Social media and social work: The challenges of a new ethical space

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Abstract

Social media and other online technologies have transformed communication between social workers and service users, with many practitioners engaging and working with clients through social networking sites. While it is readily agreed that there are numerous ethical issues associated with online practice, such as those related to confidentiality, dual relationships, and boundary crossing, there is a lack of clarity about how to deal with such issues. Consequently, this paper draws from a case example to develop a nuanced understanding of ethical issues and ethical behaviour in online spaces. We argue that social workers need to develop their knowledge of the complex interplay between discourses such as those related to power, permanency, authorship, audience, embodiment, and professionalism because these have understandings that underpin daily practice. Social workers must also remain committed to ethical values and critical reflective practice. We conclude with recommendations for education, research and practice.

Key words: Social media, social networking, ethics, social work practice

Social work has only recently begun examining the use of social media and other online technologies in social work practice. Online technologies have "crept" into social work practice and revolutionised communication between practitioners and service users (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012, p. 283). Social workers make use of online, video, and telephone therapy, as well as text messaging, email and social networking sites for connecting with clients and colleagues (Reamer, 2013). This transformation of practice has raised a number of ethical issues. Reamer (2013) identifies concerns related to confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, conflicts of interest, dual relationships, boundary crossing, service termination, documentation, and research evidence (or lack thereof) (see also Fange, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014). While practitioners have readily identified ethical issues with online mediums, they are not always clear about how to deal with them (Mishna et al., 2012). Further, it would seem that many social work students are unaware of the ethical issues and dilemmas that can arise in online communication and the importance of maintaining professional behaviour and boundaries in online spaces (Mukherjee & Clark, 2012).

Social work professional associations have responded to concerns about online ethical issues by preparing guidelines for use with social media and other technologies. For example, the British Association of Social Work released a policy statement in 2012 that "encourages the positive uses of social media, to which social workers should apply the values and principles of the Code of Ethics" (The Policy Ethics and Human Rights Committee, 2012, p. 10). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) have updated their practice standards to state that social workers must identify "ethical considerations with respect to using online communication and social media" (AASW, 2013a, p. 15) and published guidelines on social networking and online service provision (AASW, 2013b, 2014). In the United States, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) and the Association of

Social Work Boards (ASWB) set standards for technology use ten years ago (ASWB, 2005). These centred on cultural and technical competence, privacy and confidentiality, and documentation and risk management. These guidelines have yet to be updated, despite the significant changes in online communication since then. A major problem, according to Voshel and Wesala (2015), is that "practice standards continue to lag far behind the rapid growth of online social media" (p. 68) and leaves a gap to be filled.

To date, scholars providing guidance on ethical issues in online practice arenas have relied on existing, and sometimes dated, codes of ethics. This has meant that there is no comprehensive contemporary discussion of the complexities and interrelationships between social media, social work practice, and social work ethics. A more nuanced understanding of ethics in online spaces is needed. Consequently, this article adds to the emerging body of literature on social work, social media and ethics by highlighting broader issues pertaining to social media and their intersection with social work values and practice realities. We begin by highlighting the opportunities and dangers associated with social media, before drawing from a case example (described below) to extrapolate professional issues inherent in social media. We conclude with suggestions for promoting social justice in online domains.

Opportunities and dangers

The growth of social media has come with huge benefits for individuals, groups, organisations, communities, and businesses. People can now develop new friendships, maintain old friendships, establish a small business, connect with others, and keep abreast of research and current affairs more easily. Social media has allowed adopted children and children in care to make contact with birth parents (Greenhow, 2015). Communication has never been easier for a global audience within instantaneous reach, e.g., Social Work Without Borders (see *Social Dialogue*, August 2015). Health departments, fire, police, ambulance,

and other essential services can quickly issue warnings to a wide audience through information technologies (Alexander, 2014). Evidence also suggests that young men who speak online to friends about personal problems are more likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who do not (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). Social media can promote open dialogue with collaborative reflections (Friesen & Lowe, 2012), democratic participation and engagement in politics (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012), coordinate successful political action (see Shirkey, 2011), strengthen relationships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), and be inclusive (Bertot et al., 2012).

However, there are dangers. While social media can empower individuals, it can also empower trollers, stalkers, and predators, as numerous reports of paedophiles using social media to access victims (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010) or of children and young people being bullied online (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011) exemplify. The speed at which posts can go viral can contagiously affect others in harmful ways (Fu, Cheng, Wong, & Yip, 2013). Further, regimes have tightened their control on social media when political uprisings have been unsuccessful (Shirkey, 2011). Social media has been used to promote terrorist acts and disseminate rumours in disaster situations (Alexander, 2014). Such misuse of these communication tools have led to calls for detailed increased surveillance of citizens and their online communications, with Edward Snowden revealing in 2013 that both Britain and the United States had indulged in widespread surveillance of private communications.

The challenge for social work is to use the benefits and opportunities which social media enables, without causing harm. Using social media requires new ways of thinking about and reflecting upon everyday activities. The following sections explore the complexities of social media and assist social workers in developing a more nuanced understanding of this area of practice.

Conceptualising social work, social media, values and ethics

Social media complicates social work practice in a way not previously witnessed. It is no longer possible to understand the impact of social media and the ethical issues that arise from it in simple, binary or linear ways. As shown in Figure 1, the social contexts in which communications occur are crucial in comprehending its usage. We highlight that social media and social work practice occur in a neoliberal context which privileges technology, financial power and a collapse of time and space (Virilio, 2000). Social workers must remain committed to their ethical values (as stated in previous literature), and practice in a critically reflective manner. Figure 1 indicates that social workers need to develop their knowledge of the complex interplay between a range of discourses, such as those related to embodiment and disembodiment, power and empowerment, permanence and impermanence, and underpin their daily practice with these understandings.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

We discuss each of these discourses through the case study below. It has been compiled by drawing upon real-life examples shared online, research, and stories offered by other people.

Case study: Mary, William and Adam

Mary is a 23 year-old, single parent mother, recently separated, and has given birth to a son, William. Mary grew up in out-of-home foster care in a rural town, but moved to the city when she turned 18. She has limited money, has no contact with her ex-partner and father of William, and is socially isolated. She does, however, have a strong network of friends on Facebook, which includes her former social worker, who she connects with online frequently.

Mary wants to show that she is a good mother and she does this, in part, by posting lots of status updates, profile picture updates, and pictures which include both herself and William. Mary is unconcerned about the safety risks posed by posting photos online because she has set her security settings quite high.

When William turns one, Mary posts a status update celebrating his birthday. Her close friend Emily shares this update with her networks and adds the comment 'time to party'. Shortly afterwards, Mary receives a 'friend' request from Adam, who is a friend of Emily's on Facebook. Mary accepts the request because she trusts Emily's judgement about who she would connect with online and likes Adam's profile picture. Adam and Mary begin conversing online. When William is fourteen months old, Mary and Adam run into each other at a park. Mary is unaware that Adam has located Mary via a geotagging platform where Mary has 'checked-in' at her location. Soon after, Mary and Adam start dating and two months later Adam moves in. Mary is happy to be in a relationship with someone who is caring and she appreciates how kind Adam is to William.

Over time Adam erodes Mary's social networks and begins controlling her online activities and face-to-face meetings with friends. Mary is unaware that Adam has begun to sexually abuse William. At the same time, he is undermining Mary's

parenting abilities and confidence, making her increasingly dependent on him. The abuse escalates and Adam uses social media to distribute and sell abusive material to people who pay increasing amounts for the degree of abuse inflicted on William. Mary's friends online, including Mary's former social worker, are concerned that Mary's engagement online diminishes overtime. They continue to post comments on her Facebook page in an attempt to connect with her better, without success.

This case study raises important questions for both social workers and users of social media more generally, but especially parents of young children. These can be considered in terms of: macro-level contexts; online ethical issues; and practice considerations. The ethical issues inherent in social media and highlighted in this case study are influenced by concepts related to abusive interactions, privacy, empowerment, authorship, permanence, embodiment, professionalism, and consequences. Practitioners need a solid understanding of each of these elements, along with a commitment to the values and ethics of the profession and exceptional skills in critical thinking. We discuss these in turn below.

Macro-level context

Neoliberalism

The growth of social media and online communication technologies have emerged in a context of neoliberalism; an ideology grounded in the belief that market forces are the driving principle in all social, political and economic decisions (Giroux, 2005). Neoliberalism results in: the loss of public spaces, a diminution of government-funded institutions, blindness to unregulated market competition, freedom for capitalists to move their assets around the globe, interpersonal relationships based on market individualism (Bauman in Wallace & Pease, 2011), and shrinkage of time and space and acceleration of the speed with which things

happen (Virilio, 2000). According to Giroux (2005) "under neoliberalism everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit" (p. 2). Products and services are designed to maximise profits and minimise costs. Corporations dominate not only economics, but also social and political life and produce commodified relationships, communication, and services (Dominelli, 2007), with citizenship becoming a function of consumerism (Giroux, 2005). Neoliberalism dominates almost every area of people's lives and "has changed the relationship between the individual citizens and the state, individuals and their social and physical environments" (Dominelli, 2007, p. 32). In many ways, capitalism has driven technological progress (Nelson, 1990) and has had overwhelming influence on the creation and use of social media. It has made social media ubiquitous and cheaply available everywhere. And despite its potential for control over individuals, it enables people to connect with large audiences quickly. It also provides opportunities for individuals to abuse and exploit other individuals, especially sexually and financially.

In the case study, photographs of the abuse of William are disseminated online for profit using a social networking site. This site, like many, allows for the commodification and marketization of human suffering inherent in a neoliberal society. Many websites rely on clickbait (a term used to describe online content that generates advertising income by enticing web users to view the content). In the abuse of William, Adam sells abusive photos for profit. Such transactions expose how the free market drives demand for abusive material. Additionally, the secrecy offered by the web has enabled William's abuser, Adam, to maintain his privacy to avoid being found out, although he had to take the precaution, as many perpetrators of sexual abuse do, of isolating Mary, betraying her trust, and making her dependent upon him (Dominelli, 1989). Many people trust social media sites to look after their interests, yet with limited safeguards in place and in the context of a dominating neoliberal culture, safety comes second to profit. Individuals are expected to take care of their own security, with providers being reluctant to intervene quickly (O'Brien, 2014). While this

may be changing, (e.g., the work with Facebook the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is doing in the UK), social media, allows people like Adam to empower themselves with limited recourse for victim-survivors or their families. Social workers who are aware of the potential for harm and exploitation that the web offers those wishing to perpetrate violence against others can exercise vigilance and explore matters further if they begin to suspect that an individual's pattern of behaviour is changing without apparent reason. In William's case, the social worker could have asked to meet Mary, or gone to her house to see what had happened when she stopped responding online.

Online ethical issues

Embodiment and disembodiment

Social media provides users with the ability to form communities, share information, connect with others, and socialise (Bertot et al., 2012). Online relationships and interactions become both embodied and contextualised (van Doorn, 2011). They are informed by and inform offline relationships, behaviours and events. Essentially, material moves from physical spaces to digital spaces and back again. Thus, 'everyday (inter)actions are materialized in digital space' (van Doorn, 2011, p. 538). This can blur the boundaries between virtual reality and physical reality, and create 'lived-in spaces' that acquire meaning and significance for individual(s). However, while interactions online may be embodied with congruence between mind and body, the user cannot see the reactions of others and is unable to get immediate feedback from them. This produces an element of disembodiment associated with online interactions and causes the user to be unclear about how another person will receive the information that has been posted. It can be difficult to predict the outcome of a particular comment. Thus, social media can create a sense of connection and disconnection simultaneously.

Mary's friends care deeply about her and actively seek to connect with her online. Their relationship with her is embodied. Yet, because the relationship is mediated by social media and a digital or disembodied space, they are unable to transcend its limitations and fully understand Mary's circumstances and the abuse she is experiencing. Because Mary's suffering is invisible to them, they feel disempowered and unable to ask Mary what is troubling her. Hence, an element of silencing accompanies the medium. Yet, while some voices are silenced, others, such as Adam's are amplified through their control of the media. The embodied nature of online interactions is exemplified in the manner in which Mary first met Adam through online chats. However, the disembodied nature of online communications means that many social media users will seek to meet outside of the digital realm, as Mary and Adam did. Having established the basis of trust online, Mary did not have full access to the signals that might have made her more wary of entering into a relationship.

Intended and unintended consequences

While there are often intended and unintended consequences for any actions taken, these may become amplified online. Many of these relate to privacy, empowerment, or lack thereof online, and permanency. Social media allows users to reach a large audience irrespective of their intention to do so. This can be valuable when promoting positive change, but can also be damaging. The presence of 'digital dirt', for example, can have unforeseeable negative consequences, particularly for children and young people (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Mary did not foresee how the disclosure of personal information online put her and her son at risk of abuse because a knowledgeable user would be able to locate her. Furthermore, it is unlikely that her friend Emily thought through the potential consequences of friending Adam online. Social workers need to become more aware of unintended consequences of online behaviour and exhibit greater consideration about how material may be received by the intended (or unintended) audience and used to abuse people who are vulnerable. Social

workers need to be careful not to act unethically because they did not check someone or something out.

Professionalism and non-professionalism

Many practitioners utilise social media to publicise professional services (Ahmed et al., 2013). Social media enhances their capacity for career building by marketing oneself through self-branding to promote themselves as employable and professional (Gershon, 2014). This is important for job-seekers, as many employers check a job applicant's personal websites and social media postings (Toten, 2014) and use social networking sites for recruitment (Schawbel, 2012).

However, there have been instances where employees, including some in the health and social services, have lost their job due to social media misuse or privacy breaches. Many practitioners have not considered the impact of their online material on service users (Greyson, Kind, & Chretien, 2010). Their failure to do so can pose risks to them individually, their profession, and service users (Bickhoff, 2014). For example, a social worker was sanctioned by the Health and Care Professionals Council in the UK after a mother involved in a court case searched for the social worker on the internet and found the social worker's publicly available Facebook page contained a passage where she had described her glee at the mother's children being removed (Stevenson, 2014).

In social work, it is often unclear what is permissible and what is not in online spaces. Mishna et al. (2012) refers to this as the 'ethical grey zone'. In the case study, one of Mary's online friends is her former social worker, which in contexts like out-of-home foster care can be important for service users where connections with former workers helps maintain continuity and is valued by service users (Dominelli, 2005). However, in the case study, the social worker may inadvertently become complicit in William's abuse through inaction. She failed to examine the reasons behind Mary's reduced contact, and has missed her abuse as a

mother and young woman. Moreover, by not following up on Mary, the social workers misses a potential opportunity to pick up on William's abuse. The social worker's inaction in the nebulous spaces of online reality raises questions of culpability alongside issues about fitness to practice. Social workers thus need to consider the implications of online behaviour carefully and get the support of their professional associations to do so.

Single and multiple authorships

The boundaries between author and reader have become unclear with the rise of social media (Zeng, Chen, Lusch, & Li, 2010). Its collaborative and participatory nature denies people of sole authorship of their life stories (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). Instead, these are often developed through a compilation of the views of many people packaged as one profile, with status updates and tweets being repeatedly shared, modified and reposted (Murthy, 2012). Thus "every new medium affects who and how many people can be the author of a statement" (Gershon, 2014, p. 283). This can result in a lack of consent by specific authors when there are different authors, and an expanding authorship which has no explicit limits. The original author often loses control of the material and may be unaware of what someone might do with the information posted online. In Mary's case, she posted a status update that was reposted and embellished by her friend Emily that was subsequently read not only by Mary's intended audience, but by people in Emily's online network, which included a child abuser who was not known as such. Mary thus lost control about who viewed her post and how it was conveyed. Material is repeatedly shared online by Mary and Adam about William. His life story, in a sense, is being authored and co-authored by others, a process in which he has no input, raising questions not only about authorship, but about consent and power.

Public and private spaces

The boundaries between public and private spaces are blurred online (Strauß & Nentwich, 2013). Users of social media sites often have to agree to terms and conditions that allow for surveillance, data mining, and target marketing, with applications (apps) retaining users details, conversations, and material they have shared privately (Reyman, 2013). This blurring of boundaries differs from that experienced in daily life routines when private woes are turned into public issues so that they can be investigated and the personal domain can be overtly politicised, as in the feminist slogan, the 'personal is political' (Dominelli, 2002). In online transgressions of the private-public divide, it is done surreptitiously as a condition of accessing a particular site or service, with social media users giving little thought to the terms of agreement. Standards expected by one person sharing something privately can easily be violated by another person who shares something publicly (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010), as occurred to Mary, who assumed that her friend would only share materials with bona fide friends that she trusted. According to Alexander (2014) this is "part of a broad trend towards the gradual abandonment of personal discretion and increasing tendency to share intimate details" (p. 728). The erosion of privacy remains largely invisible, while the maintenance of privacy can be at the expense of others. For example, the parents of 15 year old Eric Rash who committed suicide were denied access to his emails and Facebook accounts (Boyle, 2013) and had to resort to the courts to acquire permission to do so. Thus, there are considerable challenges that social workers must be aware of related to privacy, security, discretion, respect, data management, and accessibility. Mary believed her data was safe online because she had established high privacy settings. Spaces which are often viewed as private can be very public and technically knowledgeable individuals can subvert privacy settings. Additionally, her profile picture was still publicly available, information she shared was readily shared with others, and it is likely her online data would be retained for the purposes of marketing, data mining, and other surveillance purposes. The blurring between

public and private boundaries raises important questions: What could her former social worker have done to alert Mary to these possible dangers when she became her 'Facebook friend'? Given that her formal professional relationship had ended, what responsibility did she have for Mary, given her vulnerability as a mother of a young child? Did she have any responsibility towards William, given child protection considerations? Where should the professional boundary lie? Who will determine ensuing dilemmas, and how?

Power and disempowerment

Social media can be empowering to users when it breaks down hierarchical structures (Castells, 2009) and gives users a platform to broadcast their views to a potentially large audience. It can also promote openness and transparency in government, reducing corruption and allowing users to monitor government activity (Bertot et al., 2010). However, for those who have little access to social media or limited control over the content, speed, and direction of material posted online it can be disempowering (Marlin-Bennett, 2013). With little way of vetting connections, social media users can be the target of criminals, marketers and fraudsters (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Social media providers take little responsibility for protecting users from abuse. This raises serious issues. For example, Greenhow (2015) describes how adoptive parents can resent their adopted children getting into contact with birth parents through social media, and the potential danger of unwanted contact. At the same time, some parents in her sample, felt this provided a wonderful opportunity for children to develop good relationships with their birth parents. In the case scenario, William has no control over the information – good or bad – posted about him. Social media lends itself to a form of 'adultism' (Dominelli, 1989) where adults exercise power over children without their involvement or consent. Additionally, William's human rights, and the social justice due to him as a child have been deliberately violated by Adam.

Social work should promote the rights of disempowered people not only in face-to-face interactions, but also in those occurring online.

Permanence and impermanence

Social media carries with it both a sense of permanence and impermanence: permanence in that users leave behind evidence of the sites they have visited and impermanence due to the speed at which current information supersedes previous data. Users often have little say in what information is retained permanently online. Once material is posted, it can stay online indefinitely. Further, such posts are often made in real time (Bertot et al., 2012), making the speed of the transfer of information as provided by contemporary telecommunications technologies contribute to a kind of pollution known as a 'grey ecology'. Virilio (2010) argues that "the pollution of time and distance is much more severe… than the pollution of material substances" (p. 13).

The material posted online about William may well retain a place on the internet throughout his lifetime and become permanent. Further, the haste in which posts are made by Mary allow little time for reflection about unintended consequences. Actions taken online have both immediate and long term effects and can be difficult to permanently remove. Social workers need to be aware that discourses related to power, authorship, and consequences have a time dimension. Actions one day can unwittingly affect the future, without the possibility of redress.

Practice considerations

Criticality, values and ethics

In light of the intersecting discourses around power, privacy, embodiment, professionalism, authorship and consequences, social workers must be critically reflective in their practice.

Critical reflective practice (Fook, 1999; Healy, 2000) and critical theories are useful in understanding and unpacking diversity, and raising questions that might not be otherwise considered (Dominelli, 2014). It will help ensure that social workers do not engage in unethical practice inadvertently. While it is important that social workers hold onto core values and principles related to human rights, social justice, integrity, competence, and respect, this alone, is not enough. Social workers must be fully informed of the complexities of online interactions and remain up-to-date on research in this field. Social workers must also help citizens to have digital and ethical literacy and they should promote the rights of disempowered people in not only face-to-face interactions, but also online ones.

Conclusions: Implications for research, practice and education

Being well-informed and able to exercise one's rights is a condition of citizenship (Dominelli, 2014). Social workers need to help citizens understand ethics and ask for the realisation of their rights if social justice is to be implemented. How do these relate to online chats that have repercussions far beyond their existence in ethereal space that, for example, can affect one's sense of wellbeing, the right to be free of abuse and violence, and one's current or future employment prospects? These issues are greater than one individual, and we would argue that social work's professional associations – nationally and globally – need to develop comprehensive guidelines to assist social workers in this task. These should include guidance on how to be critically reflective practitioners online and how to question or interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions. Moreover, we suggest that professional associations engage with employers to develop social media policies that do not put the burden of anticipating the consequences only upon an individual practitioner. Responding to this is becoming necessary especially for young people who are increasingly unlikely to communicate via traditional media. The question of who becomes included and excluded arises as digital divides become more pronounced in a market-place that asks for credit cards upfront for online purchases

including applications that facilitate communication. Finally, we argue that more research into social media is needed to help social workers keep pace with rapidly changing technologies. Limited research in this area means that being well-informed about rights to communication technologies, their use and misuse are items requiring urgent attention. Research can provide a robust foundation for teaching social work students how to use online resources in an ethical manner that promotes social justice. We argue that such teaching should become mandatory in the social work curriculum, and could potentially be covered in modules on values and ethics. Getting to this point might require regulatory bodies and professional associations to set standards regarding their inclusion in all programmes of study. Our suggestions are feasible, and we would argue, essential for social work practice in the 21st century.

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