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# Relationship-based social work and electronic communication technologies: anticipation, adaptation and achievement

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## ABSTRACT

While social workers continue to recognise the centrality of relationship in social work practice they are now trying to build and mediate relationships with service users in a context fundamentally changed by technology. The paper suggests that different modes of electronic communication are not simply add-ons to society but are altering the social texture of society including the ways that people relate and interact with others. The relationship base of social work is not immune or dislocated from the explosion of social media and electronic communication which is occurring in the wider society and, therefore, attention needs to be paid to the impact of these new technologies on the way in which social work is practised. Using qualitative research with early career stage social workers in Ireland this paper aims to contribute to knowledge on this emerging dimension of social work practice.

## KEYWORDS

Social media; communication technologies; relational social work; early career social workers

## Introduction

The relationship base of social work is not immune or dislocated from the explosion of social media and electronic communication, which is occurring in the wider society. Social workers need to pay attention to the impact of these new technologies on the way in which social work is practised. This paper argues that social workers continue to recognise the centrality of relationship in social work practice but are trying to build and mediate relationships with service users in a fundamentally changed context since the theorisation of relationship in social work was originally developed. The factor which we believe is making such a transformative difference to the context in which the current generation of social workers operate is technology, in particular, the rapid escalation in different forms of electronic communication. We suggest that modes of electronic communication are not simply add-ons to society but are altering the social texture of society including the ways that people relate and interact with others. The relationship base of social work is not immune or dislocated from the explosion of social media and electronic communication, which is occurring in the wider society and, therefore, attention needs to be paid to the impact of these new technologies on the way in which social work is practised. This paper aims to contribute to knowledge on this emerging dimension of social work practice.

The information discussed in this paper is drawn from findings from two distinct research projects (Byrne, Kirwan & McGuckin, 2019; Byrne & Kirwan, 2018, 2019) which the authors have conducted and from which a selection of findings has illuminated how social workers perceive the impact of electronic communication technologies on relationship-based social work practice. Both studies adopted a wide-angle lens in terms of what they included within the definition of electronic communication technologies and so the findings reported here relate to new modes of digital communication as well as more 'traditional' forms of electronic communication such as e-mail and smartphone texting. Both studies were conducted with early career stage social workers. In one study, the participants were in their first three years of post-qualification practice in Ireland, and the second study recruited newly qualified social workers (two years or less post-graduation) who were in the process of mediating the transition between studenthood and entry into employment as a social worker.

The topic of relationship-based practice in a context of multiple availabilities for electronic forms of communication was not the singular focus of either study, but it was an issue on which participants in both studies had much to say. As will be presented, each study uncovered findings which we believe will be of interest to all social workers and not only those in the early stages of entering into this role. In particular, the studies revealed a spectrum of views among participants regarding the impact of electronic communication technologies on relationship-building in social work. At one end of the spectrum, many examples were found which highlighted the usefulness of electronic communications between social workers and service users in terms of efficiency, communication flows and somewhat paradoxically the facilitation in some instances of greater rapport between the worker and the service user. At the other end of the spectrum, data from the two studies revealed how technology was perceived by some social workers as a challenging factor in their practice environment with expressions of concern from some participants about the porous nature of social media regarding privacy protection. A small number of participants across both studies reported negative work-related experiences in which communication technology of one form or another was centrally involved. It is important to state from the outset that this paper is not based on a re-analysis of the data from the two studies. Instead, because of the authors' involvement in both studies we are aware that findings from both studies 'speak' to each other in the sense that they revealed something about the use of electronic communication technologies in the social work context.

Before setting out the key findings relevant to the focus of this paper, we provide a brief overview of the methodological approaches adopted in the two distinct studies from which we draw the information discussed in this paper. There are overlaps between the target participant populations for both studies, but as will be seen, the two studies were conducted using different methodologies and with different samples of participants. Nonetheless, the findings from both studies chime in many respects, but also clear contradictions in the findings become more visible when they are presented alongside each other. Therefore, while it can be somewhat clumsy to combine findings from two distinct studies into one corpus, we think the overall landscape of the changing social context of practice that is revealed through the findings produced across the two studies is worthy of consideration in one paper so that a full discussion can be undertaken regarding the processes that these findings illuminate.

## Methodology

By way of background to the two studies drawn upon in this paper and the research methodology used, it is useful to explain the routes into this area of research travelled by both authors. The first author is not a social worker but is a lecturer in online development and professional education based in a university department, which includes social work education. The second author is a registered social worker and a lecturer in social work. Both authors have an interest in researching the bridge travelled by newly qualified social workers into the social work workplace and it is via this interest that the authors' involvement in the two studies which feature in this paper came about. Both studies received university ethical approval.

Study 1 (Kirwan, Mc Guckin, & Byrne, 2018) conducted from 2013–18 was dedicated to gathering and analysing the views on technology in the workplace from new entrants into the professions of social work and teaching in Ireland. New entry was defined as three years or less in employment in their respective professions. Preliminary findings from this study had been previously published (Kirwan & Mc Guckin, 2013, 2014) and more publications are in train based on a wider set of findings from that project. A focus group methodology was the primary mode of data collection for this study and three focus groups in total were conducted. Findings presented here relate to the views of seven social workers across the focus groups. Regarding the views of participants on electronic communication technologies, a consistently similar spectrum of views was recorded in each of the focus groups and a satisfactory level of saturation on this topic, in terms of our confidence in reporting this set of findings, has been achieved. The age range of the social work cohort of participants in this study ranged from mid-20s to mid-40s and all were in employment as social workers at the time of their interview.

Study 2 (Byrne & Kirwan, 2018, 2019) collected a dataset over a period of two years from 2017–19. The main focus of Study 2 was to explore the experiences of newly qualified social workers as they travel across the bridge between student hood and professional career. It is also useful to note that Study 2 built on earlier exploratory research with newly qualified social workers which was published a number of years ago (Clarke, Kirwan, & Byrne, 2012). The research design of Study 2 utilised individual, semi-structured interviews with participants recruited (with difficulty) through the national professional association of social workers in Ireland and through snowballing techniques. The dataset of this study now comprises seven recorded interviews with newly qualified social workers. Despite their stage of entry into the field, the ages of the participant sample ranged from mid 20s to people in the mid 50s years age range. This is an important characteristic of this cohort because of the debate regarding the attitudes towards communication technology which have been attributed to age differences by some writers (Prensky, 2001), but disputed by others such as in the preliminary findings of Study 1 (Kirwan & Mc Guckin, 2014). Some participants in the Study 2 participant cohort were employed in their first social work contract, some were freelancing and on the books of employment agencies from where they got occasional short-term relief work, one participant had left her first job and had moved to a second appointment in a different agency.

Data from both studies were transcribed and thematically analysed using Template Analysis. After detailed reading of early transcripts, a coding template was developed and applied to the analysis of subsequent transcripts and refined as needed. This approach 'encourages the analyst to develop themes more extensively where the richest data are found' (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015, p. 203).

This paper extracts and focuses on findings from both studies regarding the use of electronic communication technologies in social work to bring these findings together under the same spotlight. As stated earlier, the data has not been re-analysed for the purposes of this paper.

Before presenting and discussing the findings from the two studies, a short review of the literature on electronic communication technology in the context of social work is set out below so that the findings of the two studies can be discussed with reference to that literature.

## **Literature review**

There are two main areas of the literature, which have strongly informed our analysis of the data related to electronic communication and relationship-based practice in the above-mentioned studies. The first concerns the body of literature from research on early career experiences and processes. The second field of knowledge, which informs our work, deals with the ways in which social life is being transformed by technology. This is a vast literature but our research focus has drawn our attention to publications, which deal with the use of electronic communication in the context of relationship-building and help-giving. In particular, we are interested in learning about direct client work where the social worker 'meets' or interacts with the service user through a technological medium.

### ***Early stage career development in social work***

There is a growing awareness that the pathway from social work student to social work professional is an important stage in the overall career trajectory of the social work professional. This transition period can be formative, exciting and also sometimes challenging, leading Graham and McKenzie (1995, p. 5) to characterise this type of change as a 'threshold' experience. Lairio & Penttinen (2006, p. 151) use the analogy of a 'leap into the unknown' to portray the extent of novelty which accompanies this period of career development, where for the first time the full responsibility of professional practice rests upon the new professional's shoulders and they are expected to perform to professional standards. A number of factors have been found to influence how this transition process is experienced by new social workers (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011). These factors can include the quality of the prior placement experience, the quality of professional supervision provided in the new employment, and the fit between the new worker and the tasks/roles to which they are assigned.

In our engagement with the topic of early career stage development in social work, we have found that Wendlandt & Rochlen (2008) offer a useful framework in helping to explain how this early career stage is navigated by the new social worker. Wendlandt & Rochlen mapped a socialisation process for new graduates, which involves three main

stages, namely a) Anticipation, b) Adjustment, and c) Achievement. They suggest that as graduates enter into employment their anticipation of what to expect is refined and they make adjustments to fit into their new role. Over time, the new worker will ideally progress towards a sense of achievement and competence in their role. This triptych of anticipation, adjustment and achievement informed our analysis and will feature in the discussion in this paper of the findings related to the use of electronic communication technologies.

### ***Relationship-building***

Despite the many demands on social workers such as complex caseloads and limited resources, the relational dimension of social work continues to be positioned as an important, arguably central, feature of practice (Alexander & Grant, 2009; Hennessey, 2011; O'Leary, Ming-Sum, & Ruch, 2013; Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003). Research has highlighted how positive relationship-building can itself be important for clients and central to delivering respectful and effective services (Beresford, Croft, & Adshead, 2008; Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2010). However, writers have also identified various challenges to relationship-based practice including undeveloped emotional competence on the part of social workers (Morrison, 2007), staff turnover and burnout (Le Grand, 2007) as well as organisational bureaucracy or structural issues (Smith et al., 2012; Winter, 2009). There is a lack of agreement in the wider literature regarding the impact of technology on relationship-based practice. Questions remain regarding the extent to which electronic communication technologies are serving to help or hinder the establishment and maintenance of relationships between social workers and those with whom they work (Bryan, Hingley-Jones, & Ruch, 2016) or how it might be possible to integrate new technologies into relationship-based practice (Turner, 2016). Space limitations constrain the review of literature presented here but the spectrum of opinion on this issue is presented by outlining the views of a selection of writers who have taken different or opposing positions on this issue.

By way of entry into this topic, it is important to note that social professions have been using technology for quite some time to connect and interact with people who require their services. The telephone helpline, for example, is a long-standing feature of the service landscape which is well established as a valid and useful means of providing help, support, information and sometimes counselling to people such as victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or historical abuse and people contemplating self-harm or suicide, to name but a few. Information websites, as another example, are now commonplace and provide information on many matters which intersect with aspects of social work practice. The functionalities of some of these websites have moved beyond simple information provision and many allow members of the public to post comments, questions, or connect through the website with a service provider or even each other. Thus, it can be observed that technology has many acknowledged uses in the social and health services arena and practising through, and with, technology is a reality for social workers.

However, the emergence of a new generation of electronic communication technologies has led to questions about the ways electronic communication changes or alters the granular texture of interpersonal interactions. For example, a paper by Bayles (2012)

has become a focal reference in the psychotherapy literature for discussion of the use of Skype and whether or not it can be an acceptable medium or vehicle of communication between therapist and client. In particular, Bayles questioned the extent to which the use of this form of electronic communication could disrupt or compromise the therapist's ability to observe and interpret important physical cues and clues from the client and if this lack of physical proximity would in turn impede the effectiveness of the therapy and limit the value to the client of the therapeutic encounter.

Reeves (2015), writing as an attachment therapist, built on the observations of Bayles (2012) and considered how the use of Skype might impact the therapist/client relationship boundaries, the ability of the therapist to manage transference and counter-transference and generally the consequences for the quality of the therapist/client relationship arising from the loss of physical connection between them when therapy was conducted within an electronic- as opposed to a physically-proximate context. Starting from a sceptical position, Reeves (2015) shifts to accepting the possibility that some features of electronic communication have potentially positive contributions to make towards the development of the therapeutic relationship. Through reflection on her own use of Skype in her work she acknowledges that in some instances this form of electronic communication can actually enhance the experience of therapy for the client, particularly those whose engagement in therapy would be otherwise discontinued or disrupted as well as helping clients for whom a degree of 'distance' aids their ability to initiate and continue in therapy. She also illuminates how the negotiations which surround establishing a contract for therapy using electronic communication media (because certain practical arrangements need to be set out at the start) provides the therapist with insight into how the client negotiates with the world in general, how they relate to others and in particular how they wish to conduct the relationship with the therapist.

Simpson (2017) pushes this debate to new heights by suggesting that social workers should 'proactively' incorporate mobile communication technologies (such as the use of smartphones) into their practice as a means of achieving effective communication strategies with service users. Simpson refers to the study of service users' views conducted by Beresford et al. (2008) in which participants emphasised the need for social workers to communicate effectively and she suggests that the incorporation of electronic forms of communication into social work practice may be perceived by service users as the provision of a more attentive service which is responsive to their needs because it facilitates increased 'social presence' and availability on the part of the social worker. Simpson's own study (2017) own study captured a degree of weariness on the part of service users when they had to revert to outdated modes of communication, such as going through an agency switchboard, in order to contact their social worker in times of need. It is clear that Simpson agrees with Rettie's (2008) conclusion that electronic communication can enhance, as opposed to disrupt, a sense of social presence. This, Simpson concludes, works for and not against the relational dimension of social work practice. Turner (2016, pp. 324–25), too, concludes that social work should heed the potential opportunities provided by social media to not only connect but connect differently with certain client groups and also to respond more effectively in certain circumstances (Turner, Bennison, Megele, & Fenge, 2016).

However, the need for social workers to be mindful of the ethical dimensions of electronic communication technologies has been documented in papers by Reamer (2013, 2015) and Turner (2016). In particular, they emphasise the need for additional guidance for social workers in relation to boundary maintenance and protection of client privacy. In Ireland, CORU, the Social Work regulator, includes specific guidance on effective communication with service users and the use of social media in the Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics (CORU, 2019) as well as general guidance on related topics such as confidentiality, privacy and consent. This reflects an international trend in the field of social work regulation including the recently published *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* (NASW et al., 2017).

Ground-breaking research by La Rose (2014) has also drawn our awareness to the power relations entwined in social work practice. She has evidenced how the use of technology as a means of surveillance can become a means of asserting power. For example, Cundy (2015) expresses a professional discomfort arising from her decision to Google a client:

“Through my idle online search I had made [the client] into an object of voyeurism and I regret it” (2015, p. 114).

The knowledge generated by the surveillance is held unequally by the parties, creating a power relation. This asymmetry exists even when the one being watched is aware of the surveillance. But La Rose (2014) has illuminated a reverse dynamic which arises when the social worker is the subject of surveillance and her work reveals the level of discomfort that this can engender in the social worker.

The literature review has drawn our attention to the relational dynamic between worker and service user with particular reference to how electronic forms of communication can alter important processes such as ‘proximity’. However, the literature offers an inconclusive set of viewpoints on these issues. Instead of providing an agreed theoretical pathway into our data, our review of wider literature has encouraged us to be alert to an array of potentially contradictory messages and this inquisitive stance was helpful as it kept our minds open to the discovery of a variety of messages from the data.

## Findings

In this section, we present findings derived from the two studies introduced earlier in this paper. Findings from the teacher group who formed part of study 1 are not included in this section. The purpose of this paper is not to compare the findings from the two studies but to lay out the spectrum of findings which emerged across both studies which are relevant to the development of knowledge on the intersection between relationship-based social work practice and the use of electronic communication technologies. To this end, two overall categories of findings are presented here with the first titled ‘The Communication Calculation’ and the second category titled ‘Surveillance and Power’.

### *The communication calculation*

The findings presented in this section concern the consideration, even calculation, involved when social workers are identifying the method of communication they will

adopt in their work with different service users as well as the method of communication with other professionals.

### **Communication with service users**

The studies reveal that social workers embrace multiple communication tools to access service users but many are simultaneously wary about conducting significant relationship work through electronic media. As we are all aware, in a technologically networked world, the electronic communication options have greatly expanded. This offers the scope to stay connected when not physically present but also raises the risk of using the wrong communication type in any particular situation. The studies revealed that social workers think about what communication tool might best suit individual service users and are very mindful of the specifics of the relationship in their communication calculations:

*I work in the area of intellectual disability so most of the work you do is with the client's families or their carers. A lot of them work so it's easier to email them with arrangements to set up meetings, they can have a quick look at work, no one knows their business on email. I'd use email quite a lot with a certain cohort of parents. Some of the older ones can't fathom the internet. [Social worker, study 1]*

Despite the widespread use of electronic communication technologies in the wider population, some groups may not have access to devices such as smartphones or email accounts and this lack of access can rule out the use of electronic communication in certain situations:

*Most of my clients [with an intellectual disability] wouldn't have a phone, they may have very high needs, issues, very few would have a phone. [Social worker, study 1]*

However, the potential of some forms of electronic communication was highlighted in the data, because messaging services left service users with a visual representation of the communication from the social worker, which they could look at as often as they wished. This aided clarity in certain contexts as illustrated in the following observation:

*With a lot of [clients] that I work with would have some sort of intellectual disability and it gets a bit confusing for them. That's why we'd use WhatsApp. [Social worker, study 1]*

Essentially, the availability or potential availability of electronic communication technologies widened the spectrum of ways in which social workers could communicate with service users. Within the data, some of the participants made a connection between this level of choice and their ability to communicate effectively with service users:

- *A lot of clients only have text or access to wifi, they don't have calls so the only way they'd get in contact with you is through text message or social media. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *Depending on what client, I know to ring or text, you have some clients that don't want to talk on the phone, they prefer to talk in person. You know sometimes people are avoiding your calls when they don't answer so you can send them a text ... But,*

*yeah you have to pick the right type of communication for the right client, the right setting. [Social worker, study 1]*

The depth of engagement by social workers in their contact with service users via electronic forms of communication varied and this is one point in the data, which remains contested and upon which we can only conclude that there exists a range of opposing viewpoints within the social work profession. Some social workers expressed vigilance regarding the use of email, text or social media communications and regarded these as only suitable tools for organising appointments with service users and not suitable for any form of in-depth intervention:

- *Text message would be ...setting up meetings ‘where are you?’ but not too much information being divulged. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *You wouldn’t get into a conversation with a client on text message. More ‘I’m thinking of you’ or ‘Is everything ok?’ [Social worker, study 1]*

This line in the sand was not always fully agreed upon between the social worker and service user and examples were provided where boundary agreements were not clear:

*Sometimes parents will send me photos of stuff, or screenshots but I can only say back ‘thank you’ or ‘I received them’. I can’t exchange any information that might identify anyone or their whereabouts. [Social worker, study 1]*

In contrast, some participants took the view that work with certain client groups, such as teenagers, was aided by communicating with them through their preferred electronic medium. This was viewed as helpful in reducing the relational distance between them and helped build a relational foundation in preparation for deeper-level engagement:

- *...text, [helps reduce the distance] with teenagers, definitely! And younger parents in their late teens, early twenties would use text a lot more than phonecall. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *Others, teenage kids, might not want to vocalise what they want to say on the phone but if it gets anyway deep, we’d have to follow up with a phone call or a house call to make sure that things are ok. [Social worker, study 1]*

In further contrast, within the data, some social workers discussed using electronic communication as a substitute for face to face or voice contact by phone as a way of managing the amount of time spent interacting with service users:

*I find we text our foster carers more because it’s quick business ‘I’ll pick so and so up at x time’ that’s fine that’s all they need to know and I find we text rather than call them because you could end up in lengthy conversations on the phone that you really don’t need. . . you don’t have time to have I suppose. [Social worker, study 1]*

Participants highlighted potential pitfalls of electronic communication, which could impact on relational issues, including the problems of misunderstandings such as misinterpretations of meanings attached to communications:

... information can get lost in translation and you don't know what the other person is reading, what tone they're reading it in, how they're reacting to it so they do encourage us to use the phone. But we do use text message and rely on it for small bits of information 'I'm on my way' 'I'll see you in 5 minutes' that sort of stuff. [Social worker, study 1]

### **Communication with other professionals**

We were interested to note that it is not only with service users that the research participants talked about incorporating electronic forms of communication but also mentioned it in relation to how they now communicate with colleagues, including supervisors. For example, participants illustrated how electronic communication often aided access to supervisory or peer support especially in busy environments:

*We'd use text a lot with our team leader because she's in meetings back to back so we text her if we need her, if we need direction, we text her and she'll get back straight away. So, we're just on a really busy team with a lot of people in court at the moment so she's just not around so that's our easiest way of accessing her, of getting information off her quickly, so we don't leave voices mails, we don't call unless there's something really seriously wrong. Most of the time it's a quick text and you usually get a reply really quickly so that is an easy form of communication. [Social worker, study 1]*

The data also revealed an ethical awareness among social workers relating to the discussion of service users with other professionals via electronic communication technologies:

*We do have a group WhatsApp between the team but we don't discuss clients but we do discuss our whereabouts like 'I'm free if you need me to cover' [Social worker, study 1]*

### **Surveillance and power relations**

Certain forms of electronic communication technologies such as Google Search and Facebook provide varying levels of access to the public to information uploaded regarding individual people. The act of 'searching online' or 'googling' named individuals has crept into society where it now flourishes as an accepted way of staying informed about news events, the lives of celebrities and so on. Many people will conduct an online search before they engage the services of a range of professionals such as a lawyer or doctor. It is, therefore, unsurprising that this issue appeared within our research data. Examples were provided by the participants of the ways in which electronic communication technologies are used as a means of finding out about service users. We describe this as surveillance as it is essentially involves the social worker informing their knowledge of a service user by accessing electronically stored data, which were not uploaded for the purposes for which the social worker accesses it.

Some participants talked about the act of looking people up online:

*Sometimes I'm curious about people and I think 'will I look them up on Facebook?' and then I think 'no - it's not the way it's to be'. [Social worker, study 2]*

The potential that online searching will produce error in assessment was highlighted in the following quote where the participant, drawing on Goffman's theory (1959), makes

the point that context is everything and that the online persona a person adopts may not be true to the reality of their lived experiences:

*People portray themselves differently on social media than they really are so when you're looking at them on social media, it's not who they really are. Irving Goffman is it? Front stage, back stage. So I have been curious but I've stayed away from it. It's a boundary... people's private lives are their private lives, even if it's private/public. If they want to tell me something, tell me, if they don't, don't – that's fine. Once you start [looking] then you're into it and maybe no turning back and especially now when people can see who's been looking at their pages, not on everything, but there are ways they can tell. It's best just to stay away from it, I don't need to look at people's social media to see what they're doing. [Social worker, study 2]*

The ethical dimension of online searching for service users was highlighted as in the following quotes:

- *I have seen people doing that in the office and having a joke and a laugh, putting people up on the screens, I do not agree with that, 100%. Clients deserve respect from everyone and that's just disrespectful. [Social worker, study 2]*
- *Professionally, I feel [looking at clients on Facebook] is over the line but a lot of my clients say 'Hey go onto my Facebook page, I've posted some pictures' and I say no. [Social worker, study 2]*

However, this ethical stance was not universally steadfast and participants differentiated their views relative to context, particularly in instances when concerns arose regarding the safety of another person:

- *Depends on the job. I'm working with young people, for me that would be overstepping a mark. Different settings are different. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *I would hope my clients would respect my privacy so by going over the line and looking at theirs, I 100% felt guilty and went 'oh Jesus I shouldn't be doing this'. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *I have to be honest, I have searched [for a client on social media] just due to the nature of my job [in child protection], I might need to know if the parent is telling the truth, now we shouldn't be doing it but, sometimes. [Social worker, study 1]*
- *I see the ethical boundary and I know I have crossed it those number of times but you're looking at the safety of children and what they're being exposed to 'Is mam posting up pictures of her taking drugs or drinking or are the children in the background.' There's always that bit of worry because we have a responsibility to these children but also to protect the ethical boundaries too. [Social worker, study 1]*

Also, online searching is a potentially two-way street and the studies reveal that social workers are aware of the possibility that they are the subject of such searches on the part of service users:

*That's why I've gone off Facebook, if people are curious about me, they could put my name into Facebook and look me up – no! [Social worker, study 1]*

The studies also revealed that some social workers have experienced situations in which service users post negative comments about them or their agencies onto online platforms. In the following quote, the social worker refers to television news reports about their agency but suggests that these were somehow less distressing to experience than online posts from service user groups:

*There's been newscasts going on in relation to XXX, that hasn't been an issue. But there seems to be an army of people out there that have a big conspiracy theory ... and people writing online 'the social workers took my kids for no reason' and you just think 'like, fecking hell'. [Social worker, study 2]*

In addition to online posts by service users, participants in the studies also raised the experience (which they had experienced directly or knew about in relation to other social workers) of being electronically recorded by service users as they attempted to do their work. Recordings could be audio or audio-visual recordings and part of the concern about these recordings was where they would be used afterwards. In particular, the possibility that a video recording could be uploaded onto a platform such as YouTube caused anxiety to the participants in both studies.

- *We have to be very careful now of what clients put on social media about us. Streaming ... taking photos of us and threatening to put them on [the internet]. [Social worker, study 2]*
- *We have issues where they've taken videos of us and put it on Facebook. [Social worker, study 2]*
- *The [social workers] in that video had no idea they were being videoed, the phone was in the corner, propped up I guess, and they never knew. [Social worker, study 2]*

## Discussion

The findings from two research projects presented in this paper usefully highlight the extent to which electronic communication technologies are now part and parcel of everyday social work practice. This is perhaps not surprising given that the arena for social work is in the 'social', the space in society where people interact with each other and with the various administrative arms of the state and the same space in which electronic communication technologies are flourishing.

A positive finding from this study is that social workers are actively embracing electronic communication technologies to assist efficiency and effectiveness in their communications with service users and indeed, in their interactions with other social workers such as colleagues and supervisors. This study also supports the conclusions of both Reeves (2015) and Simpson (2017) that relationship building between service providers and service users can be enhanced and strengthened if such technologies are used by workers equipped with an understanding of how and why such forms of communication can assist relationship development and maintenance. We view this as a paradoxical benefit of electronic communication because it suggests that positive relationship-building is possible even in a situation where the service user may not be proximate or visible to the social worker, where exchanges are conducted asynchronously and possibly without sound (for example,

posts or emails) and where the social worker does not have proximate access to audio-visual clues (tone of voice or the physical expression of emotion) from the service user.

However, the arrival of electronic communication into the world of social work is not without its problems. The data echoes the reports by La Rose (2014) of electronic communication media being used as a tool of surveillance by service users. Furthermore, the data highlights the calculations social workers engage in to decide if they will use networking platforms or the internet as a means of investigation or surveillance of service users. The need for guidance for social workers on what is acceptable ethical practice in this regard is clear. While some of the participants alluded to ethical concerns they carried, none referred to any professional ethical code as a source of guidance to which they would turn when faced with the ethical challenges, which social media and electronic communication in general can pose. Similarly, the profession is playing catch-up in terms of coming to terms with the idea that technology is now empowering dissatisfied service users to display to the world examples of their interactions with social workers. Just as social workers are under-prepared to deal with the ethics of electronic communication, so too are they under-prepared in how to respond to situations in which they are recorded or where comments about their practice are shared online to a worldwide audience.

For new graduates moving into the professional role, this area of practice is perhaps not as unanticipated as it might have been for a previous generation unused to electronic methods of communicating in general. However, the adjustment to the role of social worker now includes coming to terms with the ethical use of electronic communication technologies as well as being capable of dealing with experiences such as being recorded or commented upon in social media. It is a feature of the current landscape of practice which did not exist in previous generations and on which there is sparse disciplinary knowledge or established practices to which new social workers can refer. Therefore, we would argue for greater attention to be devoted to these issues in social work education and in the guidelines issued from employing organisations and professional associations.

In conclusion, we highlight the ubiquitous presence of electronic forms of communication within social work practice as evidenced across the two studies reported here. Our findings fail to harmonise completely and some, on the face of it, appear contradictory. However, we recognise that we (and the world) are at an exploratory stage of knowing on this issue and this of itself prompted us to share the messages from our data with a wider audience. This new electronically mediated social space is one in which issues such as privacy and confidentiality remain largely ungoverned and probably ungovernable. The one conclusion we believe our paper illuminates with clarity is that electronic communication technologies are altering the timbre of the relational issues, which social workers are encountering in their work with service users. There is much work still to do to better understand the implications of these new technologies for relationship-based practice in social work and we hope this paper will encourage others to further develop knowledge on this topic.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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