

#SocialWorkAdvocacy

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What separates social work from other fields of human services is the underlying need to work toward equality and social justice for every population. This is often accomplished by working on behalf of those who are oppressed, marginalized, or disenfranchised. For that reason, it can be argued that advocacy is at the foundation of social work practice (Belluomini, 2014). The growth of social media and availability of low-cost and user-friendly innovations have changed the way people engage in advocacy. Social media has become an emerging tool for electronic advocacy. In the 21st century, social workers have engaged in electronic advocacy using new tools to address ongoing client issues and policy outcomes. There is a need for social work to heed the call to explore new forms of innovation to engage in advocacy. This article explores the practical usage of technological innovations as tools for engagement in electronic social work advocacy.

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Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have widened the “civic space” (Nugroho, 2011). Civic space is the place—physical, virtual, and legal—where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly (Civicus, 2018). By forming associations, speaking out on issues of public concern, gathering together online and offline and participating in public decision making, individuals use civic space to solve problems and improve lives (Civicus, 2018). Social media, or SNSs, provide rich forums that focus on social change and create a modern way to connect individuals to current issues related to advocacy (Maben & Helvie-Mason, 2017). Zhang (2014) pointed out that online activism differs from previous activism, pointing to the absence of centralized leadership, large-scale demonstrations, or radical change as evidence of this. Instead, online activism “emphasizes collaboration, civic participation, and social and cultural change” (p. 292). This type of activism enables people to send content, transforming them from observers of activism to activists themselves with a greater stake as leaders, not just followers, of unfolding events (Alterman, 2011).

SNSs encompass the web-based and mobile applications that connect, engage, and distribute user-generated content digitally in a multidirectional communication model (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzales Canche, 2012). The most popular SNSs include Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Applications such as these are designed to enable users to develop, connect, and share in the creation and consumption of content (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that expand the technological foundation of what has been referred to as Web 2.0 and allow the development and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These tools have unique features that can expand the reach of information across individuals, organizations, and communities, as communications can spread

quickly among a vast group of people making it possible for supporters to join a cause regardless of geographic location or timing (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012; Kanter & Paine, 2012; Satariano & Wong, 2012). Along with creating opportunities to spread information quickly, these new technologies also open the prospect for the spread of “fake news.” Fake news is defined as information that is completely fabricated and manipulated to resemble credible journalism and draw maximum attention (Hunt, 2016). These platforms can mask or make incomprehensible the very facts needed to think critically about life’s choices in a digital culture that tolerates “fakeness” in its various disguises (Alvermann, 2017).

Advocacy can be described as the heart of social work and serves as the foundation of social work practice (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2015). Moreover, Kilbane, Freire, Hong and Pryce (2014) noted social workers employ advocacy strategies as a primary way to promote social and economic justice. Belluomini (2014) reported that advocacy is one of the things that differentiates social work from other fields within human services, as it focuses on the underlying need to work toward equality and social justice for every population. This is often accomplished by working on behalf of those who are oppressed, marginalized, or disenfranchised. Given the expansion of social media tools, it would be advantageous for the profession of social work to continue to expand its reach for how advocacy will occur in the 21st century (Bliss, 2015).

Social networking tools create opportunities for social and human services providers to reach more people with a greater impact on the most vexing social problems. These new technologies can also be deployed to more strategically target social spending, speed up the development of effective programs, and bring a wider array of help to more individuals and communities. As innovations continue to grow, it is imperative that the field of social work embrace the position of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare of harnessing technology for the social good. While doing so, this might also include teaching critical inquiry to discern between what advocacy efforts are genuine and backed by empirical data (Alvermann, 2017). The components of electronic advocacy (e-advocacy) along with elements of the social work advocacy practice model to provide a framework for guiding social workers in advocacy efforts are examined. Additionally, the advantages and challenges of integrating social media into social work advocacy are outlined and the implications for social work practice are identified.

Overview of e-Advocacy in Social Work

As we consider the changing face of activism in the digital age and the impact of social media as a channel for advocacy, there is evidence in earlier work that the social work profession placed emphasis on exploring new forms of advocacy (Maben & Helvie-Mason, 2017). For example, scholars who first explored the topic, Moon and DeWeaver (2005), discussed how the growth of the Internet, and availability of low-cost computers and user-friendly software, created the need to make more extensive use of electronic advocacy. McNutt and Menon (2008) suggested the challenges brought on by globalization and devolution could be addressed by using new technologically based advocacy techniques. Additionally, Edwards and Hoefer (2010) discussed the role of Web 2.0 in the advocacy process. Finally, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare in the 12 Grand Challenges highlighted the expansion of new digital technology as a goal for advocacy. The 12 Grand Challenges, which focus on improving individual and family well-being, strengthening the social fabric, and helping create a more just society, recognize the need for the profession of social work to harness technology for the social good (Berzin, Singer & Chan, 2015).

E-advocacy entails the use of SNSs to advocate, plan, and rally support for community causes, campaigns, and coalition actions. These sites include Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram,

Youtube, Vine, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr. For practitioners, these platforms, if adopted, can be effective tools for fostering and disseminating information, knowledge generation, and collaboration building on behalf of client populations (Belluomini, 2014; Edwards & Hofer, 2010; Saxton, Niyirora, Guo, & Waters, 2015). For its adoption to be successful, there must be a framework, which social workers can use to understand their advocacy efforts. An exploration of the social work advocacy practice model is provided in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

The social work advocacy practice model was derived from Donna Bliss (2015). The framework identifies key determinants associated with social work advocacy. The model consists of five key constructs: cause, outcome, target audience, strategies and tactics, and evaluation. It claims that to effectively begin the steps of advocacy, one must first identify the root cause requiring action. Cause in the model focuses on the party that is to be the beneficiary of advocacy efforts. This includes whether the efforts are made on behalf of an individual, group, community, or population. The next construct in the model is the outcome. This is the degree to which the change or benefits from the advocacy efforts will be received by the beneficiary. Target audience, the next component in the advocacy practice model, is the party on behalf of which the advocacy is being carried out. This includes specific individuals, groups, or communities not considered to be able to bring about changes in outcomes on their own. Additionally, strategies and tactics are key antecedents that compose the plans and activities that the advocating entity will adopt to influence the target audience and bring about the desired outcome. Last, evaluation focuses on determining the potential success or effectiveness of the micro-, mezzo-, or macro-level change process. McNutt (2011) noted a gap in the literature regarding this last construct. Without this final evaluative component, the advocating entity will be making aimless decisions in the absence of formative and summative feedback about their advocacy efforts (McNutt, 2011). The constructs of the Bliss (2015) model can aid in laying the foundation for devising strategies and tactics among advocates ready to engage in the social, political, and policy change. The following sections examine both the opportunities and challenges created by integrating e-advocacy into social work.

Opportunities Created by Integrating e-Advocacy Into Social Work

As we explore constructs within the social work advocacy practice model, it is important to understand the role social media plays in creating an e-advocacy platform for the social work profession (Saxton et al., 2015). Specifically, social media provides social workers with increased opportunities and a larger platform for advocacy on issues of social justice (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2016). A good example of this was the case in which social work professionals, academics, and allies came together to support a group of low-wage workers of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas, and a labor organization UNITE HERE.

For more than 5 years, UNITE HERE and hospitality workers at Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio were engaged in a campaign to shed light on low pay, poor working conditions, and antiunion practices of Hyatt. During this time, the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) had an existing contract with Hyatt Hotels to hold its conference at the Hyatt during their 2014 conference. Becoming aware of the workers' and labor organizations' efforts, social worker professionals and the academic social work communities, through the use of social media, stood in support of marginalized Hyatt workers. Many members opposed the social work conference violating an active boycott rooted in economic and social justice (Brady, Young, & McLeod, 2015). As a result, the social work organizations members successfully advocated for the SSWR to honor the local boycott of San Antonio Hyatt Hotels by relocating the 2014 annual conference (Brady et al., 2015).

This case provides critical insights about the benefits of actively using social media and web-based technologies within a community organizing effort. It also provides a glimpse into how the constructs of the social work advocacy practice model could be employed. First, the cause in this case was bringing attention to wage disparities among hotel workers by supporting Hyatt workers and UNITE HERE organizers. Second, the outcome included the short-term goal of refraining from patronizing the establishment during an active boycott and relocate the conference. Along with this, the long-term goal was to ensure that SSWR modified conference planning policies and practices to avoid similar issues in the future. Thirdly, target audiences were the SSWR president, board members, members, and presenters; social work deans; directors; and other social work administrators. Next, strategies were the measures taken by hotels workers, UNITE HERE organizers, and the social work professionals themselves in using social media to bring attention to the practices of the hotel. Strategies employed through this example included the creation of an online petition, use of existing listservs, and social media platforms to raise awareness, plan the organizing effort, and mobilize people. These efforts led to the termination of the conference contract by the SSWR with the hotel. Lastly, evaluation would be the process of reviewing the success of the implemented measures. This would entail organizers reviewing the goals and tracking outcomes throughout the community organizing effort. Organizers would also examine data from various sources to determine the effect of the social media campaign on the process and outcomes. This example highlights the usefulness of social media and digital technology integration into community organizing (Brady et al., 2015).

This is only one of many examples that illustrate how social media platforms are used as measures of social change. As noted by many, social media hashtags, which comprise the pound sign (#) followed by short phrases, have become a new milieu for communication (e.g., Robbins & Singer, 2014). For instance, they are used to label advocacy movements, enabling online advocacy movements to spread to other users of the SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter. Saxton and colleagues (2015) studied the use of hashtags among 105 members of a U.S.-based patient/health advocacy coalition and found that hashtags focused on educating the public were the most frequently used. The researchers also concluded that call-to-action hashtags were more likely to be retweeted by the organizations' consumers than business-related hashtags.

Moreover, Obar, Zume, and Lampe (2012) asserted Facebook, Twitter, and listservs are also among the highest ranked technologies that help advocacy groups mobilize people to effect social, political, and ideological change. Twitter is a chief example of a SNS that is built on user interaction. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) examined 73 nonprofit organizations' use of Twitter over a 30-day period and categorized the organizations' utilization of Twitter into three major functions: information (including organizations' news and activities), action (consisting of items urging followers to attend events, make donations, and become activists), and community (relating to dialogue and relationship building). Maben and Helvie-Mason (2017) explored the use of Twitter as a platform to promote social and cultural change. The authors also highlighted several hashtags that have revealed social injustices such as poverty, racial and sexual stereotypes, media bias, sexual exploitation of Black girls, and the dismissal of transgendered women. These hashtag campaigns include #MeToo, #EconomicViolence, #NotYourAsianSidekick, #NotYourNarrative, #FastTailedGirls, and #GirlsLikeUs.

Social workers are integrated into this expanding list of e-advocacy movements (Battista-Fraze, 2017). Numerous macro-level social workers are part of the online community #MacroSW. Social work practitioners are able to join a live Twitter chat each Thursday to share ideas about social justice and advocacy. #MacroSW provides a forum that facilitates interaction of social workers from all over the world. #MacroSW also allows social workers to share and learn about current policy

developments, practice needs for our communities and constituencies, and discuss ways to serve the broader society (Hitchcock, Zgoda, & Battista-Frazee, 2016). Additionally, Sitter and Curnew (2016) suggested blending the two methods of advocacy (offline and online) in real time. In their example, they offered an opportunity for caregivers, academics, and community members to engage with each other around the topic of sexual rights as a human rights concern during a workshop. Leading up to the workshop, advocates who participated via Skype posted details of the workshop through Twitter and Facebook. The day of the conference, the Right2Love group tweeted messages that included its own hashtag (#Right2Love) as well as the name and hashtag for the conference. These were included to increase the reach to online users through their followers. During the workshop, users who were unable to attend the session were invited to tweet questions to the group using the #Right2Love hashtag, and advocates would respond via Skype and/or online. While the Right2Love advocates were geographically separated but connected via Skype, the communicative interactions unfolded live between online and offline spaces. This example is a demonstration of how online engagement can serve as a pathway to offline action (Sitter & Curnew, 2016).

Challenges of Integrating e-Advocacy Into Social Work

Despite the advantages of using e-advocacy in the social work profession, there are some challenges that must be addressed when incorporating digital technology into advocacy. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Association of Social Work Board (ASWB), Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and Clinical Social Work Association's (CSWA) joint standards on technology has called for the profession to adopt social media and integrate its use into social advocacy efforts. Specifically, when appropriate, social workers should have access to technology to help equip clients to participate in democratic and political processes by voicing their concerns and advocating through online social media (NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA, 2017). Despite the rising call for adoption of social media efforts for advocacy, professional bodies have chosen a risk-averse approach to social media due to the anxiety around potential boundary issues (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2016). One area of concern is the overlap of personal and professional social media use (Strom-Gottfried, Thomas & Anderson, 2014). Voshel and Wesala (2015) asserted that traditional professional boundaries are more difficult to maintain in the digital age, where the line between the personal and professional have become blurred. For instance, social workers may receive "friend" or "follow" requests on various social media sites from current or former clients. Social media contact with clients can lead to boundary confusion and breaches in privacy and confidentiality (F. Reamer, 2013).

The revised NASW Code of Ethics also has a section emphasizing the ethical challenges pertaining to social workers' and clients' increased use of technology (R. Reamer, 2017). Literature encourages social workers to embrace social media and become competent social media users; however, there is limited research outlining the ethical use of the Internet by social workers outside of direct professional practice with clients (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; Sitter & Curnew, 2016). As a result, there are few guidelines on the practical use of digital technology, and more specifically social media platforms, for the purposes of advocacy (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2016).

Organizations also face risks when integrating social media in the workplace. For instance, because social media tools are provided by third-party sites and can be used on personal devices, organizations are not able to monitor them the in the same ways that they do other internal system technologies, which require employee log-ins (Sage, Wells, Sage, & Delvin, 2017). One common response to avoid ethical and legal violations is to prohibit the use of social media within organizations (Kimball & Kim, 2013). This limits an organization's ability to promote its services and advocacy efforts. Social media usage also raises issues in the areas of privacy and safety. By adopting

the use of specific social media tools, organizations appear to be adopting the privacy and security policies employed by the social media providers (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Organizations must review their own policies and be proactive in creating guidelines for the appropriate use of social media (Beaumont, Chester, & Rideout, 2017; Kimball & Kim, 2013). NASW, CSWE, ASWB, and CSWA's joint standards present guidelines for social work administrators and supervisors to consider when developing social media policies for employees. Specifically, Standard 2.27 suggests administrators inform employees that work-related and personal information posted on social media may impact their organization (NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA, 2017). By establishing clear social media policies, administrators provide employees with direction on how to maintain professional standards, which includes protection of client confidentiality, maintenance of professional boundaries, and the use of appropriate language.

Obar et al. (2012) identify additional challenges e-advocacy poses. Though social media and electronic platforms can be used to promote civic engagement and collective action, generational and digital literacy gaps are present and may hinder organizations from realizing these goals. Metallo and Agrifoglio (2015) explained that most literature, which examines digital technology usage among generations typically focus on two generational labels, digital native and digital immigrant. According to Prensky (as cited in Metallo & Agrifoglio, 2015), digital natives are individuals who were born after 1980, have been surrounded by digital technology for the majority of their lives and thus, possess the skills to use digital technology. Digital immigrants were born before 1980 and began using digital technology as adults (Metallo & Agrifoglio, 2015). Digital natives may have an advantage over digital immigrants because they used digital technology from an early age (Gillingham, 2014). Although digital immigrants are growing more competent in digital technology, digital immigrants are more passive than digital natives in their use of digital technology. Digital immigrants are considered to be "users" of online content, whereas digital natives are considered to be creators of online content (Vodanovich, Sunaram & Myers, 2010). Obar et al. (2012) provided an example and report that organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union experienced major problems with integration of social media primarily because the senior staff do not use social media. Therefore, when there is difference of opinion regarding the use of social media, senior staff were essentially less informed than junior staff when it came to arguing its necessity and usefulness.

Additionally, presenting one unified and consistent voice can be a challenge when too many individuals represent the online movement. E-advocacy is continuously criticized due to doubts that symbolic actions such as "liking" a cause on Facebook, following a cause on Instagram, or retweeting a message on Twitter have significant influence in social change efforts (Sitter & Curnew, 2016). Correspondingly, concern exists around social media's lack of ability to create personal connections, which can make it difficult to mobilize individuals (Obar et al., 2012). Still more, the effects of fake news or the deliberate spread of misleading news stories using social media platforms have the potential to have a negative effect on the voice and the message of the movement along with advocacy efforts. The proliferation of fake news in recent times has caused considerable concern for those engaging in advocacy efforts at the state, national, and international levels (Picton & Teravainen, 2017).

Implications for Social Work Practice

The changing nature of social and political issues means the profession must put into action its unique approaches in terms of starting where the client is, the person-in-environment perspective, and the importance of systems (Social Work Policy Institute, 2017). For that reason, the need for social workers to be more adaptable and perhaps persuasive in their advocacy efforts is even more pronounced (Bliss, 2015). The integration of electronic advocacy into social workers' role as agents of

change is imperative (McNutt, 2011). Electronic advocacy can help in raising the profile of the profession by emphasizing importance of engaging in advocacy efforts. The next step, according to Westwood (as cited in Stanfield and Beddoe, 2016) is to harness the unlimited potential that technology offers. To ensure future practitioners have the technological skills needed to support individuals, groups, and communities they will serve, social work educators “need to prepare students to use, manage, and shape how these tools will affect their future advocacy of behalf of clients” (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013, p. 43). This can occur by encouraging educators to create a place for social media to be integrated into the classroom, both as a teaching tool and as a necessary knowledge base. For instance, Hitchcock and Battista (2013) suggested social work educators use social media tools to develop critical engagement skills among students to facilitate student discussion groups. Cooner, Knowles, and Stout (2016), developed a specific app for social work students to facilitate reflection on ethics and social media in social work practice.

Still more educators can use simulation activities to teach students using technological platforms and demonstrate how these tools can be used for advocacy in a responsible way. For example, educators in courses focused on diversity, can use current events or create case examples of individual, group, or community disenfranchisement. Using a social media platform (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, etc.), educators can ask students to coordinate advocacy efforts for the individual, group, or community. In this instance, social work educators capitalize on students’ eagerness to use social media by showing them how to use social media to develop their knowledge, skills, and values (Westwood, Taylor, & McKendrick, 2014).

Additionally, social media provides a platform to engage and organize people instantaneously, which has increased the speed at which positive change can occur (Battista-Fraze, 2017). To ensure social workers remain aware of the opportunities and challenges social justice policies present, there is a need for further research examining the effectiveness of e-advocacy, assessing the influence of e-advocacy on policy change and providing information about the evolving e-advocacy environment (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2016). More specifically, reviewing the length of time it takes for the reach and scope of the e-advocacy effort to influence shifts in policy positions on the local, state, national and international levels can be helpful in understanding the extent to which e-advocacy efforts affect future legislative action on behalf of marginalized and disenfranchised groups.

Conclusion

Battista-Fraze (2017) suggested advocacy has been transformed by social media. Therefore, it is imperative for the social work profession to continue to evolve, which includes engaging in e-advocacy on a larger scale. As electronic advocacy expands among social work advocates, professional practice will still require the traditional obligation to address injustices and seek equitable access to services for marginalized populations (Schneider, Lester, & Oshiang, 2013). While classic face-to-face grassroots advocacy tactics such as petitioning, and protesting will remain a part of social worker advocacy efforts, the continued expansion of how advocacy occurs is paramount. Whether occurring via online only or as a blended concept, the integration of social networking media creates an opportunity in which individuals and organizations can influence large numbers of people (Bliss, 2015). As the new face of activism in the digital age and the impact of social media as a mechanism for advocacy continue to be assessed, social workers have the opportunity to engage in advocacy that is powerful, innovative, and spirited (Maben & Helvic-Mason, 2017).

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