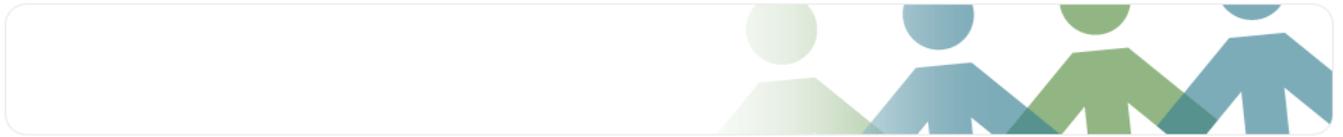


# Social Media Use and Social Work Practice



Canadian  
Association of  
Social Workers



**Acknowledgements:**

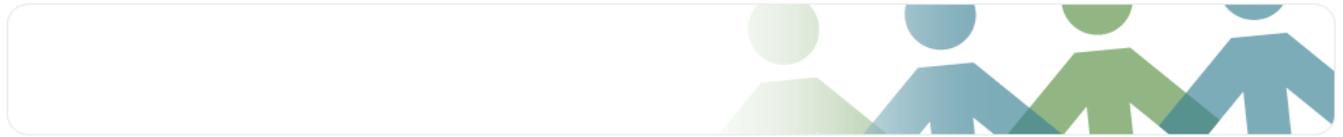
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Annette Johns (NLASW)

Pat Zacharias (MIRSW)

Andrea Munro (NSASW)



## **Preamble**

Social work practice is grounded within the context of a code of ethics that sets forth the shared values and principles of those who practice within the profession. The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) highlights six core values.

Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

Value 3: Service to Humanity

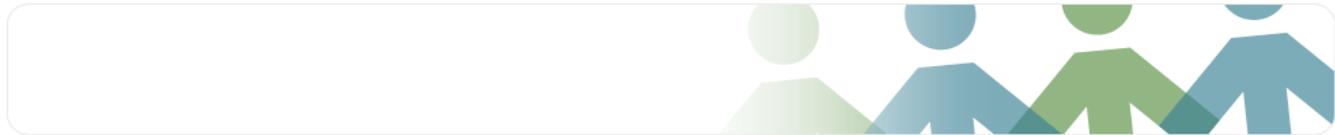
Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice

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## **1. Introduction**

Social media is a term used to capture on-line technology which enables people to communicate and instantly share information and resources with local, national and international audiences. Examples of social media include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Skype, YouTube, on-line blogs, and Foursquare. As social media use continues to evolve and expand, social workers must examine the use of this technology within the realm of professional practice and ethical decision-making.

The overall purpose of this document is to explore some of the ethical challenges and considerations, while highlighting best practice guidelines which are grounded in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005). It is recognized that each province and territory may have their own regulations and guidelines to guide social media use in professional practice which will take precedence.

## **2. Benefits of Social Media**

The popularity of social media sites brings many benefits to the user and global community. Some of these benefits from a professional point of view include the ability to communicate with on-line communities that expand local or provincial/territorial parameters, to share information and resources with a wider audience at a low cost, to build community, to promote research, and to impart ideas and expertise on issues that impact on health and well-being.

## **3. Ethical Challenges**

Many social workers use social media sites in their professional and personal lives. While its' use may seem straightforward, there are many ethical challenges that need to be explored and discussed.

As outlined by Johns (2012), "modern day technologies continue to challenge our profession to think critically about professional/personal boundaries, self-disclosure, dual and multiple relationships, privacy and conflicts of interest within an ethical framework". Examples of ethical dilemmas pertaining to social media use include how to handle friend requests from clients or former clients, deciding whether to search or follow a client on a social media platform, whether to post information related to work with clients on a blog or personal Facebook page, or whether to use client testimonials on their professional website.



The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) does not address social media use specifically, but does provide guidance on the ethical issues that warrant attention and consideration. As outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) “Ethical behaviour comes from a social worker’s individual commitment to engage in ethical practice. Both the spirit and the letter of this Code of Ethics will guide social workers as they act in good faith and with a genuine desire to make sound judgments” (p. 2). While social media presents a different forum for the sharing of information and building connections, the ethical issues remain the same and ethical principles and standards must equally apply.

#### **4. CASW Code of Ethics (2005)**

Sections of the code of ethics pertinent to a discussion on social media in professional practice include:

##### **Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons**

As outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), “social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights” and “respect the client’s right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent” (p. 4). These are important principles that need to be explored within the context of social media.

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) highlights several ethical guidelines which social workers should reflect on in relation to social media including:

1.1.1 Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others.

1.1.4 Social workers limit their involvement in the personal affairs or clients to matters related to service being provided.

1.2.4 Social workers seek a working knowledge and understanding of clients’ racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs.



#### **Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice**

Honesty, impartiality, and transparency are principles that are held in high standard within the social work profession, and social workers must examine these principles within the context of social media. It is also the responsibility of the social worker to establish appropriate boundaries with clients and to ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients. Social workers must consider whether boundaries are being challenged when social media is used.

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) speaks to ethical responsibilities in professional relationships as it relates to boundaries, conflicts of interest, and dual and multiple relationships. It is the responsibility of the social worker to reflect on these guidelines as it pertains to social media.

2.1.1 Social workers maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship.

2.3 Social workers avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment.

2.4.1 Social workers take care to evaluate the nature of dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the needs and welfare of their clients are protected.

#### **Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice**

As outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) “social workers demonstrate respect for the trust and confidence placed in them by clients, communities and other professionals by protecting the privacy of client information and respecting the client’s right to control when and where this information will be shared with third parties” (p. 7).

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) outlines social workers’ ethical responsibilities to clients that pertain to confidentiality and states that “social workers do not solicit private information from clients unless it is required to provide services or to conduct social work research” (p. 6). Other guidelines include:

1.5.6 Social workers take care to not discuss confidential information in public or semi-public areas such as hallways, waiting rooms, elevators, and restaurants.



1.5.7 Social workers take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines and other electronic technology. Social workers inform clients of the limits to confidentiality that may apply to these forms of communication.

Social workers must reflect on these guidelines when faced with a friend request from a client or former client, and when commenting on practice through social media. It is advised that social workers do not post client information (including non-identifying information) to social media platforms.

### **Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice**

This value speaks to the importance of social workers practicing within their competency and skill level. When social workers use social media platforms in their practice, it is incumbent upon the social worker to have the necessary knowledge of how these platforms operate, to know what the risks and benefits are, and to develop strategies/policies to minimize these risks and maintain the best interest of the client.

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) also addresses the ethical responsibilities of social workers who supervise students (i.e., field instructors, educators). Specifically the guidelines state:

3.5.2 Social workers endeavour to provide instruction based on the most current information and knowledge available in the profession.

3.5.3 Social workers foster in social work students' knowledge and understanding of the social work profession, the *Code of Ethics* and other appropriate sources of ethical practice

Social workers who supervise students have an ethical responsibility to engage students in learning about the ethical issues pertaining to social media use, to foster critical analysis, and assist students in navigating the complexities and developing their own risk management strategies that are in keeping with best practice standards.



## 5. Risk Management Strategies

There are several steps that social workers can take in reducing ethical risk in social media use including:

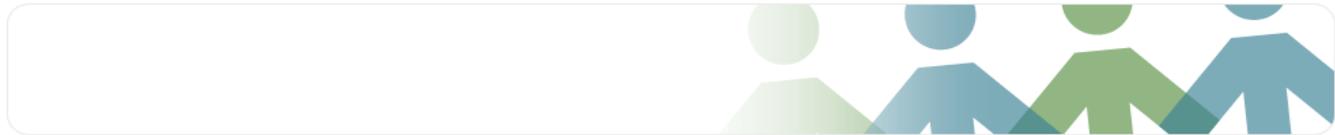
- Consultation – open dialogue and discussion with colleagues on the ethical challenges of social media use and strategies to mitigate risk that is in the best interests of clients and maintains ethical standards.
- Privacy & Confidentiality – information shared through social media platforms does become part of the public domain and can be accessed by those with internet access. It is the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that client information is kept private and confidential. Social workers should also become familiar with legislation governing privacy within their provincial/territorial jurisdictions.
- Models for Ethical Decision-Making – social workers can avail of several ethical decision-making models when resolving ethical dilemmas in practice. Social workers may explore these models within the context of social media.
- Continuing Professional Education – engaging in professional development opportunities that explore boundaries in professional social work practice and foster on-going critical reflection.
- Policies & Guidelines - become familiar with relevant provincial/territorial professional standards/guidelines that address social media use in practice, or contribute to the development of these standards where they do not exist.
- Social Media Operations – become familiar with the operational policies of social media sites and ensure that your own privacy settings are sets to the highest levels.
- Documentation – documenting conversations with clients pertaining to social media policies and the resolution of ethical dilemmas (i.e., how a friend request from a client was addressed). Social workers must also consider whether information accessed about a client through a social media platform needs to be documented. It would be incumbent upon the social worker to assess what is clinically relevant and to engage clients in dialogue about information that may be obtained about them on-line.



- Boundaries explore boundaries within the context of professional practice and social media use and recognize when boundaries are being challenged. Reflection on the following questions may also be helpful. Have I set clear boundaries with my client? In my use of social media, am I creating a blend between my personal and professional life? Does my code of ethics, standard of practice or organizational policy provide guidance or direction?
- Informed Consent – informing clients about your own professional social media policy at the beginning of the social work relationship to ensure client clarity while establishing clear boundaries.
- Explore Your On-Line Identity - find out what information may be available about you on-line by periodically engaging in an internet search using a variety of different search engines (i.e., Google search). This is the information that clients and supervisors will also be able to access about you. If there is a discrepancy in the information that is available on line to how you would like to be portrayed in your professional life, you may want to reconsider the content of your personal life that is available on-line.
- Develop your own risk management guidelines that are based on the values and ethics of the profession. Social media will continue to evolve and change. It is therefore important that social workers continue to explore social media use within an ethical framework and to stay current with the social media platforms they may be using in their personal and professional lives.

## **Conclusion**

This document outlines some of the ethical considerations and best practice guidelines for social media use in social work practice. As with other ethical issues and dilemmas in practice, there are rarely black or white answers as it pertains to social media use. Social workers must use their own professional judgment, seek information from their provincial/territorial regulatory bodies, review best practice guidelines and risk management strategies, and engage in on-going dialogue with colleagues.



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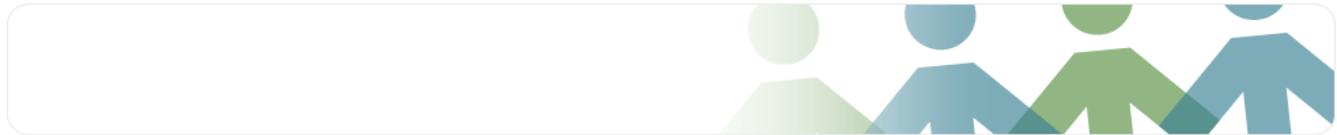
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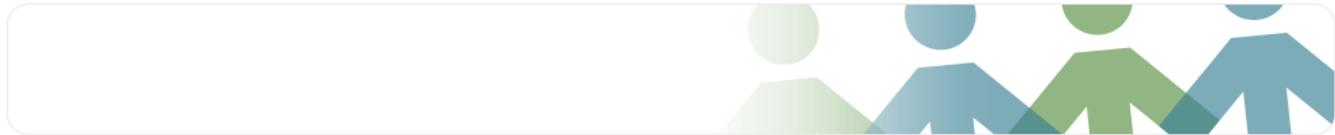
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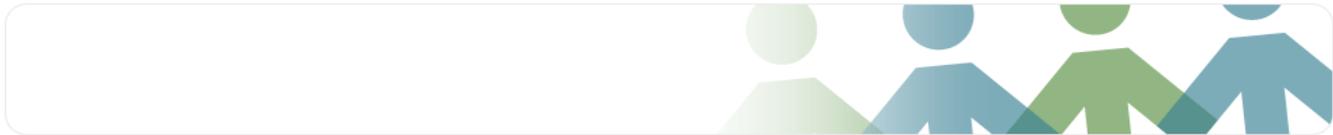
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