

Guidelines for the Use of Social Media

SDSU School of Social Work

Field Education Program

Social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Second Life and various blog sites are just a few examples of new and exciting ways to connect with others and share information. However the rapid growth of social media communication tools and their ease of accessibility can also have unintended and potentially damaging consequences to users if basic guidelines are ignored. Students are expected to adhere to social work values, ethics and engage in professional conduct as outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics when using social media communication tools, whether using a personal site or an agency site. Common issues that students need to understand and manage when utilizing social media include, but are not limited to, privacy and confidentiality (Section 1.07), conflicts of interest and dual relationships (Section 1.06), and informed consent (Section 1.03) in our relationships with clients, colleagues and in our practice settings. Utilizing social media communication tools as a social work professional requires ongoing attention to these ethical challenges.

As a social work professional, it is important to consider whether you are using social media channels for professional activities such as advancing social justice issues, advocating for vulnerable populations and promoting your professional identity versus using these sites to maintain contact with friends and family. Your *professional image*, that is, the professional self you develop that is guided by social work values and ethical standards, extends beyond the field agency and physical setting of an office. As social workers, we must be cognizant that the legal, ethical and clinical responsibilities we have as professionals and that those obligations extend to the virtual world of the Internet and include the use of social media communication tools. As with the Hippocratic oath to “first do no harm”, it is imperative to consider how to be connected within the context of social media while protecting yourself, your field site, your clients, the School of Social Work, and the profession.

As you get started in your field placement, it may be helpful to explore the following questions with your field instructor and/or task supervisor.

1. Does your field site have a policy on the use of social media communication tools? If so, review the policy with your field instructor. If not, what expectation does the agency have regarding the use of social media during field hours?
2. How much personal information is shared with clients and former clients as well as agency staff and professional colleagues?
3. What are the most common ethical concerns you should be aware of when using social media as a professional social worker?

To help facilitate these conversations, consider the following topics for discussion with your field instructor and/or task supervisor.

What are the agency guidelines regarding the use of Facebook and who can you friend?

Managing friend requests and maintaining privacy setting is critical regardless of whether you use social media for personal and/or professional reasons. Allowing clients, former clients, or others in your professional circle to cross into your personal life may complicate and blur your professional boundaries. This is particularly tricky when managing Facebook accounts. As a professional, you must fully consider the extent of your privacy settings, how you will manage friend requests, your level of self-disclosure, and how you will monitor wall posts or other interactions on your site. Be aware that if you do not employ any privacy settings on your social media site, your profile is public and anyone can see what is on your page. Additionally, people can see when you are tagged in photos, view comments made by others, note your status updates and see who you've friended. All professionals must evaluate the scope of their social media connections. Since this is still an emerging professional topic, some professionals may be cautious and guarded in their use of social media while others may be more open and exposed. It is your responsibility as a professional social worker to abide by the Code of Ethics, including your virtual communications and use social work values and principles to guide your interactions.

What privacy and confidentiality concerns should I consider when texting, emailing and/or using Twitter?

With the proliferation of hand held devices such as smart phones, iPhones and Blackberries, accessing the Internet and connecting with others is literally in the palm of our hands. Text, email and Twitter are quick and effective ways to communicate with others however many ethical, legal, and clinical issues must be addressed when using these communication tools. There is a huge potential for unintentionally sharing protected information so always use good ethical judgment. Be cautious about discussing information about your field placement, classroom work, or agency staff. Do not discuss confidential or private information about clients, colleagues, or agency practices even if you are disguising the information. In general, consider the security, privacy and confidentiality of all communication methods and when in doubt, seek consultation and supervision before embarking into unfamiliar or uncertain areas.

Can I check my personal social media accounts during the field hours?

In general, your time in field and the resources provided to you in your field placement are to be used for field related matters. Before using social media communication tools on behalf of your agency, be sure to seek approval of any messages or posts. Be careful not to endorse or promote a product, cause or position without prior approval. If you have personal sites, it is best to maintain them on your own time using your own computer.

I can't find anything in the Code of Ethics that specifically mentions social media, so does that mean the Code of Ethics does not apply?

Absolutely not! The NASW Code of Ethics provides a variety of standards that social workers should consider when engaging in use of social media. Here are a few examples of the Codes applicability to social media.

- Standard 1.06 states that “social workers ***should not engage in dual or multiple relationships***...in which there is a risk or exploitation or potential harm to the client...and social workers...are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries” (1.06c). The Code goes on to note that “dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively” (1.06c). Our ethical obligations to clients, colleagues and other professionals are no different when using Facebook, Twitter or other social media channels as well as communications via our cell phones such as texting or email.
- Standard 1.07(i) states that “social workers ***should not discuss confidential information in any setting unless privacy can be ensured.***” We all know there is no such thing as privacy on a social media site or the Internet. Comments can be forwarded or copied, posts and pictures can be found on search engines years after the initial publication, and archival systems save information even after you delete it. Always consider the image you are portraying by the photos and comments you post. Understand how privacy settings work and review them regularly. Refrain from providing too much personal information such as your home address or full birth date. Don’t post in advance when you plan to be on vacation or away from home for an extended period of times. Be sure to project the image you want potential faculty members, future employers, advisors and friends to know you by.
- Standard 4.03 states that “social workers ***should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities.***” Social media channels provide an excellent means to build community; however, as you navigate these channels, do no harm to yourself, your field site, your clients, the School of Social Work, or to the social work profession in the process. Do not pretend to be someone else or hide your identity when using social media. Be clear if you are sharing personal views and use good judgment regarding sensitive issues. Verify information before you post it, correct mistakes in a timely manner, and be aware of legal liability issues such as copyright infringement, defamation, and posting proprietary information.

What should I do next?

Take some time to review these guidelines with your field instructor and seek to identify other ethical standards that are applicable in your practice setting. As a social work student, you are continually developing a professional identity and you must be cognizant that your private world has a greater likelihood of becoming public when using social media. Field instructors, colleagues, and even clients may have access to information via the Internet that you would otherwise limit to your friends and families so we encourage you to consider the personal versus professional role of social media in your life and your field setting.

