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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 there are numerous ethical issues associated with online practice related to confidentiality, dual relationships, and boundary crossing, there is lack of clarity about how to deal with such issues. This article uses a case example to develop a nuanced understanding of ethical issues and ethical behaviour in online spaces. We argue that social workers need to link their knowledge of the complex interplay between discourses that underpin daily practice like those related to power, permanency, authorship, audience, embodiment, and professionalism to social media created spaces. In doing this, social workers must retain their commitment to ethical values and critical reflective practice. We conclude with recommendations for education, research, and practice.

Social work has only recently examined the use of social media and other online technologies in social work practice. These have crept into practice and revolutionised communication between practitioners and service users (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012). Social workers use online, video, and telephone therapy, text messaging, email, and social networking sites to connect with clients and colleagues (Reamer, 2013). This transformation of practice raises a number of ethical issues. Reamer (2013) identified concerns about confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, conflicts of interest, dual relationships, boundary crossing, service termination, and research evidence (Fange, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014). While practitioners have identified ethical issues with online mediums, they lack clarity on how to address them (Mishna et al., 2012). Furthermore, many social work students are unaware of the ethical issues and importance of maintaining professional behaviour and boundaries in online spaces (Mukherjee & Clark, 2012).

Social work professional associations have prepared online ethical guidelines for social media use. For example, the British Association of Social Work released a 2012 policy

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statement that "encourages the positive uses of social media, to which social workers should apply the values and principles of the Code of Ethics" (Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee, 2012, p. 10). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has updated its 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 for this (AASW, 2013b, 2014). In the United States, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) set standards for technology use 10 years ago (ASWB, 2005). These centred on cultural and technical competence, privacy and confidentiality, and documentation and risk management. These have not been updated, despite ensuing changes in online communication. A major problem is that "practice standards continue to lag far behind the rapid growth of online social media" (Voshel & Wesala, 2015, p. 68), leaving 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. Thus, 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 the intersection between social media, social work values, and practice realities. We highlight opportunities and dangers associated with social media, utilise a case example to detail professional issues arising from social media, and draw recommendations from it.

Opportunities and Dangers

Social media provides benefits for individuals, groups, organisations, communities, and businesses. People can more easily develop and maintain friendships, establish a small business, and keep abreast of research and current affairs. Social media has allowed adopted children and children in care to contact birth parents (Greenhow, 2015). Communication has placed a global audience within instantaneous reach; for example, the Social Work without Borders (SWwB) network (see IASSW, 2015). Health departments, fire, police, ambulance, and other essential services can quickly issue warnings widely through information technologies (Alexander, 2014). Evidence also suggests that young men who speak online to friends about 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. Social media empowers individuals, while also empowering trollers, stalkers, predators, and paedophiles who use social media to access victims (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). Others bully children and young people online (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), raising child protection considerations. The speed at which posts go viral can irreparably harm recipients (Fu, Cheng, Wong, & Yip, 2013). Some

government regimes have tightened control of social media following unsuccessful political uprisings (Shirkey, 2011). Social media can promote terrorist acts and disseminate rumours in disaster situations (Alexander, 2014). Such misuse of these communication tools have led to increased surveillance of citizens and online communications. In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed that Britain and the United States perpetrated widespread surveillance of private communications (BBC, 2014). The challenge for social work is to use the benefits and opportunities that social media enables, without causing harm and reflect critically on their incorporation into everyday practice.

Conceptualising Social Work, Social Media, Values, and Ethics

Social work literature has called for graduate competence in using social media (Robbins & Singer, 2014), with an increasing number of educators using social media in teaching (Kilpeläinen, Päykkönen, & Sankala, 2011). Social workers have used social media as an advocacy tool (Sitter & Curnew, 2016), a method of practitioner peer support (Gandy-Guedes, Vance, Bridgewater, Montgomery, & Taylor, 2016), and for facilitating client support groups (Parker Oliver et al., 2015). However, its use in social work is contested. Social media complicates social work practice in ways not previously witnessed. It encompasses benefits and challenges that create ethical issues and have impacts that cannot be understood in simple, binary, or linear ways. For example, child protection workers cannot assume that a child placed in a loving foster home will not fall prey to online abuse (Greenhow, 2015). Below, following a description of the methodology, we employ the literature and a case study to contribute to the development of more nuanced understandings of social media's impact on social work and child protection.

Methodology

Case studies allow in-depth exploration of particular real-life situations and complex phenomena (Yin, 2014). To explore the ethical complexities that social media raises for child protection workers, we developed a composite case example based on real-life stories and situations that we composed by removing identifying information to protect anonymity among those involved. The framework for analysis involved critical reflective discussions between us, drawing from our knowledge of practice, and literature on social media and ethics. The process followed that described by Fook (2011) where critical reflection becomes a research method used iteratively across sessions, with each iteration of the framework subjected to scrutiny and interrogation for its explanatory power and insights into the case study materials. The process was thus dialogic, integrative, and potentially transformative (Fook, 2011).

Contextualising and Reconceptualising Practice Online

Figure 1 distils the concepts our analysis highlighted as essential for social workers to use social media competently in practice. It reveals the extensive range of concepts and contexts for social workers to (re-)examine and understand the complex interplay between diverse discourses, including embodiment and disembodiment, power and

empowerment, permanence and impermanence, and reconceptualise traditional concepts for social media. We discuss these discourses through our composite case study. Understanding the social contexts within which such communications occur can expose their (mis)use. A crucial element is the neoliberal, globalised world that privileges technology and financial power, and collapses time and space (Virilio, 2000). This allows potential child abusers to access children secretly. Social workers must question taken-for-granted assumptions about power and vulnerability, become aware of this potential danger, and undertake action to protect children. Existing professional values and critical reflection will enable social workers to navigate tensions and dilemmas inherent in social media.

The following case study raises crucial questions for social workers, especially around child protection, and general users of social media, including parents of young children.

**Case Study: Mary, William, and Adam**

Mary, a recently separated 23-year-old, single mother, 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 aged 18 years. She has limited money, no contact with her ex-partner (father of William), and is socially isolated. However, she has a strong network of friends on Facebook, which includes her former social worker, with whom she connects online frequently.

Mary wants to show that she is a good mother and does this, in part, by posting lots of status updates, profile picture updates, and pictures that include her 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 1 year old, 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, one of Emily's Facebook friends. 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 14 months old, Mary and Adam run into each other at a park. Mary is unaware that Adam has located her via a geotagging platform where Mary has "checked-in" at her location. 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 very kind 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. He simultaneously undermines Mary's parenting abilities and confidence, making her increasingly dependent on him. Adam escalates William's abuse and uses social media to distribute and sell abusive material to people who pay increasing amounts for higher levels of abuse inflicted on William. Mary's friends online, including Mary's former social worker, are concerned that Mary's engagement online has inexplicably diminished. They continue trying to connect by posting comments on her Facebook page without success and leave it at that.

Perception of choice lulls internet users to suspend caution and critical judgment, despite its dangers. Consequently, the social worker does not consider the possibility that Mary may be disempowered and unable to use the internet freely, an issue that could be settled by a personal visit. She thus misses an opportunity to help Mary and observe William. Had this been done, the abusive relationships Adam had with both Mary and William may have been exposed. Social workers can use traditional social work skills to reflect upon taken-for-granted assumptions and critically reflect upon online behaviour including the macro-level contexts in which online contact occurs; online ethical issues; and practice concepts that shed light on abusive interactions—privacy, empowerment, authorship, permanence, embodiment, professionalism, and consequences. Besides understanding and applying these elements, practitioners need a commitment to safeguarding children, ethical professional behaviour, and critical reflective thinking. We discuss these points below.
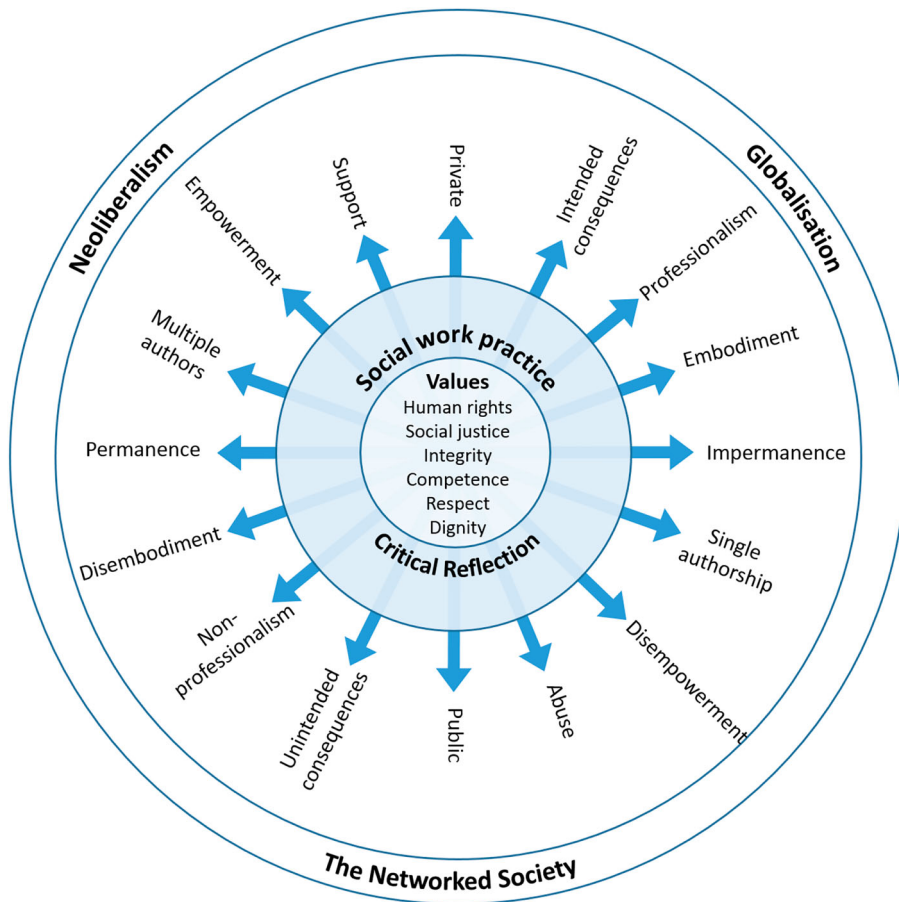
Figure 1 Social media: Concepts, values, and skills for social work practice

Findings

Macro-level Contexts

Neoliberalism, Globalisation, and Networked Society

Social media and online communication technologies have emerged in a context of globalisation, neoliberalism, and rapid technological changes that developed the networked society. Understanding these dynamics enables practitioners to make sense of their abusive potential. Neoliberal beliefs in market forces and profit-making as driving principles in political and socio-economic decisions (Dominelli, 2004; Giroux, 2005), as well as privatised spaces and interpersonal relationships based on market individualism (Bauman in Wallace & Pease, 2011) mean that abusers like Adam can easily exploit, abuse, and control others for profit. The shrinkage of time and space accelerates the speed at which things happen (Virilio, 2000) and allows Adam to form a predatory relationship with Mary quickly. Neoliberalism also commodifies relationships, communication, and services (Dominelli, 2007) so that William and Mary lose their humanity. In Adam's eyes, they become items of consumption (Giroux, 2005). Understanding that

neoliberalism "has changed the relationship between the individual citizens and the state, individuals and their social and physical environments" (Dominelli, 2007, p. 32) enables practitioners to appreciate that "capitalist social relations [embedded] in daily routines in personal lives, public life in general and professional practices" (Dominelli, 2010, p. 601) need unpacking to uncover their implications for practice. Globalisation and technological progress (Nelson, 1990) have overwhelmingly influenced the creation and use of social media and development of the networked society by making social media ubiquitous and cheaply available everywhere.

Many websites rely on "clickbait", a term used to describe online content that generates advertising income by enticing web users to view the content. Adam's sales of abusive photos of William expose how the free market drives demand for abusive material. Additionally, the secrecy of the web enables Adam to maintain his privacy and avoid being found out, while taking the precaution 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. This is misplaced, because safety comes second to profit. Individuals are expected to take care of their own security, with providers being reluctant to intervene (O'Brien, 2014). This may be changing; for example, the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is working with Facebook to develop safeguards for children. However, social media currently allow people like Adam to empower themselves with limited recourse for victim–survivors or their families. Social workers, 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 detect inexplicable changes in an individual's pattern of behaviour and take action to find out what is going on, as Mary's former social worker could have done.

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) as they become informed by and inform offline relationships, behaviours, and events as 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), to blur the boundaries between virtual reality and physical reality, and create "lived-in spaces" that acquire meaning and significance for the individual(s). Although online interactions may be embodied with congruence between mind and body, the user cannot see others' reactions and is unable to obtain immediate feedback. This produces an element of disembodiment that can confuse the user about how another person will receive posted information or predict the outcome of a particular comment. Thus, social media can create a sense of connection and disconnection simultaneously.

Mary's relationship with her friends, including her former social worker, is embedded; they care deeply about her and actively seek to connect with her online. Because the relationship is mediated by social media and digital or disembodied space, they cannot transcend its limitations and fully understand Mary's circumstances and the abuse she is experiencing. Mary's suffering becomes invisible, whereas they feel disempowered

and unable to ask Mary what is troubling her. While they are silenced by the medium, others' voices (e.g., Adam's) are amplified because they know how to control the media. The disembodied nature of online interactions is illustrated by Mary and Adam meeting first through online chats. The disembodied nature of online communications leads many social media users to embody their relationship by meeting outside the digital realm, as Mary and Adam did. Having established trust online, Mary became unaware of the signals that might have made her more wary of befriending Adam. Configuring this dynamic as choice means that users including social workers miss clues that would permit a reassessment of this assumption.

Intended and Unintended Consequences

Any action, whether related to privacy, empowerment, disempowerment, and permanency, can have intended and unintended consequences, short- and long-term. These may become amplified online and allow users to reach a large audience irrespective of their intention to do so. This can be valuable when promoting positive change, but can be damaging because "digital dirt" 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 placed her and her son William at risk of abuse because a knowledgeable user could locate her. Her friend Emily is unlikely to have thought through the potential consequences of friending Adam online. The social worker is unlikely to have warned Mary of the dangers of placing identifying photos online, or to have contacted William's birth father to ascertain whether he had given consent to this act as was his right. A social worker who understood social media would likely have picked up on both points.

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 promoting 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).

Some employees, including those in 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) and these can pose risks to them individually, their profession, and service users (Bickhoff, 2014). For example, a social worker in the UK was sanctioned by the Health and Care Professionals Council in the UK after a mother involved in a court case searched for her social worker on the internet and found that the social worker's publicly available Facebook page contained a passage describing her glee at the mother's children being removed (Stevenson, 2014).

Lack of clarity about what is permissible and what is not in online spaces gives rise to an "ethical grey zone" for social workers (Mishna et al., 2012). The online connection between Mary and her former social worker can be significant in maintaining continuity in contexts like out-of-home foster care and is valued by service users (Dominelli, Strega, Callahan, & Rutman, 2005). However, in this case study, the social worker's inaction inadvertently made her complicit in William's abuse. She failed to examine the reasons behind

Mary's reduced contact, thereby missing both her abuse and her son's. The social worker's inaction in the nebulous spaces of online reality raises professional questions about culpability alongside issues about fitness to practice. Feeling competent about setting defensible boundaries is essential. Social workers need to consider the implications of online behaviour carefully, and obtain their professional associations' support and training 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 sole authorship of their life stories (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010) as these become a compilation of many people's views packaged as one profile, with status updates and tweets being repeatedly shared, modified, and reposted (Murthy, 2012). As "every new medium affects who and how many people can be the author of a statement" (Gershon, 2014, p. 283), multiple authorship can result in a lack of consent by specific authors when expanding authorship among different authors has no explicit limits. The original author can lose control of the material and may be unaware of what someone might do with information posted online. In Mary's case, a status update she posted was reposted and embellished by her friend Emily. This was read subsequently not only by Mary's intended audience, but also by people in Emily's online network, which included a child abuser, not known as such. Thus, Mary lost control about who viewed her post and how it was conveyed. Mary and Adam repeatedly share material about William online. His life story is being authored and co-authored by others, in a process over which he has no input or control, raising questions not only about authorship, but about consent and power. Moreover, William's human rights and the social justice due to him as a child have been deliberately violated by Adam. From a child protection perspective, this highlights a need for independent measures to safeguard a child from adultist behaviour. In "adultism" (Dominelli, 1989), adults exercise power over children without their involvement or consent.

Public and Private Spaces

Blurred boundaries between public and private spaces online (Strauß & Nentwich, 2013) and social media sites' requirement that users 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) create a wide-ranging audience for material posted on the internet. 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). Further, standards expected by one person sharing something privately can be violated by another person sharing that publicly (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010). Doing so can modify the intended audience, as occurred to Mary, who assumed that her friend would only share materials with bona fide and trustworthy friends. This is "part of a broad trend towards the gradual abandonment of personal discretion and increasing tendency to share intimate details" (Alexander, 2014, p. 728). The erosion of privacy remains largely invisible, while its maintenance can occur at others' expense. 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 resorted to the courts to acquire permission to gain this. Thus, there are considerable challenges that social workers must be aware of, related to privacy, security, discretion, respect, data management, and accessibility. Spaces that are often viewed as private because an individual sets high privacy settings can become very public because technically knowledgeable individuals can subvert them, as happened to Mary. Additionally, Mary's profile picture remained 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. These issues raise important professional questions: given that her formal professional relationship had ended, what responsibility did her "Facebook friend" and former social worker have for Mary as a potentially vulnerable mother of a young child? Did she have any responsibility towards William, given possible child protection considerations? Where should professional boundaries lie? Who will determine ensuing dilemmas, and how? We suggest that the profession has to answer these questions, and argue that becoming knowledgeable internet users would enable social workers to engage in preventative actions that could pick up suspicious or inexplicable patterns of behaviours. The former social worker's action here could have strengthened Mary's resilience by warning her of potential dangers, supporting her care of William, and actively engaging her other friends.

Power and Disempowerment

Social media can empower users by breaking down hierarchical structures (Castells, 2009), giving users a platform to broadcast their views to large audiences, promote openness and transparency in government, reduce corruption, and allow users to monitor government activity (Bertot et al., 2010). However, those having little access to social media or limited control over the content, speed, and direction of material posted online can be disempowered (Marlin-Bennett, 2013). With limited vetting of connections, social media users can be targeted by criminals, marketers, and fraudsters (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Social media providers' refusal to take responsibility for protecting users from abuse raises serious issues. Greenhow (2015) described how adoptive parents can resent adopted children unilaterally contacting birth parents through social media, and the potential danger of unwanted contact. Yet some parents felt this provided a wonderful opportunity for children to develop good relationships with birth parents.

Permanence and Impermanence

Social media carries a sense of both 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 have little say in what information is retained permanently online because posted material can stay online indefinitely. Posts are made in real time (Bertot et al., 2012), and the speed of the transfer of information provided by contemporary telecommunications technologies contributes to a kind of pollution Virilio termed "grey ecology". Virilio (2010, p. 13) argued that "the pollution of time and distance is much more severe … than the pollution of material substances".

The material posted online about William may remain on the internet throughout his life-time 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 that are difficult to remove permanently. Social workers need to be aware that discourses related to power, authorship, and consequences have a time dimension. Actions today can unwittingly affect the future, without the possibility of redress.

Practice Considerations

Criticality, Values, Ethics, and Practice Recommendations

Intersecting discourses around power, privacy, embodiment, professionalism, authorship, and consequences require social workers to retain criticality in their practice. Critical reflective practice (Fook, 1999; Healy, 2000) and critical theories are useful in understanding and unpacking diversity, raising questions that might not be otherwise considered (Dominelli, 2014), and ensuring that social workers do not inadvertently engage in unethical practice.

Social workers have core values and principles related to human rights, social justice, integrity, competence, and respect to deploy in online space, but this alone is insufficient. Additionally, social workers:

(1) Must be fully informed of the complexities of online interactions and engage with the latest research in this field.
(2) Should help citizens become digitally and ethically literate, informing them of issues related to privacy, authorship, and so on, while educating them about the possible benefits and dangers of online interaction and promoting the rights of disempowered people in not only face-to-face interactions, but also online ones.
(3) Would benefit from being aware of unintended consequences of online behaviour and exhibit greater consideration about how material may be received by the (un)intended audience, be cognisant of the limits of privacy in online communications, write in a manner congruent with their professional values (see McDonald, Boddy, O'Callaghan, & Chester, 2015), and use social media strategically, including for career building and activism.
(4) Ought to be mindful of the blurring between public and private boundaries, exercise caution when considering accepting contact requests from former clients, and refer to their professional association guidelines in making decisions about contact requests.
(5) Have a general duty of care towards vulnerable others whether online or not.

Conclusions: Implications for Research and Education

Social workers are responsible for helping citizens understand ethics and realise their citizenship rights if social justice is to be implemented (Dominelli, 2014). How do these relate to online chats that have repercussions far beyond their existence in ethereal space and can affect one's sense of wellbeing, the right to freedom from abuse and violence, and one's current or future employment prospects? These issues are greater than one professional, and we argue that social work's national and global professional associations should

develop comprehensive social work guidelines for online communications that cover how to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions and behave as critically reflective practitioners online. Professional associations should also engage employers in developing social media policies. Being proactive is necessary because young people are becoming increasingly unlikely to communicate only via traditional media. More research into social media is urgently required to help social workers keep pace with rapidly changing technologies and become well-informed about communication technologies, their use and misuse. Research can provide a robust foundation for teaching social work students how to use online resources in an ethical manner that promotes social justice. Teaching students about ethical social media usage should become mandatory in social work curricula, with possible coverage in modules on values and ethics. Our proposals are feasible and essential for social work in the twenty-first century.

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