

## Harnessing Technology in the Social Work Discipline: Moving Forward Ethically

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### Abstract

This article discusses the importance of embracing technology to advance the discipline of social work. The development of service provision through digital platforms has created new considerations of the discipline's values, ethical standards, and practice standards. Although technology presents new challenges and potential problems, the advantages and potential expansion of service delivery to vulnerable populations are substantial. The importance of proactive policy development concerning agency, provider, and client social media use will be discussed, as well as specific domains of client privacy, informed consent, client confidentiality, the client-social worker relationship, the social worker's privacy, and boundary issues.

**Keywords:** ethics, social media, social work, technology

### Harnessing Technology in the Social Work Discipline: Moving Forward Ethically

This article will provide a brief history of social work ethics, the most recent changes to the *National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics* (2017), and the resulting practice standards regarding social media and technology. The article will also discuss the discipline's call to harness technology for social good through the 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work. The importance of proactive policy development concerning agency, provider, and client social media use will be discussed, with special attention to the six core values of social work, client privacy, informed consent and confidentiality, advocacy efforts, and boundary issues. Additionally, the article will encourage social workers to embrace technology in an ethical manner to assist clients and communities for change, while also advancing the discipline.

### History of Social Work Ethics

Harnessing technology in the practice of social work requires a brief look at the history of ethical social work practice and its evolution throughout the past sixty-five years. With the birth of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 1955, there was an immediate need to address not only the knowledge base and skills specific to the profession, but also the values guiding professional social work practice. Introducing a structured foundation of core social work values with the creation of the NASW quickly led to a need to operationalize how these values would impact social work practice behavior. A Code of Ethics was approved by NASW in October, 1960; discussion, clarification, revision, and significant change have been ongoing, up to and including the revisions and clarifications approved in August 2017 specifically related to the interface of social work practice with a digital/electronic environment.

As social workers have diligently worked to harness the broad, multi-faceted, person-in-environment realities that impinge upon their unique practice with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations, moral expectations and ethical behavior have not gone unnoticed. As professional social workers encountered complicated ethical issues in practice, they looked to their colleagues and their professional association to provide consultation, guidance, and mentorship in making practice decisions. Professional social workers' questions related to the day-to-day practice of social work led to the transformation of the original NASW Code of Ethics, which briefly stated fourteen proclamations focused on differentiating personal interests from professional interests and client privacy issues, to the current 20-plus pages outlining the six areas of ethical responsibility with over fifty subsections addressing specific practice issues (NASW, 2017).

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With the start of the new millennium, practicing professional social workers found themselves challenged by rapid changes in their practice environment. As the internet and social media became common business, household, social, and personal avenues of communication, social workers found themselves struggling with how this access to information and connection would impact ethical professional practice. Questions regarding record keeping, professional boundaries, confidentiality and privacy, exploitation, accountability, competence, and licensure regulation began to permeate the social work practice field. Organizational considerations for response to this rapidly changing practice environment resulted in collaborative efforts between NASW, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) during this time period and the publication of the *NASW, ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* in 2017. Immediately following the completion of this collaborative work, the NASW made changes to the NASW Code of Ethics in August 2017 to take effect in January 2018 (NASW et al., 2017). The document provides four main sections for the reader: (a) Provision of information to the public, (b) Designing and delivering services, (c) Gathering, managing, and storing information, and (d) Social work education and supervision (NASW, 2017).

Professional social workers now need to consider their own comfort and competence related to the use of technology. Social workers must have the necessary skills and knowledge to properly use technology and, in many cases, be able to instruct clients in the use of the technology. Social workers should consider technology as a component of continuing education practices. Expertise in developing policies and procedures that address all aspects of electronic/digital communication in the practice of professional social work is another important aspect of evolving social work response to the changing environment. Protecting client confidentiality, record keeping, client access to records, and worker access to electronic client information require attention as the ethical practice of social work transitions into day to day activities in the professional relationship. Finally, a new layer of responsibility is added to the professional relationship as social workers must be aware of laws, policies, and procedures in multiple jurisdictions as they strive to provide ethical services to clients through electronic/digital communication (NASW, 2017).

After preparing themselves with this new knowledge and skill, social workers must then consider the actual implications for practice in the professional helping relationship. With the 2017 NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) as a guide, social workers using electronic/digital communication in any form in the professional helping relationship should plan for discussion with clients that involves these new guidelines for informed consent. Some considerations for discussion would include informing clients about policies and procedures related to the use of technology in practice, verifying the identity and location information for clients receiving services through electronic means, and obtaining consent from clients before conducting electronic searches of the clients' information unless there is a situation of serious, imminent, or foreseeable risk of safety.

Social workers should also develop practices that avoid personal or non-work related electronic communication with clients, protect client confidentiality by ensuring client understanding of how and through what means of communication confidential information might be shared, and address the possibilities of breaches in confidentiality related to electronic storage and communication. Social workers should also consider practices that do not allow for posting client information on professional websites or on social media without client consent, avoiding any inappropriate sexual communication or sexual harassment through the use of technology with clients, colleagues, supervisees, students, and trainees, and providing informed consent to clients when using technology in research and evaluation. Finally, practice habits should include discouraging unethical conduct of colleagues involving the use of electronic communication and avoiding negative criticism of colleagues through electronic communication (NASW, 2017).

## **12 Grand Challenges of Social Work**

Although not all, the vast bulk of the changes to the 2017 Code of Ethics are due to advances in technology. The discipline of social work was initially slow to embrace technology in service provision, especially technology surrounding electronic sharing of information and harnessing the internet, social media, and communication platforms for client services (Oliver et al., 2015; Reardon, 2010). However, now the discipline has collectively issued a call to action for all social workers to embrace technology for the advancement of our clients and their well-being on all three levels of practice: micro, mezzo, and macro (Berzin et al., 2015; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Shevellar, 2017). One significant initiative that assisted with the collective push for social work to embrace technology was the 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work. Through the efforts of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW), the following areas were selected as priority foci for all social workers. These 12 areas (in no specific order) represent the vulnerable and oppressed populations and social work issues that most urgently need attention for service delivery, awareness, advocacy, policy, and legislation:

Table 1: 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work

Advance long and productive lives	End homelessness
Close the health gap	Harness technology for social good
Stop family violence	Promote smart decarceration
Ensure healthy development for all youth	Reduce extreme economic inequality
Eradicate social isolation	Build financial capability for all
Create social responses to a changing environment	Achieve equal opportunity and justice (Grand Challenges of Social Work, 2019)

The AASWSW recognized the need to harness technology for social good because of the opportunities and advances it affords clients (Berzin et al., 2015). Technology can be used to reach more people, including those who struggle with the lack of reliable transportation, geographical isolation, anxiety-related disorders and other mental health issues that make social outings challenging, and distance clients, such as military personnel. Additional benefits of technology extend to social service agencies, such as increased efficiency; faster service provision, a platform to organize groups around a specific cause; increased communication with clients, staff, and stockholders; more comprehensive research; and increased collaboration with other agencies and disciplines (Barsky & Reamer, 2018; Groshong & Phillips, 2015). Therefore, the discipline of social work must promote the use of technology, as clients, families, and communities need every advantage to edge them toward success (Berzin et al., 2015). However, the harnessing of technology must be done respectfully, honestly, accurately, and ethically.

As social workers embrace technology with more rigor and confidence, there are challenges that create resistance (Reamer, 2015). At the root of resistance may be an opposition to change by a practitioner. Genuine care and concern for clients may also hold social workers back from embracing technology (McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017; Reardon, 2010), especially if the client-social worker relationship is affected (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). Embracing new technology, specifically social media and electronically shared information, pulls five ethical categories to the forefront: client privacy, informed consent, client confidentiality, social worker privacy and confidentiality, and boundaries (Cummings, 2016; Groshong & Phillips, 2015; Reamer, 2013& 2015). Fortunately, the Code of Ethics already provides standards of how social workers are to address potential threats in these areas. While technology brings up new conversations, sticky situations, and potential ethical dilemmas, these are all predicated on already established principals. Therefore, it is not new issues as much as it is new ways of thinking about established values and standards already in place (Reamer, 2015).

### Social Work Core Values and Technology

The discipline and practice of social work is based on six core values: Service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). When technology is utilized to provide social work services, the core values must be honored. Like so many other concepts in social sciences, the six core values of social work are not perfectly delineated; they overlap and meld into each other. When looking at ethical ways to implement technology, common principles stand out that are based in the core social work values. The social work value of *service* means to provide help and guidance to those in need (Segal et al., 2019). Therefore, social workers should work to make needed services accessible to all clients, especially those in vulnerable and oppressed populations, including persons of minority status and those struggling with poverty, the digital divide, physical, mental, and/or cognitive disabilities, and other differences (Reamer, 2018). The social work value of *social justice* means to confront social problems that continue to create inequality to groups of people most vulnerable to prejudice, discrimination, marginalization, and intolerance (Segal et al., 2019). One method of addressing injustice is the provision of knowledge and advocacy to communities. Digital platforms and social media provide new and effective avenues to accomplish this goal and allow for quick and widespread dissemination of information. By using technology to assist with advocacy efforts, social workers can provide an even bigger voice to the voiceless and powerless. Technology also provides opportunities for clients that otherwise would have no realistic prospects for services, such as clients in rural settings, those struggling with social anxiety issues, and/or differences that cause them to isolate (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). Social workers can harness many types of technology to assist clients, including providing on-line assessments and interventions for suicide prevention, anxiety reducing smartphone apps, on-line support groups and chatrooms, and other services that are more appealing to clients struggling with logistical and/or personal barriers to traditional services (Simpson, 2017). Technology can be an avenue of freedom and hope for some of the most oppressed and vulnerable clients.

Two other social work values that overlap considerably concerning technology are dignity and worth of a person and the importance of human relationships. These values are also central to why some practitioners are leery of using technology in providing clinical services, as there is concern that the client-social worker relationship will be compromised and the quality of services provided reduced (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Reamer, 2018). The social work value of *dignity and worth of a person* speaks to respecting all people, their diversity, and supporting their right to self-determination (Segal et al., 2019). Social workers uphold the dignity and worth of a person by maintaining the cultural preferences of clients. This can create additional challenges with the use of technology, as not all cultures embrace technology with the same fervor. Whether it be culture preferences derived from age, life experiences, location, ethnicity, or other agents of socialization, social workers strive to provide services to clients in a manner that is respectful of their culture and preferences, while also working to increase overall quality of life. Social workers do this through assessing the client's preference of service delivery, familiarity with digital components, ensuring adequate access to technology, making language translation services available, honoring diversity, and furthering the cause of inclusion for all persons (Reamer, 2018).

The social work value of *importance of human relationships* addresses the foundational belief that the greatest tool a social worker possess is their ability to connect with their client (Segal et al., 2019). Technology makes creating this connection more difficult. Social workers are trained how to observe non-verbal communication, take clues from the environment around the client, and other dynamics that are not always attainable through digital platforms. However, just because the avenue of service delivery may be mechanized, this does not mean that the relationship between the client and social worker is artificial (American Psychiatric Association, 2018). Technology allows social workers to provide critically needed services to clients they may never meet face to face. Consequently, social workers who provide digital service must develop skills to assist with creating an authentic relationship through digital platforms, including acknowledging the learning curve for both practitioners and clients, decrease distractions to increase genuineness, conveying the appropriate boundaries for an on-line clinical relationship, always being prepared for sessions, minimizing noise or other barriers to quality streaming, and remaining hypervigilant for observable client dynamics (TheraNest, 2020). Fortunately, the skills of listening and empathy transcend digital platforms (Blakemore & Agllias, 2020), making it possible to establish a quality relationship between a client and practitioner in remote settings. Nevertheless, providing services digitally may create potential problems with privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, and client-practitioner boundaries. This emphasizes the importance of being adequately trained in how to provide digital services ethically and effectively, as key components in creating an authentic relationship is to ensure the protection of client information and proper boundaries (Barsky & Reamer, 2018; Groshong & Phillips, 2015).

Lastly, the social work code values of integrity and competence work simultaneously regarding technology and ethical practice. *Integrity* means to provide services in an honest and trustworthy manner, while *competence* means only providing services one is proficient in through adequate knowledge and properly training (Segal et al., 2019). When using digital platforms, it is vital that social workers ensure the information is accurate, comes from reliable sources, and is up to date (Reamer, 2018). Additionally, the information needs to be free of personal bias on the part of the practitioner and should represent the discipline of social work (Kimball & Kim, 2013). Being confident in the information provided to clients is also part of competency, as social workers must take on the responsibility for assessing if digitally based services will sufficiently provide what clients need, the client's level of comfort and capacity to use technology, and to insure the information being transferred back and forth is protected (McNeece & DiNitto, 2012; Reamer, 2018). Competence in technology meaning knowing how to use digital platforms and a commitment to life-long learning, as technology evolves rapidly. Without dedication to integrity, social workers place themselves in dangerous legal situations and will likely struggle to maintain a thriving on-line practice. Social workers lacking competence will be obsolete very quickly and risk placing their clients in danger due to lack of proficiency (Goldingay & Boody, 2017). As with any social work provision, if digitally delivered services are not grounded in all six core values of social work, they run a high risk of being unethical and harmful to clients, which is the antithesis of the discipline.

### **Social Media and Technology Policy**

One of the most important and proactive practices social work agencies and/or independent practitioners can do to protect clients and themselves is to create a social media and technology policy (Reamer, 2015). This is a document (paper or electronic) that clearly, and in language that clients and staff can understand, explains how social media and electronic sharing of information will be handled and guidelines of engagement. The documents should not be too cumbersome to understand, and brevity should be used to increase the readability of the document.

Additionally, the document needs to be easily navigated so both clients and staff can find answers to questions as they arise, especially in times of crisis (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). Standard 2.10 states, "Social workers

who use social media shall develop a social media policy they can share with clients (NASW et al., 2017, p. 18). The presence of a social media and technology policy provides protections for clients, social workers, and agencies. It is also the basis for risk reduction for social workers and agencies (Barsky & Reamer, 2018; Whittaker & Taylor, 2017).

### Client Privacy

When working with clients, social workers are often tasked with gathering detailed client information for screenings, assessments, intake paperwork, social histories, treatment planning, and diagnosing (Cox et al., 2019). Additionally, clients are not always forthcoming with information. This is reasonable, as clients often have a long history of being treated poorly by others, hurt and deceived by people who are supposed to take care of them, and suffer various forms of abuse and trauma. Trust and rapport take time to develop between a client and the social worker; therefore, minimization of important details, dishonesty, and resistance to share information should be expected (McNeece & DiNitto, 2012). Additionally, clients who have suffered trauma and/or struggle with substance use disorders may legitimately struggle with what the truth is, as both conditions dramatically affect one's memory and ability to be a historian (Burke-Harris, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014).

Experienced social workers often become accustomed to gathering information from clients, loved ones, and referral sources to fill in the gaps that exist. Therefore, the enticement to use social media and the internet to look up information concerning clients might be quite strong. Standard 3.09 states, "Except for compelling professional reasons, social workers shall not gather information about clients from online sources without the client's consent; if they do so, they shall take reasonable steps to verify the accuracy of the found information" (NASW et al., 2017, p. 38). Within this statement are many key words that need to be examined to appreciate what this standard is asking of social workers and agencies. First is the term *compelling professional reason*. The Code of Ethics uses the language *serious, imminent risk* as a defining reason to use social media or the internet to look up clients. Therefore, online searches might be appropriate in emergencies where a client is in immediate danger and the only way to ascertain where they might be or to engage in communication is to use social media or the internet. Even if this is the case, social workers should first consider other possibilities, such as contacting loved ones that have a current release of information, other social agencies that provide collaborative services, and/or the police (NASW et al., 2017).

Second, is the term *shall not*. It is important to recognize that the standard does not say *will not, must not, or is strictly prohibited* (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). To work with the Code of Ethics, social workers must be comfortable with some ambiguity (Knowles & Conner, 2016). *Shall not* appeals to the social work values, both to the practitioner and the discipline. A social worker will not be arrested if they look a client up on the internet, but there is a hope that as a practitioner who values integrity and the dignity and self-worth of clients, one will not engage in this activity.

Third is the phrase *without the client's consent*. There may be reasons why clients need to be looked up on social media and online: for the protection of social workers, other clients, and/or children. If a residential treatment facility provides services to women who struggle with substance use disorders and allows them to bring their dependent children with them to treatment, it may be the policy of the agency or a stipulation of government funding that the agency ensure that none of the residents are registered sex offenders. Therefore, all clients are checked against the registry before they are admitted to the program. If checking a client's name on social media or the internet is a standard operating procedure, this needs to be clearly stated in the agency social media and technology policy (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). That way, clients are properly informed and are not caught unawares. The decision concerning what information is routinely looked up on all clients needs to be taken seriously and reviewed often to ensure that this policy is in place for the right reasons.

The fourth and final term is *verify the accuracy*. It is vital that social workers understand the difference between real and fake news, and what is considered a reliable source of information (Smith, 2015). Only credible information obtained from the internet should be used, and the source of information and why it was obtained should always be carefully documented in the client's record (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). Regardless of why or how the information was collected, clients have the right to know that the social worker or agency obtained information from the internet and/or social media. Occasionally, a social worker may accidentally come across private information of a client. Although there is no intent toward malice, the best way to respect the importance of human relationships is to notify the client (Reamer, 2017).

When social workers find themselves in a position to use social media and the internet to obtain information about clients, there are several issues to keep in mind. First, social work is an American-made discipline. While it may have been heavily influenced and inspired by Elizabethan Poor Laws and social welfare

practices of England, social work as a discipline, academic science, and practiced art began in the United States (Segal et al., 2019). Additionally, social workers are held accountable to some of the most stringent and robust set of ethics of any of the helping professions. Therefore, social workers set the example for social services and other practitioners worldwide. This kind of responsibility demands disciplined and sound judgement. Second, social workers need to examine their motives before obtaining information from the internet. Social workers need to determine if they are conducting search engine inquiries because it is in the best interest of the client or if they are just being curious. If it is the latter, social workers need to cease and desist. In doing so, the values of the discipline are upheld, as is the professionalism of the practitioner (Barsky & Reamer, 2018).

### **Client Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

When looking at *The Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* (2017), the section concerning designing and delivering services is the largest, incorporating 27 practice standards. Standard 2.01 states, “When providing services to individuals, families, and groups using technology, social workers shall follow the NASW Code of Ethics just as they would when providing services to clients in person” (p. 11). This opens the door for social workers to embrace technology for clients struggling to access services in a traditional manner. However, proper policy must be followed. Clients have the right to know how their information might be shared and how the agency or individual practitioner will ensure that it is safe. When providing services to clients that never physically come to an office, confirming identity can be challenging. Clients also need to understand the benefits and risks concerning technology and their service provision. Additionally, it is also the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that clients know how to use the technology that will be part of their services, and for their personal and cultural preferences regarding the use of technology to be respected (Barsky & Reamer, 2018; Groshong & Phillips, 2015).

Some of the most practical safeguards that social service agencies and social workers can employ to ensure electronic information is protected is to use encrypted pathways and to establish inner-agency hierarchies to determine who needs to see client information, and who does not (Reamer, 2017). With the growing popularity of client portals in agencies and hospitals, information and tutorial trainings that help clients understand how to manage their information electronically should be made available. It is important that social service agencies and social workers anticipate problems, not just proactively address issues (Whittaker & Taylor, 2017). One noteworthy item is the implementation and maintenance of software programs to protect client information. Social work students often pick up a second major or minor in criminal justice, public administration, or child development to assist them in their future career goals. Social workers with additional training in computer science or cyber security would be highly marketable in today’s social work market (Reardon, 2010). Additionally, social work preparatory programs should include curriculum that trains social work students how to safely and ethically incorporate technology in social work settings as part of their overall education in social work ethics (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

While some approaches to protecting client information are straightforward and part of regulatory boards, other scenarios can be a bit trickier. For example, what happens when social workers are working from home? Due to the increase in distance services and use of telehealth, a social worker’s office can be anywhere. Enforcing rules in the office concerning password-protected computers, privacy screens, locked filing cabinets, and documents being shredded is easier due to office policies, staff trainings, supervision, and peer pressure to follow the rules. However, in one’s home, the idea that no one is watching can cause social workers to become complacent and develop poor habits while handling client information, creating potential breaches of confidentiality (Groshong & Phillips, 2015). If a social worker is working on their home computer in the evening, and their partner suddenly remembers an email that must be returned, the use of a shared home computer can quickly turn into a channel of confidential information. Therefore, it is important for social workers to be dedicated to the same safeguards at home that are used at the office to ensure client confidentiality (Cumming, 2016). If social service agencies allow social workers to work at home, the agency social media and technology policy needs to clearly address how client information will be protected. Additionally, individual practitioners also need their own developed, written policy that is accessible to clients (Barsky & Reamer, 2018).

Additional situations that need attention to ensure confidentiality are networking sites that are established for clients, such as social media venues for support. Innovative social service agencies may want to develop an online source of support for clients and other community members who are struggling with specific issues, as well as loved ones. Commonly there is factual information provided, suggestions, networking services for support in the community, and oftentimes quotes or personal testimonies from clients who have made significant progress and want to share their story of hope with others.

It is crucial that before online sites go live there are policies in place for how to deal with potential problems that might arise (Reamer, 2015; Whittaker & Taylor, 2017). Specifically, what will the agency do with inappropriate, offensive, or unkind comments by users? What happens if a site user provides too much information and unknowingly identifies themselves or if comments and posts reveal locations of clients who are in danger of abusive partners or vengeful peers? What if a client who was living a life of recovery relapses and is now not the shining example of the agency; is their testimony removed from the site page? Proactive thinking and policy development, education of staff and users of the site, and a posted social media and technology policy are all key to having a healthy and effective support site (Barsky & Reamer, 2018, Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Reamer, 2015). Bottom line—if an agency creates a media site, they are accountable for the activity of the site. Therefore, having an established plan saves a great deal of time, trouble, and potential liability (Reamer, 2013).

### **Advocacy**

One of the most beneficial aspects of the internet and an element of technology that social work needs to embrace is the ability to substantially increase advocacy efforts (Berzin et al., 2015). Awareness of issues and the depth of problems is often the first step to advocacy and meaningful systemic change (Netting et al., 2017). However, the guiding principles of the social work ethics and technology still apply. The information provided to the public must be presented in a respectful, honest, accurate, and ethical manner (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). When social workers become personally and professionally involved in advocacy, passions can run high. In order to get the assistance clients need, there may be a temptation to exaggerate information, present skewed data, and/or use fake news as a means of “shock and awe” to get others attention and support (Shevellar, 2017). If not careful, the importance of the cause and the greater good could cause social workers to engage in dishonest dissemination of information. This is in direct opposition to the core social work value of integrity (Segal et al., 2019). To avoid ethical practices from being compromised, social work policies involve a number of checks and balances. Therefore, the agency social media and technology policy should address how misleading information on agency monitored sites will be handled (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). Additionally, before information is put out to the public, it is important to run it by others who share the same ethical standards. It is common for passion to cloud one’s judgement; therefore, supervision, consultation with colleagues, and providing means for public viewers to contact the overseer of a media site about concerns of posted content offers preservation of ethical practice.

Social service agencies must be cognizant that information and posts on sponsored media sites reflect the agency (Kays, 2011; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017). Therefore, proactive policies need to be developed concerning what is considered appropriate and keeping with the values and mission of the agency. Staff members need to understand what types of posts and information on social media will be allowed and what happens to posts that reflect poorly on the agency. Additionally, if an agency’s social media and technology policy stipulates that due to the importance of the agency’s reputation in the community, a social worker’s personal and private social media also falls under the agency’s policy, clear guidelines need to be proactively developed (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). Employees need to provide assurance that they understand these policies to avoid future problems. The use of social media and technology to forward advocacy should unequivocally be utilized to increase awareness and movement toward change (Berzin et al., 2015; Shevellar, 2017); however, proactive problem shooting and a well-developed social media and technology policy is an agency’s best defense against problems (Reamer, 2017).

### **Privacy Issues and Boundaries**

If there is one collective mantra of social workers, it is the statement, “Once a client, always a client.” Unlike other social service professions, social workers believe that regardless of how much time lapses, the power differential between a client and a social worker can never be fully eliminated; therefore, there are a number of ethical standards surrounding the client/social worker relationship (Segal et al., 2019). Social workers are not to engage in dual relationships with clients (NASW, 2017), which means everything from physical intimacy to purchasing a used car from a previous client can be considered unethical. Therefore, when social media platforms emerged, social work ethics also had to evolve to address this new potential area for ethical dilemmas (Reamer, 2015). Initially, the edict was social workers should not have a presence on social media, thereby eliminating the potential for a dual, online relationship (Kays, 2011). However, this was an unrealistic expectation for the profession.

In time, the discipline would come to see social media as a tool to be utilized to help clients and advance the profession (Berzin et al., 2015). This creates a complex problem. Some social workers are open to the use of social media as a means of assisting clients and are comfortable with the technology, while other social workers feel the hazards that come with social media outweigh the potential good, and are opposed to embracing new

technology (Oliver et al., 2015). Furthermore, there are some social workers who simply lack the competence to effectively and ethically use technology to assist clients. Social service agencies need to engage in open conversations concerning the use and benefits of technology, provide training opportunities for staff, and support innovation concerning technology (Reamer, 2015). The possible issues that could come up from the use of social media and potential client/practitioner relationship issues are endless (Groshong & Phillips, 2015). What happens if a social worker friends a client unknowingly? What happens when attempts at advocacy from one's personal account cause past clients to want to join the efforts? What about mutual friends of mutual friends, creating issues where clients and social workers find themselves in similar social media circles and viewing posted material? This is why social work ethics are standards of practice, not explicit rules. To be a social worker means taking the ambiguity of the standards and using the values of the profession, common sense, supervision, consultation, and on-going evaluation to determine a plan to move forward (Reamer, 2013; Segal et al., 2019).

Additionally, practitioners must be aware that clients can seek out information concerning social workers through social media and internet searches. This means that social workers need to protect their personal information and their professional persona. Social workers utilizing personal and professional social media and other electronic forms of communication need to be proficient with privacy settings and take on this responsibility, even in their own personal electronic spaces (Kays, 2011; Knowles & Cooner, 2016). In the event that inappropriate contact occurs between a social worker and a client (past or present), it is the social worker's responsibility to minimize the damage, inform the client of the situation, and make countermeasures to ensure similar occurrences do not happen again (Barsky & Reamer, 2018).

It takes a very special kind of person to be an effective social worker. Social workers are customarily kind, giving, passionate people who are so dedicated to helping others that they often are self-sacrificing of their own time. Because of these common characteristics, social workers are vulnerable to chronic overworking (Branson, 2017). Research indicates that social workers logically know the importance of self-care and professional boundaries, but struggle to engage in self-care due to their sense of duty to others (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Williams, 2015). Advances in technology have allowed social workers to work from anywhere and anytime. If a social worker does not establish proper boundaries surrounding work hours, they could work non-stop. Social service agencies commonly have social workers on-call for after-hour client crises. Social workers may carry a work cell phone so clients can call them anytime. Clients may be able to email their social worker, who might be savvy enough to receive emails on their phone, making this another point of constant contact. While a social worker wants to be available to clients as needed, what happens when this becomes the expectation of the client? If a social worker makes themselves available 24 hours a day, and the client becomes dependent on this level of service, the social worker is placing them in danger of abandoning the client in a time of not being available (Barsky & Reamer, 2018).

To avoid this dilemma, social workers must be diligent in creating and maintaining professional boundaries (Knowles & Cooner, 2016). Additionally, there needs to be an established plan of action for what clients are to do if they are unable to get ahold of a social worker after hours. The agency's social media and technology policy needs to address what kinds of situations constitute an after-hours contact, methods of contact that are appropriate, and backup numbers in case the primary contact is not available. Additionally, if a social worker knows they are not going to be available to clients for a specific time, such as a vacation or out-of-town conference, it is the social worker's responsibility to inform clients of their absence and whom to call during this time period (Barsky & Reamer, 2018). Being proactive and communicative can set everyone up for success. Social workers put the needs of clients ahead of themselves (NASW, 2017). While this is a common motivation and personal characteristic of social workers, it is also an avenue for potential ethical issues if proper boundaries are not established.

### **Moving Forward and Recommendations**

Fortunately, the NASW Code of Ethics was revised in 2017 to account for new challenges that social workers face in the digital world. As social workers struggle to learn the new and revised ethical standards, they are also accountable to practice standards that have been established as a direct result of the change to the Code of Ethics. This can be a daunting task. However, most licensed social workers are required to obtain continuing education units routinely for license renewal, and numerous states require that a portion of the education units be in ethics.

This provides opportunities for social workers to become more aware of ethical changes, their new responsibilities, and ways to navigate new challenges. Ethical and practice standards are purposefully written with ambiguous language. As social workers become more familiar with the changes to the Code of Ethics, questions, conflicts, and dilemmas will emerge (McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017).



This creates the need for an on-going collective conversation about the Code of Ethics, practice standards, and how to go about serving clients in the best way possible, while also ensuring their rights, safety, and dignity. Therefore, continued trainings for social workers is highly recommended. Although traditional lecture and workshop trainings are necessary to assist social workers in becoming proficient with new standards surrounding technology, there also need to be opportunities for hands-on learning to increase competency. If social workers are being asked to provide services through digital platforms, using technology for training purposes is a basic method for helping practitioners to become more familiar and comfortable with this medium. This would also develop deeper empathy for clients who might be struggling with digital platforms or have a strong dislike for this service method but have no other realistic choice. As with any substantial change, there is a frustrating learning curve that must be embraced and first attempts are often awkward, filled with confusion and mistakes. Social workers and clients can unite in their technology challenges and this can be beneficial for starting to build an authentic clinical relationship through digital channels.

One of the most important arenas for the promotion of technology in social work is higher learning preparatory programs. Other human service majors are also working to develop graduates who are ready to provide effective digitally based social services. If social work education resists technology, practitioners may be viewed as inept (Baker et al., 2014). Social work education programs should include ethical and practice standards that accompany the discipline, with inclusion of considerations for social media and technology. Additionally, research indicates that social work programs that provide educational services, such as classes, labs, and simulations through digital platforms, produce practitioners who are more diverse in their skill sets and comfortable in using technology in service delivery (Bentley et al., 2015; Fange et al., 2014). Social work is a scientific discipline and a practiced art. Therefore, students should have the opportunity for experiential learning surrounding the use of technology. University and college programs should be encouraged to develop innovative methods of teaching this information, including on-line and/or blended course work, peer to peer consulting on case analysis through digital simulations, required pod casts and on-line training modules, use of mental health smartphone apps with self-reflective activities, and video-conferencing (Baker et al., 2014). Incorporating digital methods for learning provides students with academic content, but also opportunities to practice and rehearse social work skills (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). This methodology also provides students with opportunities to learn from their mistakes above and beyond a onetime test or writing assignment (Simpson & Maltese, 2017). As social work education programs provide more digital platform learning opportunities, evaluations need to be used to determine if what methods equate to learning and competence in the ethical use of technology. Furthermore, methods shown to be successful should be disseminated at conferences and in academic journals to inform other preparatory programs of potential teaching methods to encourage retention of information.

Knowledge-based information, open conversations, trainings, opportunities to engage, consultation, and supervision are methods needed to assist social workers, social work students, and the discipline to understand their accountability to the new standards surrounding social media and technology. Too many times, innovation is met with challenges and problems, causing one to give up and remain with the status quo. As technology advances, so should the discipline of social work. Therefore, a final recommendation is for preparatory programs to consider encouraging students to take additional classes in mass communication and computer science. The students will have a valuable skill set to bring with them to the practice of social work and will be on the frontline of advancing the discipline.

An area of needed research is how to best help social workers and social work students learn information surrounding new ethical and practice standards. Additionally, social workers need training to translate new information into competence in skills and confidence to embrace new technologies that will advance the discipline. Experiential learning opportunities should be developed in social work curriculums, with learning outcomes recorded to determine if there is a relationship between hands-on experiences in a safe, low-risk environment and an increase in confidence and motivation for future adoption of technology in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

The increased presence of social media in practice settings is an area that needs to be addressed by preparatory programs and agencies to protect both clients and practitioners (Knowles & Cooner, 2016). Understanding the new and revised ethical and practice standards in social work regarding the use of digital technology is important to clients served, practitioners, and the discipline as a whole. The advances provided by technology are too vast and prospective to disregard because of challenges that come with the use of new digital platforms. Although risk management is vital to the protection of clients and practitioners, fear cannot be allowed to squelch innovation. Ongoing education, communication, discussions, informed policy, and evaluation of new practices are key to creating an environment where social workers and clients feel comfortable to engage new

technologies with confidence. Harnessing technology for the social good means better services to clients and communities, which is at the heart of the social work discipline.

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