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Chapter title: Social media for students in practice:

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This chapter examines social media in social work practice contexts and settings and explores how agencies, organisations and practitioners can ensure it is used safely. In social work practice the barriers to engagement with social media and in particular the concerns about practitioner and service user/carer privacy and confidentiality are amplified and this chapter explores the opportunities which social media presents in practice contexts as well as the possible threats. New communication technologies have the potential to contribute a great deal to social work practice benefitting service users, and practitioners, adding novel dimensions to practice just as long as they are used ethically by practitioners who are aware of the importance of professional boundaries.

Definitions

As with any new development in social work a range of acronyms start to appear which need deciphering. Included here is a very brief definition of some of the most popular terms used in this chapter and their relevance to social work practice. **Social Media:** Social media is a publishing and broadcasting medium (BASW 2012). Social media is a Web 2.0 technology which is designed around user interaction. Social media users can connect with and interact with web based content. Social Media has the potential to promote and communicate news, information and ideas; it is potentially a powerful mechanism for raising awareness of social work issues and social justice. **Social Networking Sites:** A Social Networking Site (SNS) is online spaces where people can build their own profile, share content, for example photographs or films, and connect with others. Examples here are Facebook which is a used as both a social networking tool by individuals and as a marketing tool by businesses, it has also been used to explore values and ethical dilemmas related to social work practice as will be discussed in this chapter. LinkedIn is another SNS which connects professionals which each other, and allows them to share information, interact and post comments. **Blog:** A blog is a personalised website where you can blog (write) about your opinions, ideas, views, thoughts or reflections. These can be made private or only available to certain individuals. They can like all forms of social media be made public and as such they are also global and permanent once published. **Micro-blogging** also includes ideas, opinions but it is condensed or limited. Twitter is an example of a micro – blog which is limited to using 140 characters. Twitter users may have a personal and private profile, or maybe just one, in any case for social workers what they post on twitter is publicly available (unless privacy setting are in place) and so care must be taken to ensure that posts are appropriate and in keeping with the professional value base of social work. **E professionalism** is a terms which has emerged more recently and it describes the ways in which users of social networking sites understand, manage and respond to social media. It is of particular significance in social work because of the daily interface with

vulnerable people, and because of the need for confidentiality and trust between service users and practitioners.

Background

Emerging in the early part of the twenty first century social media develops, promotes and improves online networking between individuals and is used by industry and commercial organisations to market their businesses. It is a relatively new development which the primary and allied health and social work professions have recently begun to grapple with. Social media encompasses a broad range of tools, networks and mediums which people use to communicate in different ways and formats. People share content, opinions, information and their thoughts and ideas –these may be in text, images, audio or video format or a combination of each. There are SNS's where people can create their own profiles such as Facebook which has 1.3 billion users (Statistics Brain, 2014a), Google+ Bebo, LinkedIn and MySpace. Other SNS's allow people to blog or microblog, write articles, share their opinions, provide updates on projects they are working on, or simply provide a status update, these include Twitter, Blogger Whatsapp and Tumblr. Latest figures suggest that globally there 645,750,000 registered twitter users, and on average 58 million tweets per day (Statistics Brain, 2014b) There are SNS's which are mainly visual/audio and allow people to share photographs, films, videos and music for example Instagram, Flickr and Youtube.

Social media and social work practice

Social media has the potential to raise awareness and promote issues relevant to social work practice Kimball and Kim (2013). Whose Shoes? (http://nutshellcomms.co.uk/) is a good example of how an organisation has used social media to promote and encourage collaboration and co-production between service users, carers, commissioners, social workers and academics. Originally designed as a

board game Whose Shoes? is now also an interactive tool which is used to facilitate policy and practice development in regard to personalisation and self-directed support for adults. The organisation behind this initiative uses social media to promote and market the online and real time game based planning tool, raising awareness of the personalisation agenda and supporting individuals and communities of practice and learning to bring about local changes to how adults are cared for.

In another example BDO illustrated a range of developments using case studies from across the UK to illustrate how social media had been used to engage with the public and raise awareness of important social issues. For example a social media campaign in Leicester was launched to encourage teenage girls to carry condoms. The pre-campaign survey showed that 53% of students thought it was positive that girls carried condoms, the post-campaign survey found 78% (BDO 2012p.9). BDO however also report that many local authorities have punitive social media policies when it comes to staff accessing social media based on the view that social networking at work detracts employees from their work. However the benefits of encouraging social media and the opportunities it presents to engage with local people and promote awareness of important local issues are missed with this stance.

Reflective questions:

•   What is you agency/organisations social media policy?

•   Are you able to use social media during work hours?

Practice educators and work based supervisors who support the fieldwork practice aspects of social work education all play an important role in enabling student social workers to develop professional accountability and practice which is ethical and safe, and yet little is known about the role social media plays in this training despite its growing significance in our everyday lives and in the lives of service

users. The issues about remaining professional and the potential disregard for confidentiality were highlighted in a well reported case about a social worker who posted a comment using Facebook about her delight that a judge had removed children from their parents, describing this as a "Career High" (BBC News Essex 2012). This social worker clearly breached professional boundaries and BASW code of ethics; however it is unlikely that most breaches of confidentiality on SNS's will be as explicit as this. It is though incumbent upon practice educators to engage with questions about SNS and how students use this, as there is continual growth in the use of technology more generally by agencies and organisations to provide services, alongside a willingness /ability of many people to use online resources to seek help and support where once this would have been provided face to face.

There is a lack of published research which examines social work practitioners use of social media although this is an emerging area of study. Rosenthal Gelman and Tosone in 2008 bemoan the lack of training and education available to social workers to use technology generally to advocate for social work service users or to inform their interventions. In the UK Rafferty (2011) described an example from social work practice in a care leavers project which followed up the young people who had left care by checking up on their Facebook page. The ethical issue here are clear, did the care leavers know they were being "followed up" in this way? And did the agency have a policy which was shared with the student who was tasked with the follow up activity?   In a recent Australian study of 935 health professionals use of social media, Usher (2012) found that the majority (83%) did not use social media in their professional role and this was related primarily to their lack of knowledge of the technology, only 19% used social media in their private lives. Whilst this may not tell us about the uptake of social media by social workers Usher's study reveals a lack of engagement in an environment where there is unprecedented and unchartered growth in new and emerging forms of communication, relating and practicing in social work. It is well established that in the UK social work practice educators use the internet and online sources for support, their Continuing Professional Development and to keep up to

date with practice knowledge and policy /legislative changes (Horder 2007). This engagement by practice educators with online resources might be enhanced by their engagement with SNS's where materials can be accessed archived, and shared quickly. This is a useful social media activity which can also be easily shared with students

Reflective questions:

- Can you communicate about work issues with colleagues and or your students using social media?

- What professional activities do you carry out using social media?

- How do you keep up to date with professional/practice issues and developments?

BASW code of practice for social media

In 2012 BASW published their Social Media Policy, recognising the potential this has to promote the values of social work across a global stage and with international partners. BASW also foresaw that social workers would need to be proficient and literate in their use of social media. The policy aims to: *"clarify what BASW considers to be the professional responsibilities of social workers and social work students, in relation to the increasing use of social media"* (BASW 2012, p.4). BASW illustrates the potential dilemmas which practitioners may come across in relation to the use of social media by service users, for example where a looked after child might be contacting their birth family, or where a service user posts abusive messages about a practitioner on a social media site. It is likely that practice educators will come across both the negative and positive aspects of social media in practice.

The BASW policy states that: *"social workers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about technological developments and understand the impact, use and advantages as well as possible ethical concerns and risks in relation to themselves, the people they are working with and their employers"* (BASW 2012, p.5). BASW states that there is a real need to reflect on the changes in the way we communicate and consider how this impacts on practice. In particular BASW (2012) refer to the *"collection and use of information about and by individuals and how to maintain the service users right to a relationship of mutual trust, privacy, and confidentiality"* (p.5)*.* The Social Media Policy is designed to apply to social workers in the UK, including employers and education and training providers. BASW recommends that social media policies and code of practice for staff are proactive and support professional development and e-professionalism. In developing social media policies Kimball and Kim (2013) suggest that agencies should be proactive in establishing these and involve social media users, legal representatives and human resources departments. In the spirit of participation, collaboration and transparency it would also be considered good practice to include service users and carers in designing such policies.

Reflective question:

- What are your own concerns about using social media in your practice with social work students?

- What advice would you give to a service user about using social media to communicate with your agency?

- How can you model e professionalism with social work students on practice placements?

Social media in social work practice education

The use of SNS's in social work education to complement existing teaching and learning strategies has been a recent development (Westwood 2014a). The obstacles to engagement with social media are

discussed by Thackray (2014) who describes four issues which determine how we engage with social media and these are: technological barriers which impact on the adoption of new technology, developing an online identity and the boundaries which determine how an online identity is shared; privacy and being exposed online and the adoption of a new online culture. For those who are new to social media and technology, and may perceive themselves to be digital visitors starting off slowly and building up knowledge is recommended. Many social work students are already digital residents familiar with and active users of new communication technologies, and potentially willing to share their expertise and know-how with their practice educators.

Whilst there are a range of concerns about using social media in social work education, there is also great potential for SNS to enhance the students learning experience in relation to skill development, and understanding values issues for practice as illustrated by Iverson Hitchcock and Battista (2013); Singh Cooner (2013 and 2014) in his work on using closed Facebook groups with student social workers, and by Taylor (2014) who uses Twitter to promote membership of a national online Social Work Book Group which involves students, academic and practitioners. Social work educators who integrate support social media into their teaching argue that it supports students to develop a professional online identity commensurate with social work values. In addition social media provides a wealth of opportunities to the profession in terms of future practitioners being advocates for social justice, and for students developing e-literacy to stay updated on policy and legislation changes which affect their practice (Iverson-Hitchcock and Battista 2013). How social media might enhance practice education when students are on fieldwork placements however relies on organisations, practice educators and agencies familiarisation with and adoption of social media as a learning /development strategy and as outlined above whilst there is some evidence of it being used in this way there is limited empirical work available and so we are entering unchartered areas of practice learning.

People who use social work services are amongst the growing numbers of those who use social media, taking advantage of new technology and changing the way in which they seek support, and from a workers and organisational perspective new ways of interventions are being delivered and developed (Mishna et al 2012). In their study Mishna et al (2012) found that service users were initiating contact using technology although younger service users were more likely to use texting. For some of the practitioners involved in the study the online interaction potentially complemented the face to face work and service users were able to give feedback using e-mail for example. However one participant described how a service user had posted a blog criticising the social worker and the intervention they had received, which was public and crucially, permanent. Thus for all of its potential and opportunities, the privacy and confidentiality which characterise social work interventions are potentially threatened by the advent of social media.

Whilst there are real concerns amongst practitioners and students about the use of social media in practice, Rafferty (2011) argues that this should encourage real engagement with social media rather than avoidance. This position was adopted by Singh Cooner (2013) for a research study with social work students using closed Facebook groups and real life social work practice scenarios. In the study students were invited to set up a Facebook account which enabled them to work together on tasks outside of the classroom environment. Even though students were not always comfortable using this medium, they did report that the exercises they were tasked with enabled them to engage with real life practice dilemmas and consider the potential consequences.

In a consultation exercise designed to inform this chapter practice educators expressed concerns about the blurring of professional boundaries, breaches of confidentiality, and the potential that engagement with service users using social media might also lead to conflicts and misunderstanding. The consultation revealed that agencies and organisations were using social media to market and publicise their services and activities, as well as advise their followers of new developments,

communicate broadly (not individually) with service users, as well as sharing relevant local and national news. The practice educators were invited to describe what support they might need to help them to use social media and as well as robust guidance and monitoring, they suggested on-going training and support in terms of safeguarding and boundaries, and easy access to resources to enable their engagement. In relation to how service users might benefit from social media they suggested that it has the potential to reduce isolation for service users who might gain from online peer support networks, social media could be used as a tool to celebrate the work of unpaid carers and provide a more positive image of social work generally and updates about activities. In essence there was an emphasis on embracing some aspects of social media which was seen as being able to meet some of the needs some of the time for service users who are isolated, social media was not perceived as being able to replace, but only complement social work and what social workers can offer. This being the case, albeit from a small consultation, suggests that practice educators do have a role to play in supporting student social workers to develop their understanding of how SNS can be used appropriately and ethically.

Reflective question:

- What barriers are there for you in using social media in your professional role?
- How would you advise a student social worker to respond to a friend request from a service user on Facebook?
- What advice wold you give to a student who has a twitter account which they use for both work and for their social life?

Professional boundaries

In their discussion of ethical issues for social media and social work, Kimball and Kim (2013) describe how online networks which include colleagues, friends, old school friends, and family are separate in real life whereas online "*these worlds collide*" (p.186). It is thus important when designing policies that the personal and the professional are distinguished.

Professional boundaries are defined as: *"the boundary between what is acceptable and unacceptable for a professional to do, both at work and outside it and also the boundaries of professional's practice"* (Doel et al 2010, p.1867).

Doel et al (2010) argue that ethical engagement is essential for the development of ethical social work practice. As discussed in this chapter social media provides opportunities for ethical engagement, it presents real time ethical issues which move students and practitioners away from a tick box ethical checklist approach and into a public, global forum where conversations and discussions about practice take place and involves service users, carers and professionals. This public forum potentially dissolves or blurs the boundaries which more formal situations dictate, however this blurring is not always appropriate. In their discussion of how digital technology "crept in" Mishna et al (2012) discuss how social workers experienced and responded to the influx of new technology and the ethical issues which resulted from this. In their paper Mishna et al (2012) remind us that the internet generally allows service users to access information about practitioners and vice versa. However does being able to access information about a service user mean that a practitioner should access this? These ethical questions are presented in the Social Work and Social Media (SWSM) APP designed by Singh Cooner (2013) and reviewed in Westwood (2014b). The activities included in the SWSM APP are designed to trigger discussion, reflection and debate about the ethical issues of using social media in social work using several practice based case studies. The case studies illustrate how service users seek advice about using social media; how staff can benefit from advice shared on social media; and how it presents opportunities for service users to feedback about their experiences. The tasks deal with issues related to looking at service users' social media sites, for example, facebook or twitter, when

preparing for a visit and are suitable for team discussion and individual supervision sessions with students or between practitioners and their managers.

Reflective question:

How does your team currently deal with queries from service users or carers about using social media?

What do you think are the main barriers or facilitators to your team engaging with questions of social media?

What ethical issues related to social media have you or your team responded to?

Summary

This chapter has examined some of the key issues related to the use of social media in social work practice education. The developments in technology during the early part of the twenty first century show no signs of slowing down and these present opportunities to engage with service users at an organisational level to develop social media policies and codes of conduct when using social media generally and to a certain extent to engage with individual service users if this is appropriate. However the risks and potential for blurred boundaries might detract or prevent social work students and practice educators from embracing these opportunities. Student social workers may be keen users of social media in their private lives, and may wish to avoid using social media with service users for fear of breaching professional boundaries. Practice educators play an important role in working with students to express and reflect upon these concerns and to develop an understanding of how social media interactions can lead to conflict and tension between practitioners and service users. Moreover practice educators can contribute to the development of student's professional identity and ethical

practice by engaging in social media activities and familiarising themselves with the key policy

frameworks and codes of conduct related to social media in their agencies/organisations.