Abstract

The uneasy relationship between the social work profession and the media has led to recognition by social work educators of the need to incorporate knowledge of media processes and skills of media engagement into the social work education agenda. In addition, there is a clear link between traditional media and social media in the social work context, and the tensions experienced in the media landscape resulting from the recent move to ‘new media’ are relevant to social work and its role in advocating publicly for the rights and needs of vulnerable people. This article makes reference to these ideas in the context of a small Aotearoa New Zealand study that seeks information about social workers’ professional use of social media in this country. Ideas offered by professional leaders in social work are thematically analysed, and themes discussed in this article relate to the complex personal and professional identities social workers negotiate as social media users. Implications for social work education are offered, including those that relate to professional identity development and the ever-shifting ethical landscape of social media engagement.

Key Words

Social work and social media; social work education; social work advocacy, media advocacy; social work identities.

Introduction

Social work has traditionally had an uneasy relationship with ‘the media,’ and much has been written about this fraught association (Mendes, 2001; Galilee, 2005; Warner, 2014). Social media, defined here as ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological
and technological foundations of Web 2.0” (Kaplan, 2010, p. 61), offers opportunities for the social work profession to move away from the constraints of traditional media where our voice has often felt muted or even absent. The impact of social media demands the attention of social workers all over the world - both because of its significant influence on local societies, and for its potential as a tool for advocacy on social justice issues. Competence to engage in social media has arguably become the imperative of all professions (Bernhardt et al, 2014) however it is put forward that the social work profession should be more highly engaged in media activities given its principles of social justice and commitment to social change - activities which require an expertise in networking, communication skills and “media consciousness” (Briar-Lawson et al, 2011). This imperative has led to tertiary interprofessional learning opportunities with journalism and social work students (Gelman and Tosone, 2010; LaLiberte at al, 2011), and exploring collaborative practice between social workers and journalists (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013).

This thinking also extends to the close link between the media and social media in the social work context. Social media has created the capacity for non-journalists to disseminate news, changed the way journalists gather and report on news events and how news is consumed and shared between people. Studies show that those who use social media as a news source are increasingly more interested in the views and analysis of their personal networks, rather than the traditional offerings of journalists. This suggests that “hierarchical relationships between mass media consumers and producers of media content are being further unravelled” (Hermida et al, 2012, p. 816). This reality offers social workers an opportunity to forge a new boundary between themselves and traditional media; as “citizen journalists”.

This global backdrop sits behind this present mixed methods New Zealand study which explores how social workers are responding to this new media landscape. We asked selected social workers in leadership roles about their professional social media use and their thoughts about its relevance to the profession. This article reports some findings emerging from the analysis of these key informant interviews. A brief literature review sets the scene is offered, and a selected set of themes relating to social work identity and its relevance to social work education are explored. Some initial implications for social work education are identified.

**Literature review**
The social work literature contains broad support for social workers to embrace technology and social media (Perron, 2010; Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Giffords, 2009; Schembri, 2008). Since the inception of the internet in the late 1970s and social media in the early 2000s, the focus in the literature has shifted from the initial call for social workers to become merely “technologically competent” (Parker-Oliver, 2006; Jenkins, 2006), to support a more active engagement with the internet plays in society, and its increasing role in human relationships (Chakradhar, 2009).

The development of Web 2.0 and the evolving opportunity for society to interact with the internet via social media, has developed interest in how social workers could and should (or shouldn’t) engage with it. In New Zealand O’Donoghue (2001) noted that potential for social work offered by Web 2.0. More recently Ballantyne (2014) recognizes the lack of presence of New Zealand social workers on social media and makes a strong case for this to change.

Literature addresses ‘how-to’ articles, summaries of ethical concerns and guidelines (Reamer, 2012, Dombo et al, 2014, Lopez, 2014), but also calls for the profession to move more quickly to take advantage of social media on behalf of vulnerable people, and to incorporate its use into goals for social change and social justice. (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Giffords, 2009; Schembri, 2008). Anxieties about potential boundary breaches has seen professional bodies generally adopt a risk averse approach to social media via the development of guidelines for ethical practice (see for example the contributions made by the Australian Association of Social Workers in the online resources provided (ASW, 2013).

The view that social workers should not make use of social media is not represented in the literature; on the contrary, the case is made that social workers should embrace, critique and become competent with the place of social media in society. Current writing has drawn a line under this determination and is beginning to demand further research into the reality of its use. For example, there are few studies on the effects of technology on social work, and the effectiveness of it on practice; it is recognized that adopting technology without analysis of its effectiveness is unethical: "Simply adopting technology without an extensive needs assessment and an evaluation of the innovation will not result in credibility or in effective social work practice" (Parker-Oliver, 2006, p.132).

Similarly, there is a lack of research done around the ethical use of the internet by social workers outside of direct professional practice with clients. More study is required on the
effects of personal use of social media on professional relationships to support organizational policy (Kimball & Kim 2013), and on how social work can use social media for advocacy purposes. "Such research should translate into actions that organizations can take to improve their advocacy effectiveness. Studies should also inform organizations about the changing internet advocacy environment. This will keep practitioners aware of opportunities and threats related to social justice policies" (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010, p. 237).

Neither is there much critique by social workers of the impact social media has had on human relationships (Hill & Ferguson, 2014). This is an interesting omission particularly as one does not have to go far in popular media and communications literature for critical analysis of the internet on society, on how we communicate and its transformative or revolutionary qualities (Kaplan, 2010; Naughton, 2013; Zuckerman, 2010; Krotoski, Willig et al, 2015).

The overwhelming push for social workers to use social media is based on practical, ideological or principled rationale. There is a growing and helpful collection of research appearing in the social work education literature for example (Scourfield and Taylor, 2013; Cooner, 2014). Research is however needed to exploresocial media usage by practitioners. Without specific research on the practice implications, there is a risk that we will focus on teaching the technical skills of social media in social work education, rather than taking a critical approach that enables students to more creatively consider the place of social media in their professional context. It is recognized that social media has provided a framework within which the social work profession much adapt and operate (Hill & Ferguson, 2014), rather than the other way round, and the links between social work concepts of collectivity and social media concepts of participatory culture and collaborative problem solving, are worthy of exploration (Jenkins, 2006).

Much research to date has focussed on the effectiveness of social media in education, offering some insights into how we might interrogate the professional use of social media. Young & Delves (2009) examined a blog learning project in teaching and concluded that interpersonal skills can be learned using the blogging medium, that it was useful for networking, and collaboration in community work. Constructivist principles of learning were found to be congruent with social media, for example the ‘community of learning/enquiry’ pedagogy. Such approaches are referred to frequently when discussing the relevance of social media, particularly blogging, to social work education and professional development (La Mendola et al, 2009; IRISS, 2010; Cooner, 2013, Fang, 2014).
The concept of professional support was explored by Chakradhar et al (2009) in a study of social work students using an online support network (ONS), concluding that the support was a significant contributor to success and well-being, and makes a case for similar support networks for practitioners. Cooner (2014) evaluated a project where social work students used Facebook as a learning medium, finding that it offered opportunity for students to explore and develop ethical boundaries prior to entering practice. Kilpelainen (2011) studied the use of social media for distance learning, and there is general and growing recognition of the significant place social media has in contemporary tertiary education, of which social work training is clearly a part. Online learning programs, like Moodle, incorporate social media activities, and the success of blended learning and distance learning depends almost wholly on interactive learning opportunities provided by the internet. (ie, MOOCs)

The value of technology in social work education is generally acknowledged (Megele 2014) now however there is a “disjointedness” between the technology needed for learning and for practice, and a need to differentiate between the two which further includes “having the skills and being able to understand the opportunities and risks of engaging as social worker practitioners, students and educators, with society: including communities, service users, other professionals, managers and policy makers; through multiple channels of communication” (Rafferty, 2011).

Westwood (2014) offers encouragement to educators to create a place for social media in the classroom, both as a teaching tool, and as a necessary knowledge base for future practitioners. The editor’s rationale for its use in social work education begins with the reality of social media use, highlighting the mainstream use of Facebook and Twitter and the importance of social media in bringing to our attention immediate information about social issues that are of core interest of social workers. Westwood’s contributors explore how Twitter and other social networking services (SNS), like Facebook, or use of blogging, can be used to foster debate, to be aware of current events, to foster critical thinking, to apply social work theory and network with other students and academics, to develop academic writing and to support students in their research or other academic pursuits, reducing isolation and encouraging inspiration. Westwood offers a clear mandate of helping social work educators and practitioners identify obstacles to social media use and find ways to overcome them. There is growing interest on the part of social work educators to develop response to ethical and pedagogical issues presented by social media (Fang et al, 2014; Megele, 2015)
There is a case made for learning about boundary and ethical issues as social work students by using social media as part of a unique learning project (Cooner, 2014). And acknowledgement that the spirit of social media is easily matched with pedagogy that encourages: “Social media and new technologies have expanded our consciousness, redefined our relational identity and transferred our notion of knowledge and education as well as the meaning, significance and processes of learning” (Megele, 2015).

The research reported in this article addresses the broader question: how are practising social workers using social media? What are the perceptions of social workers as to the benefits and limitations of using social media in a professional capacity, and what is the nature of their experience? Information about the lived reality in this regard will potentially provide a much needed link between the academic directives and practice wisdom.

**Study Design**

This article reports on qualitative findings generated from a series of 12 semi-structured key informant interviews that were conducted in the context of an exploratory mixed methods study. The research aimed to offer ‘an overall beginning picture of New Zealand social workers and how they operate in their social media landscape.’ The interviews were conducted concurrently with a self-administered online survey of social workers which is currently undergoing statistical analysis, the results of which will be presented in subsequent publications. The study received ethical approval by the University of XX Human Participants Ethics Committee.

**Participants**

Social work leaders with their ‘fingers on the pulse’ of the profession and with an experience of the phenomenon of social media were asked to provide observations and analysis via semi-structured interviews. Twelve interviews were conducted by a single researcher via both face to face and telephone/ depending on the geographic location and preference of the interviewee. Questions were designed to explore interviewee experiences of using social media, their views and opinions about its importance in New Zealand social work, on how it is used and how the unique nature of NZ social work might be reflected in its approach to social media.

This phase of the study took a ‘narrative’ approach to participant sampling, whereby the researcher reflects on who to sample depending on convenience and their importance in the field but mostly on the need for participants “to have stories to tell of their lived experiences”
(Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Participants were thus chosen based on their ability to explore their professional use of social media, and in order for a range of views to be collected, for these people to represent different fields of practice. This is a small sample size, and the intent of the interviews is not to generalize the information offered by participants, rather to “elucidate the particular, the specific” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). These participants provide an example as opposed to a sample of the larger population they represent (p. 150).

Thematic analysis of interviews

The interviews were thematically analysed using a variety of “scrutiny techniques” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 88). The interview transcripts were scrutinized for repetitions, metaphors or analogies, similarities and differences, and missing data, or things that are not said. It was also important to consider where “qualitative data illuminates questions of importance to social science” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 93). By extension, it was important to consider data that highlighted matters of importance to social work – for example, those of social justice, empowerment and professional behaviour. Another approach to the generation of themes in thematic analysis is the consideration of responses to specific questions in the interview schedule (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Although the questions were open-ended, the interview conducted informally and there was a desire to be inductive, it was essential to acknowledge themes clearly generated by the questions.

The twelve key informant interviews produced an overwhelming amount of complex data. The initial themes generated were diverse and numerous, spanning social work identity, competence, capacity and ethical implications. There was a wide spectrum of opinion offered about the relevance of social media to the profession, varying levels of confidence and competence in its use, and intriguing observations about the place of New Zealand culture and the unique influence this has on the professional use of social media. Metaphors used to describe relationships with social media suggest emotional responses worthy of further exploration and attention. These themes will be discussed in the next part of the article, with emphasis on those that have particular relevance to social work education.

Identity as a theme

Key informants were first asked to describe their own professional use of social media. Responses were primarily descriptive therefore and at times extensive depending on the level
of social media use and the number of social work roles held. The notion of identity as a social media user was a theme that emerged as a result of this question, and continued to develop throughout the interviews as a key focus, deepening to include ideas about the boundaries between personal and professional identity, the public and private nature of identity, cultural or national identity, and the identity of the New Zealand social work profession.

**Personal identity as a social media user**

Firstly, analysis identified a range of individual identities expressed by participants in relation to social media. Recognition of metaphors in narrative is a useful way to identify themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2006) and the self-descriptive metaphors and adjectives used by interviewees regarding their competence or experience with social media revealed a diversity of perceptions. For example, participants variously described themselves in relationship to social media as a *virgin, nerd, geek, neanderthal, promiscuous.*

Another clear use of metaphor was in the description of interest in or reticence towards social media (for example, *fear, courage, bravery, excitement*). To illustrate the emotive element contained in responses, the following is a quote from an interview describing their first experience of doing a ‘Tweet:’

> I think it’s probably doing the first one and realising that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. That’s it actually okay to do it. It is really getting over that stage fright and leaping off the edge. (7)

Related to the levels of confidence expressed by participants were additional statements made by those who, after expressing a well-considered opinion about the professional use of social media, qualified their views by further stating they “*didn’t feel qualified to say*” (2). This suggests that social media is a specialty area belonging outside the expertise of social work, perhaps solely in the realm of internet technology specialists.

**Professional social work identity as a social media user**

Interview participants expressed many views about their social work professional identities in the context of their use of social media; and these were largely described by acknowledging the complexity of the boundaries between identities -personal, private, professional, public
and organizational. For the participants it was impossible to describe these aspects of identity separately because of how significantly they overlapped.

Firstly participants grappled with the dilemma social media presents regarding private information and where it might be located in the public (therefore professional) place of social media. This participant highlights a position that both personal and professional identity needs to be kept private; a complete lack of presence (personal and professional) on social media was important to safeguard personal and professional privacy.

You’re very open to exposure. When you’re working in an environment where you may have had to make decisions around children that aren’t necessarily the decisions that a family would have made, you are far more visible and far more open to being found. And also social media provides an opportunity for people to air their grievances and complaints about individuals, which adds vulnerability for people. (2)

The dichotomy of public and private identities is also seen in participants’ thinking about the differences between an identity “at home” and an identity “at work.” The use of social media in social work education for example, demands clarity between the two as is the case in the following from an educator:

And it also raises the question about the public private boundary, which is a really interesting boundary. For social work educators it’s been quite interesting in terms of when are you on in terms of raising issues as a conscious critic and disseminating information, and when you are actually off the clock and you’re acting in terms of a private citizenship role. (6)

Here is where the difference is clearer between the various identities being expressed by the interviewees, because an identity as a social work agency employee, or member of an organization, can be quite different to an identity as an individual social work professional. This is made more complex, and possibly highlighted more clearly by the reality that many organizations ban social media use by social workers in the workplace, however it is important to include here the comments made by interviewees reflecting the struggle inherent in determining boundaries between what is private and what is public from a organizational or employee perspective.

There are certain things and certain people who are political people that I have ‘liked’ on my personal page but I am really mindful around what I choose to ‘like’ or ‘share’
or not like, because I don’t want to compromise myself professionally. Which is really interesting. Not that I would like something personally that would not fit with a social work perspective, because I wouldn’t, but it’s more about organisationally where we sit in terms of being really apolitical. (2)

The impact that organizational identity has on the ability to act more publicly as a professional is highlighted in this quote:

I’m really aware of the fact that my present role or my current role gives me more scope to be out there in the public, whereas when I held other positions particularly in government departments it’s a real no-no to be saying that you work for a particular organisation. (8)

The public space of social media has driven all participants to think very carefully about how they portray themselves publicly and the comments highlighted so far reveal the complexity of this challenge. The following comment is an example of how one participant manages the boundary between their personal and their professional lives on social media by getting rid of it altogether:

And I’ve decided to err on the side of transparency, because I think that in some ways that’s a healthier way of being; rather than assuming I can be two separate people I’m actually trying to live my life in a way that’s congruent. (5)

This participant talks further about the notion of congruency in identity, suggesting that ideally there should be no difference between personal and professional identity. They go on to say however that “it also means it’s harder for us to find private spaces or private social spaces.” This reinforces the earlier discussion about the private/public boundary, offering a more nuanced differentiation between what it means to have a professional online identity, and a private identity, whether that be personal or professional.

Those participants who accepted the need for congruence between public, professional and personal identities, also acknowledged an element of risk in doing so. In considering the negotiation of ethical boundaries of social media use, it is suggested we should encourage ourselves to be more comfortable with the “grey” (Reamer, 2012). This is nicely captured in the following comment:
So we have to actually accept a more human side of ourselves as well. I don’t think it’s just saying in our personal lives we need to be more ethical, I’m actually saying also in our professional lives we need to be more forgiving and open, and allow a bit greyer in there. (5)

To be congruent, more accountable to ourselves, to avoid compromising our values and principles, we must be willing to carry more risk. The nature of that risk is debateable, as is highlighted by this participant:

The government maybe slightly edgy about hiring me to do some things for them, because I’ll be critical of them. I suppose I just accept that’s the case and that’s what I’m doing. I’m not going to try to separate those two identities because to be honest if anyone wanted to really find that out they’d find that out anyway. (9)

Discussion

The ubiquitous presence of social media has clearly offered challenges to all participants who contributed views to this project, regardless of their level of experience using it professionally. This is unsurprising given the very radical changes in communication practice witnessed since the advent of Web 2.0 – an understanding of these changes necessitates not only technical knowledge of social media, but an understanding of it socially and culturally. To wait for experts to emerge is a risky position for social workers to hold given the important social and cultural implications of social media use (Rafferty, 2011) and the acceptance of this reality (and action on it) suggests a developmental leap is needed for social work. The practice of producing social media content rather than simply being consumers of it, which is the hallmark of Web 2.0, has implications for social work education, returning to earlier rationale in the literature for media education (and by extension social media education) for social workers.

The concept of “continuous multilogue communication” for example, illustrates how radically communication styles have changed (Megele, 2015). This term describes the behaviour of many people communicating with many other people at the same time without taking turns in conversation, producing more strands and a wider range of input. This is a challenging
relational concept for those who value, as social workers traditionally do, the confidential ‘one to one,’ ‘face to face’ way of relating, and may well induce feelings of “fear” as described by participants in this study.

Fear of the unknown can also be related to other comments made by participants in this study. Identifying oneself as a social media ‘virgin’ for example also highlights a feeling of being on the precipice of something you know nothing about, inferring it to be an “inevitable” human activity that has associated with it a great deal of myth, a merging of emotion, technical knowledge, social status and cultural expectations. It also highlights issues of power, confidence and questions about being knowledgeable “enough.”

The highly emotive aspect of these comments may also be explained in part by applying an analysis of ‘privacy.’ In a qualitative study of online privacy (Houghton & Joinson, 2010) powerful emotional reactions (anger and shock) were found to be common when privacy breaches were experienced. In the case of this study, it could be said that perceived or potential breaches of privacy have induced similar emotional reactions.

Another key observation made by participants in this project is the complexity and multiplicity of identities that emerge when engaging with social media. The various online personae that in some cases spanned numerous platforms or fields is usefully analyzed by applying Bordieu’s Field Theory (Willig, 2015). Bordieu refers “multiple versions of self,” which acknowledges the potential of social media users to manage private and public relationships at the same time, thereby acknowledging the success of some participants in achieving this.

Social media forces us to create an identity, to think about how we present ourselves publicly and in doing so there is a potential for a new public identity to emerge that collectively redefines the profession. Indeed online personae is an important “currency” in the world today (Harbeck-Voshel and Wesala, 2015), and this does not relate only to individual identity but also to organizational and professional identity (Young, 2013). The conceptual tools of Bourdieu’s field theory assist to understand how the social work profession differentiates itself from others, both by highlighting the relational aspect of their role (thereby minimizing the importance of social media) and by mirroring anxieties prominent in risk averse social service environments. There is possibility too that how social work perceives its status or “capital” in society (Beddoe, 2013) is related to how much confidence it has to engage in the very public practice of social media.
Summary

Participants in this research, all of whom hold key roles in the New Zealand social work profession, presented views in this project that challenge social work education on a number of fronts. The individual, nuanced identities of social workers and the practice and ethical implications of these will have profound impact on the collective identity of the profession and its behaviour in the social media landscape. The following participant summarizes this point well; in making a strong case for social media education for social workers they highlight the key relationship between the emotional experience of using social media and crucial need for new knowledge:

So it moves from the scary unknown to the known. There may still be scary bits about the known, which is valuable to recognise but while it’s still unknown then people are going to feel less confident around engaging. Becoming informed, becoming aware, and developing a more sophisticated view of social media; it’s not all good and it’s not all bad. (3)

There has been a paradigm shift in social work education in response to this need for awareness. Social media is imbedded in course delivery as a way of developing knowledge and skills in its use (Megele, 2015), and there is recognition of the critical need for students to have support in the creation their online identity (Harbech-Voshel&Wesala, 2015). Focussing our analysis on the complexity of social work identity and the opportunity for multiple identities in the world of social media will assist in our development of useful, robust social media strategies in social work education.

References


