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## Social Work, Technologies, Covid 19

Taylor-Beswick, A. (2021). Social Work, Technologies, Covid 19. In D. Turner (Ed.), *Social Work and Covid-19: Lessons for Education and Practice* Critical Publishing.

**Published in:**

Social Work and Covid-19: Lessons for Education and Practice

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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### **Introduction**

This short chapter employs a pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post pandemic frame to contextualise an aspect of social work's response to COVID19, a digitised response to the global crisis that continues to alter educational methods and approaches to practice in the field. It was the measures put in place to control the spread of the virus that forced social work to seek digital alternatives to face-to-face, in-person or proximal practices. In common with most human service professions, this pivot online has not been without tension; gaps in digital knowledge and infrastructure, and the absence of digital leadership and funding are amongst the many difficulties the profession is experiencing.

Literature working at the social work and technologies intersection offers insights into the significance of this current shift in practices and methods (see for example: LaMendola, 1985; Toole, 1987; Rafferty, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2014; Sapey, 1997; Peckover et al., 2008; Rafferty and Waldman, 2006; Rafferty and Steyaert, 2009; Baker et al., 2014; Ballantyne, 2015; Robbins et al. 2016; Turner, 2016; Taylor, 2017; Taylor-Beswick, 2019; Goldkind et al., 2020). Of particular relevance is the troublesome nature of technology acceptance and adoption, described as being hindered by the mismanagement of information and communication technologies (ICT's) in the field (Peckover et al., 2008; Rafferty, 2014). Associated with this is a distinct lack of attention to ICT's and digitalisation within pre-pandemic social work education, which has ultimately created a lag in the progression of digital capabilities and digital development across the profession (McAuliffe and Nipperess, 2017; Zgoda and Shane, 2018; Taylor-Beswick, 2019).

Whilst there had been an obvious and pressing need for the profession to advance its digital practices, the current global crisis has further highlighted the consequences of the lack of digital advancement in social work. The urgency to respond to the pandemic has offered little opportunity for digital development, criticality or analysis. Technology adoption has therefore involved a wide range of commercial platforms, with notions of free and

functional convenience often usurping privacy and ethics (Goldkind et al., 2020). An acknowledgement of all of this in no way diminishes the extraordinary efforts within education and practice to address the significant challenges that COVID has presented.

### **Pre-pandemic digital social work**

Social work has historically concerned itself with the development of diverse and progressive approaches and methods. Face-to-face, in-person and proximal practices, carried out by value orientated practitioners, have been foundational to establishing meaningful and effective professional relationships. These relationships are developed within a diverse range of environments, including homes, parks, schools, hospitals, cars, communities and libraries. Due to the measures put in place to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, proximity, presence and the importance of being physically present were largely arrested. Previous methods of establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships were upended due to the need to maintain a safe physical distance. Social distancing, social work in the online or mediated through a screen, is at odds with practice fundamentals. A reliance on technologies, the online or the digital would not previously have been viewed as significant to how social workers go about their business. A lack of digital capabilities or mediated methods were unlikely to be thought of as detrimental to professionalism or practice effectiveness. Teaching with or teaching about technologies was not routinely associated with the development of professional knowledge, skills or capabilities (Taylor, 2017; Taylor-Beswick, 2019).

Whilst pre-pandemic social work was much less reliant on technologies, there is a rich and substantial body of knowledge stemming back to the early 1970's that urges social work to develop its socio-technical conscience, digital capabilities and practices. Social work's 'electronic turn' occurred much earlier than the twenty first century (Garrett, 2005, p.529). The technological concerns and solutions relevant to the profession are robustly addressed within this vast body of literature. The majority of this work has its origins in social work education, developed by a group of technology interested social work academics. The human services Information Technologies association (husITa) has been active for over 30 years in its mission, 'to promote the ethical and effective use of information technology for human betterment' (2018, np). It was at the inaugural Social Work and Technologies

Conference, that these social work academics articulated their belief in 'the value of information technology for the future of human services' (Toole, 1987, in Ballantyne, 2017, p.3). Conversely, they warned of how 'ill-informed applications of IT would result in systems which do not model human service value systems' (1987, in Ballantyne, 2017, p.3). These very early predictions, about the ill-informed use of applications, are becoming more and more felt across the social world and through human-techno systems. Surveillance, automated bias and algorithmic oppression are just a fraction of the socio-technical issues that have rapidly been emerging (Leslie et al., 2020). Despite an increase in pre-pandemic social work's digital awareness, there was little evidence of the profession's resistance to digital forms of discrimination and oppression. Social work is well positioned to take a stand against these issues. Indeed, it has a responsibility to push back on the voracious tech capitalism currently plaguing humanity.

### **Pandemic digital social work**

It is completely understandable within the context of a highly contagious pandemic that human service professions would exploit the affordances of social type technologies (for example: Yavnai and Lafrenière, 2020; Dewar and Akingbulu, 2020; Mitchell and Ali, 2020). The absence of a safe and robust public sector digital infrastructure led social work to use platforms designed for commercial purposes. Arguments for the continued use of, what are often, data risky digital platforms, are primarily grounded in notions of convenience. Ease of access, the perceived lack of cost and the functionality of a platform are favoured over safer digital alternatives. When adopted for use in professional practice digital platforms must be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as any other practice environment. Inviting service users into unexamined digital spaces presents a very real risk to rights and privacies (Eubanks, 2017; Noble, 2018; Goldkind et al., 2020). Discussions amongst the online social work community continues to illuminate a variance in opinion, regarding which digital platforms might be appropriate for professional practice. Information about appropriate and acceptable digital practices has been slow to emerge in policy and guidance. The viability of commercial social technologies as a substitute for ethical face-to-face practice has yet to be resolved within the social work community.

Whilst the adoption of commercial platforms was driven by the need for business continuity, there appears to have been little pause to consider the implications of these digital choices. Platforms known for scraping and mining vast amounts of personal and sensitive data continue to be used across education and practice. Commercial platform usage in a human social service raises a host of tensions and issues, and challenges the premise from which social work is practiced. Fundamental therefore, is the practitioner's ability to assess the safety of a digital environment, and have the knowledge and skills to communicate this to others (Kolah, 2018). Whilst the affordances of digital technologies should be taken advantage of and exploited, social work should also guard against colluding with market forces. The 'McDonaldization of social work' is how Dustin (2017, p.5) might explain it, based on her work to better understand the roots of new managerialism in care management, particularly when thinking about how to achieve ethical human engagement over that which is thought of as free, and convenient.

Despite a steady increase in digital engagement within the popularist context, personal platform choices, understandings and usage are not always appropriate or translatable to professional practice (Fenwick and Edwards, 2016). Critical digital decision making is essential to this, because of how pandemic digital adoption will have already set precedents for future social work practices. A value too must be placed on personal information and data, if social work is to be at the forefront of challenging the role of the digital in exacerbating existing inequalities. The likelihood of dualistic disadvantage appears to have largely gone unexamined throughout the pandemic period, meaning that the rights and privacy of many will already have been compromised. Social work needs to own its role in this inadvertent replacement of one oppression with another, because hard-fought rights are the cost of this lack of attention (Goldkind et al., 2020).

In spite of repeated calls for change to the social work education, learning about and learning with technologies remains an underdeveloped aspect of social work curriculum (Glastonbury and LaMendola, 1992; LaMendola, 2010; Perron et al., 2010; McAuliffe and Nipperess, 2017). In a study designed to reveal the contribution of social work education to digital practice preparedness, students described, with much angst and fear, the degree to which they felt unprepared to engage in ethical digital practices (Taylor-Beswick, 2019).

Issues of a similar nature arose in a recent survey of qualified social work practitioners, who whilst keen to explore digital methods, explained how the lack of digital education and training meant they had little in the way of digital capital or confidence (BASW/SCIE, 2020).

### **Post-pandemic digital social work**

Given that the pandemic shows no signs of abating, digital methods will remain key to practice continuity. Social work, as a population of social scientists, needs to consider how it can examine and address the new and unfamiliar forms of abuses and social injustices caused by digital technologies. It will need to think more about the relationship that is needed with computer sciences, so as to influence the design and development of digital platforms; because without this, human life and human rights will continue to be undermined by ungoverned and unregulated platform designers.

Even though the time to fully reflect is not yet upon us, there will come a time when the profession will need to consider pandemic driven responses. In the wake of COVID19 it will be important to reflect upon the changes that have been made, both in education and practice, to think about the changes that were a crisis response and those that will have become established aspects of professional practice. Decisions will need to be made about the appropriateness of both digital and traditional methods going forward, with close attention paid to those that no longer serve us, or those that no longer assist us to serve. Furthermore, a position will need to be taken on tech-capitalism, surveillance, data rights and data exploitation

Fundamentally, 21<sup>st</sup> century social work, needs 21<sup>st</sup> century technology specific regulatory requirements and guidance, and up to date QAA Benchmark statements (QAA, 2016). In England, the Digital Capabilities for Social Work project offers a significant starting point from which to leverage these developments (BASW/SCIE, 2020). An acknowledgment of the urgency of this work from across the profession is vital now that we have entered a new and more dangerous form of capitalism. We need to prefix everything with the word 'digital' to understand the magnitude of the issue at hand, until this issue is given the rigorous attention it deserves.

## Conclusion

As reminded by Ruha Benjamin, “Arundhati Roy, in “The Pandemic is a Portal,” wrote:

*“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And be ready to fight for it”* (Strommel et al., 2000, p.ix).

This Chapter urges social work to engage more judiciously with the phenomenon that is digitalisation. It calls for the profession to be more attuned to, not only its own digital future but the implications of the digital on our collective futures, so that the integrity and efficacy of the profession and the value of humanity, can, on some level, be preserved.

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