International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics

Volume 20, Number 1 (2023)

Internet Searching of Client Information by Social Workers: Reckless or Required in Today's Online Society?

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Abstract

Telehealth and social media raise ethical issues for social workers, prompting the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to revise ethical standards in recent years to address use of technology. Social workers are directed to avoid searching client information electronically but may do so with clients' informed consent. Professional technology standards and directives from NASW indicate that the information gathered on the Internet about clients is distinct from that obtained from clients directly. While internet searching of clients is widely used in business and other professions, its value in social work has been largely unrecognized. This article lends support for viewing internet information on clients as critical data that should be routinely gathered by social workers in many instances, justifying its importance in light of the ecological perspective which is the foundation of social work practice. Gathering internet information on clients is valuable to understanding people in their environments, as much of daily life now takes place in the digital world. Recommendations assist social

workers to responsibly engage in internet searching of client information so that it can be incorporated into social work's standard of care.

Keywords: Ethics, ecological perspective, technology, social media

Introduction

Digital communication in social work practice has become increasingly popular and essential since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States, which already boasted high internet and social media usage, has seen a surge in internet use since lockdowns and stay-at-home orders were enacted in early March 2020 (De et al., 2020; Villanti et al., 2017; Walensky et al., 2021). Due to the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, physical distancing was deemed essential by health organizations, including the World Health Organization, to help limit its spread (Masters et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Education, business, and social functions quickly transitioned online, greatly expanding the amount of time and ways in which Americans interacted with one another electronically (Koeze & Popper, 2020). While the actual effects of this enhanced screen time are unknown, there is little doubt that the transition of virtually all face-to-face interactions to online exchanges has resulted in dramatically more of daily life occurring in the virtual world (Geddes & Marsh, 2021).

The delivery of social work services also moved quickly online. COVID-19 resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation in many Americans (Hwang et al., 2020), with greater interest in telehealth services as a way to address therapy and other needs in a safe and effective manner (NASW, 2020a). The rapid increase in online social work has challenged professionals to understand the implications of delivering services in new ways (Mishna et al., 2020). Even before COVID-19, there was a recognition that enhanced use of technology in practice posed certain ethical challenges for social workers that warranted additional guidance (NASW, 2017a). To provide direction, standards were incorporated into the profession's ethical code, particularly focusing on the challenges associated with using

technology in light of client consent, confidentiality, and professional boundaries (NASW, 2018).

Despite recognition of the importance of the online environment in the lives of most Americans and the advent of new ethical standards on use of technology, social work literature has not provided ample consideration of the use of client internet data to assist with implementing the generalist intervention model, specifically as it relates to the assessment of clients. Social work views clients' behavior in relation to its environmental contexts and the virtual world has become the setting in which the preponderance of individual interactions take place. The online presence of clients, as a rich context for assessment, has not been adequately explored in social work, though it is a widely published topic in other professions.

In its Code of Ethics, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) posits that searching or gathering information electronically on clients should only be done for "compelling professional reasons, and when appropriate, with the client's informed consent" (NASW, 2021a, p. 14). As all actions by social workers should be driven by the well-being of clients and for professional purposes, explicitly stating that the impetus for conducting internet searches on clients must be "compelling" indicates that accessing online data on clients is considered different than use of other available client information. Recently NASW released a directive that boldly recommended avoiding internet searching of clients completely, though there was a caveat mentioned under the directive about its allowance "to address safety concerns and/or as deemed clinically appropriate with client consent" (NASW, 2021b, para. 3). However, this communication raises questions about the sanctioning of internet searching as it clearly states, "with social media offering easy access to information, social workers should avoid using the Internet to search and gather information," citing the Code as justification for this recommendation (NASW, 2021b, para. 3). Viewing the gathering of internet information about clients as distinct from other client data available to social workers contradicts the ecological perspective and causes confusion for social workers given its widespread value for

obtaining critical therapeutic information by both clients (Morris et al., 2018) and practitioners (Pirelli et al., 2018).

This article challenges the position that internet searching of client information should be avoided, using scholarly literature to support its usage as a standard of care in today's digital world. Online posts and interactions by clients should be considered relevant in social work assessment as they represent modern day social exchanges that historically occurred face-to-face and were regularly used by social workers in their work. As clients increasingly spend more of their lives online, it is important for social workers to understand clients' virtual interactions, making internet searching not reckless, but required methods for gaining insight into client functioning and problems. However, internet searching of client information has ethical issues that must be considered, warranting the need for additional guidance in this area.

Literature Review

The use of electronic equipment in the helping professions dates back to the late-1950s, with use of closed-circuit television for clinical teaching purposes (Wittson & Benschoter, 1972). However, the advent of the Internet and its proliferation in the 1980s and 1990s spawned new ways of incorporating technology into practice, with major social work organizations offering workshops and resources to assist practitioners with its use by the turn of the century (Marson, 1997).

Some of these organizations joined forces in 2005 to craft standards (which were later revised in 2017) to provide guidance to social workers in proper use of technology (NASW, 2017b). The standards, like the Code, state that internet searching of clients is permissible with their consent, but it posits that "client information discovered on the Internet using search engines is different from information that clients share directly with the social worker" (NASW, 2017b, p.39). This position is interesting given that the standards acknowledge that technology is a critical part of the clients' environment, therefore indicating that electronic communication should

always be considered. Absent from these standards are ways in which social media postings by clients and clients' presences in the virtual world can be competently incorporated into social work assessment, which is a likely need given that the Internet represents the largest repository of information available today.

Most social workers think that internet searching of client data has a place in practice, but are conflicted about its use (NASW, 2020b). Recent blog posts by social workers indicate disparate opinions with some expressing that it should be avoided and others feeling that it is a necessary part of their work (NASW, 2020b). One undergraduate student reported that her field instructor recommends internet searching only after meeting with clients first. Most posts indicate that internet searching is only permissible when clients are at imminent risk or that it is a gray area, with more guidance and discussion needed to help resolve ethical issues associated with its use.

The profession recently identified the most pressing societal issues in its Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society (Fong et al., 2018), with harnessing technology for social good identified as one of 13 key priorities. Social workers are challenged to use technology in new and innovative ways. It is time for the profession to examine the role of clients' public internet information in social work assessment given the importance of internet interactions in clients' daily lives. Searching for client information should be considered due diligence by social workers as part of a standard of care, rather than a practice to be avoided.

Prevalence of internet usage in daily life

Internet usage is increasingly prevalent and found in all aspects of daily life. According to the Pew Research Center (2021a), internet usage in the United States has nearly doubled over the past two decades with almost 90% of Americans online today. Internet users include individuals in the harder-to-reach demographics, such as those making under $30,000 yearly, adults over the age of 65, those living in rural areas, and those with a high school

education or less. The pervasiveness of the Internet is especially apparent when looking at the screen time of young children, which has raised concerns with parents, medical professionals, researchers, and educators (Park & Kwon, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2020). Children are beginning to use the Internet early in the life course, with research indicating that it may be as early as two years of age (Tena et al., 2019). Eighty percent of parents report that their children under age 12 engage with tablets and 67% use smartphones, of which 17% of children 12 and under have their own (Pew Research Center, 2020). Teenagers ages 13 to 17 spend roughly six and a half hours daily on social media while tweens spend slightly less (four and a half hours) (Joshi et al., 2019). The prevalence of internet usage has surged recently, with 60% more usage than pre-pandemic levels (De et al., 2020).

Much of internet usage involves socialization or the use of social media. In 2004, five percent of Americans used social media, whereas 72% of Americans use at least one social media platform today. Usage of specific platforms varies widely depending on age and gender (Pew Research Center, 2021b). As with internet access, social media usages rates have increased exponentially since 2004, when early social media platforms became immensely popular (Cuthbertson et al., 2015).

Technology's role in biopsychosocial well-being

Technology use has become ubiquitous to daily life biologically, psychologically, and socio-environmentally. While technology has always been used by medical professionals for diagnosis, treatment, and management of disease, it is now also used regularly by non-medical Americans to shape behaviors aimed towards better health. Cell phones and smart watches, for example, can track users' step counts, calories consumed, and sleeping patterns, as well as provide reminders to take daily medications (Haghi et al., 2017). Further, these devices have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic for contact tracing purposes by determining whether or not individuals have come into contact with those who have tested positive for the virus (Leslie, 2020).

Use of technology can also aid in the continuity of mental health services and facilitating lower-risk medical appointments, leading to better mental health outcomes (Kichloo et al., 2020). During COVID-19, mental health providers and medical doctors used secure online platforms, compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), to provide treatment to clients/patients (Calton et al., 2020). Applications, more commonly known as apps, continue to be developed to address mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety using cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches, with research showing promise about their effectiveness (Marshall et al., 2019).

Technology is also increasingly being used for social interactions. Due to COVID-19, many gatherings are held virtually with the use of videoconferencing sites. Coworkers engage in virtual happy hours, children have virtual playdates, and families spend holidays together online in order to remain emotionally connected, but physically distant (Nguyen et al., 2020). Even pre-pandemic, technology was used by many to increase feelings of connectedness (Antonucci et al., 2017).

Every facet of individual functioning is impacted by technology for most Americans. Online interactions are central to biopsychosocial well-being, with the Internet serving as the environment in which critical aspects of daily living occur. If social work is to truly regard biopsychosocial functioning as important for diagnosing problems, it is necessary to include clients' online interactions in social work assessments; indeed, not to do so would be ignoring many of their behaviors in today's electronic world.

Racial and cultural differences in online usage

Social workers need to consider dimensions of diversity when examining online practices of clients. While social media usage is about the same across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines, there are differences in how social media is utilized. Some platforms are more preferred and are more widely used than others for certain groups (Krogstad, 2015). Marginalized groups are more likely than Whites to use social media for political reasons, getting involved in causes that are important to them, promoting social justice

issues, and connecting with politically like-minded individuals (Auxier, 2020). People of color also face more unique challenges than White individuals on social media. Cyberbullying has become a notable and worrisome phenomenon (Chan et al., 2021). Young people of color, specifically adolescents, have progressively been subject to racial discrimination through social media (Tynes, 2015). These distinctions are important as social workers consider the prevalence and types of online client information that may be available.

Social work's unique focus on person in environment

The person-in-environment (p-i-e) orientation has been a hallmark of social work (Akesson et al., 2017; Cornell, 2006), with the profession distinguishing itself from psychology by considering the impact of environmental factors on behavior (Kondrat, 2013). The p-i-e framework helps social workers organize observations and develop intervention strategies by directing them to assess client functioning with context in mind.

In Germain and Gitterman's seminal work on the ecological perspective that served as the basis for the p-i-e approach, the environment is seen as dynamic over time, comprising both social and physical contexts. They posit that social assessments must include "dyadic relations, social networks, bureaucratic institutions and other social systems including the neighborhood, community, and society itself" (1980, p.137). The physical or built environment contains buildings, environmental factors and conditions, and even plants and animals that serve as potential influences on human behavior. In the last forty years, there have been dramatic changes in social, economic, and political systems, resulting from globalization, which have challenged social work practice to keep pace (Healy & Thomas, 2021). It is incumbent upon social work to revise definitions of environments to incorporate changes in systems that impact professional relevancy and incorporate innovations into foundational principles of the profession.

In recent years, social workers have considered how emerging societal trends affect practice (Nissan, 2020). The flexibility of the p-i-e perspective has been cited as beneficial, although it raises questions about the unique scope of social work practice (Hopps & Lowe, 2008). There is a paucity of research on exactly how or when innovation of social work practice perspectives is needed (Rogge & Cox, 2001), leaving practitioners with little guidance to help them adapt their day-to-day work to incorporate significant changes in the world over time.

Akesson et al. (2017) highlight the need for innovation in the p-i-e perspective to "broaden and enhance social work practice" (p.372). There has been a call for more scholarship on environmental issues (Coates, & Gray, 2012), with attention focused on how environmental conditions or events impact the profession on the mezzo and macro levels (Miller et al., 2012; Schmitz et al., 2012).

No scholarly articles were found in the social work literature that advocated for the use of client internet data in assessment despite clients increasing presence in this environment. Clearly the Internet serves as a rich contextual source in which to view client interactions and assess client behavior. The importance of the Internet to clients' daily life is supported by recent research that found that lack of long-term internet access would negatively affect people's lives emotionally (Grandhi et al., 2020). Study subjects commented that the Internet was their "world" (p.13) with them reliant upon it for all aspects of daily living. Internet interactions are viewed as integral to personal well-being, highlighting the importance of include them in any client assessment which is based on a p-i-e perspective (Karim et al., 2020).

Internet searching in social work and allied professions

Despite scholarly articles written about ethical internet usage by social workers (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; Reamer, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2020), the topic of using the Internet to gather client information is only the sole focus of academic publications in allied disciplines, such as psychology

(DiLillo & Gale, 2011; Kaslow et al., 2011; Kolmes & Taube, 2014). The lack of information available to social workers is surprising given the strong commitment of the profession to ensure the just treatment of clients and the competence of those entering professional practice (CSWE, 2022).

Without guidance, social workers are left alone to identify the conditions under which to use this technology ethically. One of the ethical issues when internet searching is the extent to which clients truly understand that personal data is publicly accessible on the Internet so that they know that it will be available to social workers and others (Vogelsong & Nelson, 2019). The degree to which social workers should be complicit in practices that are not transparent to users is an ethical question that needs further consideration.

Another ethical concern arises if social workers learn and inadvertently disclose something they have gleaned from their searching before clients may be ready to do so. Such disclosure could irreparably damage the therapeutic alliance that has been built and lead to subsequent termination of clinical services. Further, information found online may be dated, inaccurate, and/or irrelevant to the client's presenting concerns. Lastly, practitioners can find that internet searching interferes with the therapeutic process, disallowing the client to practice vulnerability by opening up slowly and naturally within the confines of the helping alliance (Tapp, 2019).

The NASW Code of Ethics identifies internet searching as a privacy and confidentiality issue and dictates that the practice should be avoided unless for a compelling professional reason (NASW, 2021a). The standard clearly states that client consent should be obtained prior to electronic searches of client information, except in instances of danger to self or others. While there is consensus that internet searching raises additional ethical issues, the degree to which it should avoided and not embraced as requisite in many instances of practice is debatable.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethical code does not address internet searching of clients (APA, 2017), but other work on the issue agrees that client informed consent should be obtained before conducting such searches (Chamberlin, 2010). Psychologists have generally regarded

electronic searching of client information benign and often helpful (Kolmes & Taube, 2014). Interestingly, psychologists appear more concerned with their own personal information being online and being unable to control what they self-disclose to clients. Clients often search the Internet for information on their psychologists and found the practice "neutral or treatment enhancing" (Kolmes & Taube, 2016, p. 153).

The American Counseling Association (ACA) and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) also do not explicitly address client-targeted internet searching in their ethical codes (AAMFT, 2015, ACA, 2014); however, several ACA standards, namely those that specify that counselors must respect client privacy and request private information only when deemed beneficial, may be applicable to internet searching (ACA, 2014).

While there is much concern about internet searching of client information, research has found that obtaining internet information for clients can have therapeutic benefits. For example, Morris et al. (2018) examined the online resources and supportive services available to individuals whose parents have cancer, citing the value of internet searching for gathering critical information related to diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, the Internet has been found to be an effective way to connect those with similar interests or problems, serving as a great advocacy tool that can mitigate isolation that may be associated with diversity or difference (Bowen et al. 2017).

Medicine has struggled to understand the role of the Internet in the doctor-patient relationship. Research indicates that both the American Medical Association and the Federation of State Medical Boards' (FSMB) guidelines remain silent on the appropriateness of internet searching of patients, though it appears justified in certain circumstances (Baker et al., 2015). This lack of specific guidance resulted in coining the practice the "Google blind spot" (p.6) with agreement that decisions about searching for patient information should only be done after considering the intent of the search and how it impacts continuing treatment.

The Internet is often used by patients to gather information on their doctors, with little consideration about how such searching impacts practice. Research indicates that medical and other personnel have personal and professional data widely available (Mostaghimi et al., 2010). Additionally, ratings of doctors on review websites strongly influence individuals' perceptions of providers and their desire to use them for health care (Furnas et al., 2020). Instead of discouraging individuals from using internet searches to gather information about physicians, there has been enhanced advocacy to ensure that doctors are aware of their online presence.

While helping professionals have been somewhat reticent at times to use digital footprints of clients in practice, research shows that it is becoming increasingly more popular with the development of mental health applications to collect patient information for clinical purposes (Fisher & Applebaum, 2017). Interestingly, building and promoting an online presence is deemed desirable in other fields, with internet searching of people seen as essential for doing one's job responsibly.

In social work and allied professions, the potential benefits associated with internet searching indicate that it has a place in practice. However, the degree to which this tool is actually used is unknown, as it appears to be mired in ethical issues that are not found in some other professions.

Internet searching in non-allied professions

Search engines are increasingly the doorway through which people access a nearly infinite amount of information, making them the world's most powerful gatekeepers (Vogelsong & Nelson, 2019). While social work appears to view data on the Internet as private, literature in other fields views obtaining information via internet searching a "public service" (p.7). The Internet is seen as a way to enhance open access of information and making it more widely available. The Internet is essential to basic freedoms – including the freedom to speak and the freedom to know, with the United Nations calling for internet access as a basic human right (Article 19, 2021; United Nations, 2016). So public is online information that considerable

efforts have been made to educate the public about the availability and widespread use of it for malicious purposes (Ben-Hassine, 2021).

Internet searching for information on people is commonplace in many professions. In 2013, 35% of college admissions officers utilized internet searches of potential students including scouring social media profiles (Schaffer, 2013). Today, use of econometric data obtained from applicants' internet usage is used regularly in nearly all college admissions processes (Moody, 2020).

Internet searching is also commonplace in human resources, with professionals using data obtained online to make hiring decisions. In 2015, 84% of human resources professional utilized social media to find job candidates, with half of them indicating that that the content served as a screening tool of those candidates (Ruiz-Elejalde, 2016). In fact, in the business world, employees and applicants are counting on companies searching the Internet to find out more about them, leading them to boost their online presence and ensure up-to-date postings on professional social media sites (Ruparel et al., 2020).

Online searching is also used by political analysts and consultants to predict voting behavior (Smith & Gustafson, 2017) and gather information on opponents (Ogden & Medina, 2020). The impact of internet searching on American democracy has been widely acknowledged with internet information gleaned on candidates used in voter decisions (Richey & Taylor, 2018).

Exemplars of Online Searching for Client Information in Social Work

There is strong support to regard the Internet as a vital client environment, making it essential to p-i-e assessments that are essential in social work practice. While commonplace in other professions, internet searching of client information has not been widely accepted in social work. Additionally, there is confusion about its appropriateness given recent NASW guidance stating that "Google searching clients" should be avoided (NASW, 2021b, para. 2), even though it is allowable, according to

professional ethical standards, for compelling reasons and with clients' permission (NASW, 2021a).

There are many instances in which internet searching of client information assists in assessment and subsequent treatment. All actions by social workers should be completed for professional reasons and with client consent, unless needed to avoid harm to self or others. It is unclear as to why internet searching is specifically called or identified as a practice that should be averted. The following examples demonstrate the merits of online searching of client information, supporting its usage in the future, as a standard of care.

Assessing risk

Example:

A social worker at a homeless shelter receives a referral for a person who has recently been arrested for several high-profile felonies. When the social worker meets with the individual, they do not provide information about the nature of the offenses. The social worker is unclear if the person would be appropriate for housing in the shelter given that it is communal living. The individual has a place to stay temporarily so does not need housing today but would like to get into the shelter quickly as they are not getting along with those with whom they are temporarily living.

This situation does not meet the criteria of imminent risk, but certainly may be one in which a social worker would benefit from collecting additional information on the nature of the mentioned offenses in order to assess whether there would be safety concerns if the individual were to live at the shelter. With the person's permission, searching the Internet would likely yield information (i.e., newspaper articles) on the recent arrests. While the safety of others at the shelter may be considered compelling, internet searching is not the only way in which information on these arrests can be obtained as there is more traditional methods of information gathering, such as contacting local authorities.

Gathering collateral information

Example:

A social worker at a substance use treatment program receives a call from a client's family stating that the client has relapsed. The family reports that there are public pictures on the client's social media account of them using illicit drugs. The client vehemently denies that these pictures exist and that any drug use has occurred. The social worker has a consent form signed by the client allowing the social worker access to "all available information which is needed in the assessment and treatment" of the client's substance use disorder.

Others, such as family members, often serve as collateral informants to help validate, or potentially refute, client information. Such collateral information is important when clients are not able to provide needed data themselves and/or there is a question about the reliability of material collected from clients. Internet searching of clients is viewed by 65% of forensic practitioners, including social workers, as an important source for collateral information (Pirelli et al., 2018).

The consent form obtained from the client covers looking at the social media posts, but the social worker may be confused about accessing this information given the current standard in the Code of Ethics (2021a), questioning whether it is compelling, and the consent is informed given the broad nature of the form's wording.

Observing online socialization

Example:

A mother and her teenage son seek services from a social worker due to the son's recent concerning behavior. The son has always had a group of good friends and done well in school, but his grades have declined and his behavior has become increasingly more erratic. His mother reports that he is interacting with others solely online. He complains that his mother is overprotective, that he has "nothing to hide," and prefers online interaction because he is an active blogger on issues that are important to him. The mother reports that the son has been

increasingly fascinated with conspiracy theories. The mother and son both ask the social worker to look at the blogs to provide an opinion about whether there are any concerns.

In this scenario, both the mother and son want the social worker to examine blogs to determine whether their influence is maladaptive or not. As social media is often used a tool in the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Colliander, 2019), it is beneficial for the social worker to explore the son's social media usage to see if he is promulgating and has an unhealthy interest in content of concern.

The Internet plays an important role in socialization for most Americans. In order for social workers to adequately understand connections with others, it is important to observe these relationships in the environment or context in which they occur – the Internet. Interactions with others on blogs or social media platforms can identify interests of clients, as well as other meaningful client information, such as insight, acceptance of others' feelings, perceptions regarding locus of control, etc.

The Internet provides written and/or graphic data that social workers might not otherwise have, as it memorializes thoughts, interests, etc. that clients express in interactions outside of social work interviews. Online client posts contain rich assessment material about clients' proclivity to use true versus strategic self-presentations online, the latter of which is linked to lower self-esteem (Jang et al., 2018). Using all available data when working with clients to identify problems and develop plans for resolving them is important and treating information obtained via the Internet as uniquely private may make social workers reluctant to use it even with client consent.

Identifying impaired clients

Example:

A hospital social worker needs to gather information about a woman who has been brought into the emergency room after being found lying on a sidewalk. Her condition is not life-threatening, but she is disoriented and incoherent. She has documents with some identifying information

but is not able to identify her address or the names of family or friends. She is stabilized medically, so will need to be discharged with an appropriate plan of care.

The ability of the woman to consent to the Internet search is questionable given her mental state. While the police can be called, the Internet may provide valuable information about her identity, assisting the social worker with discharging planning. Presenting information obtained from internet searching may help orient the woman, as well as provide important data to identify family or other supports. There is no danger to the woman at this time but understanding more about her life circumstances would greatly expedite her leaving the hospital to a more suitable setting.

There are many additional instances when internet searching of client information might be considered to be appropriate, but these exemplars illustrate instances in which this action is not only justifiable, but benefits the client, making it consistent with a core value of the profession. Online communication is critical within all life domains and while people are sharing information more publicly online than ever before, social work appears apprehensive about using this online data. The dearth of scholarly literature on this topic raises the question of whether social work is engaging in an ostrich syndrome, by either discouraging its usage overtly or covertly by identifying client information discovered consensually online using search engines as different from information that clients share directly. Social work, like its allied professions, must be ready for major changes in the way information is collected and used for helping. Internet data are social artifacts of clients' interactions in their online environment. Social workers can ethically and responsibly use this information, though further support and guidance will be needed.

Implications

Internet searching of client information, like all actions done by social workers, should be for professional reasons and with client consent, when possible and appropriate. However, there remains ambiguity concerning the appropriateness of conducting internet searches of clients as part of professional social work practice. Additionally, there is a lack of resources to assist social workers in how to responsibly use data obtained from internet searching as part of social work assessments. Failure to use internet data about clients as a standard of care does not consider the importance of the virtual world in today's society and is not consistent with the p-i-e perspective. Internet searching should not be avoided, but instead embraced as a way to access comprehensive information that can be used to assess and treat clients more effectively and efficiently. Historically, social workers have been able to navigate complex ethical issues and those raised by internet searching are not unsurmountable. To increase the competence of social workers in navigating the ethical challenges associated with using online client data and build support for its routine use in biopsychosocial assessment, the profession must proactively develop additional guidelines that assist in using this new type of information effectively and ethically.

Technology affects almost all aspects of daily life. The Internet serves as a context for human behavior, and professionals should not deviate from their ethical values and principles when using it in that capacity. Revisions made in 2017 to the NASW Code of Ethics go beyond simply getting clients' consent for internet searching by stating that it should be avoided unless social workers can justify its use for "compelling" professional reasons (NASW, 2017a). This overly restrictive stance is not consistent with the notion that online activities of client are part of the p-i-e perspective and that use of technology should not be treated with different ethical or moral professional standards (Johnson, 2001).

Social work's strong focus on client protection has resulted in a hesitation to embrace the opportunities that the Internet provides for gathering client information. Online information is publicly available and

social workers should not restrict their assessments to only information in the physical world.

Internet searching is commonplace in many other professions. The vast majority of social workers entering the field have used internet searching in their professional training as a primary method for gathering information. Instructing these social workers that this valuable data gathering method should be limited or avoided is antithetical to what they have been consistently taught. A more constructive approach would be to teach students about the responsible use of this practice by incorporating it into social work undergraduate and graduate curricula.

In consideration of the professional values of social work, internet searching of client information should include the following guidelines:

1. Social workers should have a policy about their use of internet client information, which includes the parameters (scope, time period for which data is collected, etc.) of searches.

2. Social workers should be aware of the policies of their employers regarding internet searching of client information and ensure that these policies are consistent with their own practices, as well as the ethical principles of the profession. In instances in which employers' policies are not consistent with their own practices and ethical standards, social workers should advocate to rectify discrepancies to ensure greater adherence to professional values.

3. Social workers should provide clients with copies of their own search policies, as well as copies of their employers' search policies, when applicable. These policies should be provided prior to the commencement of services and be posted publicly on websites whenever possible.

4. Social workers should obtain clients' informed consent prior to doing internet searches, except when such searches may be needed prior to obtaining consent to prevent danger to self and/or others.

5. Social workers should consider the intent of internet searching of client information, doing so only for professional purposes.

6. Social workers should erase their search histories if internet searching of client information is done on shared computers.

7. Social workers should anticipate how obtaining internet client information affects current and future treatment and the social worker – client relationship.

8. Social workers should never deceive clients (such as by gaining access to private, password-protected information under false pretenses) in order to gather their electronic information for professional purposes.

9. Social workers should provide clients with information gathered via the Internet and allow them the opportunity to validate and discuss it.

10. Social workers should document the sources of internet information gathered and clearly delineate which information was obtained from internet versus other sources.

11. Social workers should be explicit about their use of and reliance upon any data gathered via the Internet when using it in assessments and/or reports.

12. Social workers should recognize racial and/or cultural differences in online usage that may impact availability and types of online data available on clients. Social workers should realize that social media has been used to discriminate or threaten people based on diversity and difference. Social workers should advocate for the removal of harmful material against others based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. that is discovered when doing internet searches.

13. Internet sites from which data were collected should be appropriately referenced.

14. Social workers should protect the identity of others unless there are threats of harm when gathering or reporting client information obtained from the Internet.

15. Social workers should educate clients about privacy and other concerns associated with their online information and take steps to assist clients to address any concerns that they have about their digital footprint.

While it is prudent to have professional concerns about the implications of internet searching for client information, the profession should not shy away from gathering and using electronic client information in its practice. Additional research is needed to identify situations in which such data collection can be useful. Social work should join with allied professions, such as medicine, counseling, and psychology, who are also wrestling with similar ethical concerns. Social work curricula should engage students in discussions about how to operate effectively and ethically in today's digital world. Additional training is needed for social work practitioners whose education did not include internet usage in the problem-solving process.

The question about whether internet searching of client information is reckless or required is not easily answered. With additional guidance, irresponsible practices can be avoided, but the profession is far from ready to embrace this new form of data gathering as a universal standard of care. Futurist thinking requires innovation and acceptance of new ways of practicing. It is important for social work not to avoid these changes. The reasons for collecting client information on the Internet are compelling. Luckily, there is no profession better suited than social work to navigate the ethical complexities associated with responsible usage of this practice. It is the profession's historical roots in fairness and justice that will help to guide social work in the future use of this valuable digital tool.

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