

Social Media, information and communication technologies: Part 2

Social Networking

“First we lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we're going to live on the internet!”

(From 'The Social Network', Dir David Fincher, Columbia Pictures, 2010)

The social networking phenomenon has, over the last five years, become firmly entrenched in international society. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, 4Square, MySpace and Linked in, have hundreds of millions of users worldwide and have transformed the way in which people communicate and socialise with one another. Please see the glossary at the end of this ethical guideline for descriptions of some of these popular social networking websites.

Shearsby (2009) commented that mediums such as Facebook, with the ability to search for and invite other users to be “friends” are uncharted territory for health professionals and may have implications for professional relationships with clients (from Robinson, 2009). It would be unrealistic to suggest that social workers should not engage in social networking sites on a personal level; however it is important that social workers consider the ethical implications that may arise from their use of such sites.

In response to such developments and changes in society, there is a need for the social work profession to update or develop new ethical standards and guidelines in order to protect the interests of clients and social workers alike, and to ensure that the ethical responsibilities of social work practice in the ‘real’ world remain the same in the ‘virtual’ world.

The use of social networking sites create more complex ethical implications in relation to professional boundaries, dual relationships, confidentiality, privacy and informed consent than may have previously been experienced pre-social networking. Being especially aware of the boundary between one’s private and professional spheres as well as the impact on privacy is extremely important for social workers in the advent of this ever increasing online culture. If social workers, or organisations that employ social workers, wish to use social media as a way of engaging clients, it is important that these are separate and clearly distinct from a social worker’s personal social media websites and are associated/named in accordance with the organisation rather than the individual users. (The use of social networking in a professional capacity will be discussed in more detail in part 3 of this ethical guideline series, and will be titled: *Providing social work services via information and communication technology*).

It is possible, and extremely easy, for clients to perform searches on social workers, and other professionals in their lives, on social media websites. Depending on privacy settings, clients and others may be able to view comments and photos and discover information about the social worker's life – meaning the boundary between the professional and the personal can be easily blurred, without the social worker even being aware.

The Code of Ethics (2010) states:

Social workers, not their clients or former clients, are responsible for setting and maintaining clear and appropriate professional boundaries in all forms of communication, including face to face contact, written communication, telephone and online communications (including social networking, email, blogging and instant messaging (5.1.6 c).

Therefore, to avoid permeation of the boundary between the personal and the professional with regard to client-social worker relationships, it is the responsibility of the social worker, not the client, to be proactive and vigilant in ensuring their personal life remains personal when engaging in social networking. Social workers should never assume that clients will refrain from searching for social workers on social networking sites.

Social workers should also be wary that if they post a comment on another person's social media site, if this person posts a photo of them on their site, or if this other person refers to them being present in a particular location (known as 'checking in' on Facebook) the social worker has no control over the privacy settings this person chooses to adopt, and therefore, their comment, photograph or location could be accessible to anyone.

Personal internet postings that clients or others can inadvertently gain access to, could compromise or complicate social workers' professional relationships. A client could learn something about their social worker via a social media site that is at odds with their perception of the social worker in a professional capacity. This could, in some instances, cause the client harm. For example, if a client has an alcohol related issue, and sees a photograph of the social worker drinking alcohol at a party, it could impact on the professional relationship and inadvertently cause harm to the client. The *Code of Ethics (2010)* states in section 5.1.6g:

Social workers' private conduct will not compromise the fulfilment of professional responsibilities.

Similarly, if a colleague or employer views something that is perceived as inappropriate or at odds with a social worker's professional identity or something derogatory relating to their work setting, to a client or a colleague, it could compromise a social worker's professional reputation with their employer, put them at risk of an allegation of unprofessional behaviour or bullying or impact on professional relationships with colleagues.

When engaging with social media, social workers may consider the following points:

- Social workers should ensure that all personal social media websites are set up with as many privacy settings as are available by the site so as clients and other members of the public cannot gain access to information, photos, comments etc. Those websites where total privacy cannot be guaranteed might be avoided by social workers. It would be recommended that social workers read the privacy policy of the social networking site, and ensure understanding of the limitations to privacy and how privacy can be best protected if engaging in a particular site.
- Privacy and security concerns, while in some instances can be technology related issues, are largely behavioural issues, or how people choose to use such sites. It may be worth considering, every time you post something on a social networking site, whether you would be happy for a stranger to know/see this information and/or whether it would be appropriate for a stranger know/see this information.
- Social workers should also check whether “friends of their friends” can access their sites. There could be a case where a “friend of a friend” is a client or a colleague.
- Social media sites can change privacy settings options without the user being aware. Social workers may want to regularly check their privacy settings to ensure that there have not been any changes made which could compromise their privacy or allow unwanted access to their site.
- Social workers should be mindful of having little control over others’ privacy settings when engaging on their friend’s social networking sites, and therefore, even if their own site is private, information/photographs may still be accessible through another person’s site who does not have robust privacy settings in place, or who may be “friends” with a client or colleague.
- Social workers should be mindful of who they become “friends” with on social networking sites. It is worth considering that in some instances, it may be inappropriate or a blurring of professional boundaries to include colleagues/managers/employees as “friends” on a social media site.
- If a social worker has a work related social media website such as for posting blogs or sharing resources etc, it would be important that they clearly differentiate between this and a personal social networking site, name the blog according to the area of discussion/business name rather than the social worker’s personal name, explain to clients and other professionals the nature and purpose of the site (if appropriate) and possibly consider the need to invite/accept others to engage in the site – rather than running a public forum.

- Social workers may consider a contract/agreement with clients that they, as social workers will not search for or engage with clients via social media websites so as the expectations are mutual between both parties. Having this in written form, where both parties agree and sign would be recommended.
- Social workers should consider, when engaging with social media forums such as Twitter; that people can create ambiguous names and request to “follow” another user. Social workers should be wary that they may inadvertently accept someone as a “follower” who is a client. Social workers may also wish to consider having an ambiguous or de-identifying user name themselves on Twitter, so as it is more difficult for clients and others to find them.
- A social worker may also consider the ability that people have to “check in” to locations or for others to locate their whereabouts due to GPS tracking being enabled on a mobile device. Social workers may need to discuss with clients their privacy and confidentiality if they “check in” or can be located at a social worker’s office or building.

Case examples

Q1: A former client has invited me to be friends on a social networking site. Is it breaching professional boundaries if I accept?

The Code’s expectations of social workers is that it is their responsibility, not the responsibility of the client or former client to set and maintain clear and appropriate professional boundaries with respect to communication (5.1.6c).

If faced with such a situation as above, the social worker must weigh up the ethical considerations for both options and decide to accept the friend request or not. The social worker should also consider the context of the friend request as there may be some circumstances where connecting with clients via social media might be deemed acceptable especially as communication via social media is becoming increasingly common. Some examples may be:

- If as social worker you have a ‘work’ profile page which does not disclose any information about your personal life.
- If you are a social worker who provides counselling/social work services via the internet and social media and you have a professional profile in order to provide these services.
- If you work in youth services and have a ‘social work’ profile for the purposes with connecting and communicating with younger clients.

If the social networking site is the social worker's personal non work related site, there are further things the social worker should consider. If the social worker does not accept the friend request the issue of the client experiencing rejection from their former social worker could be of concern. However, in accepting a friend request the social worker must consider the implications this could also have for the client. For example, if some aspect of the social worker's personal life or some information contained on the social worker's social networking site conflicts with how the client perceived the social worker for the period of time that they were in a professional relationship. The social worker also must consider what benefit accepting the friendship request would have for the client. "Why are they requesting my friendship?" "Were they dependent on the previous therapeutic relationship and are they looking for a means to continue such a relationship?"

Of further consideration is the possibility that the former client could return to the service that the social worker works in.

If faced with such a scenario, consulting or seeking supervision with a senior member of staff would be the first advised step.

Reflectively, social workers may need to think about changing their privacy settings, so as it is not possible for clients to find them, and request their friendship in the first place.

Q2: I have an agreement in place with all of my clients that they will not search for me on social media sites and vice versa. I am currently working with a single mother and her children where there are some welfare concerns. I have recently had some suspicion, based on some comments the children have made, that the mother has been allowing her ex-partner back into the house with the children - when there is a court order in place for supervised access only. I searched for the mother on a social media website, and found photos of the partner at the house with the children dating back to last weekend. What do I do?

The social worker, in this instance, has breached their professional contract with a client. However, the social worker now has information that the client is placing her children at risk by allowing them contact with her ex-partner.

Given the social worker now has this information, he/she would need to consider his/her ethical responsibility to report this to the statutory agency given the family is breaching a court order.

If the social worker determines that they need to report this, he/she would need to acknowledge with the mother that the professional contract was breached and take full responsibility for doing so. This could impact significantly on the professional relationship that the social worker has with

the client, and the social worker would need to be prepared for this. The social worker could potentially lose all trust from their client and no longer be able to work positively with this family.

The social worker, in their reflection, might consider the different avenues they could have explored in this situation. For example, the social worker could have attempted to sit down with the mother and speak about his/her suspicions and concerns. The social worker may have approached their manager/supervisor and sought some guidance around how to proceed given the suspicions. The social worker may have been able to speak in further detail with the children to ascertain if his/her suspicions had any foundation.

Q3: I am a social work researcher and educator and have an online social media page, where I post interesting articles, new research and advertise CPD activities in my area of practice. This is a public site and people can comment on things I post. Recently, an ex-client (I used to work for a counselling service many years ago) found the site and posted a comment asking me how I was and referred to our past therapeutic relationship. How do I respond?

The social worker in this instance is in a difficult position given the client who commented is an ex-client. The social worker has made the forum on this social media site public and therefore has little control over what is posted on the site. The social worker also has no professional, private avenue to respond to the client, other than on this forum due to their status of being a previous client.

The previous client is clearly not understanding of the purpose of the forum and has publicly breached their confidentiality. The social worker may need to attempt to tactfully state to the client that the purpose of the forum is to share and comment on practice resources for this area of practice, and state that he/she no longer works in direct practice and therefore cannot comment on previous relationships he/she had with the client. The social worker may suggest that the client speak to their current counsellor about this, or advise that they seek out a new counsellor.

This is an issue that could arise again for this social worker if clients search for the social worker's name on the internet. The social worker may need to consider removing their name from the title of the page; instead, adopting a name relevant to the topic or issues discussed so as to avoid their own personal association with the site.

If the social worker chooses to keep this as a public forum, they may need to consider having a statement on the front of the page stating the forum's purpose, what kind of comments are appropriate, and what kinds of comments are inappropriate and will not be responded to.

The social worker may also need to consider, by way of reflection, changing the forum to a private forum rather than leaving it public. It may be that the social worker only accepts people to the forum who are known professionals working in this field – given this is the purpose of the forum - and that they are clear of the forum's intended purpose and appropriate topics for discussion.

Glossary

These definitions have been taken directly from a weblog posted by Bodnar in 2009 at the web address listed on the references page.

Blog

Blog is a word that was created from two words: “web log.” Blogs are usually maintained by an individual or a business with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

Facebook

Facebook is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study, and live around them. In April 2012, Facebook was said to have 900 million users worldwide. Facebook allows any users who declare to be at least 13 years old to become registered users of the site.

Following

Following on Twitter can mean one of two things - Twitter users whose updates you subscribe to (people you are following) and Twitter users who subscribe to the updates you publish (people who follow you, called your followers).

Foursquare

Foursquare is a social network in which friends share their locations and connect with others in close physical proximity to each other. The service uses a system of digital badges to reward players who “check in” to different types of locations.

Friends

These are individuals you consider to be friendly enough with you to see your Facebook profile and engage with you.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site. Founded in December 2002 and launched in May 2003, it is mainly used for professional networking. As of June 2010, LinkedIn had more than 70 million registered users, spanning more than 200 countries and territories worldwide.

MySpace

MySpace is a social networking website owned by News Corporation. MySpace became the most popular social networking site in the United States in June 2006 and was overtaken internationally by its main competitor, Facebook, in April 2008.

Twitter

Twitter is a platform that allows users to share 140-character-long messages publicly. User can “follow” each other as a way of subscribing to each others' messages. Additionally, users can use the @username command to direct a message toward another Twitter user.

References

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