

The Data Welfare State

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Abstract: This presentation is based on the book *Data Welfare State* (2025), co-authored by Anne Kaun and Anu Masso. The book critically examines the intersection of automation and welfare state transformation, focusing on the complexities, contradictions, and socio-political implications of algorithmic decision-making within welfare institutions. As welfare automation is increasingly viewed as a solution to budget constraints and shifting demographics, this work highlights the tensions between technological promises of efficiency and fairness and the practical realities of implementation.

Drawing on empirical research from Estonia, Sweden, and Germany—representing three welfare state models (Estonia with a transitional model, Germany with a corporatist-statist model, and Sweden with a social democratic model)—the book examines how automation affects case workers, citizens, and the broader political fabric of welfare provision. The authors investigate the growing delegation of cultural practices—such as categorisation, classification, and sorting—into digital systems, highlighting the risks and contradictions that arise in the process.

This book challenges the notion of seamless digital transformation, revealing the inherent biases and injustices that may emerge as technology reshapes the welfare state. By offering critical insights into the evolving role of automation in welfare, it provides a framework for understanding how data-based systems can align with core welfare state values while navigating the social and political consequences of digitalisation.