

Social Work and Social Media: Reconciling Ethical Standards and Emerging Technologies

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Abstract

The rapid and pervasive arrival of online networking through blogs, chatrooms and sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn create unique challenges in the application of familiar ethical concepts. Client privacy, professional boundaries, social worker self-disclosure, conflicts of interest, and informed consent all take on new forms and complexities in light of technological advances. This article introduces the prominent features of social networking and the ethical tensions they can create for helping professionals. It concludes with guidance on translating clinical and ethical standards for a changing electronic environment.

Keywords: ethics, social networking, Facebook, confidentiality, self-disclosure, boundaries, conflicts of interest, online, privacy, social work

1. Introduction

Networking is a familiar concept to social workers and other professionals. Historically,

individuals have used their colleagues, alumni associations, and social circles to share personal news and ideas, show photos of vacations and life events, organize around shared interests or causes, and seek assistance with job searches or problem-solving. The rapid and wide-ranging emergence of online networking (ON) has taken personal networking to a broader and potentially more complex level. This presents an array of challenges as individuals navigate the etiquette of using these venues in their private lives to share information, connect to people with like interests, and seek support and advice. The professional challenges of ON are also profound. Suddenly personal and professional data, opinions, problems, and experiences can be spread more rapidly and more widely. Once shared, such information may take on a life of its own, and be difficult if not impossible to erase, even if harmful or untrue (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Yet the vastness of online networks can yield positive results that are constructive for

social work practice. For example, an expert in domestic violence may be able to link research findings to a breaking news story through a blog, thereby increasing professional and public understanding of the issues involved. A clinician in a remote region may pose an ethical or clinical dilemma and receive immediate and varied perspectives for resolution. A caseworker in need of resources may post the request on Twitter.

Conversely, online networks can pose vexing problems—a query about addressing a difficult clinical issue may reveal too much client information or result in sarcastic, unhelpful, or even harmful suggestions. A blog posting may incur the ire of an employer who finds the worker’s perspective on a social issue at odds with the agency’s views. Further, ON increases the social worker’s visibility and exposure, and also that of his or her clients. Should professionals “friend” clients, former clients, or supervisees? Should organizations “Google search” prospective employees, clients, or interns? How should practitioners handle information learned through online contacts with students, clients, or supervisees?

Clearly, the emergence of ON demands renewed attention to long-held ethical standards on confidentiality, conflicts of interest, competence, and professional boundaries. This article reviews the features of common forms of ON and identifies areas where ON can create tension with prevailing ethical standards. The article distills the extant literature and concludes with recommendations for professionals in direct and administrative roles to effectively and ethically engage in ON.

2. Understanding Online Networking

Building on traditional forms of networking, ON includes a variety of methods by which people can electronically share information, opinions, music, photos, interests, articles, and other content. Some forms of ON are monitored or screened; a Twitterer or blogger can decide who will receive his/her posts, access to Facebook statements or photos can be limited to approved

friends, consumer feedback can only be posted by people who register with the particular site. Other sites and individuals may allow open or anonymous access to the material posted. The number, type, features, uses and misuses of ON are exponential. However, certain forms are well-established, with durable features and predictable applications and problems. Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, podcasts, and rating sites, and their salient features, are discussed below.

2.1 Facebook

Arguably the best-known and most used of a variety of social networking sites, Facebook has over 1 billion users worldwide, at least half of whom log on in any given day. Once registered, Facebook users seek out others to “friend” and respond to “friend requests” by “confirming” the request, or “ignoring” (rejecting) it. Confirmations are relayed to the new friend while rejections are not. Once registered, users can post information to their profiles, including birthdates, relationship status, religious or political affiliations, interests, favorite books, movies, music genres, etc. Users can play games (such as Candy Crush or Bingo Bash) that facilitate interaction with other gamers. They can also sign petitions, post pictures, offer status and location updates, follow causes, organizations or products they endorse, and register opinions on an array of issues large and small by signaling whether they “like” it.

In 2012, Facebook reported that the site was processing more than 500 terabytes of data each day. As a point of comparison, the printed collection of the Library of Congress amounts to about 10 terabytes (Costine, 2012). Other ON sites may be more narrowly targeted (Myspace has been rebranded as a site for musicians to share music, LinkedIn targets professional networking, CaringBridge coordinates information sharing for people who are ill) though they offer similar features and controls.

Public agencies, nonprofits, hospitals, universities, and foundations often have Facebook pages to attract “friends” and “fans” to their

services or causes. These are part of integrated marketing strategies, linked to the organization's website and other ON activities, intended to familiarize the public with issues, cultivate donors, rally advocates, generate good will, broadcast positive stories, and attract referrals, applicants, employees, and volunteers (Satterfield, 2006).

2.2 Blogs

Short for "weblogs," blogs are analogous to op-ed pieces found in the traditional newspaper; video blogs are referred to as "vlogs." Bloggers write recurring or occasional posts on topics of interest. Blogs encompass the fields of health, travel, politics, entertainment, sports, business, and an array of other topics. Posts can be spurred by breaking news, frequently asked questions, gossip, emerging research findings, or a simple opportunity to keep an issue or entity in the public eye. Organizations may sponsor blogs to assure regular posts on issues or services. Individuals may blog about their personal interests (French cooking, a trip, the joys of parenting, progression of an illness) and professional experiences (career transitions, life in graduate school, working with people who are homeless). Access to blogs may be limited by the author, or made available for posting to other ON sites. Additionally, comments in response to blog posts may be monitored, unmonitored, anonymous, or identified. Commenters may also engage with each other, resulting in a conversation of sorts called a "thread."

2.3 Twitter

Twitter is a site for "microblogging." It has many of the same features and uses as a blog, but posts (known as "tweets") are limited to 140 characters. Twitter users may limit their followers, accepting only those they know. Others, like celebrities or public officials, may automatically allow anyone who wishes to "follow" their posts. As with friends on Facebook, some people seek prominence in accumulating as many followers as possible. Some tweets are insipid ("I ate risotto

for dinner"), some are adept at rallying activists ("Call your Senator about amendment X. They will be voting today and we need your support"), and others make information distribution viral and uncontrollable ("I just got a lay-off notice and more are to follow" or "Jeff and I were just in a car accident and he's injured"). A popular feature of Twitter is the ability to "retweet" information. This involves taking a user's original message ("Call your Senator about Prop X!") and reposting it through another user's Twitter feed. The "retweet" is a popular tool for making something viral, as it allows for increased circulation of the original poster's message. This has been particularly effective when a celebrity or other known figure chooses to retweet information from an average user, as it exponentially increases the possible number of readers beyond the original poster's own followers.

2.4 YouTube

YouTube is the best known of a variety of video sharing services. Like blogs and Twitter, YouTube facilitates the sharing of user-generated content or consumer generated media (CGM), in this case, video, rather than written material. Users can provide links to other videos (clips from television programs, sports highlights, concerts, lectures, home movies), share videos and links they have received, and rate and comment on those posted. A quick scan of YouTube reveals the breadth of video content, from archives of historic world events, to bulldogs on skateboards, to spring break revelry. Videos may be carefully scripted and constructed or shot with a cell phone unbeknownst to the subjects involved. They can be used to entertain, educate, humiliate, expose, or incite action (in response to election fraud or patient maltreatment, for example). YouTube videos can also be used for education—demonstrating the features of mania or the steps to repair a faucet. YouTube is searchable by key words and objectionable content can be addressed via a "flag" option on the site that alerts YouTube to content that violates the "Community

Guidelines.” Content that is deemed pornographic, too violent, or abusive to people or animals is considered inappropriate for the site (Google, n.d.).

2.5 Podcasts

Podcasts are audio or video files that are stored and distributed episodically or on request. For example, radio or television programs may be saved and reviewed as podcasts, as can lectures from faculty, agency information sessions, staff development workshops, or consumer education about medications and services, etc. Through devices such as the iPod and smart phones, podcasts are easily transportable, allowing users to listen to content while traveling, waiting in line, working on other tasks, exercising, or just tuning in incrementally whenever time allows. Some journals and professional associations offer continuing education credits for listening to relevant podcasts and correctly answering a handful of post-test questions. A disadvantage of archived material is that the content may be dated, leading users to cite examples, quote research findings, or utilize intervention techniques that have since become discredited or obsolete.

2.6 Rating sites

ON creates abundant opportunities for accountability as archived statements may be retrieved and compared when an individual takes on a new role or when novel issues emerge. Online sites also facilitate consumer-generated critiques, through community bulletin boards and specific sites such as Rate My Professor, Angie’s List, Yelp, and Rate My Treatment. Each of these venues uses particular systems to allow users to evaluate services, products, and providers through rating scales (accessibility, service, price, easiness in grading, “hotness”) and open commentary. Sites are frequented by past users who wish to share positive or negative feedback and by prospective users who want input in selecting services or in preparing for those to whom they have been assigned. While sites typically require free registration for access, ratings are

usually anonymous, and thus may draw extreme or derogatory posts. Likewise, ratings may be skewed by users who are themselves the subject of the evaluation (the agency whose workers go online to give the agency high marks) or by those whose experiences are particularly positive or negative, thus warranting the time and effort to offer feedback. Such sites typically offer space for subjects to dispute ratings or comments, though the energy and attention required to do so may not mitigate damage done by the post, whether true or not.

The salient feature in all forms of ON is the presence of *latent ties* (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Concomitantly the greatest risk and benefit of ON, networks grow exponentially once one person’s friends are linked to their friends and the friends of friends (FOFs). This spider web of contacts is part of the power of ON in getting the word out, expanding the reach of organizations and individuals beyond a narrow circle of known contacts, supporters, colleagues and customers. Digital channels such as Twitter and Facebook are credited for assisting the Arab Spring as activists were able to rapidly disseminate plans and photos, coordinate activities, and communicate with the globe (Wolman 2013).

For better and for worse, imbedded in these latent networks may be individuals for whom the original information was never intended. An appeal for a kidney transplant makes its way to a match, who might not have heretofore considered organ donation. A faculty member’s complaint about his class makes its way to the students’ parents via friends of his friends on Facebook. A clinician’s vacation video may trouble her clients and supervisors alike. A clip from a podcast lecture on genetic testing and fetal selection may raise the ire of disability rights groups and anti-abortion activists, generating intense commentary and criticism for the speaker, who is at a loss for individualized avenues of clarification.

Not only is the breadth of exposure a feature of ON, but so is its speed. Videos, stories, and posts that are salacious, heartrending, or humorous may “go viral” and be widely

distributed through an array of media such as email and text messages. Such efficiency can be essential when rallying supporters to resist budget cuts or program changes, when raising matching funds by a deadline, when calling for a public demonstration, or when sending emergency alerts on hurricanes, shooting incidents, or other community emergencies. Viral stories can also create social capital by fostering conversation around the proverbial water cooler, even if the shared experience is as banal as a dancing baby video or as sobering as footage from a plane crash. On Twitter in particular, commentary is often concurrent with the event being reviewed. This can be advantageous (as when Twitterers check facts as statements are made in a presidential debate) or amusing (as when fashion commentary is provided during a televised awards ceremony). Rolling commentary can be destructive, as well, in the form of “tweckling” (Parry, 2009) when audience members tweet among themselves about the shortcomings of their presenter.

A third feature to consider in evaluating ON is the nature of impression management. Individuals exist in private, personal and public spheres, with each domain demanding successively greater exposure to those outside the individual. The same is true of organizations. Typically, individuals and organizations censor the information that is shared among the three levels, differentiating between those things that stay “within the family” from those that are shared with a circle of trusted others and those that are made public. Particularly with their “public selves,” individuals and organizations are mindful of the images they construct and the messages they send and craft their messages accordingly—in their advertising, communications, dress, and so forth. The anonymity, democracy and spontaneity of electronic communication may lead to “online disinhibition” in which users are less discreet than they would be in face-to-face transactions (Suler, 2010, p. 31). Conversely, users may also become hyperaware of their communications and take image-crafting to the extreme, becoming

deceptive in the online personae they construct. In creating a profile, the user can literally “type oneself into being” (Sundén, 2003, p. 3). Younger users may deliberately create images that are more edgy, sexy, or threatening than they are in real life. Bloggers may become more provocative to draw in readers or encourage re-posting. Professionals may overstate their services and efficacy.

Beyond distortions in the public image, ON blurs the boundaries between the private, personal, and public spheres. Information intended to be kept “in house” such as a program’s financial problems or a glitch in patient care can suddenly be released to the media and the blogosphere with the click of a mouse. Videos from the New Year’s Eve party or photos from the staff retreat may surface in social networking or other content sharing sites. Opinionated blogs written during college are examined as part of the hiring process for a new administrative or clinical position. The issues that can emerge when information intended for one context or sphere arises in another leads to the fourth and final consideration in the use of ON, the truncated nature of the communications involved.

While some ON communications may occur in “real time” through tweets or chat rooms where individuals exchange information as if in live conversation, most ON is asynchronous and messages may be received at a different time and in different circumstances than when they were sent. Further, ON messages are often offered without benefit of tone or context and are thus exceedingly vulnerable to misinterpretation. Consider the university professor whose Facebook post, “Had a good day today, didn’t want to kill even one student. :-)...” resulted in sanctions, suspension, and shunning from students and colleagues (Miller, 2010). Even with a smiley emoticon, the message lacked any associated tone of fatigue, irony, humor, or discouragement that might have blunted the message. It was circulated outside a circle of friends who would typically charitably consider the source, and it was interpreted in a climate of heightened sensitivity

as a result of acts of campus violence both by and toward faculty. Messages such as this, when communicated, don't simply evaporate into the air, but live on indefinitely online, allowing the damage to accrue. And, beyond the mere absence of context, the abridged nature of ON communications (chats, posts, comments, tweets, etc.) creates hazards of superficiality, insensitivity, and incivility as perspective and detail are lost (Suler, 2010).

Clearly, even when ON is used as intended, the various forms offer both opportunities and perils for professionals and organizations. In the context of ethical standards, ON and the associated features have particular implications for client privacy, professional boundaries and informed consent.

3. Privacy

The assurance of privacy is fundamental to the helping relationships in social work and other professions. The conditions for maintaining client privacy are typically spelled out in initial sessions and informed consent is obtained to indicate that the client understands the scope of confidentiality. These limits vary somewhat by settings, state statutes and licensure standards, but generally they permit disclosure of information if needed to obtain payment, assure the safety of the client or another person, or address suspected child abuse. The NASW Code of Ethics also suggests that clinicians limit the amount of information they seek from clients to that which is necessary for service provision. And, when services are provided to clients in groups or family services, professionals should inform members of the expectations about keeping confidentiality, while recognizing that they cannot "guarantee that all participants will honor such agreements" (NASW, 2008, 1.07.f).

Social workers are also admonished to avoid disclosing identifying information when discussing clients for consultation, teaching, or training purposes "unless the client has consented to disclosure of confidential information" (NASW, 2008, 1.07q). "Identifying information" goes

beyond revealing the client's name or image; people may also be identified by location, occupation, age, ethnicity, or salient case features.

The emergence of ON creates a number of implications for upholding privacy standards. Participating in clients' social networks, as a Facebook "friend," Twitter "follower," or CaringBridge "supporter" exposes the social worker to information the client may not intend to share or that the professional is ill-equipped to address. For example, party photos may demonstrate a client's failure to maintain sobriety, or "status updates" may reveal truancy. If a client posts about despair, acute illness, or suicidal intent on a Friday evening, what is the professional's obligation and process for responding? Similar challenges arise when relating via ON with former clients. What if the worker only occasionally checks ON sites? Has the client or former client been led to believe that there will be ongoing connection and the sites can be used as a way to reach out to the therapist outside service hours? Online relationships among members or among a group or therapeutic community may affect group dynamics, client vulnerability and the emergence of destructive sub-groups.

How should information received through ON (whether shared by the client intentionally or inadvertently) be addressed in treatment (Grohol, 2008; Guseh, 2009)? Some proponents of ON relationships with clients suggest that the more information received, the better that services can be delivered, and that ON can be used to detect unmet needs, treatment noncompliance, or fraudulent receipt of benefits. Whatever advantages are accrued by such knowledge, they come at the expense of obscuring the social worker's role (detective or counselor?), eroding the trust that is essential for client change, and damaging the integrity that is at the core of social work values. This may pose a particular challenge if the information gleaned through ON is incongruent with the client's reporting to the social worker. A client who is working on recovery from substance abuse and who reports sustained

sobriety may well be taken at his or her word; but if the same client posts a status or sends a Tweet that indicates use or abuse (“OMG, so high right now #chronic#420#blazeit”), which report has more validity?

A similar challenge exists for employers who use ON sites as a form of screening for prospective employees (Jones, Schuckman & Watson, n.d.). Employers may argue that Google or Facebook searches are analogous to background checks and that they constitute efficient and prudent steps in employee selection. However, ON searches may violate nondiscrimination protections in hiring, yield information involving mistaken identities, or convey erroneous and irrelevant information (Clark, 2010).

Workers who use ON to connect with friends, seek consultation, blow off steam, advertise their programs, or expand public understanding of social problems may put clients’ privacy and dignity at risk by sharing information that is too detailed, is inappropriate for the venue, or which reflects negatively on the social worker, the profession or the work setting.

While professionals may be tempted to refute unflattering, inaccurate, or distorted information online, it can be difficult to do so without appearing overly defensive and effectively bringing additional attention to the dispute. The protections for client and employee privacy apply even when there may be ON provocation by a terminated worker or another disaffected critic in an ON rating service, blog commentary, or networking post.

4. Professional Boundaries

Boundaries refer to the norms that protect, ground, and guide the helping relationship. They mark a social, physical, and psychological space around the client that is protected from inappropriate intrusion by the social worker. Boundaries help assure the client that actions or expressions by the social worker are made in the client’s interest and for the benefit of the services being provided, not for the social worker’s social, financial, or sexual needs. Boundaries can be

exceedingly complex, with variations in norms across cultures, geographic regions, practice settings, and populations served. “Boundary crossings” indicate deviations from standard practices, but are typically benign when done in the client’s interests and without adverse effects and are therefore not inherently unethical (Reamer, 2001). In the wrong context or with the wrong client, however, even simple boundary crossings may represent problematic conflicts of interest or create the first step in a “slippery slope” toward boundary violations and client exploitation (Epstein & Simon, 1990).

The NASW Code of Ethics cautions practitioners to avoid or address potential conflicts of interest by taking “reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients’ interests primary and protects clients’ interests to the greatest extent possible” (NASW, 2008, 1.06a). Certain conflicts of interest, such as sexual relationships with clients, former clients, supervisees and others, are expressly prohibited, and social workers are further cautioned to avoid business, professional, or social relationships with clients and former clients due to the risk of harm or exploitation. Ultimately, the social worker bears the responsibility for “setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries” (NASW, 2008, 1.06c).

Online interactions with clients inherently carry a risk of boundary crossings and, ultimately, harmful violations. A social worker who, through Twitter or Facebook, learns unnecessary details of a client’s workplace or personal life may have difficulty keeping those details from impinging on the helping relationship. Extraneous information revealed through ON contacts may affect the social worker’s objectivity, causing him or her to judge the client more favorably (or harshly) than the case itself suggests. Innocuous references to hobbies in online profiles may derail the focus of services when shared interests are discovered and discussed. Should that discussion lead further to a suggestion for the worker and client to join one another in golf, political action, scrapbooking, or

whatever the shared interest is, the boundary is thus clearly breached.

The challenges in boundary maintenance exist with relationships beyond the client-worker dyad. Social workers who serve as instructors, administrators, and supervisors may enjoy genial relationships with students and staff, but the added dimension of ON relationships can affect the ability of each to carry out their professional responsibilities. Supervisees or students may be intimidated by the power differential when presented with a request to friend or follow a superior. ON relationships may reveal information that adversely affects the primary relationship—the supervisor is upset by a radical blog the employee writes, or the faculty member is disturbed by salacious comments a student posted on Twitter or Facebook. The NASW Code of Ethics stipulates that supervisees should be evaluated in “a fair and considerate manner and on the basis of clearly stated criteria” (NASW, 2008, 3.03). It can be difficult enough to attain objectivity in appraisals of students or staff without the issues being clouded by inapplicable information.

5. Professionalism

Professionalism is a broad concept. It includes specific standards and expectations, such as those embodied in a code of ethics, but goes beyond particular behaviors to suggest broader qualities of character such as trustworthiness and integrity. The actions of the individual social worker reflect not only on him or her, but on the profession of social work. Thus, ethical standards that regulate the way one treats his or her colleagues, responds to public crises, addresses personal impairments, or advocates for social policies may all be seen as elements of professionalism. Other standards specifically address the way social workers’ behaviors reflect on the field and on their work (NASW, 2008).

- Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities (4.03).

- Social workers should work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice (5.01a).
- Social workers should uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession. Social workers should protect, enhance, and improve the integrity of the profession through appropriate study and research, active discussion, and responsible criticism of the profession (5.01b).
- Social workers should make clear distinctions between statements made and actions engaged in as a private individual and as a representative of the social work profession, a professional social work organization, or the social worker’s employing agency (4.06a)

Aligning ON activities with the precepts of professionalism can present particular challenges. ON relationships reveal information about social workers to clients, supervisors, the public, and other audiences with whom they interact electronically, and therefore these communications fall into the realm of self-disclosure (Taylor, McMinn, Bufford, & Chang, 2010). Self-disclosures in practice can enhance the professional’s credibility, normalize client experiences, and convey authenticity on the part of the social worker (Farber, 2006). However, they are not without risk. Self-disclosures can divert the therapeutic focus, blur boundaries, create distress or disillusionment in the client, and lead to role reversal, placing the client in the role of caregiver (Zur, 2008). ON self-disclosures contain further risks in that they prohibit the professional from knowing the recipient of the information and appraising how the information is received, diminishing intentionality, which is at the core of proper self-disclosure (Taylor et al., 2010).

Clearly, indiscreet photos and statements, such as those of medical students posing with “their cadavers,” reflect negatively on all involved

and perhaps reveal poor judgment on the part of those who posed for, posted, and distributed the photos (Heyboer, 2010). This can serve as an example of how a harmless, if crude, tradition once shared only among the students involved can go viral in the age of electronic distribution.

Yet, even fair, benign, and constitutionally protected statements may suddenly turn into a nightmare when critical comments about legislation create a backlash or when private activities, personal opinions, and affiliations raise questions about one's integrity, judgment or character. In these instances, the "eyes of the beholder" determine the ethics of the behavior. Such innocuous-yet-problematic ON activities might occur when:

- A social worker is "tagged" (identified) in bathing suit pictures from a cruise that are posted on social networking sites.
- A clinician blogs, tweets, or posts comments that are critical of agency policies.
- A social worker is listed as a donor to a group opposed to causes aligned with social work values.
- A professional posts, forwards, or "likes" a cartoon that mocks the intellect of the President.

Some would suggest it is unfair to require professionals to censor their private activities in order to avoid any possible offense or misunderstanding. The counterpoint is that in an ON age, no behavior is truly private as norms change, technology advances, and security erodes (Rosenblum, 2007). Others would further suggest that social workers, teachers, and other professionals depend on their reputations and the esteem in which their fields are held and therefore must conduct themselves in line with a higher standard than the general public.

How, then, can social workers and other professionals navigate these and other ambiguities of practice in an ON era? Numerous individual and

organizational strategies exist, including the use of clear policies, consultation, and informed consent.

6. Recommendations for Ethical ON Practices

As part of professional development, social workers and others must become familiar with the forms and functions of ON and consider the implications for their own privacy and that of their clients (Reamer, 2009; Taylor et al., 2010). Professionals are admonished to place the client's interests and thus the helping relationship foremost in their considerations, which now encompass online activities. This suggests that caution and restraint should guide the participation in ON venues and conversations. The news is replete with cautionary tales of doctors, teachers, police officers, and others whose work and careers have been harmed by an ON incident (Beck, 2013; Decker, 2012; Gordon, 2012; Shapira, 2008). Environmental scanning of the media and professional literature can uncover heretofore unexpected ON opportunities and hazards and thus help in crafting policies around them (Tariman, 2011).

The boundaries professionals ultimately set, on the continuum from no voluntary ON presence to active participation, will likely depend on the age of the worker, the norms of his or her region, culture, and practice setting, and his or her own level of interest in ON. Nonetheless, competent practice will require articulation of the effects of various ON choices on his or her practice and clients, then aligning policies and practices with those decisions.

Individuals and organizations can use handouts and web postings to articulate their policies about such requests as "friending" online, much as they do policies on exchanging gifts. Informed consent conversations can explain and reinforce these stances. A general discussion at the outset of service, explaining that the social worker or agency does not permit online relationships, is less loaded and painful than stating this when a client or former client requests such a link and is hurt or confused by the refusal.

For clinicians who are active in ON,

conversations and written materials might elaborate the boundaries between comments on blogs and other media and other professional activities, including helping relationships (Kolmes, 2010). For example, “I am active in health issues involving infertility, and you may see me online or in the news commenting about those challenges. When I do that, I am speaking about infertility in a general fashion and out of a personal interest. That is not intended to be a substitute for the one-on-one work we will do and I never use information from my cases in my online work.” ON-active professionals might issue similar disclaimers as part of their ON postings too, so that consumers of information in any venue understand the intent and limits of the information shared (Crystal, 2009).

The actual crafting of an individual or agency policy on ON activities requires conversation and consultation. As discussed earlier, ON has many constructive uses. It is also a widespread way for people to learn, communicate, and share. Avoiding ON entirely is both unwise and impossible for contemporary service providers, yet each will have to decide how, where, and how much to engage in ON. Education and consultation with other agencies, professional membership organizations, governing bodies, and legal experts will help identify the hazards and opportunities different ON strategies will have for a given organization or individual (Behnke, 2008).

Crafting and implementing resulting policies requires ongoing conversation among staff and management as the nuances and implications of policies are revealed. For example, how will the organization respond if YouTube videos are posted of an employee’s New Year’s Eve revelry or an expletive-spouting sports spectator? How will a social worker deal with a highly critical comment about his or her services, posted on a public website? How will the agency handle “trolls” or other forms of ON confrontation attacking the organization’s mission or clientele? What are the proper forms of advocacy using the agency’s site on Twitter, Facebook, or the web? Is anything out of bounds or in poor taste?

Ongoing discussion and staff development activities are needed to effectively operationalize policies and practices and address emerging ON issues. Sensitive supervision is required to assist workers in navigating the boundaries and managing the transference and countertransference that will arise with novel ON interactions. Individual self-restraint is required to consider, before hitting the “send” button, how a comment, photo, re-tweet, or article might be viewed by a patient, board member, colleague or supervisor. Applying the principle of publicity (“Am I willing to stand behind this statement or action?” “Am I comfortable with others knowing this is what I did?”) or envisioning that anything posted online may be read by a client, employer, or loved one will provide measures for evaluating the wisdom and intentions of actions online (Landman, 2010).

7. Conclusion

Although novel ON opportunities and challenges will emerge as technology evolves, the past decade has provided a glimpse into the promises and pitfalls for users in the general public and in professional roles. Swift, broad, and enduring communications have enabled immediate and diverse dissemination of vital information about missing persons, breaking news, hazardous weather, and even political revolution. They have also led to unanticipated phenomena such as cyberbullying, Wikileaks, Second Life gaming, and “catfishing,” or the practice of creating false online identities for the purpose of engaging others in fraudulent online relationships (Hill, 2013). Amid the strengths and weaknesses of technology, a digital divide essentially marginalizes those without access or capacity to take part in an online world.

Effective contemporary social work practice requires a working understanding of online activities and implications, both in the lives of clients and in the delivery of services. Each variant of ON offers opportunities for improving social work practice through enhanced access, education, advocacy, and communication. Similarly, if used improperly, each can create tensions or outright

violations of ethical standards. Knowledge, transparency, consultation, and discussion provide avenues for helping professionals and their employers to discern the differences and make proper use of ON developments. Professional organizations can assist in crafting guidelines for members on online activities that are incompatible with effective and ethical service delivery. Colleges, universities, and continuing education programs can encourage education and dialogue about acceptable uses of ON in practice. Research can elucidate the implications of ON strategies on practice and on particular professions, and articulate best practices for ON use.

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