

## Only connect: unifying the social in social work and social media

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## **'Only Connect': Unifying the social in social work and social media**

### ***'Only Connect...live in fragments no longer'***

*(E.M.Forster, Howards End).*

In 1910 when Forster published his novel 'Howards End,' the telephone was a recent invention and digitisation a mere fancy. Despite this, the epigraph to Forster's story, cited above, strikes an uncannily relevant note, over a century later, with so much of contemporary life dominated by the exigencies of connectivity and a concomitant concern that 'we look to technology for ways to be in relationships' (Turkle, 2011, p.xii) rather than pursuing intimacy in the 'real' world. Whilst this may appear to be an exclusively contemporary concern, 'Howards End' demonstrates otherwise. One of the central characters in the novel, Margaret, reflects that the more people who exist in one's social network, the easier it becomes to replace them – a thought which would be equally apposite in the current social media milieu. Forster's entreaty to 'only connect' which carries the message of Howards End, offers both a call to individual psychic unity and mental well-being, as well as a plea for the paramount importance of social relationships – an appeal that is perhaps even more relevant today than in 1910 when the novel was published.

This paper takes Forster's faith in the magnitude of human connection as the starting point for exploring the tensions and possibilities arising from integrating social networking within a relationship based approach to social work. Whilst much of the literature on social networking concentrates on the potentially negative social implications (Turkle, 2011), this paper is chiefly concerned with uncovering ways in

which the opportunities afforded by online space have been utilised effectively and further in understanding the barriers to this. The paper acknowledges that in the rapidly changing world of the internet, definitions of social networking and available platforms are transforming constantly, thus rendering much of what is written obsolete almost before it is published. However, for the purposes of clarity this paper adopts Kaplan's definition of social media as a 'group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0' (Kaplan, 2010, p.61). Whilst much of the discussion within the paper relates to Twitter and Facebook, two of the most widely utilised international social networking platforms, it is also applicable to other forms of social networking which match Kaplan's definition.

Beginning with a discussion of recent UK professional conduct cases where social workers have been sanctioned for inappropriate social media postings, the paper explores online networking as a 'bad object' within Klein's concept of splitting. This is elaborated within a historical context where new technology has demonstrably been greeted with fear. Examples of positive relational practices educed by social media are discussed and contextualised further within a social work context. Emerging data from an ongoing research project (Turner, 2016) is also identified and discussed. The paper concludes by returning to Forster's plea for connection and suggests that the social work profession should advance this further through the opportunities provided by online networking.

### **Living in Fragments?**

Social networking often provokes passionate reactions either in favour of, or against this emergent form of online communication. However, there is rarely agreement or as

Forster termed it, connection between the opposing sides, resulting in a form of 'splitting' which this paper will explore further (Klein, 1935). What is not in dispute, however, is the vigorous expansion of social networking sites and their facility for instigating, extending and sometimes ending personal relationships between users. The last ten years have seen a rapid expansion in the use of online social networking tools, for example Facebook and Twitter, and the social media field continues to grow at an almost overwhelming pace. In October 2012, Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook announced that the site now has over 1 billion active accounts and it is estimated that 38% of those using the Internet globally are active Facebook users (Balick, 2014). Therefore if Facebook was a nation, it would currently be the third largest in the world (Balick, 2014), giving some idea of the power and influence of just one social media platform.

At the same time as this rapid expansion in social networking, social work has witnessed a move back to relationship based methods with a renewed emphasis on placing these at the core of practice. Ruch (2005) suggests that relationship based practice is characterised by 'practitioners developing and sustaining supportive professional relationships in unique and challenging situations', a definition which could also be effectively applied to online networking. On social media platforms, users often build supportive personal or professional relationships, specific to their particular context or circumstances (Thackray, 2014). The possibilities created by uniting the relational possibilities afforded by social networking with the move towards relationship based social work represents a moment in time which could be uniquely exploited by the profession. However, for social work, with its traditional emphasis on confidentiality around often sensitive information, the necessity to consider social networking in

education and practice, has created a number of highly complex ethical challenges. Responses to these, which often raise ethical questions of their own, can be interpreted psycho-analytically drawing from Klein's work on splitting (1935). Rather than maintaining a middle ground in considering the potentially beneficial or adverse consequences of social networking, much of the social work response has been deleterious. Social networking platforms or those that unwittingly transgress whilst using them have commonly been positioned as either 'good' or 'bad' objects, thereby extending social work's traditionally unfavourable relationship with the media (Warner, 2014).

Examples of this are clearly evidenced in the widespread reporting of boundary transgressions within social work practice and education, as well as the lack of robust advice available for practising social workers on how to negotiate social media. In the UK both the HCPC and BASW have produced guidelines for Social Workers in using social media and these accompany the Professional Capabilities Framework (College of Social Work, 2012) which all require social workers to maintain 'appropriate conduct.' However, where relationships are concerned 'appropriate conduct' is highly context specific and therefore with the relative newness of digital space such 'appropriate conduct' may be particularly difficult to define. As Thackray (2014) describes, 'when we move to a new locality, we may find neighbourhood expectations that determine how we relate to neighbours and local tradespeople and these expectations may differ from where we lived previously' (2014, p.13). The same is true of online spaces, where 'many of the unwritten rules are learned by osmosis through engagement with others' (Thackray, 2014, p.13). As a consequence, 'appropriate conduct' becomes difficult to define and is often only judged retrospectively when a transgression has occurred

rather than in a manner which guides social workers and builds confidence in their use of digital spaces. A recent case in the UK, for example, involved Siobhan Condon a social worker who was given a 12 month conditions of practice order by the HCPC, following Facebook posts relating to service users on her caseload. This social worker had posted onto her Facebook page, "I'm in court tomorrow for a case where there is a high level of domestic violence amongst many things." Once the trial was over she followed these comments with another posting stating:

It's powerful to know that... Children's lives have just been massively changed for the better and now they are safe and protected from harm and have every hope for the future (Community Care, 2014).

Hearing this case, the HCPC's Conduct and Competence Committee found that the social worker had believed her Facebook page could only be seen by her friends and had not considered the implications of wider public access. Additionally, her lack of technological knowledge about privacy settings and potential threats to these caused her to leave her Facebook posts completely open to members of the public. This led to her comments being accessed by the mother of the three children in the case, who made a complaint after she searched for the social worker on Google.

Considering the conduct of Siobhan Condon, the social worker in this case, the HCPC found that this was the first episode of serious concern during her 15 year career. Nevertheless, the panel remained concerned that she still did not 'fully recognise the unacceptability of her misconduct,' as she had suggested that her manager had seen

her post a comment to Facebook and had not asked her to remove this. The social worker also referred to the general lack of support and professional supervision available to her at this time. The HCPC panel therefore found that public confidence in social work could be seriously threatened by her conduct and thus her fitness to practice was impaired (Community Care, 2014).

With regard to the social workers evidence about lack of supervision, the HCPC panel concluded that it was the social worker's responsibility to seek this and therefore imposed the 12 month conditions of practice order. This requires the social worker to stay under the close supervision of a social work line manager registered with the HCPC and to meet with them on a monthly basis. There is also a mandatory requirement that the social worker submit to reflective overviews within the 12 month period evidencing what she has learned from these meetings. (Community Care, 2014)

Popular media coverage of this story was intense and often vitriolic with the UK tabloid, the Daily Mail using it as a vehicle for undermining social work as a profession. Speaking about the media coverage, after the HCPC verdict, the social worker involved, Siobhan Condon suggested that the response to the story demonstrated the public's 'absolute hatred for social workers, social care and social work' (Community Care, 2015)

The adverse publicity that this and other similar cases have attracted has resulted in a repeatedly defensive response from the social work profession, so often under media attack for other reasons, leading to a suspicion of social media which becomes, like Siobhan Condon herself a 'bad object' (Balick, 2014). Evidence of this shows that in the

UK in 2014 over 60% of local authorities banned their employees from social media use at work (Hardy, 2014) whilst emerging research supports social workers complete abstinence from social networking platforms (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan and Fullmer, 2013).

In addition to high profile stories such as that of Siobhan Condon which are directly relevant to social work, media reporting of other damaging relationships facilitated by the internet, further the profession's misgivings about engaging too closely with online networking. In 2014, the widely reported death of Twitter troll Brenda Leyland caused Barnett (2014) to call for reconciliation between 'online' and 'real' lives in her lobby that 'Online actions have real life consequences.'

Whilst such appeals may attract popular support they can also be viewed as further splitting of online connection from 'real relationship' thus furthering the acceptance that at a time of unprecedented connectivity we are paradoxically perhaps more fragmented (Turkle, 2011). This distinction between 'online' and 'real' selves seems also to reach to the heart of much of the mistrust which surrounds social media use in social work and elsewhere. Turkle (2011) in her influential book 'Alone Together' suggests that 'the connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects – with dispatch.' Developing this hypothesis throughout the book, Turkle claims that we would 'rather text than talk' (p.1) and that 'these days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships' (p.xii). The key phrase in this last claim is 'these days' as despite the partial legitimacy of some of Turkle's concerns her discussion in 'Alone Together' is predicated on a romanticized view of relationships prior to the advent of social networking. Forster's character, Margaret quoted earlier



suggests that social relationships were expendable, certainly at the time that *Howards End* was published in 1910 and history generally counters many of Turkle's more powerful arguments. For example, the growth of urbanisation, created by the advance of industrialisation created significant demographic shifts, thereby offering younger people an alternative to their own small communities which they commonly found both oppressive and dull (Winstanley, 2011). Bartlett (2015, p.219) offers a similarly holistic overview of cultural change, which counters Turkle's endemic criticism of the connectivity created by technology:

Transformative technologies have always been accompanied by optimistic and pessimistic visions of how they will change humanity and society. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates worried that the recent invention of writing would have a deleterious effect on the memories of young Greeks who, he predicted, would become 'the hearers of many things and will have learned nothing'. When books began to roll off Johannes Gutenberg's press, many suspected they would be 'confusing and harmful', overwhelming young people with information. Although Marconi believed his radio was helping humanity win 'the struggle with space and time,' as his invention became popular, others feared that children's impressionable minds would be polluted by dangerous ideas and families rendered obsolete as they sat around listening to entertainment programmes.

The history of the telephone demonstrates similar splitting in both 'optimistic' and pessimistic' responses ranging from fear to irrational hopes of cure:

The telephone was often viewed with skepticism and not a little fear.

There was something magical about sounds coming from a thin wire,

and many people were afraid that the contents of the lines would spill out in some way if there was a break. Many elderly persons refused to touch a telephone for fear of electrical shock. Others tried to take advantage of the telephone...in some towns persons suffering from rheumatism went to the telephone stations in the hope that the electrical impulses received by their bodies would cure them ( Ehrenkrona, N.D).

Balick (2014, p.xxix) explores these reactions further through a psychoanalytic lens to investigate the 'psychodynamics of social networking.' Balick also discusses Klein and her work on splitting, additionally drawing from object relations, to suggest that all inter personal relationships involve an imagined object or third part, as much as the 'reality' of the other and therefore that the split between online and real life is mirrored elsewhere. The facility to connect with others and simultaneously to access online information feeds our primitive desire to be seen and known by 'the other' whilst at the same time, feeding our fear of being devoured by them. Within a contemporary world of 'context collapse' (Wesch, 2008) where we can google each other constantly and maintain contact throughout the day and night, Balick argues that much of the fear of social networking comes from our primitive fear of annihilation (Balick, 2014).

Psychoanalytic theory also offers a possible explanation for some of the negative behaviour which occurs in online space, such as the 'trolling' discussed earlier. If as Balick suggests, primitive anxiety accompanies change and the unknown, then social

media can become a distinct cultural threat causing what Hoggett (2000, p.40) describes as a 'violent' process of 'projective identification into the other.' Social networking sites thereby become the repository for the split off emotions which are unconsciously projected into them and people behave accordingly. Similarly, social works prevailing ambivalent response towards social media, manifested in the nebulous guidance discussed earlier may also be explained within psychoanalytic terms. Trevithick (2010) suggests that a failure to integrate or to deny something uncomfortable is frequently used as a defence mechanism in social work, by workers and service users alike. Where, as I have argued, primitive anxiety may be triggered by social media, denial acts as the perfect antidote, simply refuting any uncomfortable thoughts or feelings that may trigger anxiety (Trevithick, 2010) and only allowing them to consciousness as far as nebulous guidance urging people to act 'appropriately' online. Returning to the case of Siobhan Condon, her sanctioning by the HCPC can also be explained in parallel psychoanalytic terms through what Perera (1986), drawing from Jungian theory, describes as the 'Scapegoat Complex.' In this, individuals like Condon are culturally positioned as bearers of the split off shadow traits of a bureaucratic, intellectualised and dominant western cultural paradigm. With the social work profession in a parental, authority role Condon, like a transgressing child, bears directly all of the anxiety and denial which the rapid expansion of social media provokes. Her 'transgression' is punished via public sanctioning and accompanying media storm and the opportunity to learn collectively from the experience is thereby lost. Condon instead is cast into exile and isolated both from her profession, her peers and from the valuable learning which her experience might have elicited. Sanctioning her publically, both formally and via media trial also allows for a purging of the wider cultural anxiety which accompanies the

advent of social networking and social work, traditionally a whipping boy for the media and public alike (Warner, 2015) provides a perfect vehicle for this.

However, as Balick (2014) discusses the affordances of online space are by no means entirely negative but rather offer forums in which 'individuals communicate with others, share links to important papers, make requests and have them kindly answered, among a whole variety of other potential *interpersonal and social* experiences' (p.xxix).

These 'interpersonal and social experiences' also lie at the heart of relationship based social work practice and thereby have much to offer the profession. Social work is intimately linked with 'helping people and promoting responsive environments that support human growth, health, and satisfaction in social functioning' (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, p. 51) yet where lack of technological knowledge is sanctioned and penalised, rather than recognised and supported, the living in 'fragments' lamented by Forster is perpetuated and the connections afforded by social media are abandoned to anxiety. The challenge for the social work profession is to embrace the opportunities offered by emerging good practices made possible by the new world of connectivity which Forster could only dream of.

### **'Meaningful Moments.'**

Drawing from Stern (2004) Howe suggests that some of most profound relational experiences come from 'minds meeting minds' in key 'meaningful moments' which need not be mediated by spoken language alone (2008, p.164). This is interesting to consider in the context of popular criticisms of social networking which often cite the lack of face to face encounter or speech as demonstrative of the lack of 'real' relational value. Turkle for example, describes teenagers who 'will only 'speak' online, who rigorously avoid face-to-

face encounters' (2011, p.178). Yet, as I hope to show the 'meaningful moments' Howe describes can be made more possible by the networks created on social media, partly because of its infinite nature. As Bolton (2011) describes:

Although the technology and tools are relatively new, the concept of social networking has been around much longer than the Internet. People are naturally social creatures; that's what makes social media such a powerful concept. Social media channels allow human beings to sort themselves seamlessly into groups and factions and maintain intimate relationships at greater distances than ever before.

Research by Hampton, Goulet, Rainie and Purcell (2011) offers some interesting evidence as to how people may organise themselves into such groups, which counters many more critical accounts of social media conduct. The study found that use of Facebook both allowed people much more constant contact with close friends, thus strengthening bonds and facilitating re-kindling of dormant ties. Alongside this the research found that the study participants reported mostly positive experience of social media sites and that generally they felt that people online could be trusted. Bartlett (2015, p. 238), in his often murky enquiry into the 'dark web' also comes to believe that

The dark net fosters breathtaking creativity...self-harm and suicide forums are filling a gap in health provision: somewhere for people with mental health problems to come together and share their experiences from the comfort of their own homes.

Although Bartlett admits that everything was not 'pleasing and uplifting' in the world of the dark web, he leaves his research refusing to split the good and the bad created

therein. In Kleinian terms he achieves the 'depressive position' in which fears are faced more openly rather than wildly split or projected onto others(1935).

Examples of similarly relational practices, with less of a dark underbelly are also constantly emerging within social work practice and education, thereby connecting participants in creative ways. Scourfield and Taylor (2013) describe the establishment of a Social Work Book Group movement, where students at different institutions connect virtually to discuss a set book:

Book club meetings are scheduled quarterly and advertised directly to the undergraduate programme by means of a university-based digital platform and through a dedicated Twitter feed to students and the wider UK social work and social care community. The Twitter presence was established and initially driven by the academic involved to generate and gauge interest; this form of promotion continues with the additional advertising of events through the student facilitators' private Twitter feeds.

In an exemplar of the connection made possible through online social networking, the author of a set Book Club text saw the publicity on Twitter and asked to attend the group, as Scourfield and Taylor describe:

This same author subsequently attended the book club, reading specific portions of her work where the content aligned particularly well with social work education in the area of domestic violence.

This example of the Book Club demonstrates vividly the opportunities for connection made possible by online networking, speaking vividly to Forster's call

to 'live in fragments no longer.' The success of the Book Group movement is also testament to this, growing from a small start to an international movement which connects multiple institutions and people every year (Taylor, A , 2014 b).

Local authorities within the UK are also beginning to recognise the potential importance of embracing digital technology within practice, as evidenced in Nottinghamshire County Council's recent pilot project. This provided social workers with tablet devices, in order that they could save time and effort on constantly returning to their office space and whilst the ethical implications had to be considered in depth, the project found that the time dedicated to this brought great rewards in terms of enhancing practice and practitioner morale. (Donovan, 2014).

Academic and practice relationships can also be formed through social networking, turning the virtual into the 'real' as Westwood (2014) describes in her account of a book which resulted entirely from connections forged on social media. I have also written elsewhere (Turner, 2014) of discovering the potential of social media for lessening isolation, when the competing demands of single parenthood and academic work constrained my attendance at meetings and other networking gatherings. At this time, social networking offered me many 'meaningful moments' and a world of connection which I simply could not access elsewhere. I became the host of a weekly Twitter chat, #eswphd which drew together a small community of practice, all interested in similar topics within social care research. This in turn resulted in a group of 'tweeps' who supported me as I struggled with a frozen shoulder in the last lap of my PhD process. Dubbing themselves #teamturner, my 'supporters' most of whom I have never met in real life helped me sustain the self -confidence I needed to achieve my end

result (Turner, 2014). Thackray (2014) similarly describes the personal benefits gained from her engagement with #phdchat, a thriving Twitter community which supported her through her own research studies, whilst both Taylor and McKendrick (2014) demonstrate ways in which traditional academic hierarchies can be equalised through different forms of digital learning.

Similar acts of community support can be seen constantly on social networking sites, with the recent #YorkFloods2015 hash tag on Twitter creating a groundswell of support for those in the UK who had their homes flooded in the endless downpour of winter 2015 (Goodley, S and Allen, K, 2015). Internationally, perhaps one of the most striking examples of this form of solidarity is evidenced by the #JeSuisCharlie which trended at the top of the Twitter hashtags on 7<sup>th</sup> January the day that the journalists working for the satirical magazine 'Charliehebdo' were attacked and some of them killed. By the next day the hashtag had appeared 3.4 million times and was being used nearly 6, 500 times per minute (Telegraph 9/1/15). A recent Editorial for Social Work Education, the International journal (Turner, 2016) also demonstrates the power of social media to unify and act as a force for international good. With much of the discussion at a recent Annual Board meeting highlighting the challenges of social media, a Board member from Nepal also cited the ways in which social networking considerably aided the international responses to the recent disasters in his country.

It is these 'meaningful moments,' often at times of crisis, that social networking has the capacity to achieve so effectively. Countering Turkle's argument that we expect less from each other (2011) these examples of people gathering to help with food and clothes during a time of flooding or to show international solidarity after a terrorist



attack, demonstrate Rafferty's powerful point that 'Sometimes it is the technology that brings people together' (2014). This is also the aim of relationship based social work – to create effective relationships between people, which help to counter isolation and prejudice. If social workers are able to unify the positive capacity of social networking with the aims of relationship based practice, the unification which Forster urged in 'Howards End' is enhanced rather than discouraged.

### **'A small voice in a big debate'**

In her influential paper on Relationship based practice, Trevithick (2003) identifies eight areas of practice essential for creating effective relationships in social work:

1. assessment;
2. a foundation on which to build future work;
3. help for people experiencing difficulties relating to self, others, and their wider social environment;
4. help, support and care for people who are vulnerable and reliant on particular services for their well-being;
5. advocacy and mediation for people experiencing discrimination or difficulties accessing services and resources;
6. an approach to hold and contain anxiety in times of transition or crises;
7. a foundation for capacity building

8. a practice that can bear witness and report on 'social ills' as they impact on the lives of service users

Within social work practice there are many emerging examples which testify to the myriad ways in which social networking can become a force for building the principles of relationship based social work which Trevithick recommends.

I have already explored the capacity of social networking sites for helping to unify people experiencing difficulties with their wider social environment and at times of crisis, as in the Paris attacks on Charlie Hebdo. The creation of Social Work Book Groups and the examples drawn from my initial encounters with social media as a harassed single parent, also testify to the potential that social networking has to deliver different forms of capacity building and to advocate for people who may not be able to access more mainstream opportunities. Ayres (2011), a prominent social media commentator suggests that one such way is in working alongside service users:

If professionals working on the front line are unable, or not encouraged, to gain experience of the language and cultural norms of, say, Facebook, they are effectively disempowered from understanding and empathising with their increasingly fluent clients.

Emerging findings from an ongoing research project with newly qualified social workers in their ASYE year also support this (Turner, 2016). One of the participants initially turned down the offer to take part, stating

I wish I could help, but I try to avoid Facebook and have never used twitter - I am a bit technophobic. Sorry!"

However, after some time had elapsed she emailed me, saying that she had decided to participate as:

It is highly likely I will encounter issues with this in practice. I recently worked with a young mum whose life and subsequent wellbeing seemed to revolve around messages posted on Facebook, and I did struggle to get my head around her experience.

For social workers involved with young people the necessity for training which helps them 'get their heads' around such experiences is also particularly salient. UK research from Ofcom (2014) shows that children and teenagers are the most digitally literate users in the UK with children as young as six able to navigate their way around technology as quickly as most adults in their mid – forties (Goodwin, 2014). For Social Workers, like Siobhan Condon, described earlier, whose lack of technological expertise left her Facebook page open to the public, the need for appropriate training and support has never been more pressing.

Evidence provided by newly qualified social workers, also provides positive reasons for engaging with the connections and support provided by social media. Novell (2014, p.38) a self-confessed Twitter addict and newly qualified social worker herself, states that 'social media opened up so many doors for me' and further that:

Social media has enabled me to advocate for my service users and my profession on a national level. That need I had felt for my role as a social worker to be more than helping one person at a time, was, and still is, being met.....I enjoy being a small voice in a big debate.

Novell also advances the notion of social media helping to further the connection described earlier, by building international communities of practice, with access to 'social workers from all around the world', together with 'a plethora of charities, jobs, papers and opinions.'

An ongoing research project, following social workers in their ASYE year (Turner, 2016) has produced some initial data which supports much of Novell's celebration of connectivity. One social worker, employed within an acute psychiatric institution found many potential difficulties with patients having access to mobile phones. However, she was also able to reflect:

The patients I work with speak a lot about missing family and friends. It's clear to see how their phones (and social media) help them stay connected.

Returning to Trevithick's practice principles it is clear from this social worker's observation, how social media fulfils many of the essential requirements for building relationship, including as a support for vulnerable people and as a means to contain anxiety in times of crisis. The bridge to family and friends which access to social media provided for these people at a time of acute transition and distress, powerfully overturns Turkle's criticism that 'we look to technology for ways to be in relationships' (2011, p.xii). For these service users, often confused and stripped of their normal lives and routines, technology provided the only way for them to maintain relationships and thereby helped them retain a link with the world outside the ward.

In an impressive act of reflexivity, another social worker participating in the project, also recalls Trevithick's practice principles by questioning her own defensiveness when she sees negative posts about social workers:

Something for me to consider is whether the families I have seen using this forum have experienced poor practice and whether this is an appropriate channel for keeping social work to account.

Returning to Klein's work on 'splitting' this social worker has managed to overcome her initial anger with what she perceives as attacks on social workers. Looking under the surface of these, she is impressively able to relate to the perspectives of the service users, viewing social media as a potentially empowering source for them, rather than a 'bad' object. Recalling Ruch's definition of relationship based practice, the social worker quoted here is actively able to maintain a supportive professional attitude in the most challenging of situations, when she feels her profession is under attack. She has achieved what Klein dubbed, the 'depressive position' (Balick, 2014, p.40) wherein good and bad can be contained, in this case within the potential provided by social media (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

This emergent potential is also becoming clear in advances within international social work practice. Campbell and McColgan (2016) for example, describe the design and creation of service based drug, alcohol and child development App's for social work education and practice. These were developed using a multi- level consultation process involving students, newly qualified social workers and service users as well as App developers, demonstrating the democratization necessary to produce a marketable

product useful for all stakeholder groups. In an even more ambitious project, Sitter and Curnew (2016) explain their use of social media with community groups, creating participatory videos as part of a human rights advocacy programme. Findings from the project confirm the potential for social work to utilise social media as a means of advocating for the core value of social justice (Sheedy, 2013). However, Sitter and Curnew (2016) also confirm much of what has been discussed in this paper, stressing that for the positive potential of social media to emerge, social workers must be engaged with digital platforms and taught how to use these effectually. The lessons for both social work education and practice are evident.

These practical examples point towards the almost limitless potential of digital platforms for creating communities which break down boundaries and inspire real egalitarianism within otherwise disparate groups. Virtual communities of practice, which are growing in strength and quantity across numerous digital platforms are also furthering Forster's concept of connection:

Virtual communities of practice are physically distributed groups of individuals who participate in activities, share knowledge and expertise, and function as an interdependent network over an extended period of time, using various technological means to communicate with one another, with the shared goal of furthering their practice or doing their work better (Allen et al, 2003, p.7).

By harnessing the power of these developing virtual communities, social work could equip itself with the potential apparatus needed to effect the egalitarianism and social justice which lie at its core (Sheedy, 2013). Judicious engagement with the potential of

social networking has the capacity to unify service users, practitioners and educators alike and encourage them to 'live in fragments no longer' (Forster, 1910).

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the opportunities which social media offers to a relationship based model of social work. Beginning with Forster's plea to 'only connect' from as long ago as 1910, the paper has sought to show how technological change is almost always accompanied by primitive anxiety (Balick, 2014). Klein's work on 'splitting' is also explored to identify the ways in which social media and those who transgress when posting on it can be viewed as quintessentially bad objects (1935). The case of UK social worker, Siobhan Condon is explored as an example of this. The article seeks to show that far from causing us to expect less from each other (Turkle, 2011) the opportunities provided by social networking allow us to connect in different ways. Examples of this are given, from the innovative use of hash tags on Twitter, to the online meetings of groups like the Social Work Book Group. Emerging data from an ongoing study of social worker's in their ASYE year is also used to demonstrate the relational connection which social media can provide to vulnerable and disempowered service users.

Examples used throughout the paper demonstrate how reactions to social networking often mirror the ways in which social work is portrayed within the media and commonly within the public imagination. When, for example a high profile child death occurs, it is often the social workers rather than the other professionals involved who become the 'bad objects' and are split from the countless acts of good work which are carried out every day (Ferguson, 2014). Like social work too, social media and the digital context within which it occurs, is rarely neutral but rather inextricably bound with issues of

accessibility, social justice, values , biases and agendas all of which are played out publicly on a daily basis (Warner, 2015). What also links the social in social work to the social in social media is precisely that – the social. Both are concerned with people, relationships, connection and therefore both invite the darker sides of these – embedded in the harm and hurt that people have always and doubtless will always visit on each other (Bartlett, 2015). Rather than be fearful of this, the paper has sought to show that social work should both engage with and embrace the opportunities provided by social media so that the potential difficulties can be directly faced and the opportunities harnessed for the greater enrichment and enhancement of the profession, as well as for all those with whom it interacts.



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