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The digital turn in child and family social work: challenges, opportunities and imagined futures

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Editorial title: The changing digital landscape for looked after children

In his influential paper Walter LaMendola (2010) put forth the idea that social workers need to go beyond mobile emerging encounters of place and space (see Ferguson, 2008) toward the development of 'innovative tools to help people navigate and find new knowledge in the birthing of a culture propelled by mediated encounters' (p113). The subsequent decade witnessed a proliferation in the everyday use of digital technology enabling the storage and flow of information (Horst et al 2021) ref) with an estimated one in three internet users being children (Livingstone et al 2015).

The worldwide pandemic of 2020 saw governments across the globe order their citizens to stay at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus: Covid19. This singular response to the pandemic enabled a significant digital shift in all areas of social, political and economic life. This global acceleration transformed lifestyles and working lives, and the pandemic was a catalysis for widespread adoption of digitalization (Amankwah-Amoah 2021). It also led to an unprecedented change and development in the provision of social work, that not only propelled but necessitated that the sector navigate and develop services to encompass the mediated encounters of the type LaMendola foresaw (Mishna et al 2021 refs).

For children and young people, the digital shift brought about as a direct result of the pandemic transformation of their daily lives, schools were closed to all but the most vulnerable children. Children's social lives were disrupted and circumscribed so that the everyday activities such as playing out with friends were denied. For children who are looked after away from home, legislation was swiftly enacted to facilitate remote practice, which meant that assessments, visits, statutory reviews and other meetings could be held on video or on telephone calls (UK Gov 2020) .

One could argue that LaMendola's (2010) article was also prophetic in recognising that service users would inhabit the virtual spaces afforded by YouTube, Facebook and smart phones. Importantly, LaMendola also highlighted that for social work one of the difficulties the profession would face would be the way in which people form associations, in other words, community. He also added that the issues and challenges that would emerge for social work are in actual fact common to all societies, that is ethics, trust, responsibility, reciprocity, obligation, common good, common interest, reciprocity and participation (LaMendola, p.116).

The collection of articles that make up this special issue are aimed at exploring the changes in digital social work practice with children and families that grew in and beyond the context of the pandemic. The insights emerging from these articles suggest that technology and digitalisation of practices, services and systems are having a widespread impact and, echoing LaMendola (2010) raise moral and ethical questions about the provision of services, the creation of self-help communities, the use of data, and children's digital rights and experiences.

In seeking to introduce the special issue we have grouped the articles into a series of themes that in many ways mirror the issues and challenges LaMendola mentioned a number of years earlier. Firstly, the dichotomy of age and relationships. The articles by **Phippen and Bond, Corliss, and Stabler** all speak to digitalisation, children's rights and their agency. A common feature of these articles is that young people in the care system make use of their smartphones and other digital devices as a 'lifeline for normality' (Phippen and Bond). The articles also make transparent adult perceptions of social

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media use as negative (Children's Commissioner, 2017 and Simpson, 2019). Added to this, they challenge the existing narrative that is often linked to young people in the care system, that is vulnerability. Equally, the articles highlight that the practitioner response is often one dimensional. Forgetting that children's engagement with the digital world will be framed by the context of age, gender, legislation, parenting and also the social and economic background that is inhabited inside the *digital society*. In sum, what we see through these articles are that,

"The digital environment must take into account the evolving capacities of children as they age and mature, develop knowledge and understanding and experiences" (5 Rights Foundation 2021)

Returning to the issues and challenges discussed by LaMendola (2010) the articles by **Raneesh and Mohan, Cree and Mackenzie, Bilir-Seyhan and Larkins et al**, fit comfortably within the realm of trust, common interest, reciprocity and participation. Cree and Mackenzie's work which constitutes a description of a collective ethnography, illustrates the importance of relationships and record keeping in adoption services, based on their experiences of using digital tools and resources to unpack their shared history. Their shared story was only possible because of the transformation that widescale digitalization has enabled. This transformation has democratized knowledge and its accessibility so that individuals can now seek out and explore knowledge that was either not made available or easily accessible. This is evident in **Nixon's** paper that illustrates how consultation with children regarding the resumption of face to face Hearings in Scotland led to a new hybrid model being developed. The continued importance of relationship-based practice, alongside any digital innovations, is emphasized too in the paper by **Larkins et al**, which provides a framework for considering how participation and accountability might be extended in interpersonal practice between children and social work or education professionals and through children's collective relationships with systems.

In the case of **Raneesh and Mohan**, they examine the challenges, benefits, and limitations of digitisation of the adoption process in India which began in 2015. Similarly, in Turkey, **Bilir-Seyhan** explores adoptive parents' use of social media to share experiences. This digitization has led to a greater connection and access to information amongst prospective and current adopters, thereby creating an online community. The development of this system in India brought with it the inadvertent implication of unravelling the closed system of adoption as social media is now enabling birth parents and children to search for one another. The use of social media, in Turkey, has been seen to enable adoptive parents to seek and share social support.

In these five articles above we can see that characteristics of trust, common interest and reciprocity are no longer within the gift of social work practitioners. These characteristics can all be independently achieved by those who are subject to social care services. This realisation requires us to return to LaMendola (2010 p.116) who remarked, *"Across any number of personal networks, practices emerge with use and human activity with computing artifacts commonly result[ing] in unanticipated practices"*.

We would argue that if social work is going to continue to adapt successfully to digitisation there is a need for the profession and its leader to *"engage intimately with the practices of everyday life"* (LaMendola, 2010 p.117). This will mean returning to and upholding as a central tenant relationality, which can only be achieved through trusting, caring and mutually respectful relationships with the people social work practitioners work with.

And, this collection of articles also confirms the more recent concern raised by Goldkind, Wolf and LaMendola (2021), in that the widespread use of digital devices and technology enable the almost

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invisible collection of data through everyday interactions, which can tend to concentrate knowledge and power in the hands of largescale systems, rather than with individuals or communities. We echo their encouragement for:

“individual social workers and the social work field are responsible to apprehend and to protest advancing technological mechanisms of disenfranchisement.”(Goldkind, Wolf and LaMendola 2021: 251)

At the same time, we call for action within the social work profession to seek out and actively promote any opportunities that digital adaptations offer for deepening relationships, redressing inequalities and holding systems to account.

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