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**ARTICLE**

# Negotiating the Accessibility of Help: Signposting and Boundary Work in Social Services' Online Interactions

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## Abstract

Easy, low-threshold access is widely regarded as a major advantage of online services. In Sweden, several municipalities are striving to increase the accessibility of their social services by responding to anonymous users online. This article considers the nature of the accessibility of these online services. Two online platforms were studied: (quasi-)synchronous online chats and asynchronous online enquiry forms. Online chat logs and question form exchanges were closely analysed using conversation analysis. Accessibility of online services was approached through the concept of boundary work, focusing on how social workers navigate the constraints of what they can and cannot do when responding to anonymous users online. The analysis revealed that users seeking personalised advice or requesting immediate interventions were redirected to instead contact the local social services in person. When directing users to seek help elsewhere, social workers invoked constraints in their online role to account for not providing the requested help. The study's findings are discussed in terms of the unmet expectations of online users due to limitations in the remit of online social workers. Although online facilities made social workers technically accessible, the range of services available online was limited to providing information and general guidance.

## Keywords

accessibility; conversation analysis; institutional boundaries; online interaction; organisational remit; signposting; social services

## 1. Introduction

A relatively recent systematic review of 28 studies on technology-mediated social work practice suggests that one of its major benefits is enhanced accessibility (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023). Specifically, providing

services via online platforms has been shown to make social services more accessible to individuals with special needs and "hard-to-reach populations," such as those living in rural areas, as well as young people who prefer online communication to more traditional telephone and face-to-face encounters. Online service delivery is also critical for rural areas, given the increasing withdrawal of physical services (Hodge et al., 2017). One development in technology-based social work is communicating with users through online platforms, including text-based interactions (van de Luitgaarden & van der Tier, 2018) in which users are often anonymous (Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2024). Anonymity has been shown to facilitate the disclosure of personal experiences, particularly when they are perceived as sensitive or shameful (Bambling et al., 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The anonymity and accessibility of online text-based services have been cited as two of the main reasons why people seek support online (Murphy et al., 2009).

This article examines the anonymous online enquiry forms and online chats offered by Swedish social services. These online services aim to provide information on how social services operate and the policies and routines they follow. One motivation for establishing online facilities is to offer convenient, low-threshold access to social services and to make them appear more visible, comprehensive, and user-friendly. Although these online services appear to be frequently used, they do not always meet users' expectations. This study focuses on cases where online social workers signpost anonymous users to ordinary (non-online) social services to process their requests. The term "signposting" is used to describe the practice of rejecting immediate help and recommending that users seek help elsewhere (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). This is in contrast to the practice of referral, through which a service user is redirected by a professional acting as a gatekeeper—for example, a family doctor referring a patient to a medical specialist—or instances in which a user is guided to the correct department, as with a switchboard operator (for a discussion on referrals versus signposting, see Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020).

In this study, accessibility is approached as a discursive phenomenon that can be traced through the observable actions of participants in interaction (Stommel & Meijman, 2011). Access is examined by studying how it is constructed and negotiated in interactions between online social workers and anonymous users. Accessibility is operationalised using the concept of boundary work, which involves the management of role expectations and constraints in client–professional encounters (Slembrouck & Hall, 2014). For social workers, drawing boundaries entails making decisions on how to manage encounters with their clients in a way that enables cooperation within the constraints of their professional remit. Adopting a discursive perspective allows studying "how boundaries are presupposed, touched upon, discussed and negotiated in unfolding contacts with the client" (Slembrouck & Hall, 2014, pp. 63–64). Boundary work can, for example, be accomplished through delimiting and specifying the overall focus of the work and the target group, or by setting boundaries on the task itself to make it more manageable (Pedersen et al., 2017). By setting boundaries on the type of help they provide, social workers can grant or deny access to specific services.

Signposting users to another service provider along with describing a lack of professional remit (e.g., not having relevant expertise) is a way of performing boundary work (Bloch & Leydon, 2019; Kevoe-Feldman & Iversen, 2022). This is the case, for example, when help providers consider the user's problem to fall outside of the scope of their organisation's services. The present study focuses on boundaries within social services rather than between organisations or institutions. When signposting online users to non-online (telephone or in-person) social services, social workers reveal the boundaries within the Swedish social services system: which parts are responsible for what, and what help can and cannot be provided online, via text, and

anonymously. Through boundary work in the form of signposting, online social workers negotiate and establish what can and cannot be enacted as service (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). This study examines how social workers, who respond to anonymous users online, invoke the limitations of their remit when redirecting users to other (non-online) services. The focus of the study lies in how, through this boundary work, participants negotiate the accessibility of the services requested by users.

## 2. Data and Method

Data were collected from the social services in three Swedish municipalities and consist of chat logs from 68 online chat sessions and 200 exchanges via online enquiry forms. This material was collected by qualified social workers who were involved in providing these online services. All users in the dataset were anonymous. The social workers further anonymised the data by deleting information that could compromise users' anonymity, such as the geographical names and contact details (e.g., telephone numbers) of local services. In the three municipalities where the data were collected, social services could be contacted either via an online enquiry form (one municipality), via an online chat (one municipality), or via both methods (one municipality). Online chat services were open for several hours per week or every working day, depending on the municipality. When using online enquiry forms, users could submit their inquiries at any time and would receive a response from within several hours to several days, depending on when the form was submitted (e.g., during the working day or at the weekend) and the social workers' workload. Users could not respond to the answer they received and had to submit a new enquiry form if they were not satisfied with the answer.

Online services were initially aimed at the municipality's population. However, it turned out that they were also used by people from all over the country and even abroad. Online services are intended to provide easily accessible information about the structure, procedures, and rules of social services, and to help citizens understand policy documents such as the Social Services Act. Users could also inquire about a wider range of issues, including seeking advice on their personal situations, and in some cases, users could request direct assistance (e.g., financial support or accommodation). In these cases, social workers could provide more emotional support and steer users toward seeking help outside online services.

The chat logs and online enquiry form exchanges were analysed using conversation analysis (CA; see Sidnell & Stivers, 2013), with a particular focus on its application to online, text-based interactions (for a discussion on "digital CA," see Giles et al., 2015). CA has a long tradition in the study of professional practice, including social work (Flinkfeldt et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2014). CA allows for a fine-grained examination of unfolding interactions, focusing on how verbal actions are understood by the participants. CA is a suitable approach for examining boundary work as an interactional accomplishment in professional encounters with clients (Slembrouck & Hall, 2014) and for investigating how this work can be accomplished through the practice of signposting (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). CA has previously been used to apply a discursive perspective to accessibility (Stommel & Meijman, 2011).

CA has proven useful in the study of internet-mediated written communication (Giles et al., 2015; Koivisto et al., 2023) and has been increasingly applied to the study of online, text-based encounters in social work (e.g., Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2024). "Digital CA" (Giles et al., 2015) focuses on the position and composition of contributions (e.g., posts in an online chat) and exercises caution when applying concepts originating from the

study of spoken interaction (e.g., the concept of a "turn" in conversational turn-taking), as these may not readily apply to written interaction (Koivisto et al., 2023). When applying CA to online interactions, researchers also consider how the affordances of a particular medium impact interactional practices (Meredith, 2019).

The analysis followed the procedure established in CA. It began with a thorough examination and observation of the entire dataset to identify recurring patterns and collectable phenomena. During this stage, it was observed that online social workers could claim or imply that they were unable to provide the requested help or answer the user's question, recommending that online users instead contact social services by telephone or in person. These cases ($N = 47$), including both chat logs ($n = 13$) and online enquiry form exchanges ($n = 34$), were studied in detail to zoom in on how social workers rejected users' requests and signposted them to telephone and local (non-online) services, thereby setting boundaries on what could and could not be accomplished online.

## 3. Analysis and Results

The practice of signposting has previously been shown to be intertwined with the activities of rejecting a help-seeker's case for receiving a service while simultaneously offering a service by redirecting the help-seeker to a more suitable service provider (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). In this study, signposting to local (non-online) social services occurred when social workers refrained from passing judgement on individual cases, or when users sought practical assistance rather than information or advice. When steering anonymous users to seek help outside of online platforms, online social workers could account for doing so by stating that their professional remit was limited to providing general information. In this way, the social workers explicitly drew boundaries around what was and was not included in their remit when responding online. This explicit boundary work was typically observed in asynchronous online interactions via enquiry forms. By contrast, institutional boundaries within the social services system were drawn in a more subtle way in online chat interactions. The analysis and results below are structured according to the two online settings.

### 3.1. Signposting in Online Enquiry Forms: Explicit Boundary Work

Extract 1 (Table 1) shows an exchange via an online enquiry form. Here, the user submits a question beginning with a description of the problem and providing details such as the amount of money recently inherited (line 3). The user then asks whether they can receive financial support from social services. The extract shows the entire question submitted by the user and the beginning of the response from the social workers. All the extracts show the original posts in Swedish alongside their colloquial English translations. Any misspellings in the original text are preserved and translated accordingly, unless they make the translation incomprehensible.

The social worker's response begins with a reformulation of the user's enquiry as a question of eligibility for income support in lines 5–6, translating the user's question into the language of the social services (Thell, 2022). This is followed by a sentence in which the social worker first declares what they cannot do via the online enquiry form (lines 7–9) and then signposts the user to their local municipality (lines 10–11). This declaration, placed within the same sentence as the signposting, serves to account for redirecting the user to seek answers elsewhere. In the original Swedish, the two parts of the sentence are joined by the conjunction "utan" (line 10), which can be translated as "instead" or "but rather," indicating contrast or contradistinction.

**Table 1.** Extract 1: You need to apply to the municipality where you live.

| Line | Sender | Text in original Swedish | Colloquial translation into English |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | AN | Hej, ärvt en bostadsrätt som jag | Hi, inherited a condominium that I |
| 2 | | bott i 4år menar ingen inkomst, | have lived in for 4 years means no income, |
| 3 | | fick för 1år sedan 170000 men nu är de | received 170000 1 year ago but now they are |
| 4 | | slut, kan jag få ekonomisk hjälp av soc? | over, can I get financial aid from socials? |
| 5 | SW | Hej! Du har frågor om du | Hi! You have questions about whether you |
| 6 | | är berättigad till försörjningsstöd. | are eligible for income support. |
| 7 | | Socialarbetare på nätet kan inte gå in i | Online social workers cannot make |
| 8 | | enskilda bedömningar eller göra | individual assessments or make |
| 9 | | beräkningar för din specifika situation | calculations for your specific situation, |
| 10 | | utan du måste ansöka i kommunen | instead you need to apply to the municipality |
| 11 | | där du bor och få en individuell bedömning. | where you live for an individual assessment. |
| 12 | | Många kommuner har en hemsida där | Many municipalities have a website where |
| 13 | | du kan göra en provberäkning som kan | you can do a sample calculation that can |
| 14 | | ge en indikation på om du är berättigad | give an indication of whether you are eligible |
| 15 | | eller inte. För att kunna vara berättigad | or not. In order to be eligible |
| 16 | | till försörjningsstöd ska du... | for income support you must... |

Notes: AN = anonymous user, SW = social worker.

The social worker explicitly claims not to be able to provide the requested service, implying that the user's request falls outside the scope of what can be processed through the online platform. While accounting for their inability to act, the social worker simultaneously rejects the user's request (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). Furthermore, the social worker reshapes what can be seen as a straightforward question ("can I get financial aid from socials?" in line 4) into a matter requiring "individual assessment" and "calculation" (lines 8–9 and 11). The user is thus denied an answer to their question and is instead steered toward seeking it through a formal application procedure. While some Swedish municipalities offer the possibility of applying for economic benefits online, applicants in other municipalities need to visit the social services office. Therefore, when redirecting the user to make a formal application, the social worker is likely to direct them to contact the social services office in person.

Having refused to pass judgement on the user's individual case, the social worker moves on to providing tips on a webpage containing a sample calculation (lines 12–15) and explaining the criteria for eligibility for income support (starting in lines 15–16). In this way, the social worker shifts towards providing more general information. Thus, having rejected the user's request for a specific service and signposted them to their municipality, the social worker provides an alternative service that falls within the remit of online social workers. Rather than receiving a personalised judgment on their situation, the user is presented with information and it is up to the user to infer what it might suggest (Antaki & Bloch, 2020). The social worker enacts boundaries within the social services system by providing a specific service (offering information) and by redirecting the user to other parts of the system for different services (individual assessments).

A similar pattern can be seen in Extract 2 (Table 2), which is also from an online enquiry form. The extract shows the user's full question and the beginning of the social worker's response. Here, the user appears to be seeking support for ongoing contact with the social services. By using the self-categorisation "homeless" (line 1) and the institutional term "designated activity" (line 2), the user displays familiarity with social services' language. The reference to the designated activity suggests that the user is enrolled in a support programme. The social worker orients to this when referring to "your caseworker" in line 6.

**Table 2.** Extract 2: It is up to your caseworker.

| Line | Sender | Text in original Swedish | Colloquial translation into English |
|------|--------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | AN | Kan jag som bostadslös nekas busskort | If I am homeless, can I be refused a bus pass |
| 2 | | för att kunna delta i anvisad aktivitet? | to take part in a designated activity? |
| 3 | SW | Hej! Vi kan inte entydigt säga om du är | Hi! We cannot say definitively whether |
| 4 | | berättigad till busskort eller ej för att | you are entitled to a bus pass or not to |
| 5 | | du skall delta i anvisad aktivitet. Det är | attend a designated activity. It is |
| 6 | | din socialsekreterare som gör | up to your caseworker to make |
| 7 | | en bedömning om det är skäligt att du | a decision on whether it is reasonable for you |
| 8 | | beviljas busskort för att du skall kunna ta | to be granted a bus pass to enable you to get |
| 9 | | dig till aktiviteten. Du har dock rätt till | to the activity. However you are entitled to |
| 10 | | ett skriftligt beslut på din ansökan om | a written decision on your application for |
| 11 | | busskort så att du kan överklaga det | a bus pass so that you can appeal |
| 12 | | om du fått avslag. (...) | if it is refused. (...) |

Notes: AN = anonymous user, SW = social worker.

The user's question can be read as a request for a second opinion on a decision regarding their case (rejection of application for money for a bus pass), which has either already been made or is anticipated. After the greeting, the social worker begins the response by claiming limited ability to judge the user's case (lines 3–5), thus refusing to answer the user's question. As in Extract 1, the social worker reframes the user's question as one of entitlement or eligibility ("whether you are entitled" in lines 3–4 and "whether it is reasonable for you to be granted" in lines 7–8), which requires a formal assessment and decision. The social worker draws a demarcation between the roles of online social workers ("we cannot say definitely whether you are entitled" in lines 3–4) and caseworkers ("it is up to your caseworker to make a decision" in lines 6–7), thereby exposing the boundaries of responsibility within social services.

In this case, the signposting is accomplished indirectly by explaining the division of responsibilities, implying that the user should contact their caseworker instead of using online services. As this is likely to involve contacting the caseworker by phone or in person, the user is simultaneously redirected from online services to more traditional methods of service delivery. The signposting is formatted as a provision of information ("it is up to your caseworker to make a decision") rather than a suggestion for a course of action (e.g., you need to contact your caseworker). In the next sentence, the social worker continues to provide information on the application procedure ("you are entitled to a written decision" in lines 9–10) and the right to appeal. As in Extract 1, the social worker refrains from providing a specific answer to the user's question, instead offering general information.

Although the practice of signposting serves to reduce users' resistance to not receiving the service they request, it is still likely to result in rejection and resistance (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). It is not possible to trace how the social workers' responses are received in the data from online enquiry forms. Interactions through enquiry forms are asynchronous and consist of only two messages (comparable to two turns in oral interaction): the user's question or request, and the social worker's response. Technically, it is not possible for the user to respond to the answer they received (which could be seen as a third turn and an opportunity to display resistance).

## 3.2. Signposting in Online Chats: Implicit Boundaries and User Resistance

Unlike online enquiry forms, interactions through online chats are quasi-synchronous. Here, participants exchange messages in real time, even though they cannot monitor each other's actions during the production of the messages, such as hesitations and self-repairs (Arminen et al., 2016). In the data from the social services' online chats, resistance is a common response when social workers redirect users to seek help from their local municipality through more conventional (non-online) means.

Extract 3 (Table 3) shows the start of an online chat session, in which the user requests help with housing. In the first post (lines 1–3), the user provides a concise description of the problem, revealing a highly vulnerable life situation. Throughout the chat session, the user's posts are terse and often agrammatical; they lack punctuation and contain spelling errors.

**Table 3.** Extract 3: You can borrow a phone and call.

| Line | Time, poster | Post in original Swedish | Colloquial translation into English |
|------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1<br>2<br>3 | 13:01:23 AN | Är gravid snart 7 månaden har varit<br>utomlands 10 månader har ingenstans att<br>bo när jag kommer till sverige | Am almost 7 months pregnant have been<br>abroad 10 months have nowhere to<br>live when I come to sweden |
| 4 | 13:01:46 SW | Hej! | Hi! |
| 5<br>6<br>7<br>8<br>9 | 13:02:21 SW | Okej, ja förstår det som att du varit<br>utomlands en längre period och<br>tänker flytta tillbaka till Sverige och<br>känner oro för att du inte ännu hittat<br>någonstans där du kan bo, stämmer det? | Okay, I understand that you have been<br>abroad for a long period of time and<br>are thinking of moving back to Sweden and<br>are worried that you have not yet found<br>a place to live, is that right? |
| 10<br>11<br>12 | 13:04:14 AN | Ja har innan jag åkte varit med kotakt<br>med er pga olika anledningar ni har hjälpt<br>mig mig boende och bistånd | Before I left I was in contact with<br>you for various reasons you have helped<br>me with housing and [economic] aid |
| 13<br>14<br>15 | 13:04:27 SW | Aha okej, så du har varit i kontakt med<br>socialtjänsten tidigare och då<br>fick du stöd med boende och pengar | Aha okay, so you've been in contact with<br>social services before and then<br>you got help then with housing and money |
| | *Several posts are omitted* | | |
| 16<br>17<br>18 | 13:07:14 SW | Okej, har du en tanke eller vilja<br>om var du skulle vilja bo eller har<br>bott tidigare? | Okay, do you have any thoughts or wishes<br>about where you would like to live or have<br>lived before? |
| 19<br>20<br>21 | 13:07:33 SW | Jag tänker så att jag kan hjälpa dig att<br>ta fram kontaktinformation till<br>socialtjänsten | I am thinking so that I can help you<br>find contact information for<br>the social services |
| 22<br>23<br>24 | 13: 07:45 SW | Så att du kan ta kontakt för att ansöka om<br>pengar, till boende och annat<br>nödvändigt | So that you can make contact to apply for<br>money, for housing and other<br>necessities |
| 25 | 13:08:16 AN | Jag kan bara skriva här online | I can only write here online |
| 26 | 13:08:18 SW | Okej | Okay |
| 27 | 13:08:25 SW | När du väl landat/kommer till Sverige | When you have landed/arrive to Sweden |
| 28 | 13:08:28 SW | Då kan du låna telefon och ringa | Then you can borrow a phone and call |

Notes: AN = anonymous user, SW = social worker.

Although the user's initial post (lines 1–3) does not contain an explicit enquiry or request, it can be read as an urgent plea for help: the user's situation is presented in a manner that suggests the need for assistance (being heavily pregnant and having nowhere to stay). After sending a greeting (line 4), the social worker sends a post displaying a candidate understanding of what the user has written and invites the user to validate whether it is correct ("is that right?" in line 9). However, the user does not respond to this question, instead posting what can be read as an account of why she is writing in the online chat (having previously received help from the social services). The user refers to social services using the second-person pronoun "you" (plural form *ni* in the original Swedish in line 11), thus addressing those responding in the online chat as a part of the authority that helped the user in the past. In response (lines 13–15), the social worker reformulates what the user has written, replacing what the user referred to as "you" with the name of the authority in the third person: "social services" (line 14). The social worker seems to avoid using the institutional "we" that would place the online service in the same category as local social services through which citizens can apply for housing assistance. In doing so, the social worker may imply that the social services that provided help to the user are separate from the online chat service that the user is currently contacting.

Following several posts not included in the extract, in which more information about the user is gathered, the social worker sends a post asking where the user intends to live (lines 16–18). Then, in the next two posts, the social worker accounts for this question by projecting assistance with contact details (lines 19–21) and suggesting that the user contacts the local social services for help with money, housing, and "other necessities" (lines 22–24). Unlike Extracts 1–3, the social worker does not explicitly claim that they cannot provide help online; rather, they imply it. By signposting the user to the relevant local social services, the social worker indicates that the user's problem cannot be resolved via the online chat (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). The user appears to read this as a redirection to non-online services, as she resists the suggestion in the next post: "I can only write here online" (line 25), thereby pursuing the reception of help online. However, the social worker treats the user's post as being about the practical problem of not having access to a phone and suggests that the user borrow one (posts in lines 27–28). The user and the social worker appear to pursue different interactional projects (Levinson, 2013): While the user is seeking (immediate) online assistance with housing, the social worker is treating the user's problem as falling outside the scope of the online service and the user's request as an enquiry about contact details for a relevant social services' unit. In subsequent posts, the social worker establishes the user's place of arrival in Sweden and provides the telephone number and address of a local social emergency service.

In the next Extract 4 (Table 4), the user repeatedly resists the social worker's attempts at signposting. Here, the user contacts the online chat service for the third time in the course of two days with the same enquiry regarding their girlfriend, who has been refused financial assistance with paying rent. The user refers to this in line 1 ("I have already been in contact") and in line 17 ("the tips I got yesterday"). This time, a different online social worker responds, and several initial posts (omitted) are dedicated to what happened in the previous chat sessions. Previously, the user was advised to check the grounds for the refusal decision and reapply to the social services. Thus, the user had already been signposted back to local social services. In their first post, the user complains that social services "keep refusing to help" (line 5–6) and expresses strong discontent using an expletive intensifier (line 8).

**Table 4.** Extract 4: I can't provide more concrete help.

| Line | Time, poster | Post in original Swedish | Colloquial translation into English |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1<br>2<br>3<br>4<br>5<br>6<br>7<br>8 | 15:26:55 AN | Jag har varit i kontakt redan å min tjejs vägar då hon knappt har inkomster (bor pga detta hos sin mor). Nu behöver de akut hjälp för att få ihop halva hyran men socialen nekar gång på gång hjälp och menar mamman skall försörja både sig själv och sin dotter. På sina låga inkomster. Såhär får det fan inte gå till | I have already been in contact on my girl's behalf as she barely has any income (lives with her mother because of this). Now they urgently need help to make up half the rent, but the socials keep refusing to help and say the mother should support both herself and her daughter. On her low income. It's not the fucking way it should be |
| | *Several posts are omitted* | | |
| 9<br>10<br>11<br>12<br>13<br>14<br>15 | 15:38:07 SW | Det jag funderar på när du berättar det här är om de har fått ett formellt beslut där det står varför de får avslag? Hon har alltid rätt att göra en ansökan och få den prövad, även rätt till ett beslut. Det beslutet är nödvändigt om hon ska kunna överklaga | What I'm wondering when you tell me this is whether they have received a formal decision stating why they are refused? She has always right to make an application and have it considered, including the right to a decision. This decision is necessary for her to be able to appeal |
| 16<br>17<br>18<br>19<br>20<br>21 | 15:38:15 AN | Hon har berättat att trots de försökt med tipsen jag fick igår dvs att ekonomin inte skall räknas som gemensam så har de nekats hjälp. Jag sitter själv också i trubbel med hyra så jag är grymt ilsk på vem det än är som ställt till det. | She has told me that despite trying the tips I got yesterday i.e., that the budget should not be counted as joint, they have been refused help. I'm myself in rent trouble too so I'm grimly furious with whoever is responsible for this. |
| 22<br>23<br>24<br>25<br>26<br>27<br>28<br>29<br>30<br>31<br>32 | 15:41:08 AN | Ett klagomål tar oavsett tid. Så hjälper inte direkt om man akut behöver nåt för att slippa gatan. Min tjej är arbetslös dvs får hon överhuvudtaget pengar så behövs den till medicin så hon slipper höga plågor och det är typ vad den inkomsten räcker till. Jag har varit tvungen assistera med pengar så inte hon är 100% beroende av hennes mor som har låg lön. Ingen annan har gjort det. Nu sitter jag i samma båt | A complaint takes time anyway. So doesn't really help if you urgently need something to get off the streets. My girl is unemployed i.e., if she gets any money at all it is needed for her medication to avoid a lot of suffering and that is about what this income is enough for. I have had to help with money so that she is not 100% dependent on her mother who has low salary. Nobody else did it. Now I am in the same situation |
| | *Several posts are omitted* | | |
| 33<br>34<br>35 | 15:47:13 SW | Vad gäller pengar till medicine och annat livsviktigt—känner du till att man kan göra en nödansökan till socialtjänsten? | Regarding money for medication and other essentials—do you know that you can make an emergency request to social services? |
| 36<br>37<br>38<br>39<br>40<br>41<br>42 | 15:48:45 AN | Vad jag förstått har alla vägar nu försökts för hon frågar inte om snabblån för skojs skull. Dessutom skulle det inte räcka till. Med andra ord skall man hamna på gatan och SEDAN kanske få höra nån klantat till sig? Inte riktat mot dig men rätt ruttet system | As far as I know everything has been tried because she doesn't ask about instant loan for fun. Besides it would not be enough. In other words should you end up on the street and THEN maybe hear that someone screwed up? Not against you but pretty rotten system |

**Table 4.** (Cont.) Extract 4: I can't provide more concrete help.

| Line | Time, poster | Post in original Swedish | Colloquial translation into English |
|------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 43<br>44<br>45<br>46<br>47<br>48<br>49<br>50<br>51<br>52<br>53<br>54<br>55 | 15:53:40 SW | Hamna på gatan låter inte som en<br>bra lösning—det är självklart av stor<br>vikt även för socialtjänsten att<br>personer inte blir bostadslösa. Hmm, jag<br>funderar på vilka tips jag kan ge för att<br>hjälpa henne/er vidare. Här via chatten<br>kan jag inte ge mer konkret hjälp, men jag<br>har kollegor dit man kan vända sig om man<br>behöver mer hjälp i kontakten med<br>socialtjänsten, om man t.ex. riskerar att<br>bli bostadslös. Vill du veta mer<br>om vart hon kan vända sig för<br>att få mer praktisk hjälp att hitta lösningar? | Ending up on the street doesn't sound like a<br>good solution—of course it's extremely<br>important for social services too that<br>people don't become homeless. Hmm, I'm<br>thinking what tips I can give to be<br>helpful for her/you. Here via the chat<br>I can't provide more concrete help, but I<br>have colleagues who one can contact if one<br>needs more help in contacting<br>the social services, e.g., if one is at risk of<br>being homeless. Do you want to know more<br>about where she can turn for more practical<br>help in finding solutions? |
| 56<br>57<br>58 | 15:55:32 AN | Ja för det är bråttom. Tiden rinner ut i<br>sanden och annars finns det inget annat<br>val än snabblån | Yes because it's urgent. Time is running out<br>and otherwise there is no other<br>choice but instant loan |

Notes: AN = anonymous user, SW = social worker.

In lines 9–15, the social worker sends a post formatted as general information on the application procedure, implicitly suggesting a possible course of action: appealing a formal decision (Antaki & Bloch, 2020; Silverman, 1997). The user's subsequent post (lines 16–21), reporting a failed attempt to follow the advice received during the previous online chats, appears to have been typed simultaneously with the social worker's post, as it is sent only eight seconds later. In their next post (lines 22–32), the user rejects the social worker's suggestion of appealing, deeming it irrelevant (the appeals process takes time, whereas the need for financial assistance is urgent; lines 22–24). In lines 33–35, the social worker makes another suggestion regarding an emergency application. This suggestion is also rejected by the user (lines 36–38). The social worker's suggestions imply that the user (or their girlfriend) should turn to the local social services again, despite having already sought help from them. The user's tone is emotional: note the capital letters in "THEN" (line 40), and the emotionally loaded expressions "end up on the street" (lines 39–40), "screwed up" (line 41), and "pretty rotten system" (line 42). The user explicitly complains about social services but clarifies that this criticism is not directed at the online social worker ("not against you" in line 41).

The social worker's response is delayed (see the timestamps in lines 36 and 43), which may indicate difficulties in responding to the user's persistent complaints and resistance. In the next post, the social worker first contests the user's negative view of the social services (lines 43–46). Over the next two sentences, the social worker displays a willingness to help the user ("Hmm, I'm thinking" in lines 46–47), while also claiming that the user's case falls outside the scope of the online guidance ("Here in the chat I can't provide more concrete help" in lines 48–49). The social worker thereby mitigates their personal accountability for rejecting the user's request for help (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). At the same time, the social worker reinforces the boundaries within the social services system (online guidance versus local offices). This is followed by signposting the user to "colleagues" (line 50). The post concludes with an offer of further information ("Do you want to know more about where she can turn...?" in lines 53–54), which the user accepts (line 56). In subsequent posts (not shown here), the social worker provides information about and contact details (addresses, telephone numbers, and emails) for community services that can support

citizens in contacting social services; for example, in helping them to write an appeal. Thus, the user is signposted to local social services once more, albeit indirectly, to which the user continues to display resistance throughout the remainder of the chat session. As in Extract 3, the service enacted by the online social worker is providing information and redirecting the user to the relevant authorities. In Extract 4, where the user returns with the same case, the online counsellor appears to assume the role of a digital accompaniment in ongoing contacts with the local social services office.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

It has previously been suggested that, in contrast to mere "access," the concept of "accessibility" better captures the ambiguity and the dynamics of the practices through which welfare recipients are connected with social work, shifting the focus from the management of access towards a reflection on its meaning (Grymonprez et al., 2017). The practices of boundary work and signposting explored in this study can be seen as practices through which the accessibility of social services via online platforms is made visible. When negotiating and establishing boundaries, defining the responsibilities of the online services versus the local social services offices, social workers and users construct the conditions of online social work.

The online services studied in this article render social workers accessible to the general public. At the same time, online social workers orient to their remit as being limited to providing general information, which is substantially different from conventional social services, where citizens can receive more practical support. In the cases studied here, users sought personalised advice (e.g., judgements on their individual situations, as in Extract 1) or immediate interventions (e.g., help with accommodation or financial support, as in Extract 3), but were mostly redirected to contact their local social services office via non-online means (by telephone or in person). Users also turned to online services as an alternative to conventional social services when they did not trust or were dissatisfied with their existing contacts at the local municipality (see Extracts 2 and 4). In these cases, they were usually steered back to their caseworkers. In online chat interactions where users had the possibility to respond to the social worker, they resisted being redirected elsewhere and could pursue help online. In both online chats and online enquiry forms, social workers tended to provide an alternative service when rejecting the user's request; for example, by explaining general rules or procedures related to the user's situation. In this way, they aligned with the user's project of seeking help, while simultaneously reconfiguring the nature of this help so that it fell within their remit.

Alexander and Hofstetter (2020, pp. 121, 133) observed that "conversation analytic [CA] research on the topic of signposting appears to be minimal at best," and more broadly that "the resistance of professionals to provide a service is not frequently reported in interactional literature." The present study contributes to this field of research. It supports the assumption that non-emergency helplines and similar services may face specific challenges related to their remit, which may consequently make them a home environment for signposting practices (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). To our knowledge, signposting has thus far been studied in oral interactions. In this study, it is analysed in a different interactional environment: online, text-based, quasi-synchronous, and asynchronous interactions. One of the structural affordances of these interactions is the ability to routinely compose units consisting of multiple actions (Arminen et al., 2016). In oral interactions, it has been shown that users' resistance is mitigated by tying signposting actions to accounts that imply a rejection of the user's request, thereby allowing no space for the user to respond to the rejection itself (Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020). In online text-based interactions, a similar effect was

achieved by combining accounts of limits to remit with signposting within a single post. However, as in oral interactions, users in the online exchanges could still resist the option to seek help elsewhere.

Previous studies of boundary work, including those focusing on signposting, have primarily addressed the boundaries between different professions or occupations (e.g., Slembrouck & Hall, 2014), and between organisations or agencies (e.g., Alexander & Hofstetter, 2020; Kevoe-Feldman & Iversen, 2022). This study sheds light on a different aspect of boundary work, when the boundaries are established between different departments within the same agency. The conventional, in-person social services in Sweden mainly deal with individual assessments and interventions. This is not possible with online services, where users are anonymous. While anonymity is an appreciated feature of online platforms, it limits what social workers can accomplish in this setting. Furthermore, the division of responsibilities may be related to specific challenges when the same service users are handled by different parts of the organisation. If an online social worker's judgement on the user's individual situation differs from that of the user's caseworker, this can lead to contradictions in the handling of the user's case. By limiting their remit to providing general information, online social workers may be striving to avoid creating tensions within the social services system.

This study has examined cases where online social workers operate within the scope of their remit. Meanwhile, Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen (2022) have shown that practitioners may push institutional boundaries to meet the needs of help-seekers that fall outside their organisational remit. A future study could examine whether and how online social workers accomplish boundary-pushing towards tasks belonging to the domain of the conventional, local social services or other parts of the welfare system.

The focus of this study has been on "negative cases," in which users are denied the service they requested. Notably, these cases comprise a comparatively small portion of the entire dataset: 47 out of 268 interactions (13 out of 68 chat logs and 34 out of 200 enquiry form exchanges). The online services studied in this article are frequently used, which suggests that they are a valued source of support. The Swedish social services system is complicated, and accessible information about its structure and procedures can help citizens navigate it. The accessibility of information about welfare services has been shown to be crucial in enabling citizens to make informed choices about their social support (Baxter et al., 2008). However, it might be important to consider how online services are presented to the public in order to ensure that users have realistic expectations when accessing these services.

## Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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