

# Social Media & Social Work Ethics: Determining Best Practices in an Ambiguous Reality

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## Abstract

With the rapid evolution of social media today; social workers must be proactive regarding their ethical and professional responsibilities. Professional standards and the NASW Code of Ethics help keep us accountable, but in this fast paced world they are not enough. This article discusses the importance of developing risk management strategies and contains recommendations for the ethical use of social media. In the Internet age, social workers must stay focused on maintaining client privacy while simultaneously establishing and maintaining their professional and personal boundaries. In many settings, ethical coherence may be best achieved through the development of comprehensive social media guidelines/policies and training that focuses on effectively preparing new social workers for the ethical challenges they will confront in the global world of social media.

**Keywords:** social media, social work ethics, social media policy, risk management, professional standards.

## 1. Introduction

The Internet today is ubiquitous. It has worked its way into every corner of our lives—including our professional practice—and it is here to stay. Technological advances have threatened our economic and personal security and these advances have changed the face of communication forever. Therefore, the social work profession needs to revise its standards of practice accordingly to meet the challenges presented by our changing world. This means expanding the way we think about social work ethics to include online social media. Social media requires that social workers reframe how they think about privacy, confidentiality, professional boundaries, and has challenged us to innovate with new, ethically sound ways to serve our clients and constituents.

It is important to note that the concerns and challenges related to social media and ethics presented in this piece are implicitly focused on social work practice in the United States but are likely to surface in any country context. Debates about the ethical implications of social media need to take into consideration the International Federation of Social Workers Statement of Ethical Principles and the context within which these challenges appear.

This is even more important due to the fact that social media has no enforceable global standards and can operate indiscriminately across international borders. Though these recommendations have been developed within a U.S. framework, they can certainly be extrapolated for use in a global context.

## **2. Current Professional Standards**

A major challenge for the social work profession is that official practice standards continue to lag far behind the rapid growth of online social media, despite efforts by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) as they attempt to address new technologies in social work practice. For example, in 2005, when Facebook was just a year old, NASW and ASWB released their “Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice,” which was an attempt to establish overarching guidelines for ethical practice in the digital age; however, these failed to address specific precautions regarding the use of online social media. The NASW *Code of Ethics* is also behind the times. Since its last revision in 2008, many more popular social media sites (e.g. Foursquare, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest) have surfaced. When faced with any ethical dilemma, social workers are advised to consult the NASW *Code of Ethics*; however, this is currently not helpful and may indeed be more confusing because the code does not explicitly articulate ethical standards for the use of social media. It therefore becomes challenging to navigate the increasingly complex ethical dilemmas inherent in social media use.

Though the official standards of the social work profession may struggle to keep pace with the ever-evolving presence of social media in our lives, social workers must be proactive by being mindful of their ethical and professional responsibilities. It is therefore imperative that members of the social work profession engage in dialogue and necessary research that focuses on this topic in order to inform professional standards going forward. Until social workers have an adequate amount of scholarship to reference when ethically navigating social media, it is prudent to exercise caution in online activities.

We suggest that in many social work practice settings, social work coherence may best be achieved through the development of comprehensive social media guidelines/policies.

## **3. Navigating Social Media in Field Instruction**

Field instruction presents many opportunities where students can learn how to navigate social work ethics related to their use of social media. However, all social workers can benefit from guidance in several areas that include building intentional online identities as social work professionals; determining appropriate professional and personal use of social media in accordance with the NASW *Code of Ethics*; and developing risk management strategies for online behavior. Field instructors (agency-based MSW staff who are responsible for student training) are being called upon to coach students in developing an ethical consciousness that must include discussions about social media. Tandem with this thinking is the importance of ensuring that ethically sound social media policies have been implemented in organizations where student social interns are placed. These policies and/or guidelines should be created as a means of clarifying expectations for students and staff alike. Finally, the social media policies of an organization should be a required element of new employee and student orientation.

Particularly for those training to be mental health service providers during the Internet age, it has become imperative that potential online ethical issues be acknowledged and addressed in educational settings and by clinical supervisors (Lehavot et al., 2010, p. 165-166). Younger practitioners especially, who are more likely to regularly use social media, may not solicit guidance from more experienced clinicians because they perceive them to be lacking in knowledge and exposure to Internet-related ethical dilemmas (Guseh et al., 2009, p. 584; Taylor et al., 2010, p. 157). Due to the perceived “generation gap” between clinicians, younger practitioners may be unlikely to initiate conversations about online behavior with supervisors. Being able to rely upon a social media policy

would help younger practitioners chart a professional course through murky ethical waters.

For master's level social work students, 25% of the curriculum is the field experience, where they receive practical training on working within the field of social work. This is during a critical time when students are first beginning to establish their professional identity (which is an established Council on Social Work Education competency). It is therefore imperative that organizations that train social work students think seriously about developing clear guidelines/policies related to social media use. This is both to set the standard for professional online behavior in the organization and to acclimate students to the process of developing a professional identity related to social media use beginning with their field placement experience. According to Trimberger (2012), "professional social work boundaries and ethical behaviors are influenced by a worker's personal *and* professional environment" (p. 74). This points to the need for continued exploration regarding not only how social media usage in our field agencies impacts the development of a student's professional identity but also how these guidelines/policies might affect the professional overall related to the establishment of benchmarks for ethical practice.

#### **4. Ethical Implications for Social Media Use**

Agency social workers who are field instructors have the capacity to become great mentors to the next generation of social work students. They must be prepared to address social media related issues as a part of professional practice, particularly focusing on social media relationships. The inherent ethical implications need to be a guiding factor related to the student's creation of their social media identity and thus serve as the student's "social conscience." Given the exposure to social media that most current students have experienced throughout their lives, it is vitally important that field instructors provide an open forum for discussion in three key areas related to social media and social work: (1) professional use of social media related to the student's role within

the organization; (2) the overlap related to personal and professional use of social media, and (3) the overall implications for the social work profession related to risk management and ethical practice.

#### **5. Professional Practice and Social Media Use**

While developing a professional social work identity (Competency #1 of the CSWE 2008 Educational Policy & Accreditation Standards-EPAS), we are suggesting that students be encouraged to develop their online identity *intentionally*. In fact, we recommend that a specific EPAS Practice Behavior be developed related to this competency which will assist our profession in establishing a standard related to professional practice and social media use. It is critically important that students actively participate in the formation of their online persona and that they not be passive about the development of their online identity; such as photos, blogs, Twitter, and any other information that may represent them online. Everyone must set his or her identity with a purpose, and once established, must consistently in an ongoing fashion monitor, cultivate, and evaluate that online identity in order to stay appropriately relevant in the ever evolving social media landscape.

Field instructors are important mentors to students by virtue of their role in helping students develop self-awareness around their professional identity and by assisting them in determining and establishing ethical guideposts during their time in field placement. This is especially important because students need to not only know their audience but also recognize the implications that their social media activity has on their professional role and their inherent relationships with colleagues and client systems. The same behaviors that are discouraged in offline interactions should likewise be discouraged in online interactions: "If you wouldn't say it in the elevator, don't put it online" (Ekrem, 2011). Many facets of online professionalism are applicable to other fields besides social work, but the NASW *Code of Ethics* holds social workers to a higher ethical standards for behavior, which should be explored while in field placement.

## **6. Professional vs. Personal Social Media Use**

The second key area of concern in social work focuses on the overlap of personal and professional social media use and exploring what exactly is the appropriate use of personal social media during “business time.” Establishing a professional presence on the web is a part of everyday living and a digital presence has been viewed as a very important currency. In fact, web sites are popping up all over the place in an attempt to help young people establish a *professional* presence (see [www.merit.com](http://www.merit.com) for an example) vs. their *personal* presence on Facebook and the like. Students particularly need to learn early on that the creation of their online persona has implications for their professional role as a social worker over the long haul of their career. Social work by virtue of the standards and professional obligations outlined in most state licensing laws are “never off duty.” Instances requiring mandatory reporting, for example, may occur during or after business hours. Therefore, personal use of social media does indeed impact professional social work identity and thus, every individual’s credibility and professional reputation.

Technology had also inherently created some challenges around the development of personal boundaries in many dimensions in all our lives. The numbers of hours people are “on the clock” has increased due to the fact that they are receiving and answering work-related email during “off the clock” hours. Even movie theatres now admonish their patrons not to answer their cell phones or text during a show. How many times has each of us attended an occasion only to have the moment rudely interrupted by someone using a portable device? How many of us have over heard the most private of conversations when using a restroom? How many of us have had someone run into us on the sidewalk because the person is glued to their cell phone? How many serious car accidents have been caused by someone using a cell phone? The list goes on and on and the general public is becoming more and more aware of the issues related to the lack of definition around

acceptable behavior when using social media particularly on portable devices. This is why critical conversations regarding the use of professional social media are overdue. It is therefore crucial for students to participate in open dialogues in their field placements related to their social media identity. These dialogues are fundamentally necessary in order to assist them in the identification and establishment of ethical guideposts.

## **7. Risk Management and Ethical Practice**

The overall implications for risk management and ethical practice are the third and final key area of concern related to social media, which is particularly applicable in clinical settings. In their study on social work students’ use of social networking sites, Mukherjee and Clark (2012) found that 81% of the students surveyed agreed with the statement “NASW Codes don’t directly apply to behavior on social networking sites” (p. 167). This finding illustrates a *huge* gap in ethics education for social workers, which needs to be addressed in the field and in the classroom.

Since the advent of Internet-based information-seeking, protecting privacy in the practitioner-client relationship has become an increasingly challenging endeavor. The popularity of social networking and microblogging sites such as Facebook and Twitter has increased the amount of personal information people share online, while search engines like Google enable people to find practically anything they might be looking for in seconds. Unfortunately, it is also easier than ever for social work students and practitioners to blur the boundaries between personal and professional relationships online. With so much information at one’s fingertips, it can be tempting for a social worker to use the Internet in a way that violates the fundamental tenets of the social work profession. There is nothing to stop social workers from Googling clients except their own ethical awareness and resolve; which can be reinforced and solidified by having social media guidelines/policies in their organizations. The uninvited discovery of personal information on both sides of a treatment

relationship can have a devastating impact on the goals that have been established and could have a negative impact on the treatment outcomes.

Especially among students and younger practitioners, it may be second-nature to simply accept “friend requests” or connect online with anyone they may know---they might not take time to consider the ethical complications that might follow. Mukherjee and Clark (2012) found that 83% of the MSW students they surveyed indicated that they would accept a “friend request” from a client (p. 166). Being friends with a client on Facebook, in addition to being a dual relationship, presents additional ethical concerns such as conflict of interest and potential confidentiality/privacy violations. Consider how it might impact a treatment relationship if you were to learn from your client’s Facebook page that your client is friends with people you know. This blurs the boundaries of the professional relationship in a way that could interfere with normal transference and counter-transference in a therapeutic setting (Clinton et al., 2010, p. 104; Luo, 2009, p. 20; Zur, 2010, p. 146).

Non-therapeutic contacts that take place in cyberspace have serious implications for the integrity of the therapeutic relationship (Gabbard et al., 2011, p. 171). A client who is a “friend” of their social worker on Facebook might begin to perceive the social worker as an actual *friend*. It is the responsibility of the social worker to maintain appropriate boundaries so that the client does not become confused about the nature of the relationship with the social worker. An organization’s social media guidelines/policy should make clear that under no circumstances should a student or employee be “friending” a client from a personal Facebook page, “following” a client on Twitter, or engaging in any other type of online relationship with a client, as this constitutes a dual relationship (Section 1.06(c) of the NASW *Code of Ethics*) (Reamer, 2011). In field placements, social work students need to be able to depend on their field instructor to be a good role model while they are learning how to establish professional relationships and professional boundaries.

## **8. Maintaining Professional Boundaries and Client Privacy**

An online relationship with a client can also lead to unintended bidirectional disclosures by both parties which may impede the therapeutic process, as well as undermine the social worker’s professional reputation. Practitioners are advised to exercise great caution in deciding what information to self-disclose to clients based on what is relevant. However, the nature of the Internet has made it much more difficult for practitioners to control what their clients know about them (Lehavot et al., 2010, p. 160). Traditional professional boundaries in the practitioner-client relationship are certainly much harder to maintain in the age of social media, where the line between the personal and the professional is increasingly less distinct. Taylor et al. (2010) states, “Professional distance helps maintain safety for clients. Psychologists who fail to maintain personal boundaries can emotionally harm clients. Appropriate boundaries can aid in focusing therapeutic work on the issues of clients” (p. 153). The dissolution of these boundaries through unlimited personal sharing online calls into question the effectiveness of the therapeutic process and the capacity of clinicians to truly help their clients.

Social workers also need to be extremely mindful about their impulse to conduct online searches for any type of information related to their clients. These days, it is common for anyone with access to technology to simply Google any question they may have. This leads to a host of other questions: To what extent does the NASW *Code of Ethics* apply to information that may be found online without a client’s consent? If the information is online, is it still considered “private”? Social workers and students may utilize search engines in their work without thinking about the potential ramifications which may affect client privacy and potentially violate confidentiality (Section 1.07(a) of the NASW *Code of Ethics*). As an example, if someone else were to see a social worker’s search history, they might be able to guess private information about the social worker’s clients. They may also be able to determine

that the social worker looked up “HIV resources” while in session with their last client, disclosing the client’s HIV status; or “AA meetings in Springfield”, disclosing the client’s struggle with alcoholism. Being careful with online search histories is particularly important if more than one person in the work setting uses a specific computer.

Another way to violate client privacy through the use of search engines is to attempt to find a client online. Psychotherapists have many motivations for searching for clients online. In addition to being concerned for client well-being, psychotherapists were driven to search for them out of casual curiosity, habit, a desire to discover the truth about a client’s claims in a therapy session, or because the client invited them to view an online profile (Clinton et al., 2010, p. 104; Lehavot et al., 2010, p. 163-164). While some of these reasons seem to have more ethical merit than others, they all present high level challenges in maintaining professional boundaries as viewing client information without consent may cause clients to feel upset, violated, or untrusting of their practitioner (Zur, 2010, p. 147).

Some practitioners, such as Ofer Zur, choose to directly address the issue of online searches in their treatment contracts. Zur (2012) suggests that practitioners develop what he calls a “generalized informed consent contract” that includes his office policies and the fact that he may conduct a web search on his clients before the beginning of therapy or during therapy (p. 29). On a positive side, being able to screen clients in this way can be particularly useful to social workers in determining their safety with clients, especially when they work alone or after hours.

As simple as it would be to say, “never Google clients without their consent,” the ethical course is not always clear. Consider the following scenario: A budding social worker is concerned about the safety of a client who has missed the last few appointments and who has been impossible to contact. The social worker decides to search for the client on Facebook or Google to determine if the client is indeed safe. Is this a violation of the client’s privacy or an attempt to ensure the client’s

well-being? The ethical dilemma is whether or not it is permissible for a social worker to violate the client’s privacy to determine if the client is safe. Of concern is the fact that if the social worker does indeed decide to Google the client, the social worker will likely be privy to a lot of previously undisclosed information about the client that is more times than not unrelated to the issue of client safety. This type of ethical dilemma provides an excellent training opportunity where an open dialogue about online ethics can and should occur. It is extremely important for field instructors to highlight the importance of risk management and the implications for ethical practice. These “What If” scenarios should be used as an optimal training method that assists students and new professionals alike in developing a frame of reference related to their work. Utilizing case-based training during supervision with students has been shown to positively impact the overall learning that occurs as is demonstrated in Wolfer’s research (2006).

## **9. Protecting Your Online Identity**

Although practitioners may be discouraged from seeking information about clients online due to ethical constraints, clients are not bound to the same standards of online behavior and are therefore free to search for any information that might be available. As an example, a significant amount of information about practitioners’ genealogies, contributions to political campaigns and the values of their homes can be found through simple searches (Gabbard et al., 2011, p. 170). It is now becoming routine for clients to search for practitioners online as part of doing their homework when “shopping” for a provider so as to ensure they are getting the best service. Many sites also allow clients to rate practitioners. However, client reviews, due to their subjective nature, cannot be relied upon to accurately reflect a practitioner’s professional competence (Gabbard et al., 2011, p. 170). This highlights the importance of thoroughly considering all aspects when initially developing an online identity as was discussed earlier in this article. Due to the potential of being unable to “un-blur” professional and personal personas, it is easy to see how this can be

problematic. Nevertheless, practitioners and students alike should be made aware of these concerns and social media use should be a topic in an initial session with all clients.

## **10. Ethical Diligence**

A final area of concern regarding client privacy and confidentiality relates to online postings about things that occur at work with clients whether on Facebook, Twitter, a blog, or elsewhere. Mukherjee and Clark found that 67% of the social work students studied reported they had discussed field placement experiences with other students on a social networking site (p. 166). As unprofessional as this seems, it is not uncommon for professionals to “vent” about their work-related situations on their personal social media pages. As evidenced by the horror stories in the media, if this practice is indeed wrong, such posts could ultimately lead to the termination of employment, while at the same time affecting the credibility and reputation of the organization and/or the clients.

Another new social media trend involves blogging. As an example, a growing number of social workers are blogging about their clinical experiences and providing online opportunities to reflect on their practice (Robb, 2011, p. 8). Even the NASW has recently started its own blog ([www.socialworkpulse.org](http://www.socialworkpulse.org)) as a place for social workers to discuss social work related issues online. Another advantage of blogs and other online content is that they can provide clients with services and resources that they might not otherwise be able to access in person. For example, social worker Nathaniel Hope has a YouTube channel ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCN1\\_z2FEuJKhYFDAfRxECKw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCN1_z2FEuJKhYFDAfRxECKw)) with a variety of videos on mental health that he uses to supplement psycho-education with clients. Hope has also expressed an interest in eventually utilizing Internet videophone services such as Skype to provide remote therapy to clients—a proposition riddled with plenty of its own ethical and legal considerations (Malamud, 2011).

While blogs provide new opportunities for learning in the social work community, blogs require just as much ethical diligence as any other

online forum. Lagu, Kaufman, Asch and Armstrong (2008) describe a number of blog-specific issues which are common to the medical profession and are highly transferrable to the context of social work practice. First, the blog of a social worker, regardless of the accuracy of the information or the competency of the blogger, will serve to represent the social work profession to its audience. Second, anyone, regardless of credentials, can write a blog on mental health topics, so the accuracy of the information on any given blog may be questionable. Mistakes on a social worker’s blog could compromise the credibility and reputation of the social work profession—not just the individual social worker. In addition, over time, a combination of pieces of information shared on a blog could reveal the identities of clients; even if the social worker intended to keep client information strictly confidential (p. 1645). The NASW *Code of Ethics*, Section 4.06(a) states, “Social workers should make clear distinctions between statements made and actions engaged in as a private individual and as a representative of the social work profession, a professional social work organization, or the social worker’s employing agency.” This underscores the importance of honoring the integrity of the profession whenever social workers identify themselves as social workers online.

## **11. Why Social Media Policies Are Important**

The development of explicit guidelines/policies for social work practitioners would more than help to clarify some of the current ambiguities that are being experienced related to the use of social media, particularly as it relates to ethical practice (Reamer, 2011). This is extremely important in field placements where training of the next generation of social workers occurs. When working with students in the development of their professional identity, field instructors need to highlight the importance of risk management and discuss the implications for ethical practice. When students enter a host organization, it is essential that the organization’s orientation address social media use and its ethical implications. Field instructors are

responsible for ensuring that students are aware of the organization's policies related to the release of information/confidentiality, what constitutes a conflict of interest, and what constitutes a dual relationship to name a few. These ethical issues need to be addressed in the organizational context but most importantly they need to be focused on the social work treatment relationship, particularly given some of the newer online treatment options that have surfaced. Fortunately, acceptable ethical online conduct can be mitigated by establishing organizational social media guidelines/policies which should promote awareness of online ethics and strategies for risk management. An organization's policy should specifically provide guidance on dual relationships, client privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent as these specifically relate to social media use.

Every organization's policies should also articulate expectations around personal and professional use of social media while at work/field placement. Few of us can gaze at the world around us and find someone who is not connected to some form of social media, whether it is on a cell phone, iPad, or laptop. It is a known fact that the current generation of social work students has been raised in an age of technology. These students are accustomed to being able to access the information they want or need twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week! It is therefore imperative that organizations establish guidelines/policies related to personal use of social media during business hours. Students and new employees need to be socialized early on regarding the organization's culture and attitudes towards social media use. Is it okay for a student/employee to check their personal cell phone email during work hours? Is it okay for a student/employee to text and/or make personal calls during business hours? Is it okay for a student/employee to access their Facebook account during their lunch hour? Does the organization expect the student/employee to check and respond to work-related email after hours? These are but a few of the issues that should be included in an orientation session discussed with employees and students when they start working.

Most sources suggest implementing social media policies particularly in private practice settings, but these can be utilized across the spectrum of service settings from small agencies, to schools, to large hospitals. If an organization does not have a social media policy, its practitioners should rely upon the NASW *Code of Ethics* to help guide decision-making (Guseh, Brende, & Brendel, 2009, p. 585). Having an organization-wide, written policy ensures that expected online behavior remains transparent for all employees (and students) and sets the standards for care and expectations for professional practice. It is also widely recommended that private practitioners create a policy that outlines their beliefs about the ethical use of social media in their treatment contract, and that they share this policy with their clients as well as student interns (Lehavot et al., 2010, p. 165; Zur, 2010, p. 147). Standards of care and best practice dictate that social media use should be governed by the organization's specific guidelines/policies.

## **12. Recommendations for Ethical Social Media Use**

The following are suggested considerations when developing social media guidelines/policies and are applicable to any practice setting:

- A. To minimize the potential for the social media concerns previously described, it would be prudent for practitioners to first take an in depth look at the content of their online identity and then consider taking appropriate security precautions with their own personal information and identity. General caution is advised when posting anything.
- B. Practitioners should become familiar with the privacy settings on their personally controlled social medial sites and adjust them so as to limit undesired access by clients to personal information (Luo, 2009, p. 21; Lehavot, et al., 2010, p. 164; Guseh et al., 2009, p. 585). Practitioners might also want to disguise themselves online through the

use of pseudonyms (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 158).

- C. Practitioners are advised to conduct a personal Google search in order to gain awareness of what anyone including a client might find out about them. If inaccurate or clinically inappropriate information is found on a website, the practitioner should submit a request to the site's manager to have the information removed, if possible (Luo, 2009, p. 21; Taylor et al., 2010, p. 158).
- D. One way to help control the information a client might find is to create a professional website with relevant links, and to possibly purchase a domain name, both of which would help to reduce misrepresentation online (Luo, 2009, p. 21), while also providing an avenue through which to bring in potential clients (Malamud, 2011). There are now websites such as [www.wix.com](http://www.wix.com) or [www.weebly.com](http://www.weebly.com) that enable those with little to no web development experience to easily develop a site.
- E. Practitioners should discuss online privacy issues openly with their clients and suggest more appropriate means of communication (e.g. telephone) indicating that it benefits both clinician and client to respect professional boundaries (Luo, 2009, p. 21; Lehavot et al., 2010, p. 165). Focusing on establishing a professional boundary from the start and outlining the means of acceptable communication in the beginning of the relationship will serve both the client and the practitioner in the long run and more likely than not, positively impact outcomes for clients.

### **13. A Call to Action**

From the time we started researching this topic to the date it was submitted for publishing, at

least three new articles were published on the topic of social work ethics and social media (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, & Fullmer, 2013; Judd & Johnson, 2012; and Kimball & Kim, 2013). Social work researchers have clearly understood the need for scholarship on this topic. This research has laid the foundation for ethical social work practice going forward, and should be referenced when writing social media guidelines/policies and when educating students on ethical use of social media.

Social workers do not need to fear social media, but they do need to understand it, and make a place for it in their ethical awareness. Social work field instructors, especially, have a responsibility to impart a mindfulness of online ethics to their students. Though the *NASW Code of Ethics* may not provide clarity on some issues related to social media, it is imperative that member of the social work profession engage in much-needed research and continue to dialogue about this topic to inform policy going forward. Technology will become more advanced and challenges will become more daunting. We need to heed this call to action and move to create an atmosphere where vulnerable clients are protected, and where practitioners strive to maintain professional and personal boundaries so that some sense of normalcy can be maintained in their individual lives. We can expect there will always be new challenges as technologies evolve and as we begin to integrate the new capacities into our practice. Preparing social work practitioners and students with foundational knowledge in online ethics will help them adapt to the ever-changing social media landscape. The next generation will be able to use this knowledge to ethically innovate social work practice.

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