Social Media and Ethical Social Work Practice

1.5 Hours
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Final Exam

1. What do different social media applications have in common?
   a. They are for interaction and exchange of information
   b. They are essentially a one-way source of communication
   c. Most were launched by the Federal Communications Commission.
   d. They are for personal use and have no professional value.

2. What is a benefit of using social media in social work practice?
   a. It provides an additional way to engage individuals and communities.
   b. It is a substitute for maintaining human relationships.
   c. It is a way to develop close friendships with clients.
   d. It provides an avenue for service that doesn’t require documentation.

3. What is a risk of irresponsible or unethical social media use in social work practice?
   a. Waste of time
   b. Poor team work
   c. Loss of identity
   d. Harm to clients

4. In 2017, NASW, CSWE, ASWB, and ACSW worked together to revise a document that would provide ethical guidance to social workers who use social media and other digital technology in their practice. What is that document?
   a. The NASW Code of Ethics
   b. Everything You Wanted to Know About Technology
   c. Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice
   d. Guidelines for the Professional Use of Social Media

5. In what way are social media posts like face-to-face conversations?
   a. They can take place at any time of day.
   b. They reflect people’s opinions
   c. There are frequent misunderstandings
   d. Both interactions are subject to viruses
6. An example of an application that can help a social worker to schedule a meeting by checking the available days and times of many people is
   a. Doodle
   b. YouTube
   c. Twitter
   d. Facebook

7. One way for social workers to prevent social media misuse is
   a. To obtain continuing education
   b. Avoid social media use altogether
   c. Develop positive relationships with clients
   d. Follow professional licensing requirements

8. Social workers are urged to examine their personal social media accounts for what purpose?
   a. To evaluate how information and images may affect their online identity
   b. To remove all family pictures and posts from personal accounts
   c. To enable privacy settings that will prevent unauthorized use of posts
   d. To remove links that identify the personal interests of the social worker

9. What is recommended practice for handling potential friend requests on Facebook?
   a. Inform clients at the first visit that friend requests will not be accepted.
   b. Ignore friend requests even if it makes clients feel rejected.
   c. Accept friend requests from clients if they have healthy boundaries.
   d. Accept friend requests from clients but follow up with a clarification of boundaries.

10. When should the social worker discuss boundaries related to social media use?
    a. Early in the relationship.
    b. If the issue should come up later in the relationship.
    c. It is not necessary to discuss this with every client.
    d. It should be discussed at the beginning or end of every meeting.

11. What is the recommendation regarding sharing information from personal social media accounts?
    a. Do not use a personal social media account.
    b. Post only from a personal account.
    c. Post personal information on a professional account.
    d. Keep personal and professional accounts separate.
12. When is it appropriate for social workers to search clients’ social media accounts?
   a. When the information is publicly available.
   b. When the client has given informed consent.
   c. When the social worker needs to verify information.
   d. When it is suspected the client is not being truthful.

13. A social worker is concerned about a client who has missed three appointments. Under what circumstances can the social worker review the client’s social media accounts?
   a. If it is to check on the client’s wellbeing.
   b. If it is to satisfy the social worker’s curiosity.
   c. If there is a compelling reason such as danger to self or others.
   d. If it is likely that the client would not mind.

14. An emerging area of practice is
   a. Cybertherapy
   b. Advocacy
   c. Podcasts
   d. Professional Development

15. Sitter and Curnew said that this serves as a “route to activism.”
   a. Social media stalking
   b. Googling “activism”
   c. Social media advocacy
   d. Using Twitter
Course Author Bio

Laura Gibson, PhD, LCSW, has been practicing clinical social work for more than 18 years. She earned a bachelor of science degree in psychology from Bridgewater State College (now Bridgewater State University), a master’s degree in social work from the University of Southern Indiana, and a doctor of philosophy degree in social work from the University of Louisville. Dr. Gibson is a licensed clinical social worker in both Indiana and Kentucky. She is an item writer for the Association of Social Work Board’s (ASWB) master’s-level licensing examination for social workers and is a former member of the Examination Committee. She is a book review editor for the Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics. Dr. Gibson is an assistant professor and the MSW Program Director for Brescia University in Owensboro, Kentucky.

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize that the NASW Code of Ethics, revised in 2017, provides guidance in the use of social media.

2. Demonstrate understanding of the risks and benefits of social media use in social work practice.


4. Identify at least one application that can be used in social work practice.

5. Demonstrate understanding of appropriate professional boundaries related to social media use.

6. Recognize that it is not ethical to search clients’ social media accounts except in compelling circumstances or when the client gives consent.
Importance of Social Work and Social Media

“Social media and other forms of electronic communication are inextricable from social work practice today...”

(Hitchcock & Battista, 2013, p. 43).

Social workers cannot practice social work today without using or somehow contending with some form of social media, used either by themselves or by their clients. Social workers who graduated 10 years ago did not enter the same digital working environment as those who graduate today. Alternately, contemporary graduates may have more experience with social media but have been influenced by a shifting cultural norm that encourages and rewards self-disclosure; these professionals, as well, would benefit from reexamining the implications of privacy issues associated with social media. Today’s social workers not only have to navigate a new professional landscape but the ethical complexities that are associated with it.

Social media is an umbrella term that encompasses a multitude of applications, but they have one thing in common: interaction and exchange of information. Their purpose is social human interface rather than the one-way type of communication of traditional media (e.g., television, radio, web pages, etc.). The following are some examples, along with the year they were launched.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Year Launched</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>2003¹</td>
<td>Professional networking, posting or seeking jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>2004²</td>
<td>Connecting friends and people with similar interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>2005³</td>
<td>Sharing videos that are funny or informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>2005⁴</td>
<td>Sharing of social news which is voted on by others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>2006⁵</td>
<td>Trending events and news, including marketing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doodle</td>
<td>2007⁶</td>
<td>Scheduling events, meetings, and appointments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>2007⁷</td>
<td>Blogging to connect with constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>2010⁸</td>
<td>Primarily sharing videos and pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>2010⁹</td>
<td>Posting pictures in an online “file cabinet” or “scrapbook”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>2011¹⁰</td>
<td>Sending photos that are deleted when opened.</td>
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The use of technology and social media is an undeniable part of social work practice. Before considering the ethical risks; however, it’s important to become familiar with the ways that social workers are using social media to network and form professional communities. Some of the ways social media are used in social work include advocacy, community practice (Sitter & Curnew, 2016), networking, scheduling meetings, informal peer support (Gandy-Guedes, Vance, Bridgewater, Montgomery, & Taylor, 2016), learning and professional development (Cartwright, 2017), and collaborative projects (Knowles & Cooner, 2016). Because technology is a rapidly changing field, it is not possible to list all of the possible modalities; however, they include, but are not limited to, the following applications, which are briefly explained.

**Blog**—When used as a noun, it refers to a regular posting on a webpage or part of an online publication, similar to a newspaper column in the editorial section. It includes information and commentary reflecting the opinion of the author(s). When used as a verb, it the action of posting to the blog.

**Social Network**—This format allows for both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous communication. Examples include job searches, support groups, information sharing, advocacy forums, communication with political leaders, and canvassing for political candidates.

**RSS**—This is a document format that gives automatic updates to newsfeeds, especially from webpages that change frequently. For example, subscribing to a news organization’s RSS allows for regular updates to be sent to users as they occur.

**Video, Podcasts, and Photo Sharing** sites—These are primarily ways to share information, oftentimes with the opportunity to provide comment or feedback. YouTube, The Social Work Podcast, and Snapchat are examples.
Virtual World—This is a simulated environment providing a computer-generated experience. Schools of social work sometimes use virtual worlds to simulate practice experiences. Social workers may use virtual worlds to simulate real circumstances that clients will face and how to handle them, such as relapse prevention. (Getz, n.d.)

What do these applications have in common? They are interactive. They are about conversations, which is what social work has always been about, but now there are many different modes of communication. There are more opportunities than ever before to engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Increasingly, social media influences how people relate to each other (Usher, 2011). Social media are comprised of web-based technologies that are interactive and connect users with clients and constituencies.

Apply

Help Wanted – Professional Social Worker

We are seeking a social worker to join our team of clinicians in the outreach of individuals with severe and persistent mental illness. Must be licensed and have at least two years of experience working with this population. The successful applicant must meet the following requirements:

• Commitment to client empowerment, autonomy, and self determination
• Ability to work both independently and within a multidisciplinary setting
• Strong written, verbal, and digital communication skills
• Professional, ethical use of social media applications for client engagement/intervention

Are you surprised that this agency requires digital literacy skills to engage clients and provide interventions? Do you know of agencies that require these skills? Do you think you would have seen an advertisement like this five years ago or ten years ago? Robb (2011, para 6) asserts that “social media is one of the most important cultural milestones in the last half-century.” As a consequence, social media can be either beneficial or harmful, depending upon how it is used.

Technology and social media are tools that can be incredibly useful to professionals, but their use must be ethical and well considered. The greatest benefit of using social media in social work practice is that it provides an additional way to engage individuals and constituencies. There is an exciting potential to use online networks and websites to collaborate; to learn about local, national, and international resources; to participate in advocacy efforts; to understand the political climate; to access professional podcasts; and to engage in continuing professional development. Social workers are even beginning to use technology to provide services and interventions to clients online and to use the internet to engage in research activities that build the knowledge base of the profession. Emerging areas of practice are online video counseling, cybertherapy, and self-guided online interventions (Kolmes, 2010; Murphy, MacFadden, &
Technology and social media misuse, however, can expose the social worker to ethical dilemmas and legal liability. Irresponsible or unethical use can harm clients, damage credibility, and ruin careers. Social workers can be sued or have their personal life exposed forever. When the profession is portrayed poorly, it affects all social workers. Social workers can protect themselves and prevent misuse by learning more about the ethical use of social media.

Reflect

If you were being interviewed for the position noted above, how would you answer the question about your own digital literacy skills? What are your strengths and weaknesses related to professional use of social media? Identify a skill you need to develop further.

Check your understanding:

What is something that all social media applications have in common?

a. Lack of boundaries  
b. User interactions  
c. Political bias  
d. Party planning

Answer is B

Ethical Use of Social Media

"Technology-related developments in social work are both unpredictable and fast-paced. Thus, social workers should be vigilant in their efforts to monitor noteworthy adjustments in pertinent ethical standards."

(Reamer, 2018, p. 78)

The social work profession has tried to keep up with the burgeoning use of social media in professional practice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) collaboratively developed Standards for Technology in 2005 (NASW & ASWB, 2005). Through a combined effort, the NASW and ASWB taskforce was expanded to include the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA), and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and they revised those standards in 2017. (NASW, ASWB, CSWE, CSWA, 2017; Reamer, 2018). With this revision, the document grew from 28 pages to 64 pages.

The role of CSWE is to hold accredited schools of social work accountable to standards related to explicit and implicit curriculums that graduate social work students with core competencies.
CSWA is an organization comprised of individual clinical social workers. It provides information and support to members as well as advocacy at the state and national levels for access to mental health services (NASW et al., 2017). NASW is the membership organization that represents and provides advocacy for the profession.

The role of ASWB is to protect the public from incompetent and unethical social work practice through licensing and regulation. In 2015, they adopted model standards related to the following areas of practice (NASW et al., 2017; Reamer, 2018):

- Practitioner competence
- Informed consent
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Boundaries, dual relationships, and conflicts of interest
- Documentation
- Interactions with colleagues
- Interjurisdictional practice

NASW recognized that since the last revision of the Code in 1996, today’s digital landscape would be unrecognizable to social workers who practiced at that time. To be relevant for today’s social workers, the 2017 revision of the Code of Ethics provides guidance to social workers in many areas of practice. Passages relevant to social media and electronic communications include, but are not limited to

- Informed Consent (d), (e), (f), (g), (i).
- Competence (d), (e)
- Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity (d)
- Conflicts of Interest (e), (f), (g), (h)
- Privacy and Confidentiality (i), (l), (o), (q), (r)
- Access to Records (b)
- Sexual Relationships (a)
- Sexual Harassment
- Derogatory Language
- Interruption of Services
- Respect (for Colleagues) (b)
- Sexual Relationships (Supervisors/Educators and Students) (a)
- Sexual Harassment (Colleagues)
- Supervision and Consultation (dual/multiple relationships)
- Education and Training (d)
- Client Records (a)
- Private Conduct
- Evaluation and Research (f)
Apply

A social worker provides face-to-face services to a family. They have a positive relationship, characterized by rapport and mutual trust. Some family members move to a remote area, but the dispersed group asks to continue professional services with the social worker via the group chat feature in WhatsApp, a messaging tool (Lobo, 2017). However, there are some important issues to consider. First of all, the therapist will need to determine if this method of communication will meet the treatment needs of the family. Also, many licensure boards would consider that the service is occurring in both the jurisdiction of the social worker and the jurisdiction of the client. The social worker will need to determine what legal requirements exist in the client’s jurisdiction that regulates practice. It is the responsibility of the social worker to engage in practice that is both ethical and legal (NASW et al., 2018).

Similarly, if the social worker provides electronic services through employment with the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, the laws regulating practice are different. In this case, the rules of the VA supersede that of the state. The social worker must adhere to the rules of the employing agency. Guidance such as this can be found in NASW et al.’s *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* (2017).

Reflect

An organization offers several courses related to cybercounseling – providing therapy to individuals over the internet (TherapyOnline, n.d.). It is affiliated with a major university, affording it some credibility. How do you feel about the idea of cybercounseling? Can you imagine circumstances where this type of practice would benefit clients? What are the ethical issues that immediately come to mind? Where could you find guidance about how to engage in cybercounseling?

Check your understanding

A social work supervisor is asked by a social work student if it is permissible to have a live video chat with a client who cannot get to the office. There are no agency policies that either limit or permit this. Where can the social work supervisor find guidance to answer this question?

a. Digital social work is like the wild, wild, west and there are no rules.
b. The supervisor should answer based on a “gut feeling” of what is appropriate.
c. The client’s access to services should be the only relevant issue.
d. The *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* developed by NASW and others should be reviewed.

**Answer is D**

**A Source of Support and Community**

“*Social workers who provide electronic social work services should be aware of cultural and socioeconomic differences among clients and how they may use electronic technology. Social workers should assess cultural, environmental, economic, mental or physical ability, linguistic, and other issues that may affect the delivery or use of these services.*”

*(Code of Ethics, 1.05, Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity)*

“*Social workers who use technology to provide social work services should assess the clients’ suitability and capacity for electronic and remote services. . . If clients do not wish to use services provided through technology, social workers should help them identify alternate methods of service.*

*(Code of Ethics, 1.03 (g) Informed Consent.)*

Using social media as a tool in professional practice can save time and facilitate communication with both clients and colleagues. It can be a way to include individuals who would not otherwise be able to participate. However, ease of use, ability to make services accessible, and appropriateness to the client and situation must be assessed. Social workers must consider that not everyone is comfortable with technology, and the very tools that aim to include everyone may end up excluding those who lack the confidence or skill to use them.

For example, consider that social media can be used as a source of support and education for people who share the same struggles and concerns. Support groups have long been used by people who seek comfort in the company of others by mutually sharing each other’s stories. Technology provides a new avenue for hosting support groups. Examples of support group topics include grief, depression, parenting, domestic violence, overeating, etc. There are many support groups that use discussion forums, blogs, and online communities (Mental Health America, n.d.). However, social media is not suitable for everyone. For example, those convicted of sex offenses who have completed treatment may benefit from support groups; however, sometimes people convicted of sex offenders are legally prohibited from using the internet, effectively denying them access to support (McCullagh, 2009). Also, young children may not have the computer skills needed to electronically engage with others appropriately, and some clients may prefer to engage with others when in the same physical space rather than online. It is the social worker’s responsibility to make sure that clients understand the limitations of social media in their particular circumstances. Social workers must obtain informed consent from clients prior to
initiating services. Part of that process requires the social worker to assess the clients’ suitability and ability to participate in online services and their ability to understand the risks, benefits and limitations.

Social workers have long promoted professional networking and development of professional relationships. These relationships serve as a way to share expertise, identify resources, find employment, and provide mutual support (Belluomini, 2014; Gandy-Guedes, Vance, Bridgewater, Montgomery, & Taylor, 2016). In the past, social workers used community events, professional organizations and conferences to initiate these relationships. Social media now provides an additional venue for this purpose. Gandy-Guedes et al. (2016) found that a closed Facebook group was a useful source of emotional support and connectedness. Knowles and Cooner (2016) found that students effectively used multimedia, which included asynchronous, collaborative group work, to learn about the use of social media in social work. Reportedly, Twitter and Facebook played a large role in the Arab Spring by enabling the coordination of activities (Rosen, 2011; Strom-Gottfried, Thomas, & Anderson, 2014).

Sometimes social workers located in rural areas are the only professionals for 100 miles in any direction. They recognize the lack of services and use social media as a way to link clients to support networks and other types of services. Before referring clients to specific social media sites, it’s important to educate them about the risks and benefits, as well as the subjective approach of some sites. It is the responsibility of social workers to ensure that sites to which clients are being referred are reputable and accurate. Additionally, it is important for clients to recognize that just like face-to-face interactions, sites such as personal websites and blogs reflect the writers’ personal opinions and clients need to be able to distinguish between opinion and fact.

**Apply**

Social workers often take leadership roles in their work environments and are responsible for coordinating team meetings. For example, a school social worker might want to call a meeting of all teachers to encourage them to make referrals to the social worker. Teachers have different planning periods—it would be too time consuming to talk to each one individually, and emailing 20 teachers about their schedules would require a lot of juggling. Using a scheduling app such as Doodle, there is an easier way to schedule a meeting that coordinates the available times of many people. However, some teachers might be unfamiliar with a scheduling app. If teachers do not respond because they do not understand how to, the social worker has effectively limited accessibility rather than enhancing it.

“Social workers should cooperate with social work colleagues and with colleagues of other professions when such cooperation serves the well-being of clients.” (NASW Code of Ethics, 2.01 (c), p. 18). What does the term cooperation mean in the above description of a school social worker? Most would agree that working effectively and cooperatively with other professionals requires communication. Explaining to teachers the social work services that can be made
available to students through referrals is an example of how cooperation benefits clients. Social media apps can facilitate communication in instances like this. However, it’s necessary to consider whether colleagues are familiar with or can easily use the app so that they are not excluded due to lack of digital literacy.

It is important to note that social media can connect people across the continents, or they can restrict communication within a single setting. It is the social worker’s responsibility to assess the capacity of clients and colleagues to utilize social media tools, the strengths and weaknesses of those tools, and the suitability of the tools for the purpose at hand. Just as face-to-face conversations reflect people’s opinions, likewise, social media postings also reflect the opinions of the writers. They should be used as they are intended, and not necessarily as reliable facts or reasoned arguments. They are not the equivalent of peer reviewed literature.

Reflect

Do you think that mastering the use of social media is a social work skill? Should you require clients to interact with you in the manner that you feel is most comfortable, or should you interact with them in the way that they prefer? What if the technology they prefer is not comfortable to you?

Check your understanding

A social worker notices that when clients leave a domestic violence shelter, they often return to the abusing spouse and to their previous social isolation. The social worker believes that these clients would benefit from sharing their common experiences and that an online support group might be helpful. However, this type of service might increase the risk to personal safety if it is discovered by the spouse. Before inviting each person to join the group, what should the social worker do?

a. Help the client to understand the potential benefits, risks, and limitations of the group.
b. Assume that most clients will be able to participate with very basic computer skills.
c. Provide training to navigate the social media platform that will be used.
d. Urge clients to participate in the online support group before they leave the shelter.

Answer is A

Examples of Social Media Use in Social Work

“Social workers who use technology in the provision of social work services should ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide such services in a competent manner.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.04 (d), Competence)
Imagine a social worker who attends a local informational meeting about sex trafficking and learns about the practice of traffickers, who advertise young girls posing in hotel rooms. The social worker is introduced to an app, TraffickCam, which allows ordinary travelers to take a picture of their hotel room and upload it to a national database. The FBI then uses technology to match data points (e.g., pictures, drapery patterns, carpeting, etc.) with the pictures posted by traffickers. This helps law enforcement identify the locations and movements of traffickers and their victims (Scott, 2017; Exchange Initiative, n.d.). The social worker wants to engage in advocacy and make a difference. To engage a larger community, the social worker would like to share the information about this app with colleagues, friends, and other social media applications. The social worker has the opportunity mobilize the efforts of many people to fight against sex trafficking.

It is the responsibility of the social worker to verify that information is reputable and is what it claims to be before sharing it (Reamer, 2018). It is important to research the app before sharing it with the larger community and making claims that may not be accurate. A quick review of Snopes, a site known for verifying public claims, Washington University, the Exchange Initiative, and reports from reputable news media confirm that TraffickCam is an important tool in locating and prosecuting sex traffickers.

A school social worker may be asked to get the parents of elementary school children more engaged in their children’s education. The principal suggests starting a weekly bedtime story done live on Facebook (Klein, 2019). The social worker will need to communicate the project to parents, children, and teachers, provide instruction to parents, and demonstrate to parents how the program will work. However, if the social worker has never used Facebook and is unfamiliar with its uses, it will be necessary to first develop this skill.

Social media is being used in both micro and macro social work practice. However, using interactive online services as a venue for clinical practice is controversial. There are strong proponents on both sides of the issue. A survey of MSW students revealed that the belief that e-therapy was effective was associated with their belief that ethical requirements for practice could be met (Finn, 2002).

Social workers must be competent to practice, and that includes digital competency. Sites that are commonly used today such as Facebook have only been in existence since 2007, so social workers who earned their degree before that time, and those who graduated several years after, may not have been taught how social media can be used in social work practice. If those social workers have not taken it upon themselves to use Facebook in their personal lives, they may not
understand its possibilities. One way to prevent social media misuse is to obtain continuing education about it and to develop or sharpen digital skills.

**Apply**

**Basic Twitter Skills**

1. Set up an account
2. Understand hashtags and how to use them.
3. Create tweets and retweets.
4. Create and participate in a Twitter chat.
5. Attach images and memes to tweets.

**Reflect**

To what extent are you comfortable using technology? How would you feel if your employer required you to use social media in an unfamiliar way? Would you feel pressured to perform? How do you think clients feel when they are asked to communicate in an unfamiliar way and about something which makes them feel vulnerable? How can you communicate patience, understanding, and “begin where the client is”?

**Check your understanding**

A school social worker is asked to start a bi-weekly Twitter discussion activity about parenting tips. This social media application is used because it is considered the most convenient and accessible to busy parents who want to participate but are often on-the-go. It is assumed that parents typically carry cell phones with them, so a Twitter group could make the discussion both mobile and user-friendly. However, the social worker has never used Twitter before. What should the social worker do?

a. Hold a regular parenting group at the school and invite parents to attend.

b. Ask a colleague familiar with Twitter to provide instruction and guidance.

c. Look for a different job that doesn’t require social media use.

d. Tell the supervisor that social workers don’t “do” social media.

Answer is B

**Your Online Identity**

“*Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities.*”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 4.03 (b), Private Conduct)
“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.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 4.06 (a), Misrepresentations)

Consider how it would feel if a physician admonished a patient for smoking, but the patient later saw the physician outside the back door of the clinic smoking? Would it seem that the physician was a fraud, saying one thing and doing another? Physicians and other professionals portrays themselves in a particular way. Learning about unprofessional or distasteful information about them influences how that they are perceived, sometimes casting doubt on professionalism and competence.

MacDonald, Sohn, and Ellis (2010) found that 65% of medical school graduates in 2006 and 2007 had Facebook accounts. Thirty seven percent of them had posted information that was publicly available, which included sexual orientation, religious views, relationship status, photographs of them drinking, images of them intoxicated, or portrayal of them engaging in risky behaviors. The authors concluded that the accounts could be distressing to patients and/or could cast the profession in a negative light (MacDonald et al., 2010). Reamer (2018) recommended that social workers take reasonable steps to keep their personal social media accounts private.

Social workers need to take a close look at their own social media accounts to evaluate the information and images that are available to others and how those things may affect their professional identities. Social workers should review security settings and take precautions to protect themselves. Be aware that even if security settings are set on “private,” information can still be shared by others to the rest of the world. Even if something is deleted from a social media site, it is still available through caches. A cache is like a “place” where information can be found, even if it seems the information has been deleted.

Apply

Consider the following examples of how the blurring of personal and professional identities can be problematic:

A social worker provides psychotherapy to a client to help with adjustment issues following a divorce. The social worker communicates positive regard and acceptance to the client, which builds trust. The client begins to disclose more and more private information to the social worker, who is supportive of the client’s choice to divorce. The client becomes curious about the social worker’s personal life, does a Google search, and learns that the client has blogged criticisms about people choosing a divorce and blames them for their decision to “take the easy way out.” The client feels betrayed and angry and accuses the social worker of being insincere and untrustworthy.

Imagine that a social worker works at an inpatient substance abuse treatment facility. The social worker leads groups in which members are encouraged to avoid situations that might trigger
relapse. The clients have respect for the social worker and the relationship is built on being genuine and sincere. A client is readmitted to the facility after relapse and informs the unit that the social worker has pictures on a social media account that portray the social worker as drunk and high. The pictures are captioned with phrases that indicate the social worker thinks being drunk to the point of oblivion is hilarious. The clients on the unit are no longer able to accept feedback from someone whom they consider a fraud.

A social worker provides mental health services to teens. The issues that often come up are identity development, career goals, unplanned pregnancies, and online bullying, among others. The social worker’s personal view about unplanned pregnancies is that teens are too young to be good parents, and abortion is immoral. The social worker personally believes that adoption is generally the best course of action. However, the social worker is able to put aside personal views when counseling teens and will help them explore the issue and decide what is right for them in their individual circumstances. A client who has had two previous abortions comes to see this social worker, feeling very distraught. The social worker engages the client and begins to build rapport. The teen feels increasingly trusting of the social worker and out of curiosity, searches for information about the social worker online. The teen finds that more than one “favorite” on the social worker’s social media account is about pro-life, anti-abortion, and dogmatic religious groups that condemn abortion. The teen feels betrayed by the social worker and does not return.

It may be problematic when social workers go to one extreme or the other. For example, one social worker deleted her Facebook account entirely because she felt it was not possible to completely separate her professional and personal life. Rather than risk the blurring of boundaries, she opted out (Robb, 2011). The risk of this approach is becoming entirely detached from the online community and out of touch with the changing needs of clients. On the other hand, the security risks are real, regardless of attention to privacy settings. Available spyware can expose even the mostly tightly protected accounts (Robb, 2011).

Social workers’ online behavior represents not only themselves as individuals, but the agency where they are employed, and the profession of social work. Social workers should promote themselves and their profession in a positive light. Posts that may be misunderstood when taken out of context should be avoided. Clients (and sometimes employers) may conduct an online search of social workers. It is normal to be curious about the lives of others. Pictures, posts, favorite causes, and the groups they participate in, all say something about the individual, their interests, and sometimes their biases.
Reflect

Do you think it is ethical practice to combine your personal and professional use of social media? If your profession is part of your identity, is that sufficient to support the combined use? For example, if you personally support a social justice cause that is consistent with social work values, would it be appropriate to just use one personal account rather than keep up with both a professional and personal account? What is your rationale? Where can you go to find guidance on the ethical use of social media?

Social workers are increasingly using social media in both their personal and professional lives and there is some disagreement within the profession as to how it is used. Social workers are encouraged to keep “digital boundaries” between their personal and professional social media activities (Reamer, 2011).

Check your understanding

A social worker writes a blog that is critical of a particular political party. The social worker is employed by an agency that receives funding and is supported by that same political party. What guidance does the NASW Code of Ethics provide pertaining to this?

a. Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their professional responsibilities.
b. Social workers may sometimes engage in behavior that conflicts with social work values and ethics.
c. Social workers should not align themselves with the views of any particular political party.
d. Social workers should not document their personal views on blogs that are viewed by the public.

Answer is A

Maintaining Professional Boundaries

“Social workers should avoid communication with clients using technology (such as social networking sites, online chat, e-mail, text messages, telephone, and video) for personal or non-work-related purposes.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.06 (e), Conflicts of Interest)

“Social Workers should be aware that posting personal information on professional Web sites or other media might cause boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, or harm to clients.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.06 (f), Conflicts of Interest)

“Social workers should be aware that personal affiliations may increase the likelihood that clients may discover the social worker’s presence on Web sites, social media, and other forms of
technology. Social workers should be aware that involvement in electronic communication with groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, mental or physical ability, religion, immigration status, and other personal affiliations may affect their ability to work effectively with particular clients.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.06 (g), Conflicts of Interest)

“Social workers should avoid accepting requests from or engaging in personal relationships with clients on social networking sites or other electronic media to prevent boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, or harm to clients.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.06 (h), Conflicts of Interest)

In a face-to-face meeting with a client in a mental health clinic, competent therapists would consider carefully when to engage in self-disclosure based upon the potential benefits to the client. However, in the digital world, it can become second nature to accept “friend requests,” often without consideration that clients who are friended by the social worker have access to much more personal information than most social workers would reveal in a physical setting. Additionally, accepting a client as a social media “friend” may create a dual relationship, which social workers are cautioned to avoid (Halabuza, 2014; NASW, 2017).

It is wise to clarify boundaries with the client at the onset of the relationship (Halabuza, 2014). Doing so may help deter the uncomfortable situation that may result if the client subsequently makes a friend request of the social worker, which is subsequently rejected. At the beginning of the relationship, clients are less likely to see the establishment of boundaries as a personal rejection. However, being in the position of declining a friend request in the middle of the therapeutic relationship increases the risk of harm to the client because the client has likely made him or herself emotionally vulnerable to the social worker by lowering defenses. Some clinicians provide clients with a written social media policy in the contracting phase of treatment (Kolmes, 2010).

Social workers should not use social media to interact with clients for non-social work-related purposes. They should keep personal and professional accounts separate. Failure to do so may inadvertently communicate to a client that there is a friendship between the social worker and client or other type of alternative relationship. Social workers may, however, use social media sites with clients if the sites are for 100% work-related reasons. For example, a social worker may create a Facebook page, entirely separate from the personal account, and use it to convey current treatment options for people with addictive disorders. This would not contradict the Code of Ethics because there is a clear distinction that the site is used professionally. Kolmes (2010) states on her social media policy, “I keep a Facebook Page for my professional practice to allow people to share my blog posts and practice updates with other Facebook users. All of the information shared on this page is available on my website.” (para 5).

Apply

Consider the following portion of a written social media policy from Kolmes (2010):
“I do not accept friend or contact requests from current or former clients on any social networking site (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.). I believe that adding friends or contacts on these sites can compromise your confidentiality and our respective privacy. It may also blur the boundaries of our therapeutic relationship. If you have questions about this, please bring them up when we meet and we can talk more about it” (para 3).

Reflect

Have you ever submitted a friend request that was rejected? How did that feel?

Check your Understanding

When is the best time to first inform clients that the social worker does not accept friend requests from clients?
   a. At the onset of the professional relationship
   b. Only if it becomes a relevant issue
   c. After needing to reject a friend request
   d. When services are terminated

Answer is A

Client Privacy and Confidentiality

“Social workers should develop and inform clients about their policies, consistent with prevailing social work ethical standards, on the use of electronic technology, including Internet-based search engines, to gather information about clients.”

   (NASW Code of Ethics, 1.07 (p), Privacy and Confidentiality)

“Social workers should avoid searching or gathering client information electronically unless there are compelling professional reasons, and when appropriate, with the client’s informed consent.”

   (NASW Code of Ethics, 1.07 (q), Privacy and Confidentiality)

“Social workers should avoid posting any identifying or confidential information about clients on professional Web sites or other forms of social media.”

   (NASW Code of Ethics, 1.07 (r), Privacy and Confidentiality)

In macro practice, it may be acceptable to conduct an online search related to the agency, organization, state legislators, etc. For example, as a lobbyist, a social worker might search the Twitter account of specific politicians and evaluate where they stand on issues. A social worker doing community organizing might review the social media accounts of constituents to gauge the level of interest in an issue. In preparing to testify before Congress, a social worker might review
the public ongoing social media conversations to represent the predominant views of stakeholders.

However, in micro/mezzo practice, it is not appropriate to conduct an online search of clients except in compelling circumstances. In some ways, this may seem counterintuitive. After all, social workers conduct assessments as part of the problem-solving model of intervention, and assessments require the gathering of information. However, social workers generally must rely upon the information offered directly by clients as well as the information provided from collateral contacts and other providers through informed consent. Clients disclose personal information based on the trust and rapport they develop with the social worker. Informed consent is the guiding principle, although there may be some exceptions related to mandated clients. Most people would agree that it is not appropriate for a social worker to park outside clients’ homes to monitor their comings and goings and to follow them around town when they leave their house. Yet searching clients’ social media accounts is the digital equivalent of this.

Social workers sometimes feel tempted to search clients’ social media accounts, and usually this is motivated by the best of intentions. After all, they might argue, the more the social worker understands about the client’s life, the more prepared the social worker can be to help. They might also argue that information posted on social media is accessible to the public (Young, n.d.) However, the Code of Ethics warns that clients have a right to privacy, and a search of clients’ social media accounts should only be done with the client’s permission or in compelling instances where it is necessary to protect the client or others from harm. Compare this to the long-held standard that when doing a client assessment, it is not appropriate to ask the client for information that is irrelevant or just to satisfy the social worker’s curiosity. Even though knowing more about the client’s life might be helpful, clients also have the right to control what information they share with us (Reamer, 2015).

Social workers should not discuss information about clients online, even if an effort is made to “disguise” their identities. In some communities, it doesn’t take much information for readers to identify clients. Clients can sometimes be identified by location, occupation, age, etc. (Strom-Gottfried, Thomas, & Anderson, 2014). Clients have the right to confidentiality, and social workers bear legal responsibility for revealing confidential information about clients online (Boise State University, n.d.; Renison University College, n.d.). Strom-Gottfried (2016) spoke about “cautionary tales” such as foster parents posting pictures of their family’s trip to Disney World that included both their biological and adoptive children.

Apply

A social worker creates an online group for those who want to master motivational interviewing (MI). The social workers discuss the skills involved and their experiences in learning them. They also talk about different populations with which they’ve used MI, the challenges they’ve faced, and the failures. The group is closed – not available to the public. Social workers interested in joining must make the request and be accepted into the group. The group becomes a source of
consultation, as well. Social workers who share information about clients outside the organization should have informed consent from the client (NASW et al., 2017). Social workers also have the responsibility to protect the confidentiality of the information (NASW et al., 2017).

Social workers should ask about their agency’s policies with regard to technology, electronic communications, and social media use. Ask questions. For example, “What is the policy on communicating with clients by email, posting about the agency or its clients,” etc.? Always follow the agency’s policy. Discuss issues related to social media openly with a supervisor as they come up. Social media is a changing field.

Reflect

Imagine that you made the following blog entry, which contains no names: “Went to Central Elementary School today and started seeing a child who just moved here from the United Arab Emirates. Evidently, they don’t handle sexual abuse cases in that country in same way that we do.” This is followed two weeks later with a lawsuit filed against you for breaching the confidentiality of this client. What is your defense?

Check your understanding

A child protective services social worker works with a family that includes one parent and three small children. The case was opened because the daycare reported the children were dirty and arrived with soiled diapers. The social worker works with the parent to address the reasons for neglect and encourages them to take better care of the children. The social worker wants to know more about the parent’s life and if there are drugs or alcohol used, although there have been no reports of substance use. The social worker considers searching the client’s Facebook page and friends list. Is this the right thing to do?

- Absolutely – it’s okay to search for any information that is public.
- Definitely not – the client is entitled to privacy at all costs.
- It depends on whether there is danger of imminent harm.
- Yes, the role of the social worker is to protect the child from bad parenting.

Answer is C

Providing Direct Services – Micro and Mezzo Practice

“Social workers who use technology to provide social work services should obtain informed consent from individuals using these services during the initial screening or interview and prior to initiating services. Social workers should assess clients’ capacity to provide informed consent, and when using technology to communicate, verify the identity and location of clients.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.03 (f), Informed Consent)
“. . . If clients do not wish to use services provided through technology, social workers should help them identify alternate methods of service.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.03 (g), Informed Consent)

“Social workers should under no circumstances engage in sexual activities, inappropriate sexual communications through the use of technology or in person, or sexual contact with current clients, whether such contact is consensual or forced.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 1.09 (a), Sexual Relationships)

Not just for macro practice, therapy can be conducted entirely online in a variety of contexts. Cybertherapy, also referred to as cyberspace counseling, e-therapy, e-counseling, tele-counseling, and telemental health services, is an emerging area of practice and relatively new in comparison to other therapeutic modalities. Murphy and Mitchell were the first to establish Therapy Online in 1995 to treat individuals with mental health issues (University of Toronto, n.d.). Smith, Williams, Richards, and Panisch (2018) found that providing financial education online improved clients’ ability to access services. In their study, clients with low income were able to engage in this service where they would not have if they had been required to attend in-person. Richards et al. (2018) concluded that when online therapy was appropriate to the needs of the client, a mobile, web-based application (goACT) had the potential to facilitate client engagement. Gassova and Werner-Wilson (2018) reviewed 82 e-therapy websites and found it concerning that the majority lacked information about important elements such as crisis response and treatment of minors. They urged e-therapists to address ethical, legal, and jurisdictional risks before engaging in this practice (Gassova & Werner-Wilson, 2018). At least one university, the University of Toronto, offers a certificate in cybercounseling. They address clinical skills, jurisdictional issues, and liability concerns (Murphy et al, 2009).

There are many ways that social workers communicate with clients. Although not without controversy and complications, more and more social workers are providing direct services to clients over the internet and via email. TherapyOnline, in collaboration with the University of Toronto, offers an online course to teach participants about online counseling with individuals, couples, families, and groups (TherapyOnline, n.d.).

There are an increasing number of apps that social workers use to communicate with clients and/or use to help clients. The Social Work Social Media app by Cooner (2017) was developed to help social workers become more aware of ethical issues related to social media use. Using a game-based format with social work scenarios, the app addresses issues such as professional social media use, searching through clients’ public profiles, blogging, friend requests and boundaries, and evaluating the credibility of online resources.

Carson and Stevenson (2017) point out that children, youth, and older adults are not just victimized in the physical world; they are victimized online, as well. Potential victims can be groomed, stalked, and exploited by posing online as a harmless person. If social workers are not knowledgeable about social media and its applications, they will be unprepared to help clients avoid areas of risk and danger. Similarly, youth experience cyberbullying and sometimes ceaseless persecution. Social workers must be skill in this area to help those who are especially vulnerable to abusive online behavior.
Just as there is a prohibition against having sex with clients, it is worth noting that this same maxim applies to cybersex and sexting. Cybersex is sexual arousal using social media or other digital technology to exchange messages of sexual content with another person. Social workers should never engage in cybersex with clients or former clients. Sexting is the exchanging of sexual images via texting apps. Social workers should never engage in sexting with clients or former clients.

**Apply**

Following a natural disaster that occurred across the state line, a social worker travels to the disaster site to volunteer with the Red Cross. The social worker wants to avoid disrupting services to therapy clients, so considers if cybertherapy might be an option. The social worker will need to address two primary issues. First, it is the social worker’s responsibility to contact the licensing board where the service will be initiated to determine if it is permissible under state law. Second, the social worker will need to assess each client’s capacity to engage in cybertherapy and obtain their informed consent to do so.

**Reflect**

Have you considered providing therapy services over the internet? What challenges do you think you would need to address? How would you handle a client emergency when you could not be physically present with the client?

**Check your Understanding**

In the process of obtaining informed consent, what should a social worker do FIRST before conducting cybertherapy?

- a. Determine payment arrangements
- b. Assess the client’s capacity to participate.
- c. Make an accurate diagnosis
- d. Develop a treatment plan

**Answer is B**

A social worker learns that a colleague who routinely allows clients to cancel or change appointments via texting, has received a text from a client suggesting sexual attraction to the colleague. The colleague replied to the text in a way that encouraged the sexual flirtation. What should the social worker do?

- a. Nothing, since the texting is between two consenting adults.
- b. Discuss the unethical conduct with the colleague, if possible.
- c. View the situation as harmless since no physical touching is involved.
- d. Ask the colleague when the client will be discharged from the program.

**Answer is B**
Advocacy for Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

“Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.”

(NASW Code of Ethics, 6.04, Social and Political Action)

Zhang et al. (2017) found that use of social media was an important tool in engaging the community in a public health campaign about sexual health. Johnson & Halegoua (2015) concluded that social media was useful as a way to start the community engagement process, especially by organizations with limited resources. Advocacy requires the ability to obtain knowledge about core issues, engage stakeholders, and persuade others to take action (Sitter & Curnew, 2016). Social media is relevant to all of these skills. For example, some NASW chapters sponsor an annual Lobby Day, in which social workers are encouraged to visit their state capitol and talk with their legislators about important issues. They provide information about Lobby Day on their websites and via mass emails to members; they encourage members to become involved in Lobby Day; and they persuade members to travel to their state capitols to become involved in scheduled events.

Some social workers may feel strongly about a cause, but for a variety of reasons they do not become actively engaged in effecting change. Using social media to “like” organizations, retweet messages that resonate with the social worker, and “follow” legislators can serve as a “route to activism” for those social workers who want to become more involved in advocacy and policy practice (Sitter & Curnew, 2016, p. 274).

Apply

Sitter and Curnew (2016) described a participatory video project where advocates of people with developmental disabilities made short videos explaining the perspective of this population related to sexual rights. Videos were shown at conferences and community events, uploaded to YouTube, and posted on the organization’s Facebook page. The authors argued that social workers must have the digital skills to use social media as a tool for advocacy.

Reflect

What are you passionate about? We live in a global community, and you have the opportunity to meet professionals around the world who share your passions, make connections, learn about the issues, and collaborate with others. In what ways can you participate?
Check for Understanding

A social worker is very interested in advocacy projects related to people with disabilities. However, the social worker has family responsibilities that limit the time available to engage in such projects. What can the social worker do to contribute to this cause?

a. Post social media messages that support the area of interest.
b. Wait until the family responsibilities lessen before getting involved.
c. Find a different area of interest that requires less time
d. Look for opportunities to engage at some point in the future.

Answer is A

Conclusion: Making Ethical Choices in a Changing Environment

Although social media applications can be helpful tools, social workers should not let social media interfere with face-to-face relationships. When engaging in personal interactions in the same physical space, it is easy to become distracted by cell phones dinging and pinging to signal notifications of social media posts. When meeting with others face-to-face, don’t let electronic notifications interrupt the conversation, and check messages later. People sitting in your office will feel rudely mistreated if social workers are continually checking their phones during conversations.

Consult the professional literature when faced with uncertainty or self-doubt about social media use. In addition, there is an emerging consensus in the profession about standards of behavior, so this provides another source of guidance. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) reflects the digital landscape that social workers face every day and provides guidance on social media use.

Apply

Several schools of social work offer tips to new social workers for navigating the social media environment:

1. Ask if your agency has a policy on using social media. Understand and follow the expectations of the agency (South Dakota State University, n.d.). If the agency does not have a social media policy, offer to help develop one.
2. Recognize that regardless of how vigilant you are about privacy settings, it is likely that once something is posted, it may be shared by others, making it impossible to remove entirely (University of Alabama, 2017).
3. Use care in how you represent the social work profession (University of Michigan, 2017).
4. Consider in advance how you will respond to clients who attempt to contact you through social media (University of Waterloo, 2012).
5. Potential employers may ask permission for your password to see your social media posts. You can decline, but that might be a factor in whether you are offered a position
(Boise State University, n.d.). Review your posts and images from the point of view of an outsider.

New York University Silver School of Social Work posts the following Tips for Safe Social Networking on their website:

**Tips for Safe Social Networking**

- **Google yourself regularly** to discover what information can be found about you.
- **Create a professional website and social media presence** to build your online professional identity.
- **Understand each site’s privacy settings** and set them to the strictest settings whenever possible.
- **Familiarize yourself with your agency’s social media policies** or help them create policies.
- **Be mindful when posting to social media sites** especially if it involves your agency or clients.
- **Protect your client’s privacy** by not searching for them online without their consent unless you have a clinically significant reason.
- **Carefully manage client information** that you find online accidentally.
- **Create boundaries with clients** and do not friend or follow them under any circumstances.
- **Notify clients** that email or other online communications methods are not necessarily secure or private.
- **Keep your social work reputation in mind** and use professional judgment when posting or commenting online.
- **Create secondary online accounts** to separate your personal and professional life.
- **Remember that once something is posted online, even anonymously, the Internet does not forget.**

**Reflect**

If a potential employer asked to view your social media history, how would you respond? What would he or she find? How would you explain what is found in an interview?

**Check for Understanding**

To protect your representation on social media,

a. Delete negative posts at least within 24 hours
b. Ask clients not to post anything negative about you.
c. Ask Facebook to have negative posts removed.
d. Present yourself in a professional manner at all times.

Answer is D
References


