Virtual Boundaries: Ethical Considerations for Use of Social Media in Social Work

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Society has become more interactive through increased access and use of the Internet and social media tools. Web 2.0 moved the Internet beyond information storage to a place where discourse takes place (Sawmiller, 2010). Social media, Internet tools that facilitate online interactions, have the potential to further expand such discourses. Social networks (for example, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn), blogs (for example, Wordpress, Typepad), and microblogs (for example, Twitter, Tumblr) are types of social media tools that allow people to connect and share information in an online space. People use social media tools to report information, present opinions, and solicit conversation through their own domains or dedicated websites. All of this online interaction, enabled further by increases in smartphone and networked tablet device usage, poses the potential for personal and professional lives to cross in social media spaces.

Existing literature has focused on the ethical challenges of social media in professional practice with clients, use of social media as an expansion of research, and for online learning (Eccles, 2010; Giffords, 2009; NASW & Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], 2005). However, the conversation around ethical use of social media, outside the client–professional relationship, is missing. Areas in which greater discussion is needed include advising students and setting agency policies on ethical uses of social media and on the effects of personal use of social media among professional relationships.

This article is about creating virtual boundaries—the limits social workers place to guide their social media use—to create intentional online personas and about the effects of social media use in the intermingling of personal and professional lives. Social workers need to be aware of the identities they create and maintain in the realm of social media because of ethical codes and policies. The various forms and uses of social media are discussed to provide an understanding of the benefits and consequences of social media. An overview of ethical considerations is presented along with recommendations on creating virtual boundaries for personal and professional use of social media.

**FORMS AND USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Although the forms and uses of social media are constantly changing, blogs, microblogs, and social networking sites have proved to be some of the more popular social media tools over the last several years. Other social media tools, such as virtual world games, photo sharing, and information management sites, may be lesser-used tools but are still important to consider when setting virtual boundaries.

**Blog and Microblog**

A blog (or weblog) is defined as an online journal of personal reflections, opinions, and comments. Microblog content may also include personal reflections, opinions, and comments but in a condensed format. Twitter, for example, limits content to 140-character posts and focuses on real-time interactions with others in users' networks. Blogs are used professionally and personally to express personal opinions, market products and services, provide political commentary, or share and disseminate information for educational purposes (Qian & Scott, 2007). Blogs can be made public or private to select people or groups. The author or authors of the blog may use their real names or pseudonyms.

**Social Network**

A social network site (SNS) is an online space where people build a personal profile allowing them to
share content and build connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNS sites such as Facebook or Google+ facilitate the opportunity for networking by exposing a user to broader networks and creating connections that may not otherwise occur. Until recently, networking within an SNS was mostly limited to predetermined relationships rather than building new networks with strangers because people have to invite or accept requests to connect networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Other Social Media Tools
Many other tools that social workers and others use to interact via the Internet exist. To describe them all would be beyond the scope of this article, so a few tools are highlighted to provide additional depth in understanding the extent of social media tools in creating interactive communities. Interactive games such as Second Life provide virtual worlds where people interact and build communities. These virtual worlds are often open, and large social networks may be created. Photo-sharing sites such as Flickr allow people to post and share pictures. Photos can be shared broadly or only with specific people. Social bookmarking sites such as Diigo and Evernote allow people to store and share favorite websites or other materials in a restricted or larger social network.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Social media tools allow social workers to continually build social networks. Online networks often include colleagues, former classmates, friends, and family. In real life, these networks may be separate, but online these worlds collide in unforeseen ways (see Figure 1) (Houghton & Joinson, 2010). This is especially true with sites such as Facebook or Twitter, which were created to integrate social networks. Therefore, social workers are in need of policies and guidelines that assist in the ethical use of social media tools, including interactions with clients in social network arenas.

The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) does not include guidance on the use of technology. In 2005, the NASW and the ASWB published standards specifically to guide the use of technology in social work practice, highlighting the importance of maintaining knowledge and understanding of how technology may affect social workers’ service provision to clients (NASW & ASWB, 2005). This guide provides a starting point in considering ethical guidelines for the use of social media in professional contexts but lacks guidance on the effects of personal use of technologies within the professional community. Given the rapid growth of personal use of social media tools since 2005, in particular with the increased use of smartphones and tablet devices, there is a need for further development of personal and professional considerations in technology use.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Social media are being used within various social work circles (that is, personally and professionally). Organizations—including academia—need to be proactive in setting acceptable use policies for social media to prevent ethical and legal violations. One common response is to ban social media use within an agency, a practice that creates obstacles if the agency later wants to create a social network profile to promote its services. Policies and guidelines must be more nuanced than a straight yes or no to social media use within the agency or organization. A committee of social media users, rather than top-level administrators who may not understand the nuances of social media, should help create policies and guidelines. In addition to social media users, it is important to have information technology specialists, legal representatives, and human resources involved in shaping social media use policies (Schwartzman, 2010).

The Social Media Governance Web site provides various templates and examples to help organizations
create social media policies (http://www.socialmediagovemance.org). When setting policies and guidelines, it is important to clearly identify the difference between personal and professional representation of your organization. One strategy is to use disclaimer language stating whether you are representing yourself or your organization. It is also important to be clear about expectations of the NASW Code of Ethics and other organizational policies when setting rules regarding the types of material that can be posted. This includes clearly written language about the incorporation of clients into social networks. There are some areas of social work practice in which it may be perfectly acceptable to engage clients through social media, yet it is important to make a clear distinction between personal and professional representation.

Many social workers understand the ethical considerations around protecting client confidentiality, but the guidelines around respecting colleagues, the social work profession, and other professional relationships are less stressed in ethics trainings. In addition, concerns about setting boundaries regarding clients' personal social media sites exist. For example, social workers maintaining public blogs or microblogs such as Twitter will need to decide whether and how they respond to comments written by clients on their sites.

The following five questions provide a guide for social work professionals when making decisions about sharing information on their social networking sites:

1. **What information do you want to share?** Use the inherent reflective nature of social work to think about the information you are putting forward. Is this information important, harmful, protected, and so forth?
2. **Why do you want to share this information?** Reflect on the purpose of sharing this information. What are the benefits of sharing? Is there an expected outcome from sharing this information?
3. **Who needs to see this information?** After considering the purpose of sharing this information, think about the role of your audience. Who are the people who will benefit or need to know about this information? Will clients see this information?
4. **Where do I want to share this information?** After determining who needs to see this information, the question of where to share this information follows. There are various social media tools that may have different or overlapping purposes. Where you share information depends on your answers to the three preceding questions.
5. **How does the NASW Code of Ethics or other organizational policies guide sharing this information?** After determining that you are going to share this information, examine and reflect on the NASW Code of Ethics and other policies that may affect the sharing of this information.

For example, if you want to share an action alert about domestic violence policy to raise awareness in the general population, you may post such an item to Twitter with an understanding of the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics Ethical Standard 6: Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to the Broader Society, which specifically calls on social workers to promote social justice by shaping public policies and engaging in social and political action (NASW, 2008). However, when participating in online political organizing and advocacy, caution should be taken to do so in a respectful manner. A contentious political atmosphere may disrupt professional and personal relationships. In addition, as professional and personal circles are increasingly overlapping in SNS, complaints about your workday or clients may be seen by colleagues and may jeopardize your professional reputation.

**SUMMARY**

In real life, we often use physical cues to help us identify our role and put the appropriate boundaries in place, but online it is more difficult to determine where our boundaries lie. This article provides an overview of various social media tools and uses along with personal and professional considerations to help in guiding the ethical use of social media tools. As the use of social media continues to grow, the importance of virtual boundaries will also rise. Therefore, proactive considerations that include policies and guidelines that encourage responsible and ethical use of social media are needed to help social workers mediate personal and professional boundaries.

**REFERENCES**


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