

# Analyzing Internet-Related Social Work Opportunities of an Approach Inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing digitization and the expansion of internet-related services are changing people's lives and thus also the professional activities of social workers, especially when they work with young people. This text presents an idea for subject-related theory formation. This is based on the fundamental considerations of actor-network theory and considers the different dimensions of the so-called digital divide. Possible human, material and semiotic influencing factors are identified, whose interactions and opportunities for influencing each other can shape the internet-related actions of social workers. These could be investigated in research projects. The direction of such research projects is discussed.

**Keywords:** Human-technical interaction, Social work, Youth, Internet, Professional action

## INTRODUCTION

The number of areas of society that are being digitized continues to increase (Stüwe and Ermel, 2019) and also affects social work (Bossong, 2018), whose specialists meanwhile see a trend to expand the internet-related offerings. This has been further strengthened by the lockdowns since March 2020 (Buschle and Meyer, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

This poses a particular challenge for youth workers, as their addressees, the so-called digital natives (Günzel, 2017), did not experience the time before digitization and use the Internet as a matter of course to cultivate existing friendships and meet new people (Waechter and Hollauf, 2018). Today's young people no longer distinguish between offline and online, they are *onlife* (BMFSFJ, 2020). However, even in this age group there is every level of the digital divide (Iske and Kutscher, 2020), because not all have the same equipment, fast internet access or the necessary application skills.

Up to now, social worker have only had limited success in switching to hybrid offers. In addition to the requirements of the recipients, this is partly due to the technical skepticism of the social workers (Bossong, 2018), the relatively one-sided orientation of further training (Helbig and Roeske, 2020)

<sup>1</sup>The data used here refer explicitly to the situation in Germany, although the statements certainly apply in one way or another to other industrialized countries and the idea presented here is transferable to them.

and the lack of equipment (Kleinschmidt and Scheibe, 2021). All this is still incomplete and does not apply equally to all social workers.

This unfinished list shows that this phenomenon is interrelated and cannot be described and explained solely by describing the skills of the social workers. At this point, the actor-network theory (ANT) could be a useful theoretical perspective, because it allows the entanglement and reciprocal influences of human and non-human components in a network to be visible and then analyzed (Latour, 2018). This approach is beneficial for the topic of digitization (Gertenbach and Laux, 2019) and increasingly enriches the digitization discourse in social work through theoretical (Eßer 2020) and empirical works (Bastian 2018).

I take up the previous considerations on the use of the ANT in contexts of internet-related social work and think about them along the question of how a case study could be structured in which the individual situation of youth workers in relation to the respective conditions of success of their internet-related activities can be explored and subsequently analyzed.

To answer the question, I first outline the basic elements of the ANT, and then explore the potential of a thematic examination of specialists in case studies on object-related theory building (Hoff, 2020). Based on this, I present a possible research idea. Finally, I summarize the relevant findings and discuss ideas for further development.

### **Actor-Network Theory**

The actor-network theory has been developed since the mid-1980s, led by the French sociologists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, with the aim of better explaining technical and scientific innovations by not considering them to be solely intended by social, natural or technical factors. Rather, the two authors understand these developments as results of successfully completed processes of networking, whereby they also consider non-human actors. Since this term is linguistically, however, strongly linked to human persons, they replace it with that of the actant. The sustainable network of relationships thus consists of the reciprocal effects of the reactions which the participating human, animal, material and semiotic entities exert on each other explicitly for the purpose of a certain functioning (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2011). They react to the others and transform themselves by doing so (Latour, 2010). The respective meaning is not rooted in its nature, but results exclusively from the fact that one's own processes of change or adaptation are minimized by increasing them in other actants (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2011). If all the actants involved in a particular constellation have aligned themselves in such a way that the network functions stably, it becomes a black box (Latour, 1987). Thus, the way in which this state was reached, i. e. its own history of origin, fades and it is perceived only as an actant. However, this happens rarely, because at some point there is a new irritation and adaptation processes have to be initiated again (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2011).

In the international debate today, however, some authors of social work go even further and develop another, a post-anthropocene way of looking at the hierarchical relationships between humans and non-humans critically. They

think together ontological, epistemological and ethical perspectives and thus try to focus their gaze on animals, objects and concepts on an equal footing (Bozalek and Pease, 2020). I would like to add to these reflections with this text.

### **Subjects of Investigation and Useful Research Methods**

The further development of most sciences is based on the mutual effects of theory and empiricism, one being the starting point for the other. That is why I am making a brief digression on social work research here. This is confronted with the challenge of distinguishing itself from other social science research. She succeeds in that social work is the core of all investigations. For this reason, both historical developments and the current relationships between the addressed persons of social work, social workers and the organizations in the respective social context are examined (Cleppien, 2011).

Subject-related theories of social work, insofar as they already exist, often lack an empirically proven framework. Qualitative and reconstructive methods of social research, such as interviews, observations or artifact analyses, are particularly suitable for this purpose. With her idea of focusing on cases, Walburga Hoff suggests an interesting perspective on this. She developed her approach for researching addressees (Hoff, 2020). Following this, a similar plan for social workers is outlined here.

A refined picture of the social workers and their actions in practice is created through the combination of reactive and non-reactive research methods, because the motives can be asked and specific actions can be directly or indirectly observed (Köngeter, 2010). Bruno Latour's investigations are designed in this way. In the early days, he dealt with the ways in which scientific knowledge is created and the importance not only of the researchers, but also of the objects involved in the process, e.g. test tubes or technical apparatus. Through the so-called laboratory studies, he was able to reconstruct the complex interaction of human and non-human entities (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2011).

Bruno Latour recommends examining the respective actant-network relationships using ethnographic methods. In this way, knowledge about the respective occurrence and the specific composition of an actant could be gained by interviewing human informants, listing objects and observing processes. However, the decisive factor here is to record all the entities involved and thus to create a list of these actants. The analysis can then begin at any entry and proceed in the direction the evidence points. In the end, all actants and their relationships to each other were considered. However, the researcher can also decide to end the process beforehand (Latour, 2018). In this way it is certainly also possible to decipher the conditions of the Internet-related actions of social workers.

### **Digital Divide and Actants**

Access to online offers and the resulting opportunities for participation are unequally distributed, this is outlined with the concept of the digital divide.

This is related to various dimensions. What is relevant for this consideration is the technical infrastructure, i.e. not being (appropriately) online due to missing or inadequate devices or programs or due to a lack of or weak internet access. The other results from the fact that the form of Internet use is socialized and that special features arise due to age, gender, milieu, living environment and ethnic group. The prevailing middle-class focus of the design of the respective offers makes it difficult for people from other social milieus to use them optimally (Rudolph, 2019). The consideration of the different dimensions of the digital divide makes it possible to discover indications of relevant actors. These are listed below as examples.

### **Human Actants**

The personal resources and individual skills of social workers are considered here. It could first be clarified whether they are so-called digital natives, i.e. people whose biographical experiences do not go back to the time before computer technology and the Internet were established. So, these have always been part of her life. Afterwards, their skills in dealing with the media could be revealed, e.g. in creating social media posts. Furthermore, their own attitudes and preferences appear to be relevant. It's about how they feel about the technical conditions and how stubbornly they use them. This corresponds to their knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of other actants as well as their creativity and resilience when dealing with limitations.

### **Material Actants**

The focus here is on the technical and material requirements of the internet-related activities of social workers. First of all, the basic equipment could be clarified, i.e. whether they carry out these activities with a desktop computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. This consideration could be refined by considering the size and operation of the screen, the presence and quality of speakers and microphones, the type of keyboard and computer mouse, and the performance of the processor, graphics and sound card be looked at more closely. Other relevant points could be the Internet connection, bandwidth and (W-)LAN, and the available computer programs and licenses. In addition, non-digital acts should also be considered, such as the design of the space in which the Internet-related action takes place.

### **Semiotic Actants**

However, the Internet-related actions of social workers are not only influenced by the people and the materials with which they work. Legal framework conditions such as the data protection regulation and the legal responsibilities of the social worker play a decisive role for the respective task. In the broadest sense, this also includes the technical standards, the criteria for professional action and possible further training offers. Social work is also integrated into contexts, so that effects also arise from the attitude in the team and in the organization as well as from the expectations of the target group regarding Internet use, especially when it comes to young people. The intentions of the companies that make the internet offers available should also be considered,

because they usually earn more money with the user data generated by the offer than with the offer itself.

## CONCLUSION

In this text I presented the chances of the actor-network theory for an expanded perspective on social workers and derived various possible human, material and semiotic actants whose interactions could be the basis for the internet-related actions of social workers. However, the theory-based impulse developed here still has to be empirically substantiated and can therefore primarily serve as a starting point for in-depth research projects. In order for relevant findings to be gained, these should be qualitatively reconstructive and combine reactive and non-reactive methods in their research design.

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