

# Spinning the Social Work Web: A Commentary

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This issue pays special attention to the world of knowledge – how social workers gather it, apply it to practice; how we do this in a principled and a meaningful way. It seems a simple formula, yet the reality of how practitioners locate and integrate current, relevant knowledge into daily practice can be onerous, multilinear, and fraught with questions about accuracy and legitimacy. The source of our angst is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, we are citizens of the information age and, via internet technology, have access to vast repositories of knowledge; on the other, we can, strangely and somewhat randomly, be excluded or “switched off” from information that is directly relevant to our daily practice. In this commentary I reflect on my experience of this reality – the curious link between my practice and the knowledge I seek to develop it.

I have a precarious social work practice. I work to various supervision, clinical and academic contracts and, depending on what contract (if any) I’m working to, my access to information can change overnight from the rich endless databases of a university library, to a questionable array of knowledge gathered behind my various “screens”. It’s a feast-or-famine scenario which leads to a type of scrounging mentality. This is not an entirely unpleasant experience, there is some pleasure in the hunt for an elusive treasure, but mostly it has highlighted to me the basic value of connection, the importance of networks. What I mean by this is both my physical networks, and my connection to (or disconnection from) what dana boyd (2011) refers to as “networked publics” – the public spaces created by social networking sites or other forms of social media.

When I lose access to academic networks (i.e., the library), I quickly become closer to my everyday search engines and the tools of my various social media accounts. On Twitter, for example, I am a gatherer. I scavenge what I can from researchers, academics, journalists and politicians, interest and cultural groups, journals, research centres, professional organisations,

unions, government websites ... individuals of “interest”. I also subscribe to a variety of open access journals, research centres, social work blogs, government websites, and what I deem to be “reputable” news sources. This is in addition to the resources of professional networks that exist on the edges of technology, like professional discussion groups and critical friends. The result is a humble and generally adequate assemblage of information pertinent to my practice.

Of course, these networks require constant scrutiny. I am obliged to wonder how I feel about the professional circles I have joined, how they actually inform my practice, to be aware of how they represent choices I have made – how I have created boundaries for these choices to exclude certain types of information or opinion, to elevate or subjugate certain voices. I consider the various agendas dictating which aspect of any given research project is reported, and I’ve come to terms with the fact that I will never fully understand the complex logic of the internet, how it exploits me, manipulates what I see. This is a reality of the age in which we live.

And I consider my role in all of this – as a social work supervisor, for example. I can be a broker of sorts, a conduit between the practice stories I hear, and the research or professional knowledge found in my networks that might advance new understandings of these stories. I can challenge practice that does not align with the findings of current research, or support transition to new practice approaches. I can ask reflective questions to help identify *barriers* to new information – that which goes against the institutional and neoliberal status quo, which contradicts or threatens basic practice assumptions, weakens collegial relationships, creates moral distress. I can support scrutiny of research for quality or assist with translation of findings. I can observe themes related to certain discourses: our fear of the radical for example, or of the ivory tower.

As a colleague said, while we explored various opportunities available to them for professional development – we learn from the people who come through the agency door, not from the academic articles, or sages on stages. There is a privileging of knowledge produced by academia, or from within professional studies, which continues to be unsavoury to some. And although this anti-academic mindset suggests the need for an attitudinal shift, the disconnect between practice and academia is a classic professional issue and I join many others, including the contributors to this issue, to argue for a more *connected* approach.

Social work researchers and practitioners can jointly interrogate and develop their networks and consider the role of social media and internet technology in this pursuit. Practitioners can find ways of communicating practice questions to the research community, and researchers can ensure findings offer true value and real impact. Practitioners can think about developing capacity to locate and translate research findings, and researchers can work on how to make findings accessible, communicate their implications and disseminate research to the desired audience. These are all points made by contributors to this special issue, and one way this can be (and is being) achieved is by gathering more deliberately as colleagues in networked public spaces. As a young musician I spoke with recently said: it’s not enough to write a cool new song these days, you also have to spread it around (social media) so that the musician and the listener can come together. It is a reciprocal, collaborative enterprise.

Open access journals are an obvious example of this public space. Another is the use of online seminars usually sponsored by professional associations or academic institutions. In this space, researchers speak about their work, offer links to reports or articles, become involved in online discussions, and join groups for further discussion. It is a multi-layered approach further enhanced by use of social media for dissemination, deeper discussion, and network-building. Although researchers can rely on professional associations, conferences, or training organisers to support this process, it is also possible for many researchers to do this autonomously – to share aspects of their work on a website, create a simple podcast or video relating their findings, invite discussion via a website, and to share all this with colleagues via social media.

The networks I have developed for myself are not extraordinary – I know of colleagues with far more sophisticated professional connections. However, they go some way to assist with the gap I observe between the worlds of academia and practice. This experience of creating new networks has also challenged prior assumptions that I am better informed when having unlimited access to the expensive books and subscription-only journals of an academic library, that its availability somehow positions me at a cutting edge. Having said that, the work produced by social work researchers is essential to practice, and exclusion from this research space and this form of professional capital is not OK. Exclusion only serves to isolate – it profoundly impacts professional identity and a sense of belonging. And we need to move away from the discourse which sees us describing each other as “too academic”, or “not academic enough” – as if they exist at opposite ends of some kind of imagined spectrum.

The growing precariousness of our workplace means that networks will more frequently be disrupted, leaving us vulnerable if we do not develop networks *outside* our organisational context. As evidenced by the recent Covid-enforced home offices many of us now inhabit, we now have more opportunity to create our own space away from the “office”. By extending our professional networks, we strengthen our personal and collective social work identities.

Influential philosopher Slavoj Žižek offers perspectives on many aspects of contemporary life, including the turbulence of networked communications, the unique communicative qualities of the internet, and the new media of everyday life (Dean, 2006). He uses the phrase “informational anorexia” to describe how the “feast” of information available to us leaves us unable to consume it, afraid of its potential, of its unlimited possibilities. Paradoxically, the unending availability of facts and opinion on the internet strips its potential to satisfy our curiosities, to see the difference between right and wrong, between truth and opinion (Dean, 2006). These challenges leave us with new responsibilities as social workers, as consumers of research and knowledge, and as researchers who contribute to this new space. In a world where information flashes by, here one day, gone the next, the best we can do is slow down and keep our critical eye, not just on the knowledge itself, but where it comes from, where it goes and how it is all connected.

## References

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