

A divergence of opinion: How those involved in child and family social work are responding to the Internet and social media

Abstract

This discussion paper suggests that there is possibly a divergence of opinion taking place within the field of child and family social work and that the stated positions are influencing how practitioners identify and deal with risks and opportunities afforded by the Internet and social media. The suggested divergence is examined and the conclusion drawn is that what is taking place mirrors the fact that the introduction of any new technology inevitably brings with it division and debate.

In seeking to understand the reaction to digital technology consideration is given to a series of wider social discourses on childhood and risk which includes the controversial notion that the profession is a harbinger of moral panic and that the management of risk has been broadened from child protection to child safety. The discussion paper concludes by calling for child and family social work practitioners to have a balanced debate that needs to be not only informed by current research but also by an open and honest discussion about personal use and an acknowledgement that there will be difficult moral and ethical questions to work through.

Introduction

The advent of the Internet and the social media has revolutionised the way in which people communicate and access information on a daily basis. This revolution has not only impacted the life of the individual but also families and children. As outlined by Ofcom in their publication, *Adults' Media use and attitudes Report* (2013 p.4) 53% of UK adults now use a mobile phone device to access the Internet, whilst 16% use a tablet computer and a similar percentage go online via a games console/player. Moreover, there has been a 50% rise in the number of 12-15 year olds owning smart phone devices and approximately 1 in 7 children aged between 5-15 years of age now use a tablet device at home, a figure that has risen threefold since 2011 (Ofcom, 2012). The inception of the Internet and social media sites such as Facebook has led to a ubiquitous take up by children and young people which has redefined what we all understand as interacting with others through friendship networks, family ties and personal interest groups (boyd, 2007; Withers, 2006 cited in Ofcom Report, 2008; Ellison et al. 2009 and Ofcom, 2012). What is evident from the information presented thus far is that the Internet and social media have permeated every aspect of our daily lives, including that of child and family social work practitioners and, ultimately, the profession as a whole (see BASW Social Media Policy, 2012).

The aim of this paper will be to suggest that possibly a divergence of opinion is taking place within the arena of child and family social work and that the stated positions are influencing how practitioners identify and deal with both the risks (pornography, violence, bullying, sexual solicitation and commercial exploitation) and opportunities (learning, communication, creativity, expression and entertainment) afforded by the Internet and in particular, social media (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007 and Livingstone and Brake, 2009). Appreciating that a polarised rhetoric of risk and opportunities related to the Internet and social media does not take place in a vacuum, attention will also be given to the wider discourses of social anxiety and the perception of childhood. The discussion paper will then conclude by stating that there is a need for practitioners to not only have a balanced debate that is informed by research, but also to take action themselves if they are to meet the challenges of working in a culture that is dominated by the Internet and social media.

Polarised rhetoric

The Internet and social media since their existence have garnered comment from academics, the wider press, educationalists and policymakers. In terms of the wider press it could be argued that there have been a number of headlines that have taken the form of being alarmist in nature. Livingstone and Brake (2010, p.77) have labelled these attention grabbing one-liners as 'anxious headlines', for example *'Knife a Pal on Facebook'* (Clench, 2008 as cited in Livingstone and Brake, 2010); *Facebook has 'serious' underage-user problem'* (Burke-Kennedy, 2013); *'OMG! Why social networking is good for teens'* (McMahon, 2012); *'Facebook admits it is powerless to stop young users setting up profiles'* (Sweeney, 2013). Livingstone and Brake (2010) also add that such headlines tend to overstate the problem but that there is a genuine cause for concern that is buried somewhere in the headlines.

Amongst academics there are also divergent opinions as to the benefits and risks of the Internet and social media. Early on concerns were raised by Nie (2001) which related to increased levels of isolation and the growth of superficial relationships which would impact on an individual's ability to socialise in the real world. More recently research has been undertaken in response to the concerns raised about the detrimental effects and perils posed by the Internet and social media and their impact on children and young people. These concerns include the amount of time spent online, who children and young people are communicating with (Valkenberg and Peter, 2009 and Wolak, 2008), and levels of personal

disclosure as they relate to privacy (boyd and Marwick, 2011). Academics such as boyd and Marwick (2009 p.410) have summed this up as, “The complexities of the Internet continue to be a source of consternation for parents, educators, and policy makers. Some embrace the Internet, evangelising about its tremendous potential. Others fear it, preaching en masse about its dangers”.

Similarly, Buckingham (2007), an educationalist, has commented, “Popular discussions of the internet, for example, veer between celebration and paranoia: on the one hand, the technology is seen to create new forms of community and civic life and to offer immense resources for personal liberation and empowerment; on the other, it is seen to pose dangers to privacy, to create new forms of inequality and commercial exploitation, as well as leaving the individual prey to addiction and pornography”.

He adds that this reflects the polarised debate that exists in education and that both perspectives are built on a series of assumptions that include young people, their learning and the role of technology in wider society.

An argument can be made for the fact that a parallel discourse has also been taking place in the arena of adoption and fostering (see Bowyer, 2009; Stephenson, 2009; Cooper, 2009, Fursland, 2011, The Office of the Children’s Rights Director, 2012; Adams, 2012a and Oakwater, 2012). But why this arena over and above any other? Because adoption and fostering is one of the key areas where practitioners seek to exercise a guardianship role in terms of children’s best interests, and it appears from the literature that this is the arena where anxieties and concerns are most prevalent.

A recent publication in the UK by Fursland (2011) highlights the opportunities available from the Internet and social media for children and young people in care which includes the development of friendships, gaining support, being part of a community and staying in touch with birth parents and other relatives. In the same publication she also identifies a series of challenges that mainly concern themselves with the vulnerabilities of children and adolescents in care and their supposed lack of skills to communicate and behave appropriately online.

At this stage one does not call into dispute the comments in relation to the vulnerabilities of children in care. However, there is room to question Fursland’s (2011 p.29) overarching

opinion which is explicated as follows, “The Internet opens doors. It can expose impressionable children and young people to harmful ideas and influences, for example, pro-anorexia, self harm and suicide websites. It can provide an opportunity for people with malicious intentions to reach into homes and into young people’s bedrooms, under the noses of their parents and carers”. In other words what came across initially as a balanced consideration of the risks and opportunities of the Internet and social media has disappeared and been seemingly replaced by a rhetoric of risk and harm. Nevertheless, such sentiments are not purely confined to fostering, the world of adoption has been fundamentally and forever changed by the Internet and in particular social media, and as a result one can begin to identify a similar debate taking place in adoption (Howard 2012; Oakwater, 2012 and Fursland, 2010).

The report by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2012) in America highlights the fact that the Internet and social media are leading to the “growing commodification” of adoption (p.4), which in turn is moving the emphasis of adoption from finding families for vulnerable children to making a financial purchase to obtain a child. A related development is the ease with which adopted children can make contact with birth parent(s) and relatives which has led not only to the demise of the notion of a closed adoption, but also to adopted children and young people making contact without the necessary emotional guidance and support for such an encounter (Howard, 2012). At the 10th Australian Adoption Conference the presentation by Jane Adams (2012) a representative of PARC (Post Adoption Resource Centre, Australia) drew attention to the fact that once adult adoptees had a name that was associated with a member of their birth family they were far more likely to undertake a Facebook search. Moreover, the research Adams (2012) undertook on behalf of PARC revealed that the time adult adoptees took in terms of receiving information to making initial contact with a member of their birth family had reduced significantly from a period ranging between 1 and 10 years to a matter of days or minutes (Adams, 2012 p.4). This account of the changing face of adoption and the impact of Facebook would seem to be in stark contrast to Oakwater (2012 p.1) who states the following:

“In 2010 a number of my friends, colleagues and acquaintances in the adoption world suddenly experienced their adopted children being reconnected to their birth parent via Facebook. Me too. My children received an unexpected email via Facebook from a birth parent just days before Christmas 2009. My reaction was the same as other adoptive parents, a rollercoaster of intense emotions in tandem with a desire to be strong and

supportive for my children. The repeated phrase I've heard from adoptive parents is "it feels like a slow motion car crash". I concur. Battering and bruising, yet hold onto the wheel and try and steer to a safe place; simultaneously experiencing your own upheaval while watching and trying to assist in your child's turmoil. Yes it's messy."

It is not within the realm or remit of this discussion paper to pass comment on the personal experiences of adoptive parents whose children have been negatively or positively impacted by contact with their birth parents or relatives. Nonetheless, what is within the sphere of this paper is to point out the clearly emotive language which has been used, and to argue that what has been presented by Oakwater (2012) may represent the far end of the divergence of opinion that exists.

This paper has proposed that when looking at the use of the Internet and social media by vulnerable children and young people that commentators within the field of child and family social work have a tendency to engage in two separate dialogues, which on the one hand sees the Internet as providing a range of opportunities (Fursland, 2011; Adams, 2012 and Howard, 2012) and on the other, making available a multiplicity of risks (Bowyer, 2009; Stephenson, 2009; Fursland, 2011; Adams, 2012a and Oakwater, 2012). As the current situation stands, one could quite easily presume there is a potential danger that the two very separate opinions currently held may be inadvertently impacting upon assessments and interventions being carried out by practitioners. Examples of this include the feasibility of applying the same level of risk to a young person in care who has made contact with a long lost member of his birth family in New Zealand, compared to a young person of similar age and vulnerability who is in communication via text with emotionally abusive birth parents.

Why a divergence of opinion?

Although an argument has been made for the existence of a possible divergence of opinion regarding the Internet and social media within the realm of child and family social work, it needs to be substantiated by evidence that points to how this dichotomy of opinion and thinking has occurred. Lynn Woodhouse (as cited in Fursland, 2011 p.51) remarking on the use of mobile phones by young people for contact, as well as safety concerns that adults have, has stated that there is a "*significant perceptual gap between adults and young people*" about the dangers of instant communication. By this she means that in particular for young people in care their ability to retain some sense of control in relation to contacting

members of their birth family (a state of being not experienced in other spheres of their lives) means that they do not concern themselves with the mode of communication and the associated risks as adults do. Therefore, what is immediately evident in relation to young people and adults is that they have very different views about the risks and opportunities associated with anytime, anywhere contact. This explanation though useful has its shortcomings as it is only specific to fostering, and cannot essentially be applied to adoption and other child and family social work. That being said, what this explanation may do is begin to hint at series of prevailing fault lines in child and family social work that are linked to pre-empting and managing risk. Despite the shortcomings of the above explanation there does exist an overarching and far-reaching rationalisation that is provided by Marvin (1988 as cited in Buckingham, 2007) who asserts that the introduction of technology and its impact on wider society has always prompted debate and division. Marvin (1988 as cited in Buckingham, 2007) evidences this by highlighting how the introduction of electricity produced discourses that were both positive and negative. In summary, what we could potentially have within child and family social work is a similar division but without the necessary widespread debate that is informed by current research.

Current Research

Before any widespread debate within child and family social work can begin, there does need to be a greater awareness of the current research that exists regarding children, young people and their use of the Internet and social media. A series of large scale studies in the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2012); Europe (EU Kids Online, 2012) and the United States (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007 and 2012) gives some indication as to how the Internet and social media are used and their impact upon children, young people and wider society. Beginning with the United Kingdom's Ofcom report (Children and Parents: Media use and Attitudes Report, October 2012), it identified that adolescents and young adults have been the age group who have fully embraced not only the Internet but also social media. Furthermore, children aged between 12-15 years of age are described as, *"prolific social networkers with a large number of friends - an average 92 friends for an 11 year old and 286 for 12-15 year olds (Ofcom, 2012 p.2).*

The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart and Madden, 2007) identified that there had been an increase in the percentage of young people using the Internet, and that 87% of children aged between 12 and 17 years are online. Recent findings from the EU Kids

Online empirical research project (which involved a randomised sample of 1000 Internet using children aged between 9 and 16 years from 25 European countries) highlighted that 59% of respondents used the Internet, and that 77% were 13 to 16 year olds and had created their own social media profile (Livingstone et al. 2013). It was also found that Facebook was the most popular social media site used by European children and young people. A further finding was the prevalence of the use of social media amongst under-age children (38% of Internet using children were aged between 9 and 12 years) and in particular how their measure of digital literacy compromises their ability to manage their privacy settings in order to deter inappropriate and harmful contacts (p.314). It is important to note that the identified trend in terms of the numbers of under-age children accessing social media may be driven by a number of factors these include the increase in households having access to the Internet as well as broadband, user friendly programmes that enable children to easily set up their own profile, and attempts by parents wanting to maintain some level of control over their child's use of the Internet and social media.

Thus far our attention has been focussed on the almost full scale take up by children and young people of the Internet and social media. Indeed, what is necessary for child and family social work practitioners to have is not only an understanding of the extent to which a normalisation process has occurred in the lives of children and young people in terms of the Internet and social media, but also an understanding of the behaviours that are exhibited when children and young people are online. Empirical research undertaken as early as 2007 by boyd revealed that many young people used social media to manage their current friendships and to retain contact with those individuals in their lives they rarely saw. The more recent study¹ by Lenhart et al. (2012) shows that little has changed, they noted that the majority of young people using "Facebook" were posting status updates, commenting on friend's post, posting a photo or video and tagging people in forms of media². The study by Lenhart et al. (2012) also showed that a large percentage of young people witnessed mean or cruel behaviours, and that similarly, there was a significant number who experienced negative outcomes. However, the majority (78%) of respondents had positive interactions online which supported their self-esteem and enabled them to feel closer to another individual. It is essential at this stage in the discussion paper to appreciate the caveat here in the findings by Lenhart et al. (2012) which is that they are related to American young

¹ The study entailed interviews of 799 adolescents aged between 12-17 years of age and their parents, with interviews being conducted in English and Spanish.

² photographs and videos

people and consequently there is a need to be culturally sensitive when interpreting the empirical evidence presented

Notwithstanding the above there have been a considerable number of studies that have looked at the risks posed to young people in terms of online communication and interaction with strangers. A review of the literature undertaken by Howard-Jones (2012) revealed that children's and adolescents' risk in relation to adult sexual predators was rare and that what was far more common was the exploitation of personal information by spammers and fraudsters (Jagatic et al. 2007, as cited in Livingston and Brake, 2010). It should be noted that while social work practitioners will on the whole be working with vulnerable children and young people it cannot be automatically assumed that they are a homogenous group. There is likely to be varying degrees of behavioural difficulties and with that associated risks. Consequently, the divergence of opinion that exists within child and family social work could be said to be tantamount to a reductionist approach by both parties. This in turn may have a blinding effect to the complexities of risks and opportunities that constitute use of the Internet and social media by children and young people.

Wider social discourses on childhood and risk

It could be contended that the issues discussed in the last two sections of this paper are expressions of two wider discourses regarding childhood. Firstly, the sanctity of childhood and secondly, the ever present sense of social anxiety that surrounds children and young people, which in and of itself could be interpreted as moral panic. In relation to the sanctity of childhood Livingstone (2005 p.163) begins her commentary by stating that the Internet and social media have embraced many aspects of how we live our lives. More particularly, she pinpoints that the "traditionally significant boundaries between distinct spheres are being blurred or transcended" (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002 as cited in Livingstone, 2005 p.163) her exemplars include work and leisure, entertainment and education, and also the relationships between adults and children. She adds that the blur taking place in the adult-child relationship effectively spells the loss of childhood as we know it. Livingstone (2005) supports her line of reasoning by drawing our attention to the work of Gadlin (1978, as cited in Livingstone, 2005 p.166) who focuses on the fact that parents can no longer rely on their own experiences of childhood to make sense of what their children are living with and through. This observation signals a change in terms of doing away with the Victorian era of

childhood which is based on shared notions of hierarchy, paternalism and demarcated roles. This era has been replaced by a new formation of childhood where children and young people exercise a level of autonomy in terms of their family relationships. In other words, children and young people are creating a level of privacy and self-development that is out of the sight and immediate reach of their parents and other adult authority figures. Livingstone (2005, p.179) concludes her argument by stating the following, “uncertainty over parenting roles and children’s independenceis resulting in a tactical dance between parents and children. Parents’ attempts to control their children’s use of the Internet and children’s attempts to evade control”. One could at this point conclude that a game of ‘cat and mouse’ is being played out. The side effect of this being a heightened sense of anxiety in relation to children and young people, which is an actuality that is not only real for parents, but also has credence particularly in relation to child and family social work.

This idea of credence within the child and family social work stems from Clapton et al. (2012) controversial statement that this particular aspect of social work is “*prone to periodic involvement in scares and moral panics*” (p.198). The cornerstone of their argument comes from the work of Cohen on moral panics (1972, as cited in Clapton et al., 2012 p.198) plus Garland (2008 as cited in Clapton et al. 2012) and Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994, as cited in Clapton et al., 2012), where moral panics are described as incidents of social alarm that have gripped the public imagination and have the characteristics of disproportionality, deviancy and a moral dimension. What is highlighted by Clapton et al’s. (2012) article is the fact that there exists in society an ongoing sense of social alarm or anxiousness (p.201). Clapton et al. (2012 p204) illustrate this point by suggesting, “that today such anxieties are seen most in relief in relation to the dangers of sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people, especially involving the use of the Internet”. Indeed, the extent to which child and family social work is a conduit for moral panic is another debate altogether. What cannot be ignored, however, is the fact that there is a moral and legislative duty to respond to the anxieties associated with the Internet and social media, as well as the risks.

In turning our attention to look at the issue of risk, this paper will not focus on the individual child or young person. Instead consideration will be given to risk in terms of it being an overarching theme in social work and its application to child and family social work. Smith (2008), argues that the quintessential issue is that our understanding and management of risk has broadened due to such policy developments as ‘Every Child Matters’ (2003) and that

this development has brought with it difficulties for those charged with the responsibility of keeping children safe. He references the work of Giddens (1990, 1991 as cited in Smith, 2008) and illustrates the fact that the changes of the last century have bred a complex society which is characterised by increasing uncertainty and the breakdown in the traditional bulwarks of community and family. Such references would seem to chime with what has already been said by Clapton et al. (2012) and Livingstone (2008) in that the current sense of social anxiety has created an atmosphere which has led to optimum conditions being in place to augment the polemical views previously outlined.

Notwithstanding such an environment, child and family social work practitioners still have to carry out their role of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child. This already difficult task is further compounded by failures in safeguarding children like Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. This has led once again to the wholesale scrutiny of the profession and subsequent reform (Social Work Task Force, 2009 and The Social Work Reform Board, April 2012). Therefore, as an area of social work that has experienced such failures, the risk and opportunities of the Internet and social media could be said to expose a range of fault lines. The most immediate of which is the inability of individual social work practitioners to effectively identify and pre-empt possible risks faced by children and young people (Smith, 2008 p.11). A further fault line is the challenge of managing risk-laden relationships between children, young people and their birth families, particularly when the communication between the two cannot easily be impeded because of the ease with which modern mobile devices allow for texting and instant messaging. Another fault line is the way in which modern technology has in essence hampered the ability of parents and adult authority figures to effectively monitor the behaviour of children and young people. Yet the largest fault line is best described by Buckingham (2007) who states that there is a crisis in the relationship of power and authority between children, young people and adults. He comments that the ability of children and young people to access the Internet and their parent/carer's inability to view the content because it is located within a personalised technological device possibly indicates a loss of control for those adults that have welfare, caring and safeguarding responsibilities. This loss of control may stem not only from the perception gap (see page 5), but also the agency that is now being afforded to children and young people. They are no longer recipients of the world they experience; they are now increasingly producers of content and gatekeepers of information.

However, before losing heart altogether there is now the increasing up take of monitoring and filtering software by parents and foster carers (Fursland, 2011 and Madden, 2012) as part of guarding against the likelihood of reputational damage, sexual predators, fraud and cyberbullying. This development has brought with it not only a greater level of surveillance in relation to young people's behaviour, but possibly greater misunderstanding as adults scrutinise certain behaviours and misinterpret them because they have little or no awareness of the context (Simpson, 2012).

How to respond

Given the complexity of risks and opportunities that the Internet and social media poses and the responsibilities of child and family social work practitioners, how might the fault lines identified be sufficiently addressed? One can suggest that an initial place to begin is to have a balanced debate about the Internet and social media that takes account of the latest research and trends. This initial starting place is likely to require child and family social work practitioners to acknowledge that they too, like many other adults, have been seduced by the ideological myth of the golden age of childhood. Moreover, there also needs to be a recognition of our ongoing confusion about children and young people. An exemplar of this is on the one hand commending and valuing them for being digital natives and au fait with technology, but on the other hand, condemning them for inadvertently accessing sexually explicit, racist and radical material on the Internet, as well divulging personal details that expose their vulnerability (Livingstone, 2005 p.164).

Radically speaking, child and family social work practitioners as a whole may need to go as far as admitting that the Internet and social media are not the problem. Rather, what the Internet and social media forces us to admit is that we cannot keep children and young people safe at all times, despite our best efforts. boyd and Marwick (2009 p.414) make the point this way:

“The Internet demands that we take notice. It illuminates what we least want to see...We're giving agency to the Internet so that we can blame it for what it reveals, rather than forcing ourselves to contend with what we see. At the end of the day, the Internet is not the issue. The issue is us. We cannot provide perfect protection for our children”.

Though Boyd and Marwick's (2009) comments are sobering, there is still the need to have a debate that is informed by current research and an appreciation of child and adolescent development as well.

Furthermore, any debate that is to be had must be informed not only by public, but also our own individual reactions to the Internet and social media. Dare we, as individuals and a profession admit our own lack of knowledge about the Internet and social media? Dare we admit that there have been moments when we have used the technology unwisely and have disclosed our own or someone else's personal information, been the victim of a scam or have felt betrayed when information we have posted on a social media site has been taken out of context? It may be necessary for us as individuals to put our own house in order before attempting to deal with the risks and consequences of the Internet and social media in other people's households. It is acknowledged that a range of questions has been asked none of which has easy 'off the shelf' answers.

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) has attempted to provide clarification as to the professional responsibilities of social workers in relation to the use of social media. Unsurprisingly, there is a firm and enduring link between the BASW's Social Media Policy and its Code of Ethics. Furthermore, a review of BASW's Social Media Policy reveals that there is a need for all social work practitioners, including those that work in child and family social work to ensure that they maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries when using social media (BASW p.4).

The BASW policy to its credit acknowledges the power dynamics but then leaves it to the individual social work practitioner to work out the practice implications. This in turn begs the question – where does one begin? As has been hinted at already, with a review of one's own use and, where necessary, making changes to incorporate a greater level of e-professionalism (Megele, 2011). Secondly, by familiarising oneself with the employing agency's e-policies and procedures, and also using supervision to unpick the ethical dilemmas thrown up by social media. Lastly, one should seek to become competent in using the various tools that represent social media.

Focusing briefly on e-professionalism, Megele (2012) describes it as 'going beyond online communication', as it involves the individual's online persona which may include online

postings, blogs, tweets and pictures. She importantly highlights that e-professionalism does not just include the content produced by social work practitioners. It also involves how they respond to the use of online communication by service users. Further consideration of issues relating to e-professionalism have been raised by Rob (2011) and Reardon (2011); both of whom illustrate the positive and negative characteristics of online communication. Helpful though these insights are, what seems to be missing is specific guidance, particularly in relation to children and young people and their use of the Internet and social media which will be influenced by their sense of normalisation to both the technology and communication modes. Put another way, what should a child and family social work practitioner do if a disclosure of abuse comes via a vulnerable young person's blog? If you happen to be a social work practitioner born in the 1970s when the blogosphere did not yet exist, you may be surprised and alarmed that this method of communication has been used to share highly confidential and sensitive information. However, if you are a child and family social work practitioner born in the mid 1990s, then to communicate via a blog may be seen as perfectly legitimate. The example given does not just incorporate the need for an intervention that is ethically appropriate and person centred, it also acknowledges that practice is likely to differ depending on age and familiarity with the Internet and social media.

At this point one may be able to turn for comfort to the policy document that exist, but with a wording such as:

"Social workers should take into account when assessing and managing risk (3.2), and when they have a duty of care or are acting in "loco parentis", whether children and vulnerable people are a risk through their use of social media and manage this responsibly and appropriately whilst recognised that social networking is a part of modern life" (BASW, p.12).

It is questionable as to how comforted a child and family social work practitioner might be with such guidance when s/he only has a few minutes in which to make a decision. At best what is needed for such a situation is the opportunity to talk through the ethical complexities with a trusted and experienced social work colleague. What is also needed are organisational guidelines and policies that both direct and set legal parameters for practice. Above all what is required is a genuine debate through the conduits of team meetings, supervision, and the wider child and family social work community about the use of social

media and how to respond both professionally and personally. Yet it would be naïve to presume that practitioners can necessarily afford to wait whilst meetings and discussion forums are being organised. There is a need to begin the debate even whilst waiting to use the water cooler or kettle. It is acknowledged that the above suggestions are only a start; there is also a role for national associations, the regulatory bodies, nationwide professional networks and employers to play in terms of promoting a wider debate.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to throw the spotlight on an emerging tendency of those within child and family social work to have divergent opinions in relation to the Internet and social media, and how this might be influencing how practitioners deal with risks and opportunities. Consideration has been given to why there is such a divergence and it has been noted that this may be due to a lack of exposure to research findings in relation to children, young people and their use of the Internet and social media.

Recognising that the response of children and family social work practitioners may not simply be a matter of limited understanding, this paper has put forward the argument that the disintegration of trusted frameworks like community and family have led to a sense of social anxiety which is associated with prevailing concerns about childhood as we understand it. This contention has been supported by references to moral panics (Livingstone, 2005 and Clapton et al., 2012) and the management of risk which has been broadened to include the promotion of welfare (Smith, 2008). The concluding remarks of this paper strongly suggest child and family social work practitioners need a substantial and confident knowledge base to enable them to understand and support the usage or mis-usage of the Internet and social media so that they can exercise their responsibilities as both guardians of children's best interests and promoters of empowerment in a fast-paced digital world.

Key words: Looked After Children, Child Protection (Policy), Risk in Social Work, Social Networks

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