

## SOCIAL MEDIA, E-PROFESSIONALISM AND NETIQUETTE IN SOCIAL WORK

By Gloria Kirwan

### INTRODUCTION

This article asks where social work is positioned vis-à-vis the new world of electronic communication that is being played out across a range of social media. It also asks what issues e-networking raises for social workers in terms of professional conduct and responsibilities when they are active participants in this new social space.

This article cannot address all the many topics that are relevant to such questions but it sets out to conduct a whistle-stop tour around some of the issues that are emerging for social workers (and other professionals) as the world of electronic communication develops and expands.

The title of the article flags three main subjects that this article will explore, namely developments in social media, ideas about e-professionalism and finally, netiquette and its relevance for social work practitioners.

### BACKGROUND

Active users of social media will be familiar with websites and services such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Tumblr, Google+, Bebo, Youtube and LinkedIn among others. Some readers may recognise these as terms in common usage but have very little experience of participating in them or engaging in electronic communication with net friends and the wider net public. Whatever the individual reader's position may be, the facts are that Twitter has 400 million monthly visitors (Kiss, 2011) and Facebook reported 526 million daily active users on average in March 2012 with its services available in 70 languages (Facebook Newsroom, 2012). Youtube (2012), as another example, has over 800 million unique visitors per month.

Social media and e-networking, as means of communicating, are no longer peripheral but are a central feature of social communication in the lives of many people, particularly younger people. Giordano & Giordano (2011: 78) refer to social networking sites as "today's meeting halls and community centers".

It is not known how many social work practitioners use any or all of these social media but we do know that most students entering universities in westernised countries (and there is no reason to believe that social work students are different to their counterparts in other

disciplines) are active on social media networks and that before they even enter third level education they will already have a media profile and a media history. From Giordano & Giordano's (2011) research we know that the majority of students on health related courses are mainly using Facebook followed by other sites, such as Twitter, to a lesser extent. This is not surprising given that Facebook, with over 500 million daily users, is a dominant player in an ever expanding market. So, while some may argue that social media and social work have no points of overlap, this viewpoint is not likely to stand up into the future as new social work graduates, with active networking usage backgrounds, will enter the profession in the years to come. As will be evident in some of the examples provided later in this article, there is already a lot of activity related to social work on some of these social media sites and it is essential that social workers, educators and students become cognisant of the potential possibilities these media offer for improved service delivery but also the potential pitfalls they can cause if used without due care.

### DEFINITIONS

Before progressing the discussion of social media, it is helpful to clarify the terminology central to the discussion in this article.

*E-professionalism* concerns professionalism in the context of electronic media. Cain & Romanelli (2009: 67) define it as "attitudes and behaviors (some of which may occur in private settings) reflecting traditional professionalism paradigms that are manifested through digital media". The reference in their definition to actions that may be located in what appear to be private settings, such as closed online chatrooms, is not accidental. Cain & Romanelli (2009) are clear about the need for professionals to understand that privacy cannot be as easily guaranteed in digital environments as it can be in other social (offline) contexts. They also highlight the need for both students and educators to pay more attention to the potential problems that can arise for professionals and students of professional disciplines as a consequence of their interactions on social media. For example, social workers who discuss matters of a private or personal nature, or who display attitudes or beliefs incompatible with social work ethics, may realise too late how easily anything they chat about online or post on social media sites, can be disseminated swiftly across all of cyberspace.

*Netiquette*, according to Scheuermann & Taylor (1997) is a word derived from 'network' and 'etiquette' and it denotes online etiquette or the rules of social behaviour

in digital environments. While it is difficult to find an agreed code of netiquette suitable for use in media which are used across the globe and in many cultures, some online service providers and in some cases governments have stated rules or codes of expected netiquette and they will impose sanctions where these are breached. However, the more important sanction determining polite online behaviour, according to Scheuermann & Taylor (1997), may well be the speed at which netiquette breaches will be spotted by other social media users. It is likely that those who become electronic 'flame-throwers', 'trolls', 'cyberbullies' and 'stalkers' will be quickly dropped or avoided by their social media peers. Given that the whole purpose of social media is to enhance social interaction, being ostracised by the online community is a severe sanction and may be an important element in the enforcement of positive netiquette.

#### BENEFITS

The potential benefits that flow from the ability of the Internet and other forms of electronic technology to enhance access to information, to facilitate global communication and understanding, to reduce individual isolation and to bring people with shared interests into contact with each other are too numerous to list here. Millions of people worldwide every day go online to communicate with others or to locate information and services. The potential for social media to offer improved quality of life to millions of people is essentially boundless. People have experienced peer support during difficult times, access to legal, healthcare and financial information and assistance, and much more through information fora such as blogs, chatrooms, websites, apps, news channels, tweetchats and unconferences and the many other means of social connectedness that electronic forms of communication now offer.

The potential of new age technology is being identified by a range of healthcare, government and community-based services (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Eckler, Worsowicz & Rayburn, 2010; Brown, 2009; Vance, How & Dellavalle, 2009). It is now commonplace for people to conduct their interactions with state agencies online. The Department of Health (2012) in the United Kingdom set up the Maps and apps website where it lists and connects people to the 500 most popular health apps. This is an example of health services using electronic media to disseminate information on services and electronic tools to the public at large. In many ways, service users and social workers are already using apps and other social media to improve their knowledge and understanding of issues they are dealing with. It is timely therefore to consider if social workers need to be more

proactive as a group in developing social media skills and possibly even designing and developing media tools for use in their work. Will there be a time, not too far off, when student social workers will study e-technology and be assessed on their skills of technological communication?

#### PITFALLS

But is social work ready to embrace the technology revolution? Are there reasons for caution? For anyone launching themselves into the social media space there are issues that require decisions, such as privacy, disclosure comfort levels, netiquette and the rules of online engagement, as well as the levels of control that pertain over exchange and retrieval of personal data and information. The challenge for social workers is that these issues overlap with ethical issues in social work concerned with confidentiality, relationship boundaries with service users, professional behaviour regarding how service users, colleagues and others are discussed, and issues of self-disclosure for social workers.

The potential for social workers to quickly become enmeshed in a tangle of ethical knots through social media activity has been highlighted by a number of reports. Reamer (2009) describes situations in which ethical issues have arisen for social workers through their usage of social media. These include examples of social workers commenting negatively about colleagues without realising how easily these comments could enter through cyberspace into public access, or a social worker who discovered that a service user was a 'friend' (legitimately) of his wife on Facebook and in this way accessed personal information about the social worker. A third example from Reamer concerns another social worker who felt her relationship with a person she was working with was compromised when that person accessed personal information about her that she (the social worker) had posted online. The service user then left messages about this on her telephone voicemail. Kays (2012) raises the difficulties concerning professional boundaries and issues relating to the worker's privacy that can arise if a client requests to be an online 'friend' on Facebook or similar sites. Taking a different perspective, Aase (2010) quotes directly from a blog post by a physician who talks about how she manages her connectedness on social media sites with her patients and what she describes as 'blending' the patient-friend role. Kays (2012) also suggests that closing cases could be problematic if a client continues to attempt contact with the social worker online after the relationship has been officially terminated.

In summary, it can be social workers who feel invaded in terms of their personal life but it can also be social workers who behave on social media in ways that cause offence to others, including service users, and thus leave themselves ethically compromised. There are different opinions about the worker-service user boundaries that should guide behaviour on social media and there is need for further discussion within social work about how such issues are best managed.

## REGULATION

According to Giordano & Giordano (2011) there are few guidelines in existence from regulatory or accreditation bodies regarding professional conduct and social media behaviour. There are signs that this is changing. For example, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (2011) has developed revised guidelines on 'Professionalism' which contain detailed advice regarding 'Digital Media and Social Networking'.

In terms of social work education, it is likely that students are aware of general policies in place within educational establishments regarding respect for others. Some institutions will have in place clearly articulated policies regarding acceptable behaviour on electronic media, but some will not. The extent to which these issues are considered or teased out with students within social work classrooms is less clear but probably the depth to which it is dealt with will vary from one social work programme to another.

Reamer (2009) refers to "*the complex boundary implications created by electronic social networking sites*" and given the widespread use of such sites it is clearly necessary that the profession begins to grapple with both the possibilities as well as the pitfalls of social interaction in electronic social environments.

## CONCLUSIONS

Readers will be divided between those who have participated in chatrooms or Tweetups and those who have not; those who know about flashmobs or what to do with a troll and those who are not sure what these terms mean. There is a new social world developing in a new social space. It is a space with which the social work profession can engage positively provided the possible pitfalls are recognised and managed. It is likely that future social work codes of ethics will address issues related to this new social space and no doubt it will feature in future social work debates. In fact, some social workers are already active in the digital environment, but there is a need for profession-wide education and debate before the gap between those social workers who are involved and those who are not grows any wider.

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