Web 2.0 in Social Work Macro Practice: Ethical Considerations and Questions

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Abstract
The use of Web 2.0 technologies in macro practice social work is increasingly common. This paper provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of using these new technologies in macro practice settings and a discussion of ethical considerations. It also ~~and~~ identifies areas for future investigation and discussion.

Keywords: macro practice social work, social work ethics, Web 2.0, Internet, social network sites

1. Introduction

There is an increasing social reliance on electronic communication and digital media (Homan, 2011) in the United States. Social media technologies are pervasive in political and community-based work (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; McNutt, 2006), and can increase the reach of macro social work. While the "digital divide" still exists, traditional concepts of who does and does not use electronic media are becoming less valid. Gifford (2009) suggests that Web 2.0 (i.e.: social media, user-generated content) enables all people to participate in a virtual world, so long as they have access to an Internet connection or a smart phone. This ease of participation may empower social workers to more easily establish connections and relationships, collaborate with each other and with other community stakeholders, and seek support for themselves, their agencies and organizations, and for causes in which they believe (O'Hear, 2006). Despite the rapid growth of technology, and acknowledgement of its impact on social work practice (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Judd & Johnson, 2012; NASW & ASWB, 2005), there has been very little discussion of the relationship between social work ethics and the use of these new technologies in social work macro practice. This paper will provide a brief overview of some of the new web-based technologies and their uses in macro practice, discuss potential ethical challenges of their use in macro practice, and identify areas for future research and discussion.

2. Literature Review

Macro social work practice is an intrinsic component of generalist social work practice and may take an administrative, community, or policy focus. The International Federation of Social Workers (2000) defines macro practice as "engaging in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development." Rothman (2010), in an update of his classic analysis of

community interventions, identifies three distinct forms of macro social work practice: (a) social policy planning/policy practice, (b) capacity development, and (c) advocacy. The most recent *Educational Policies and Academic Standards of the Council on Social Work Education* include multiple competencies that encompass macro practice (for example EPAS 2.1.5, 2.1.8, 2.1.9, and 2.1.10), as does the NASW Code of Ethics (2008). Overall, macro social work practice involves the ability of social workers to engage stakeholders to come together to respond to larger systems' concerns and to create long-term solutions (Gamble & Weil, 2010; Homan, 2011), regardless of whether that work is face-to-face or mediated by technology.

Many practitioners and academics use the terms "community" and "macro" practice interchangeably; for example, Gamble and Weil (2010) describe community practice social work as encompassing multiple areas of practice, including organizing, sustainable development, planning, and progressive change. This manuscript will follow Netting's (2008) definitions, using macro practice to refer to the breadth of practice with larger systems, community practice to refer to practice specifically with communities and neighborhoods, administrative practice to refer to work with organizations and agencies, and policy practice to refer to legislative and governmental advocacy.

3. What Do We Mean by Web 2.0?

Web 2.0 is a broad term, generally used to refer to Internet-based technologies that are marked by user-generated content, social networking, quick and informal collaborations, and evolving communities of like-minded individuals (Giffords, 2009). For comparison, traditional websites, which are generally static, read only, and non-interactive, may be called Web 1.0. The reader is allowed to read the materials on a Web 1.0 website and may download the content, but is not generally able to contribute, collaborate, or change its content (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Richards, 2010). With Web 2.0, readers can contribute, collaborate, and change the content. Examples of Web 2.0 technology include social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, and user-generated content sites, such as Wikipedia or Flickr or YouTube.

3.1 How Are Web 2.0 Technologies Used in Macro Practice?

As noted earlier, the use of web-based media for social change efforts is becoming increasingly prevalent, and it is constantly being adapted to include new technologies and meet new demands (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; McNutt, 2006). Digital media in community and policy practice serves six main functions. These include 1) policy research and information gathering, 2) public awareness and education, 3) building transnational and cyber communities and activism, 4) organizing and coordinating of both on and offline communities, 5) raising funds, and 6) pressuring and influencing decision makers (McNutt, 2006; Homan, 2011; Trippi, 2008). Clearly none of these are new activities for macro practice social workers; however, the introduction of new technologies to accomplish these activities also introduces new ethical considerations and concerns.

4. Strengths of Social Media Technology in Macro Practice

Two of the greatest strengths of Web 2.0 technology as a tool for macro practice are its efficiency and effectiveness (McNutt, 2008). Using Web 2.0 technology requires few resources, allowing even the most cash-strapped grassroots organization to have a large impact on social change (McNutt & Menon, 2008). Brotherton and Scheiderer (2008) report that Web 2.0 technology is a great way to tell an organization's or a social issue's "story." A wider audience and more effective storytelling venue also provide a global reach for community practice, allowing social workers to potentially influence change on a global level (McNutt, 2006; McNutt & Menon, 2008).

Web 2.0 allows social movements to engage new members, members who may have been disengaged, or individuals who were denied access to the more traditional but time-consuming in-person meetings (McNutt & Menon, 2008). When face-to-face meetings or social action is required, Web 2.0 can be an effective tool for coordinating such events, allowing the organizers to track who has been invited and who will attend, and to create contact lists that allow the coordinators to inform the attendees of any last minute scheduling changes. Web 2.0 technologies allow social workers to be responsive to critical changes and to keep the members of the organizational structure informed as soon as those changes occur.

Web 2.0 tools also increase constituents' and potential constituents' access to organizations, which may improve participation in macro practice activities (Giffords, 2009). Potential participants only need a computer with Internet access, or more recently a smart phone (Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 2011), to gain entrance to the organization. Indeed, the USC Annenberg Digital Futures Project (2007) reported that online users value their "non-place" online communities as highly as they value their real-life communities. Web 2.0 encourages constituent participation by allowing participants to be a part of the conversation, to influence the decisions made, and to be active participants in the process (Brotherton & Schneiderer, 2008; USC-Annenberg Digital Futures Project, 2007).

Not only is overall engagement in social action improved, but also who is engaged in that action is enlarged by use of Web 2.0 (McNutt & Menon, 2008). The USC Annenberg Digital Futures Project (2007) study reported that that 64.9% of respondents involved in online communities are involved in causes that they were not involved in prior to joining those communities, with 43.7% reporting they are more engaged in social action since beginning their Internet participation. Some research indicates that online action leads to increased off-line action as well (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009; USC Annenberg Digital Futures Project, 2007). McNutt & Menon (2008) point out that the medium allows for engagement with hard to reach constituents, including people with disabilities and people with work or family commitments that preclude in-person involvement. Finally, with the growth of mobile technologies, access to Web 2.0 technologies is not limited to those who have access to a computer; indeed, over 50% of adults in the United States own a smartphone (Smith, 2012), meaning that they are able to participate in web-based activities from almost anywhere.

The benefit of broader access also creates a benefit of expanded and diversified ownership of information. When more voices are heard, more grassroots-based decisions are made. The power of Web 2.0 is that no single person controls the information; everyone contributes (Giffords, 2009). Not only are avenues for contribution widened, so is access to decision makers. For example, after the blizzards in New York City in 2011, Twitter followers publicly scolded the city's mayor for the city's response to the snow, which ultimately led to a public apology from the administration, as well as a change in policy (Auer, 2011). Broadening participation in and access to the public arena can be a powerful tool for macro practice social work. New technologies may level the playing field so that all the voices have equalized power.

5. Ethical Concerns in Using Web 2.0 Technologies

The NASW and ASWB *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* (2005) draws on the NASW *Code of Ethics* and the ASWB *Model Social Work Practice Act* to create guidelines for social work practice using technology. The practice competencies in this document encompass both micro and macro knowledge and skills, including advocacy and social action (9-1), community practice (9-2), and administrative practice (9-3). Although the document was written prior to the explosion of many social media and Web 2.0 applications, it

is clear that social work's leading professional organizations recognize that the expansion of information technology will touch all areas of social work practice, and will demand adaptation and adjustment on the part of social work practitioners, regardless of their area of practice. Part of this adjustment includes becoming cognizant of the ethical dilemmas that arise when practicing with social media and Web 2.0 (Marson, 2009).

A number of ethical challenges specific to macro practice in social work have been discussed in the literature, including issues of informed consent and confidentiality, boundaries, and paternalism (Hardina, 2004; Reisch & Lowe, 2000). For example, Hardina (2004) points out that it is often optimal for community organizers to be members of the target community, which may blur personal and professional boundaries in practice. In many cases, friendships between constituent groups and the organizer may not be considered to be unethical, as they would be in a direct practice setting. Similarly, social workers engaged in macro practice may find that they are rarely able to clearly delineate between work and personal time, as they are members of the community in which they work, or are attempting to build more equitable relationships with clients than might be considered inappropriate in other practice settings (Hardina, 2004; Reisch & Lowe, 2000). Additionally, many macro practice social workers work outside the boundaries of traditional social service agencies. They may draw upon principles that, while closely aligned with social work practice (for example, the creation of equal partnerships between organizers and communities), are not specifically addressed in the NASW *Code of Ethics* (Carroll & Minkler, 2000; Hardina, 2013). Thus, macro social workers often are faced with ethical challenges that are imperfectly addressed by the *Code of Ethics*. As macro practice increasingly incorporates Web 2.0 technologies, the likelihood of social workers in these practice settings encountering ethical dilemmas increases. Specifically, many of the issues that other researchers have identified as being endemic to use of Web 2.0 in macro practice (Gladwell, 2010; Mattison, 2012; Trippi, 2008) align closely with ethical dilemmas already encountered by macro social workers.

Five areas of concern emerge from literature examining Web 2.0 in macro practice: 1) the continued digital divide in the U.S., 2) questions of sustaining long-term connections and relationships, 3) potential loss of message control, 4) blurring of ethical and professional boundaries, and 5) constantly changing technology (Gladwell, 2010; Mattison, 2012; Trippi, 2008). Each of these issues can be directly related to ethical challenges faced by macro social work practitioners. Although NASW and ASWB (2005) call for social workers to adhere to the values and ethics of the profession in all areas of practice, including online, it is also likely that the authors of the ethical code or practice guidelines may not have anticipated many of the ethical challenges faced by social workers using Web 2.0. However, the omnipresence of Web 2.0 in macro practice and in both clients' and practitioners' lives also demands that social workers carefully reflect upon and adapt professional ethics to incorporate these new technologies.

6. Inclusion and Cultural Competence: The Digital Divide

The digital divide is defined as "the gap between those who can benefit from digital technology and those who cannot" (Smith, 2010). Social work ethics call for social workers to ensure clients' access to services, as well as to provide culturally competent, inclusive, and affirming services (NASW & ASWB, 2005; NASW, 2000). Thus, although use of Web 2.0 may make community involvement and advocacy available to some populations and individuals, it may make them less accessible for others. For example, older adults, non-English speakers, and people reporting a less than college education and lower incomes all have lower rates of Internet access than people who are younger, have higher

education or income levels, and report English as their primary language (Fox, 2011). Another large disparity exists for those living with a disability. Approximately 81% of adults use the Internet, however, only 51% of adults living with a disability access the Internet (Fox, 2011). It is important to note that the increased use of mobile technologies and smart phones have changed the "digital divide," with young adults, those without college educations or with lower household incomes, and African Americans and Latinos all reporting higher rates of mobile phone use for internet access (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Marson (2009) also notes the limitations regarding bandwidth, as many communities still require dial-up services and are limited to the amount of data their computers can handle. Regardless, these disparities are concerning for using Web 2.0 as a social work practice tool, as much of the focus of community and policy practice is with those communities that traditionally have lower rates of access.

7. Sustainable Human Relationships

The NASW *Code of Ethics* places human relationships at the center of ethical social work practice (NASW, 2008). However, some social work researchers and practitioners question whether real, long-term relationships can be created when people do not meet face-to-face (Costello, Brecher, Smith, 2009; Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006). Can strong human relationships, a key social work value and EPAS competency (CSWE, 2008; NASW, 2008), be created online? In an editorial for the *Christian Science Monitor* (June 30, 2008), a senior campaign strategist with the Center for Community Change argued that organizing on the Internet is individualistic in its very nature and does not create the interconnected collective action of face-to-face organizing. Similarly, Gladwell (2010) argues that the relationships formed online do not translate to "real life" sufficiently to support the risk-taking necessary for activism. Simply put, critics of Web 2.0 as an organizing and advocacy tool feel that it is not effective in building the meaningful sense of community needed to create social change.

Others contradict these concerns. As mentioned earlier, the USC Annenberg Digital Futures Project (2007) reported that online users value their online communities as highly as they value their real life communities. Certainly the events in Iran, Egypt, and Wall Street over the past several years have all supported the assertion that Web 2.0 technologies are changing the way that social change happens (Gaworecki, 2011; Rohlinger & Brown, 2009). Watkins (2009) reports that online activists during the 2008 election were highly engaged in non-online campaign activities as well. Rohlinger and Brown (2009) suggest that the Internet in general, and social media specifically, are an important "… democratic resource because it provides a free space for citizens to articulate their dissent in a less public way and cultivate oppositional identities, which, in turn, can provide a foundation for activism in the real world" (p.134). They go on to say that many individuals use online activities as a way to test ideas, build confidence, and experiment with activism, prior to carrying out the work in off-line settings.

Thus, concerns about the sustainability and "transferability" of web-based actions and groups are warranted, but the research is divided on the issue. The question remains as to whether online community practice can build long-term connectedness and communities or is only useful for quick issue response. Ethically, it seems clear that macro practitioners cannot rely on only online or only in-person organizing, but must engage all technologies for effective community practice. Watkins (2009) discusses the need for multiple contacts, posts, or interactions in order for social media to be effective. Relationship is not built through a single interaction or post or comment. Understanding and relationship are built over time and through multiple contacts and interactions, whether they take place on or off-line.

8. Loss of Control of Content and Privacy: Competence and Integrity

The social work values of competency and integrity both apply to the question of ownership of content in Web 2.0 settings (Mattison, 2012; ASWB & NASW, 2005; NASW, 2008). Often, ownership of the technology that supports Web 2.0 (i.e.: Facebook, Instagram, Flickr) activities lies with major corporations, institutions or governments, not with the individuals who create the content (Auer, 2011; Brotherton & Schneiderer, 2008). A macro practitioner may use social media to connect with their constituents; however, they may not have ultimate control over the method of delivery of the material or of the message and content itself. If material is posted to Flickr or YouTube, to whom does it really belong? Can it be reused or disseminated without permission? How can the authorship of a given statement be verified? What if the content is changed after it is initially shared, but the authorship is not changed to reflect this? If social workers are going to use social media to disseminate a message, they should be able to respond ethically and knowledgeably to both agency and client concerns about the issue addressed.

Additionally, there are ongoing discussions in social media about the expectations of privacy and ownership for uses of social media (Auer, 2011). For example, what are social media companies allowed to "know" about their users? Should advertisers be allowed to target their ads based on the information that social media users unwittingly provide? What about other stakeholders, such as potential funders for programs, advocacy targets, or members of the wider community? It is widely agreed that social networking sites make a great deal of personal information widely available, and that this information is often available well beyond an individual's immediate social circle (Judd & Johnson, 2012). While some argue that online communities are essentially public arenas, without an expectation of privacy (Weeden, 2012), this is certainly not a universally accepted belief. If social media platforms are used to disseminate information about community or social issues, what are the implications of participation for community members in other venues? For example, if an employee of a non-union workplace "likes" a union organizing website on Facebook, what are the possible implications for his or her employment? What are the parameters of individuals using workplace technology resources—email, computers, smart phones—to participate in community change efforts? Given that access to technology takes place outside of work hours, is an expectation of privacy when using workplace devices outside of work hours reasonable?

From an ethical standpoint, social workers are called upon to demonstrate competence in technology, regulation, and practice (ASWB & NASW, 2005). Thus, prior to engaging with Web 2.0 in their macro practice endeavors, social workers should be able to clearly inform potential clients about questions of technology use, ownership of material, and expectations of privacy. This can be challenging, given the constantly changing nature of the technologies, as well as the rarity of discussion of ethical issues and technology in social work education. Clearly, this is an area for further discussion and clarification, both in educational and practice settings.

9. Boundaries and Informed Consent

There is very little written on how the use of new technologies has created challenges around client boundaries or informed consent for social work macro practitioners. However, there is literature on how the use of Web 2.0 technologies by students have impacted students' relationships and boundaries (for example, Judd & Johnston, 2012; Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2009; Watkins, ,2009), as well as literature on clinical practice and the use of email or other Internet-based content (Mattison, 2012). Watkins (2009) discusses at length the way that digital technology is "blurring the line" (p.38) that traditionally separates teachers from their students. Certainly popular media is full

of warnings for technology users about editing the information they post in social media sites, as it may affect their professional trajectories. Social workers, especially those who identify as part of the "digital generation," may be unaware of the depth of impact that a careless word or unedited video or photo posted on a personal website has on their professional identities (Judd & Johnston, 2012). For social workers, the next question is how does participation in Web 2.0 technologies change the relationship of social worker to client? In a community setting, how does it change the relationship among clients?

As macro social workers we may be engaging clients on personal issues but also on larger community issues. The boundary issues identified in Hardina's (2004) discussion of the situational challenges of macro practice in the application of the NASW Code of Ethics are amplified in the social media environment. The ethics involved in maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients may become even more complex when new technologies are incorporated into the working relationship (Judd & Johnston, 2012). If practitioners maintain both a personal and a professional presence in online spaces, how are those identities merged and managed (Watkins, 2009)? The loss of anonymity and the direct and constant connections may make some macro social workers understandably uncomfortable and concerned about boundaries. Hardina (2013) describes the relationship a professional organizer has with a client as somewhere between "a professional relationship and a friendship" (p.38). If this is the case, then how do online personas and activities impact the client/social worker relationship for everybody involved? If relationships change face-to-face, what happens to online relationships (for example, someone is hired at a new agency, but maintains an online relationship through social media with previous community clients). Is it possible to stop being a social worker outside of work hours, if one has a distinctive online presence that incorporates a social work identity? How we manage those boundaries may be clear face-to-face, but may shift when working on the web, where personal information seems limitless. It is critical that ongoing discussion and examination of the ethics of macro practice in a social media environment be incorporated into professional education and continuing education.

10. Technology Competence

A "healthy skepticism" exists among many social workers as to whether this technology should be relied upon as a social work tool (Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; McNutt & Menon, 2008; Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006), perhaps due in part to its constantly changing nature. Certainly, training on its use and monitoring is not generally part of social work education (Giffords, 2009, Mattison, 2012). Additionally, Web 2.0 technology was not necessarily developed for use in macro practice and must be adapted and amended to fit social work's needs. The ever changing nature of technology also creates some generational divides, with technology that seems new to faculty being out-of-date and even "passé" to students. Finally, little research has been done to show the effectiveness of technology as a tool for social work practice in general (Mattison, 2012), as well as macro practice specifically (McNutt, 2006). McNutt (2006) stresses the need for research and evaluation to investigate the application of Web 2.0 technology as evidence based tools. Mattison (2012) calls for increase of the evidence base in clinical uses for web-based technology; the authors would broaden this call to include macro practice as well. Certainly, it is difficult to claim competence, as called for by our professional ethics (NASW & ASWB, 2005; NASW, 2008), if the topic is rarely addressed in either professional education or the professional literature.

11. Implications and Discussion

As Hardina (2003; 2013) and Resich and Low (2000) have identified, macro practice social work may already demand a slightly

different interpretation of some key social work values and ethics than clinical practice settings. (Mattison, 2012: Judd& Johnston, 2012). Issues of competency, boundaries and privacy, building and maintaining relationships that are already complex in macro practice settings may be further complicated by the use of Web 2.0 technologies. However, it is clear that the integration of these technologies into practice is inevitable (NASW & ASWB, 2005; Giffords, 2009; Mattison, 2012). Therefore, it is time for the profession to begin to engage in a conversation about the ethical implications and dilemmas inherent in the use of these new technologies in macro practice activities.

Certainly, one area for improvement is in the integration of discussion of these activities into social work education—BSW, MSW, and professional continuing education. Rather than simply observing the explosion of Web 2.0 advocacy efforts, social work educators should work to integrate it into their classrooms and professional education activities. Like any new practice intervention, students benefit from training and discussion about the implications of the use of the tool. This may be particularly true of these technologies, as students' casual familiarity with them may mean a casual approach to their implementation without critical analysis, thoughtful planning, or strategic thinking (Judd & Johnston, 2012). Thus, social work education must begin to integrate the ethical and appropriate use of these tools.

Professional organizations have an important role to play in this work as well. The most recent guidelines by NASW and ASWB, while helpful, were published in 2005. Things have changed dramatically since then—Facebook was created in 2004, YouTube in 2005, the first IPhone was released in 2007—the list of innovations goes on. Clearly, the guidelines need to be updated to reflect the current environment. Additionally, we would echo Mattison's (2012) call for the professional organizations to develop more specific standards for online practice methods, although we would broaden the call to be inclusive of all areas of social work practice. Expansion of our understandings of social work practice to include new technologies will help ensure that our use of these technologies remains within the boundaries of ethical practice.

Finally, there is a critical need for the creation of a greater base of research knowledge on the use of these new technologies in macro practice social work. As a baseline, a survey of practitioners on their uses of Web 2.0 technologies in macro practice modalities would help the profession gain a greater understanding of current levels of use and existing practices (Mattison, 2012). Beyond this, analysis of utility and efficacy of technology-driven interventions would allow for the development of a research base for practice, as well as theory development in this growing area of practice (Thyer, 2008). There is a need for the creation of an evidence base in macro social work practice in general (Thyer, 2008), and certainly our ethical commitment to competence demands that our research knowledge remain up-to-date with our practice methods.

In closing, it is clear that Web 2.0 is already an integral part of macro social work practice. Thus, the profession must understand how these increasingly common practice modalities can be practiced within our ethical guidelines. Although the ethical challenges raised by the use of Web 2.0 in macro practice may not be new ones, the use of technology does raise new questions for social work practitioners and educators to reflect on. There is a need to think critically about the strengths and limitations of applying new technologies to macro social work practice, in order to remain true to our profession's strong commitment to value driven ethical practice.

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