Should social care staff be Facebook friends with the people they support?

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In drafting a policy on professional boundaries for supported living organisations, we became increasingly baffled by the directive that social care staff should not use social media to communicate with people they support. In particular, support provider organisations in Scotland have been directed by their regulator (Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), undated) to prohibit staff from becoming Facebook friends with the people they support. This paper asks whether this is a legitimate expression of safeguarding obligations set out in the Care Act 2014 or a manifestation of the paternalism that sometimes inhibits effective practice (House of Lords Select Committee, 2005). Consideration is also given to whether a proportionate approach has been adopted or whether risk aversion has informed the development of guidance that fails to keep people safe, stand up to scrutiny or fit with the Government's digital strategy [i].

The following paragraphs attempt to tease out the issues by using the example of Facebook, although we recognise that social media is changing fast and any guidance for staff needs to be portable and applicable in a changing context. For clarity we are using the relationship between learning disabled people and the staff who work directly with and for them as the lens through which to explore these issues.

It may help to declare our position from the outset. It consists of five simple assertions, as follows:

- **Safeguarding**. All communications carry hazards, and so staff have safeguarding obligations, interpreted via a careful assessment of the person's mental capacity and played out through a sophisticated blend of compliance with guidance and ethical agility (Northway et al, 2007; Doel et al, 2010).
- **Inclusion.** Wherever possible, staff should promote natural, unpaid and mutual supports and reduce reliance on paid staff supports. This is based on an understanding of the distinctive role of paid staff that sets them apart from other citizens who are in touch with the individual. The principle of promoting

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independence means that in general, connections with members of the public are to be favoured over connections with paid staff.

- **Personalisation.** Staff should personalise their communications with the people they support and this may utilise a variety of media, all of which need to be managed carefully, without singling out one medium over another.
- **Independence.** Digital inclusion can bring huge benefits to learning disabled people and the government reinforces this through its 'digital by default' policy.
- **Responsibility.** Facebook is a neutral form of interaction that can be used for good or ill, so using it passively can reinforce feelings of loneliness, while positive use can strengthen people's positive sense of connection with others, skills and self-esteem [ii]. Both staff and people using services bear responsibility for their actions.

In summary, Facebook, in line with many other forms of social media, is simply another form of communication with its own strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and risks. The relationship between a health or social care worker and a person that they support is unlike informal relationships in that it is initiated through the provision of a service, regulated by professional bodies and subject to an ethical code. This means that the rules and boundaries affecting Facebook use in the delivery of social care services need to uphold the wider obligations on health and social care services. These rules need to be tailored to the medium to ensure that power imbalances, confidentiality and ambiguity are managed dynamically and effectively, just as they are with sign language, letter writing or use of an interpreter, but the underpinning governance arrangements must be fundamentally the same.

In challenging rules about Facebook, we are not throwing off all restraint, but rather asking for a more rigorous approach that intelligently works out what to do in the contested space between rules and professional discretion, between professional relationships and shared citizenship, between promoting good things and preventing bad things happening to people. By doing this, we clarify and reinforce the distinctive role of support staff and sharpen the focus on the learning disabled person's informal life.

Around 52% of the UK population - 33 million people - were active Facebook users in 2013 [iii, iv] and if we include the whole range of online social media such as Twitter and email, then around 82% of all UK citizens are included [v, vi]. Its rapid rise in popularity has been matched by the equally speedy establishment of normative behaviour within health and social care services. In previous generations, similar voices were raised in warning about the dangers of new media, whether printing, newspapers, radio or television [vii].

The pervasive effect of social norms in health and social care agencies in respect of Facebook is illustrated by a short survey conducted by Bates and colleagues (2013), who asked 409 health and social care staff to complete a survey questionnaire about their

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personal 'boundary attitude'. The survey offered four possible answers – 'yes, definitely', 'probably', 'probably not' and 'no, never'. Each question addressed a different area in which the boundary between personal and professional life is negotiated. One question asked the worker if they would be a Facebook friend with a person who used health or social care services. Only 5% answered 'yes, definitely' or 'probably' and 81% selected the 'no, never' option. This widespread prohibition is in line with policy demands, such as the Scottish Social Services Council that insists that:

> *'"friending" or allowing a person who uses services or their carer to be your online friend or follower is not acceptable for a registered social service worker as it creates a personal relationship outside of your workplace'. And it leaves both workers and people who use services open to allegations from comments they might post"* (SSSC, undated).

The only other question in this survey that generated such a strong response concerned staff forming a sexual relationship with a person that had previously used the care service. In this latter situation, there is a substantial infrastructure of prohibition – policies, professional sanctions, media disapproval and up to 14 years imprisonment for offenders (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Somehow Facebook has achieved a similar level of disapprobation with none of these structures in place. The desire to explore the rationale for such responses provided the impetus for this paper which we intend to take the form of a provocation in order to stimulate further investigation and debate.

In the following paragraphs, we set out various attempts to justify the ban. The list begins with the most general reasons for avoiding the internet entirely and then narrows down to reasons why staff should not be Facebook friends with people using social care services.

The internet is a dangerous place

First, the internet is viewed as a dangerous place rife with pornography, training courses on terrorism, cyber bullying trolls (Juvonen and Gross, 2008) and malevolent criminals grooming the innocent for future sexual exploitation. At a lower level, the naive might be harmed by an uncritical acceptance of false, misleading or mischievous information while others may be persuaded by marketing materials thinly disguised as health information or peer support (Hale et al, 2014). Indeed, there is evidence that certain groups in society are at heightened risk, such as teenagers experiencing online peer pressure (McBride, 2011; Vickers, 2012). Sometimes these dangers are perceived as so severe and the person's vulnerability so immutable that the best way to keep people safe is considered to be to keep them permanently offline. If this is then generalised to a wider group, vulnerable people have no opportunity to make either wise or unwise decisions regarding their internet use. They are denied all the benefits of digital inclusion.

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We note that this is the same rationale that was used to justify the creation of segregated, 'special' and 'different' places that denied people with learning disabilities full community presence in neighbourhoods, on buses and in places of work. Rather than recognising the potential advantages of participation in the wider community, certain individuals are considered to be so vulnerable that they can only be kept safe by exclusion. Such efforts often fail (Northway and Jenkins, 2012), but the myth that segregation keeps people safe persists. It is like being so fearful of food poisoning that you stop eating.

This approach also disregards the high levels of social isolation experienced by learning disabled people (Emerson et al, 2005; Learning Disability Coalition, undated) and the risk that this isolation brings in its wake (Putnam, 2000). As John Cacioppo's research [viii] concluded, "loneliness is twice as bad as obesity for health." The internet holds the positive potential to overcome such isolation, especially with people who can type rather than talk or connect online rather than travel. Facebook and other social media may contribute towards meeting the fundamental human needs (Maslow, 1954; Griffin and Tyrrell, 2004) of belonging, esteem and connection with others, and can be used to break down stigma (Corrigan et al, 2014). Building online bridges with others promotes political engagement and civic participation (Hampton et al, 2011) while a positive online persona builds self esteem and wellbeing (Kim and Roselyn Lee, 2011). Of course, there is nothing to stop people maintaining two Facebook accounts, one of which is used for work-based relationships. Similarly, there is nothing to stop a worker who does not own or wish to share their own Facebook account from supporting a learning disabled person in registering with Facebook and building a network of Facebook friends.

Finally here, the internet has the potential to empower as well as corrupt. In the healthcare community, increasing numbers of patients are gaining knowledge and evaluating the quality of information about their health condition, effective treatments and self-care, contra-indications and quality standards [ix]. Much of this information comes from the internet and from online support groups that link people with similar conditions and so provide peer support as well as access to information (McDonald, 2014). People who are denied access to the internet are at the mercy of the professionals to whom they happen to be assigned and have little opportunity to compare the service they receive with others, while professionals who partner with the people they work for by pooling their knowledge can co-construct better solutions (Edgman-Levitan et al, 2013). Digital exclusion is disempowering, but digital inclusion holds the possibility for learning disabled citizens to be informed and engaged.

Dual Relationships

Second, Facebook creates the potential for a dual relationship between the worker and the person – contact both in work and out of it. We note that the whole concept of dual

relationships, so loved by writers on professional relationships (Malone et al, 2004) has extremely limited application. It may belong in the counselling room, but beyond this, multiple layers of relationship are the norm rather than the exception. For example, in a user-led provider organisation, learning disabled people receiving support from that organisation may also be Board members, employers and employees in the organisations that provide them with support. The implementation of personal health and social care budgets (Scottish Government, 2013) is predicated on the shift of power and agency from professional to citizen: both initiatives being rooted in the principles of co-production.

From a broader perspective, Sen (2006) argues that single-strand relationships are the raw material of prejudice and the reductionist thinking that defines ingroups and outgroups, which ultimately finds its horrific expression in hate crime, ethnic cleansing and terrorism. In contrast, mature societies are made up of widely networked individuals who operate via multiple roles and identities, lacing the community together in a jumble of overlapping and interdependent relationships. Community building, support for individuals and safeguarding policies all need to strive for multiple roles and overlapping relationships for all. Safeguarding undertaken effectively needs to be woven into Facebook and other internet use, rather than adopting the futile approach of trying to keep people safe by shutting them out of modern life. The answer to misuse is not disuse but right use.

Limited access

One might advise support staff to assist people to use the Internet and join Facebook, but in a very limited way. The person's online presence should be confined to specialist websites and networks that are dedicated areas for the sole use of learning disabled people [x]. Such protected environments may be naively expected to be free of abuse, lewd photographs and so on, in a clear manifestation of the stereotype that Wolfensberger (1972) called the 'holy innocent' where learning disabled people are considered to be uniformly kind, virginal and unworldly.

Alternatively, the protected site may be moderated by a nondisabled person who censors unacceptable material and perhaps uses the opportunity to coach the disabled person in online etiquette. Whilst this may be needed on rare occasions, such training should presumably lead to ordinary participation in the adult world that the rest of society enjoys, and in general, learning disabled people learn better in vivo, rather than in artificial environments.

A lesser version of the effort to create a sheltered or protected online environment would be to make a rule that permits people to friend any citizen apart from staff who work on the person's own support team, or anyone who works for the agency that provides support to the person.

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While this position has some initial appeal, it assumes that society splits neatly into two separate groups and this denies the complexity of modern life. Perhaps more significantly, it ignores the worker's role in promoting a socially inclusive lifestyle. Staff working in learning disability services have a responsibility to support people in their efforts to engage with valued social roles and networks in the mainstream society and to use universal rather than specialist services.

Any community apart from those already occupied by staff

As people increasingly direct their own support and employ their own staff, the traditional worldview in which workers occupy single roles and relate to their client through a single-strand relationship is revealed as a naive fiction. The worker is simultaneously the assistant and employee of the person, as well as being their neighbour and perhaps their fellow football supporter.

Despite this obvious fact, some rule-makers have demanded that staff support people to access positive roles and relationships in the wider community, whilst eschewing those settings that the worker occupies in their own off-duty time. Indeed, in one local authority, staff were told to immediately leave their own off-duty leisure environment as soon as a known service user entered, in order to maintain the purity of the single-strand professional relationship.

Such advice breaches the right to community life enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998 and reinforces the myth of a binary society populated by 'us' and 'them'. It is also doomed, for, as an increasing number of people needing support access more and more community environments, the wall of separation begins to collapse anyway, whether there are rules or not.

Staff have a responsibility to promote active citizenship and this includes digital inclusion. So it is inevitable that staff and the people they support will visit the same Facebook page from time to time. This might be where neighbours meet on an online Neighbourhood Watch group or pass on unwanted furniture through freecycle. They will post entries on the same TripAdvisor or visit the same blog. So staff and the people they support will occupy the same online spaces.

There are dangers associated with stipulating rules that are impossible to adhere to, especially if people are unable to explain the basis of the rule. With the use of avatars and the proliferation of social media in so many aspects of day to day life it is almost impossible to ensure that a metaphorical cordon sanitaire is maintained. Even the estimate of six degrees of separation has been outdated and reduced by social media in the modern, interconnected world (Barnett, 2011).

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In a world where people occupy many roles, such as employer, trainer, colleague, self advocate and carer it seems incongruous that a social care employee could attend a social event, share a meal and enjoy a dance with the person, but not allow the same person to be a Facebook friend.

It reveals secrets

In this argument, staff should not connect with people they support via Facebook, because the person will then find things out about the worker's personal life that will harm the therapeutic relationship.

Maintaining a kind of blank slate in which the person being supported knows almost nothing about the worker may be appropriate in particular forms of psychological counselling, but it is generally unsuitable in most sectors of social care. The social work profession has long encouraged its staff to make appropriate use of self disclosure [xi], while the increasing use of peer support workers in mental health has highlighted the value of shared humanity in promoting personal development and recovery. Meanwhile, movements and organisations as diverse as community development, which was launched through the Settlements of the nineteenth century, therapeutic communities and the Anglican church all encourage their staff to live alongside and share their lives with the people they support.

Facebook can be a confessional where people unburden themselves to their friends and seek acceptance or forgiveness, and at other times it can be a platform to broadcast items designed to shock. In general, people reveal more of themselves, communicate at a deeper level and disclose more negative aspects of themselves online than they do in face to face communication, while the expectation of seeing the online contact face to face adds realism to their disclosures (Gibbs et al, 2006). It can also be a mechanism by which professionals who have their own lived experience of vulnerability, perhaps an episode of mental ill health, can share this part of themselves and so find common humanity with the people that they support.

Arguing that the off-duty conduct and lifestyle of the worker is irrelevant, private or a distraction to the therapeutic relationship, and so should be hidden, perpetuates paternalism. It maintains a traditional power relationship in which the worker is portrayed as emotionally distant, morally faultless and socially successful. This myth of privacy does not stand up to scrutiny, for three reasons.

First, off-duty online conduct is already subject to the law (Communications Act, 2003), where communications are outlawed if they include threats of violence, target an individual, constitute harassment, breach a court order or are grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false [xii]. Guidance from the Courts suggests the following factors may be taken into

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account in deciding whether it is fair to dismiss a member of staff for online breaches of conduct:

- nature and severity of the remarks made
- subject matter
- extent of damage to the employer's reputation
- breaches of confidentiality
- existence of a social media policy and training for staff on this
- use of work time or equipment
- mitigating factors (Atfei, 2014).

Second, off-duty online activity is often visible to employers, as one US survey found 37% checked social media before hiring a job applicant [xiii]. Third, many Facebook users choose to place a considerable amount of personal information online, so the desire for privacy is not universal and what is acceptable for nondisabled citizens should not be deemed unacceptable for persons with a learning disability. There is evidence anyway to support the view that disabled people wish to use Facebook in the same way as nondisabled persons (Shpigelman and Gill, 2014).

So it is clear that anyone using social media needs to be aware of the implications of ill considered conduct, the possible audience and consequences of what they post, but this does not justify attributing a special or different status to learning disabled persons.

There may indeed be circumstances where it will be entirely inappropriate for the worker to share aspects of their personal life with people they work for, and mature and responsible posting is required if the readership of one's Facebook page is diverse. Similarly, active use of security functions and permission to view will usually be needed (although a cautious approach is recommended by which any Facebook entry is deemed as essentially in the public domain, irrespective of the use of controls). Staff need to be alert to the risks of personal disclosure, as well as the potential benefit to the people they support, and so a blanket ban on Facebook is not justified by this argument.

It implies intimacy

Becoming a Facebook friend is sometimes considered an invitation into a personal, rather than a professional relationship. But do we actually know how it is interpreted? Could staff talk to the person and say that they are "friending" the person just as a way to get them started? The person will aim to gradually build other contacts until the worker is able to

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"defriend" the person or remain in contact simply because of a third party interest, such as being on the same football club page because they independently have that interest.

This presses us to explore exactly what we mean by the term 'friend'. Whilst anthropological research suggests that there are species-specific upper limits to the size of functioning social networks (The Economist, 2009), Spencer and Pahl (2006) vividly demonstrated in their ethnographic study of friendship in the general population that we each use the term 'friend' in our own unique way. For one person, becoming a friend is an invitation into lifelong mutual disclosure, while for another, this role is taken by family members and friends are no more than work colleagues or football buddies, with the friendship mediated entirely through proximity, shared activities and silent companionship. So we must not superimpose our interpretation of the term friend on other people, but rather listen carefully to their views and expectations.

Moreover, agreeing to be a friend is not like signing a blank cheque or entering a limitless world where all moral and pragmatic boundaries are abandoned. Indeed, a proportion of the gossip that many of us enjoy from time to time consists of discussion of how third parties overstep the boundaries we all erect to contain and define our friendships. Meanwhile, Pockney (2006) found that most of her sample of adults with learning disabilities considered their support staff to be their friends too, and their support staff were unsure how to respond. This may indeed be a problem, but it is unlikely to be solved by banning one medium of communication and leaving everything else unchanged.

It is from this place, then, that we arrive at the point of wondering what might be meant by the appellation of the title 'Facebook friend'. We certainly cannot take it as read that anyone expects it to convey intimacy or unbounded informal relationships.

Then there is the question of how friendships develop. It appears that offline and online friendships grow in similar ways by moving through a series of highly selective gates from initial social attraction through self-disclosure and predictability towards trust (Sheldon, 2010). The distinctive difference for Facebook is that it applies the title of friend to people at the beginning of this journey, while offline we usually hold back the title until much later on. So in prohibiting the formation of Facebook friends, people are being shut out of these outer circles of casual acquaintance and superficial contact as well as more intimate connections. Is the prohibition on Facebook contact really a concern about the name? Would the same concerns be raised if we all had Facebook Contacts or Facebook Acquaintances?

It is superficial

Perhaps online contact is somehow less real, genuine and effective compared to face to face contact, and so a high quality service will reject online communication in favour of face to face encounters. People using services sometimes prefer face to face encounters too,

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perhaps as a bulwark against loneliness [xiv]. Moreover, the superficial or distorted relationships that sometimes form online can be rude, aggressive or cruel due to the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004).

However, some subgroups in society appear to prefer technological solutions, such as young people who may prefer text messaging to any other form of communication and introverts who will find it easier to disclose online than face to face (Cain, 2012). In addition, recent research has found that some online therapy is just as effective, but much cheaper and more convenient for some people compared to face to face work (Hammond et al, 2011). Similar findings have been established for online support groups for people with some long-term health conditions – they are just as effective as face to face groups (Lorig et al 2010).

Whilst these advantages are to be welcomed and harnessed, there are clearly occasions when the conversation needs to move offline and engage with people face to face. Staff need to be sensitive to these occasions and employ the appropriate communication medium.

It brings the employing organisation into disrepute

In a 2011 survey [xv], almost one third of employers had disciplined or dismissed employees for writing things on Facebook that marred the reputation of their employer, breached confidentiality or revealed commercial secrets, but this seems rare in UK health or social care settings [xvi]. People using social care services and their relatives will be especially sensitive to messages about the organisation, and may be distressed or angered if unsuitable or malicious postings are made. However, organisations need to actively seek feedback and listen carefully to critical as well as complementary remarks, as they help to create a learning culture and an organisation committed to continuous improvement.

In addition to these serious risks, staff who try to maintain different personas at work and out of it may need to view Facebook as a potent tool for bridging these different social worlds. It is very likely that news from one setting will reach the other more quickly via social media than through normal face to face conversations.

It is important at this juncture to note that ordinary speech carries exactly the same types of risk that we have just delineated for Facebook. We do not ban speech, but rather expect staff to behave responsibly by being aware that they are an ambassador for their employer at all times. However, Facebook is unlike ordinary speech in the scale, speed and permanence of its communication. The spoken word is rarely recorded, but online messages can be retrieved and used as evidence. One rarely addresses large groups, and yet Facebook messages can be seen by hundreds of people within minutes of being posted. As Aase remarked [xvii], 'Social media tools do not cause lapses in professionalism, but they can broadcast bad behaviour to a wider audience.' This amplifies the impact of messages

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and makes it harder to repair errors of judgement. This adds to the obligations on staff who need to treat Facebook postings as public and to consider how they might be interpreted. If we ban Facebook because of these issues, we should also ban publishing, conference presentations, T.V. and radio appearances.

It overrides the Communications Team

Indeed, some organisations do employ Communications specialists who manage the relationship with TV, radio and newspapers as well as the organisation's online presence. It may be possible for such a team to regulate all TV, radio and newspaper interviews but it is almost as difficult for them to regulate all online communications that name the organisation as it would be for them to censor speech and filter all emails. We should not subscribe to an archaic command and control approach to information dissemination that has its roots in decades dominated by pen and ink communication.

Conclusion

In this brief exploration, we have found no convincing reason for an outright ban preventing staff from becoming Facebook friends with people they support. Rather, a thoughtful approach is needed that will navigate the risks while achieving the promise of digital inclusion for people who need support. Staff will sometimes wish to model the safe route to Facebook success, share their common humanity and offer deeply excluded people a chance to leave behind the paternalism of the past and responsibly engage in the information age.

This paper does not advocate a requirement for social care staff to open their lives to the people they work with through the medium of Facebook. We argue that a proportionate stance be adopted that recognises that all relationships, including professional ones, are negotiated arrangements that should be based on mutual trust and respect. So both individual staff and the people they work for should be able to choose whether to seek contact via Facebook, and to navigate disclosures and safeguards as appropriate in response to the circumstances, rather than be restricted by rigid and unsupportable regulations.

Acknowledgements

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