2.0 tools; it is not very user-friendly.

- *Società Italiana di Servizio sociale (SocISS)*. The association was formed in 1983 by a group of social work teachers in order to promote the development of study and research into theoretical, methodological and ethical bases of social work. The website www.sociss.it was created in 2008 and has an average of 3,000 monthly hits, and also in this case, a purely informative character. From the homepage visitors may obtain access to a variety of information (who we are, activities, events, recommended publications, etc.). The only channel of communication is via e-mail. There is an interactive web 2.0 tool that is identifiable in a little-used discussion forum reserved for registered persons. The Facebook account is worth mentioning, counting about 850 followers, and updated frequently with news and announcements for the general public.

- *SOS Servizi sociali online*. The domain www.servizisocialionline.it was registered in 2009 following the personal initiative of a social Workers, with the objective of creating an on-line space for aggregation and collective professional support. It originated as a simple blog and then diversified and expanded its goals to include offers of new services (documentation, bibliography, articles, reviews of regulations, news, job

opportunities, events, etc.) to an ever wider public. The pages are constantly up-dated and the portal utilizes numerous web 2.0 tools: forums, on-line chats, mailing lists, Facebook (over 12,000 members), video portals. A particular aspect of the forum is that it represents an on-line social secretary, who anyone may consult, even anonymously. Users post their requests, to which only the staff counsellors have the authorization to reply. The portal organizes, at frequent intervals, training events aimed at social workers, both in person and via teledidactics. Another peculiar feature is the ‘Web radio SOS’, which can be found via the link www.webradiosocialwork.it. The radio offers live streaming and podcasts containing interviews and in-depth examination of social work issues; an App is also available for smartphones to consent access to the broadcasts.

- *Associazione Italiana Assistenti sociali formatori*. Founded in May 2012, with its domain www.aiasf.it registered in 2013. It aims to provide professional training, the planning, management and organization of projects for social promotion. The site is well-structured and provides information regarding the association and a list of the courses that it organizes. The page is informative, albeit with few interactive sections. The well-established modes of contact are present (e-mail and telephone) and there is a (currently deactivated) blog. As regards web 2.0, there is a Facebook fanpage, which counts 9,000 “likes”; the profile is up-dated frequently with information about activities and its own training initiatives.

- *Associazione Assistenti sociali per la protezione civile ASPROC* (association for civil protection) is one of the most recent additions to the Italian scene. It was launched in 2015 with the aim of organizing a system of prompt-actions for the professional social work, to anticipate, prevent and aid in the event of natural disasters and social emergencies. The domain www.asproc.it was registered in 2016. Perhaps

because of its recent constitution the site provides little information purely of an informative character.

In order to provide a general outline of what has so far been proposed, we shall itemize in the following table the Italian portals for social work, with the features observed during the analysis (March 2017).

Table 2. Social work on the internet in Italy.

Web portal	Year of domain registration	Presence of basic information	Presence of updated information over the last month	Presence of autonomous training initiatives	Presence of training platforms	Presence of reserved area	Presence of web 2.0 tools			
							Forum	Newsletter	Facebook	Youtube
www.serviziosociale.com	1999	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
www.eiss.it	2000	Yes	No	Yes (old)	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
www.assnas.it	2002	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
www.istiss.it	2002	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
www.socialnet.it	2004	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
www.sunas.it	2005	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
www.cesdiss.org	2005	Yes	No	Yes (old)	No	No	No	No	No	No
www.assistentsocialisenzafrontiere.it	2006	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
www.assistentsociali.org	2006	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
www.sostoss.it	2007	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
www.sociss.it	2008	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
www.serviziosocialionline.it	2009	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
www.aiasf.it	2013	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
www.asproc.it	2016	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
www.fondazioneassistentsociali.it	2016	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

In the final part of this brief summary of on-line services dedicated to social work in Italy, we should also mention the presence on the web of blogs, sites, Facebook profiles and Youtube channels, edited by individual or associated social workers and, in part, utilized as on-line training tools or marketing tools for professional activity. Lastly, there is a noticeable, and ever-increasing number of groups and channels created on instant-messaging media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, ec.), which bring together professionals and private citizens on topics regarding the social work.

E-social work: New possibilities and critical areas

The recognition of the experiences of professional innovation on the web and the reconstruction (Sarchielli, 1998) of their specific characteristics in terms of ethics approach, organizational style, functions performed and services provided, leads to develop some considerations on the future of social work, a profession that has communication and relationship as its cornerstones (Turner, 2011), at a time when the former and the latter are increasingly experienced as virtual experiences (Bonifati, 2012).

Social innovation provides us with a multitude of initiatives, often arising from the bottom up and transformed into everyday experiments in the line of technological innovation. Since our interest steers towards those innovations that are social, both in means and goals, we define as social innovations those new ideas (products, services and models) that conjoin with social needs and, at the same time, spark off new social relations and new collaborations. In other words, these are innovations that are good for Society and increase the possibilities of action for this Society (Murray, Grice & Mulgan, 2010).

This leap forward towards innovation in communication and the management of social problems is clearly geared towards social workers. This involvement, however, takes place at a moment in which these professionals are being affected by the effects of

globalization on the welfare system and the affirmation of managerialism, with effects that also bring about the risk of de-professionalization, as well as the deterioration in working conditions (Dominelli, 2004).

Undoubtedly, attentive use of the new digital tools offers some advantages for professional activity in the shape of flexibility, accessibility, greater fluidity between the professional and the client, as well as the opportunity to document and utilize the information obtained during the intervention, coherently with a contemplative approach (Schon, 1993). Of particular interest is the possibility of utilizing on-line communication tools, with which clients can convey their personal autobiographical histories and their own representations, whereas the social worker can provide narrative feedback ranging from the phase of assessment (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002) through to the moment of disengagement from the helping process in the final stages.

It should be stressed that, in agreement with Reamer (2015), many social workers have been trained and gained work experience in a context in which digital technology did not yet exist or had not been fully applied; today there is a need to establish effective and empathetic professional relationships, even without meeting the person face to face, with conscious application of the countless possibilities offered by technology of communicating with clients. From the more specifically relational point of view, it should not be taken for granted that the professional and the client (in ways depending on age, cultural and social conditions, IT means at one's disposal, etc.) will be able to establish a state of empathy that consents emotional and cognitive expression of one's state of mind, one's problems, expectations and the exploration of the latent critical areas and resources. We should remember that digital channels impair the possibility of documenting the signals of non-verbal communication, thus rendering it more difficult to achieve an all-

embracing understanding of the situation, which is, in fact, the object of the consultancy process and the intervention (Arriazu Muñoz & Fernández-Pacheco Sáez, 2013).

Also in relationships between professionals, web communication as a space for complex interaction, offers advantages linked to the possibility of creating a more integrated and collaborative work environment, knocking down geographical barriers and facilitating instantaneous communication. From a more social and community-based point of view, recourse to the web can also become a useful strategy for stirring up public debate about the problematic issues that surface in everyday life, especially for those living on the fringes of society. The internet consents the crafting of acts of policy and the creation of alliances with consumers, unions and other professional associations; it also enables one to link up with active movements and other local, national and international bodies, in implementing interventions and sharing proposals for modifying welfare policy (Gal & Weiss Gal, 2013). However, it is also certain that recourse to digital resources presents a series of drawbacks with regard to the social worker's professional activity. The first and most elementary of these are linked to feelings of resistance and the low level of skills on the part of many professionals in the digital world, as well as little awareness of the risks and a lack of adequate training to handle professional methodology and techniques, given the time available and considering the "other" modes typical of the world of digital relations. Nor should it be taken for granted that technical/IT mastery is adequate, in the organizations in which social workers operate, to guarantee access to the web and have acceptable and efficient equipment as working tools.

Social workers' poor IT skills might also represent a problem with regard to professional autonomy. It would be necessary for the social work to acquire technological and digital planning skills (Fitch, 2015), otherwise they will have to operate with tools predisposed by persons outside their field of reference as regards methods and values.

Harris & Birnbaum (2015) draw our attention to ethical challenges and juridical implications; in the digital world, anonymity and privacy are easier to obtain, on the one hand, and to guarantee, on the other. This may favour access to services, enabling one to overcome resistance and obstacles linked to the potential unmasking of the person operating in the service. There are many other risks in terms of respecting privacy and the difficulty of establishing boundaries between roles, especially when on-line communication takes place outside working hours.

The digital praxes have dual value. On the one hand, in fact, they may constitute a way to facilitate virtual contacts and relationships between colleagues, or between professionals and clients; on the other hand, however, in a professional and social system that is still centred on the actual “presence”, on the actual meeting, on non-mediated listening, the pioneering social workers in the new digital praxes are viewed with a certain diffidence by colleagues who are still digitally illiterate, or who see in the digital world merely a space for entertainment (if not actual deviance and anti-social behaviour).

Experimentation regarding new channels might constitute, for the profession, an opportunity to escape from the professional and operational impasse, finding a solid formula for reducing the grievous effects of contemporary political and organizational orientations (Garrett & Bertotti, 2016). This may prove feasible, on condition that essential conditions for admittance to the world of technology are guaranteed, in terms of professional training/updating and upgrading of equipment necessary for access and intervention in digital mode.

Also in social work education can be exploited the potential of ICT. In Italian academic social work education, no significant offers for the acquisition of technological skills have emerged, nor for the use of digital and electronic tools in strategic terms for didactic objectives, except for the tentative initiatives of teaching via the Moodle platform

(Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). In the words of Fitch (2015, p.124) ‘Our schools of social work need to examine how we prepare our students to be digital professionals of the 21st century. While our peer professions are educating their students via medical informatics and nursing informatics, social work has no such explicit curriculum’.

A particularly interesting field for experimentation is represented by internship, understood as a process of learning from experience, the importance of which, in training for social work, is universally acknowledged (Domakin, 2015). The internship offers interesting possibilities for experimenting, via the limitless potential of ICT, both in the innovative use of the professional tools and the novel ways of learning from experience. Directing our attention towards the latter, we do think that supervision and monitoring might also be carried out by integrating remote modalities, resolving problems that are due to distance and the reduction in necessary funds for guaranteeing the essential link between the university and the hosting service (Wilson, 2014). If well-planned, expedients such as on-line chats, discussion forums, the social network and on-line didactic platforms can support the supervision and monitoring of experiences efficiently (Crisp & Hosken, 2006) and involve students in an active and interactive internship, based on neat and dynamic feedback between tutor/student” supervisor.

In Italy, research and innovation in ideas in a scenario so rich in potential, are still lacking, but the social worker is being called to invest, exploit and avail him/herself of the opportunities provided by ICT, in order to shift from “analogic social worker” to “e-social worker”, becoming ever more digitalized, in the same way as the society with which he/she is dealing and in which he/she operates.

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