

Editorial

Social work in the digital age

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are becoming a defining contemporary force transforming economic and social activity, with the result that we increasingly live in a digital society that has significantly changed the information landscape, affecting every aspect of our lives. A decade ago, Manuel Castells published his major work on the information age and the networked society (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998). Castells postulated that ‘A new society emerges when and if a structural transformation can be observed in the relationships of production, in the relationships of power and in the relationships of experience’ (Castells, 1998, p. 340). He argued that the digital age has brought about the information society, which is just such a structural transformation and has an importance in the twenty-first century that will parallel that of electricity in the twentieth century and railroads in the nineteenth century. The information society is part of the new meeting place for individuals, groups and communities and thus equally between service users and social workers. The current wave of technological innovation is part of the context in which social work students, practitioners, managers, policy makers and service users and carers operate. ‘The key significance of the networking technologies of the Information Society is that they allow us to make new connections—connections which challenge traditional assumptions about what is possible, and when it is possible’ (Department of the Taoiseach, 2002, p. 3). In the USA, this has been recognized by the National Association of Social Workers and the Association of Social Work Boards in their joint *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* (NASW, 2005). The Standards recognize that ‘current and near future technologies are changing the nature of professional social work practice in countless ways’ (p. 3) and their goals are:

- to maintain and improve the quality of technology-related services provided by social workers;
- to serve as a guide to social workers, incorporating technology into their services;
- to help social workers monitor and evaluate the ways technology is used in their services;

- to inform clients, government regulatory bodies, insurance carriers and others about the professional standards for the use of technology in the provision of social work services.

The model of a set of standards, updated, to take into account the current communication technology possibilities and Web 2.0 developments, is one that may well be useful for other countries to emulate.

In England, there have been major policy developments that rely on effective use of technology to modernize and integrate social work and integrated provision, such as *Our Health, our Care, our Say: A New Direction for community services* (Department of Health, 2006) and *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Social policy interest in the benefits of technology for social progress has been strong over many years, as reflected in the Social Exclusion Unit's report on *Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006) and the Scottish Executive's *Digital Inclusion* policy (2006). In Europe, there has also been widespread interest from policy makers in the social consequences of our transition to a networked society. Most notably, the European Council's Lisbon strategy of 2000 aimed to make Europe the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, while, at the same time, exploiting the potential offered by the new economy to modernize and strengthen the European social model and promoting social cohesion. This combination of technological progress with social and economic progress has since been reconfirmed in several European policy initiatives, such as *i2010* and the *e-inclusion* programme.

For twenty years, some of the authors in this issue have been arguing that technology can improve the quality of our lives and learning and can potentially enrich social work practice and education, although noting that achieving gains depends on our active involvement and acknowledging that the technology can also pose challenges and dangers. The use of technology for social progress will not happen appropriately and ethically without social workers working with others to mould technology developments and applications to their own and service users' needs. For much of the time, we have been saying it to each other at international conferences and in specialist journals. This special issue of the *British Journal of Social Work (BJSW)* is one way of our recognizing that we need to broaden awareness of both the opportunities and challenges we face within social work in a digital age.

Much of the literature in the UK on the role of technology in social work was written in the 1980s and early 1990s and focused on client information systems, expert systems and the computer's role in teaching (Glastonbury, 1985; Colombi *et al.*, 1993; Rafferty *et al.*, 1996; Steyaert *et al.*, 1996). Two journals focused specifically on the use of technology in the human services; from 1984 until 2003—the UK-based journal *New Technology in the Human Services*, founded by Bryan Glastonbury and Stuart Toole, and,

in the USA, *Computers in Human Services* (later renamed *Technology in the Human Services*), published by The Haworth Press and founded in 1985 by Dick Schoech, who remains the editor. Mainstream social work journals have published few articles in this area. There was some coverage in the *BJSW* in the late 1990s (Rafferty, 1997; Sapey, 1997) and, at the beginning of this decade, articles in this journal focused on paedophiles on the internet (Quayle and Taylor, 2002) and carers' perspectives on the internet (Read and Blackburn, 2005). The initial burst of books in the early 1990s has not been mirrored by a similar production rate in the early years of this decade (Hick and McNutt, 2002; Harlow and Webb, 2003). So, the paradoxical picture emerges in which most of the scholarly work on technology and social work in Western Europe was undertaken in a period when computers were scarcely available in homes, or at social workers' desks, and the internet was still an infant. Fortunately, recently, there seems to be a new interest in technology. More articles on how social work engages with technology are appearing in mainstream social work journals. Examples can be found in *Social Work* (Parker-Oliver and Demiris, 2006) and this journal (Burton and van den Broek, 2008; Parton, 2008; Tregagle and Darcy, 2008).

Eurostat data published in December 2008 indicate that 60 per cent of households in the EU-27 had home access to the internet, 48 per cent using broadband access. Some countries have access rates well above 80 per cent; others struggle around 30 per cent (Eurostat, 2008). However, even in high access countries, workplace access to the technology is still an issue for some social workers, as are the uses made of it currently. The development of information systems in England and Wales such as the Electronic Social Care Record (Department of Health, 2003), the Common Assessment Framework and ContactPoint (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a) and similar applications elsewhere mean that we can be confident that connected technology will be ubiquitous in the day-to-day work of social workers within the near future. Given this context, it is timely to revisit and update the earlier literature and share the new ideas that are emerging to support our understanding of the role and impact of the information society and the digital age to the social work context.

The call for papers was organized around four key themes:

- (1) Social work information systems supporting practice;
- (2) The learning professional;
- (3) Independent living;
- (4) The Information Society: social inclusion, social exclusion and the digital divide.

Two events helped to shape the formation of the key themes for this special issue. The international conference, HUSITA 8 (Human Service Information Technology Applications—see www.husita.org) that took place in

Toronto in August 2006, drew academics, practitioners and policy makers from around the globe to discuss the role of information and communication technologies in the human services. The conference provided the opportunity for the guest editors to introduce the idea of the special issue. Much of the literature in the area has arisen from descriptive and evaluative studies of technology innovations, but, as the area has matured (along with the academics), there has been a growth in funded research that is extending the empirical research and our knowledge in this area. Recognition of this was the spur to mainstream the subject and broaden the readership in a period of technology transition that requires ownership by the social work community so as to become transformational rather than oppressive. The HUSITA conference also provides the historical context for this issue. HUSITA is a loose confederation of individuals who have a shared interest in the use of technology in human service practice and education and who come together through international conferences. The core of the network arose in the USA from a small group of human service technology specialists who met in 1981 at a Council of Social Work Education conference in Louisville, KY, and formed the Computer Use in Social Services Network (CUSSN). In the UK, CASW (Computer Applications in Social Work) was formed in 1984 to set up and run national conferences and to publish the *CASW* journal. *CASW* was renamed *New Technology in the Human Services* which, as mentioned above, continued publication until 2003. Walter LaMendola was one of the founders of CUSSN and it is with great pleasure that, twenty-eight years on, we include Walter amongst our authors in this issue. The second event, an international seminar in April 2008, held at Fontys University in the Netherlands, brought together researchers to look at the past, present and future impact of technology on social work. A majority of the papers in this issue were represented by one or more authors and our discussions will have hopefully added value. The discussions will continue at a symposium at the UK Joint Social Work Education Conference in July 2009 and through the HUSITA network.

We were surprised at the response to the call for papers, as we received over thirty abstracts. All were of interest and it was a difficult task to make the selection. Twelve were selected and authors requested to submit shorter papers than is normal in the *BJSW* in order for us to be able to include as much of the current research as possible. In the final event, eleven papers comprise this issue and are introduced in this editorial aligned with the themes originally set out in the call for papers.

Social work information systems supporting practice?

The use of information technology in social work practice arose as a consequence of the political shift in climate within social policy implying public

services moved into the era of accountability and monitoring. This was a greater influence than either technological determinism (albeit a major influence) or social constructivism. Along with growth in monitoring and accountability, social workers have struggled to adapt to using computerized care management and children's information systems in the UK. Many staff experienced the introduction of such systems as often less than enhancing of their practice, particularly where their perspective is that the systems are being implemented as part of new managerialism and the emphasis is on the use of performance monitoring, performance indicators and outcome measures rather than on the service user/practitioner relationship or policy intelligence gathering. The Electronic Social Care Record, implemented in 2006, is at the heart of shared information systems, storing details of every social service 'user' in a database that can be shared with all relevant professionals. With growing inter-professional and multidisciplinary practice across Social Services, Health, Criminal Justice and Education systems, issues of skills, accuracy, ethics, privacy and data protection are growing challenges.

Besides the managerialist agenda, there is no doubt that there is the aim of delivering more effective services by supporting practitioners, both within social work and across cognate professions. At the time of writing, information systems are under particular scrutiny by the Social Work Taskforce in England, which has been charged to radically transform both children and adult services and how information systems support practice is on the agenda. Lord Laming has just reported on the progress in implementing the recommendations from *Every Child Matters* and the report recognizes shortcomings in the fit between information systems and practice (DCSF, 2009). Both of these make the first two papers in this issue particularly timely, as they look at whether the aim of supporting practitioners in delivering effective services is being met. In the first, Andy Pithouse, Chris Hall, Sue Peckover and Sue White use their recent research on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to develop their analysis of some of its key intentions, looking at the 'CAF of policy' and comparing it to what is happening in the 'CAF of practice' and whether it is producing better outcomes for children. The second paper is based on research undertaken by a team of researchers at the University of York. The paper, written by Ian Shaw, Margaret Bell, Ian Sinclair, Patricia Sloper and colleagues at the University of York, in collaboration with Jackie Rafferty at the University of Southampton, focuses on the findings from an evaluation of the implementation, in four pilot sites, of the Integrated Children's Information system (ICS). It is clear from the paper that the research team did not find ICS fit for purpose, yet it was rolled out across England and Wales soon after the research report was submitted. This brings into question whether the Government is as intent on evidence-based policy and practice as it declares.

Whilst the above papers focus on the administrative context currently surrounding social work in the UK, the final paper in this section focuses on the clinical process in social work, and describes a Canadian experience of how online counselling relates to face-to-face methods. Lawrence Murphy and his colleagues report on a random clinical trial, the results of which indicate online and face-to-face counselling offer similar beneficial results.

The learning professional

There is a strong drive for evidence-based practice in the caring professions, and systematic reviews are being collated in scholarly publications and 'professional warehouses' such as SCIE's Social Care Online, Research in Practice, the Cochrane Library and the Campbell Collaboration. At the same time, there is the long-standing observation that professionals in practice rarely read research publications (Horder, 2006). The information landscape of modern professionals has changed dramatically in the last five years with the advent of full texts online and the ability to capture 'knowledge and information'. What is the impact of these changes on the 'forms of knowledge in social work?' (Parton, 2008). Are we seeing a new kind of 'reflexive practitioner', or even a development towards evidence-based practice? How is knowledge management in social welfare different from business models? How does the technology support practitioner learning in an information society? What kind of skill set will the 2010 social work practitioner need?

The three papers in this section provide new insights into the questions above. The first paper, by Zeno Leung, takes the knowledge management theories of the business world and adapts them to the relational and informational world of social work in Hong Kong, resulting in a conceptual framework that can be used to both understand and implement 'knowledge' capture. In the second paper, Patricia Cook-Craig and Yekoutiel Sabah report on a pilot carried out in Israel to support social workers through virtual communities of practice. The paper describes the process of developing, designing and managing the communities of practice as well as the contribution they made to reflective practice, but also provides an insight into the barriers that were encountered. Third, a transatlantic partnership of Walter LaMendola from Denver and Neil Ballantyne and Ellen Daly from Scotland reports on a study of a networked learning approach among social work practitioners in a large, remote, rural local authority in Scotland. Findings indicate that practitioners developed a community of enquiry that privileged face-to-face communication. Online resources were primarily used as supplementary communication.

Independent living

Providing people with the resources to live an independent life is key to social work and this can involve the use of technologies, particularly tangible products such as assistive technologies. Assistive technology is technology used by individuals with disabilities in order to perform functions that might otherwise be difficult or impossible. Social workers and other caring professionals play an important intermediary role between people who can benefit from assistive technology and people actually making use of the available products and services. Yet, most of our built environment is not designed for accessibility and, sadly, we must make the observation that many technologies are designed to exclude. Equally, technology can be an enabler through its use to promote virtual mobility, provide smart homes and alternative communication channels. Although independent living is a term that can be used for all age groups, here, the focus is on older people and the role of technology and digital services.

The first paper provides a useful introduction to the literature in relation to ageing and technology research from American colleagues, Christina Blaschke, Paul Freddolino and Erin Mullen. Their systematic review has the goal of identifying the evidence from optimistic descriptions about the ultimate value of technology-based tools to support independent living. As is so often the case, the paper demonstrates that there are indications of great potential that must be further explored, but it also continues to look at the implications of the evidence for practice, education and training. After the literature review, we return to the University of York and are provided with a theoretical framework by Michael Hardey and Brian Loader's paper on the *informatization of welfare in relation to older people and the role of digital services*. They draw on a wide range of literature and perspectives, including gerontology, human-computer interaction (HCI), e-health, psychology, sociology, social policy, social science of technology (SST) and social work, in order to present a conceptual framework that enables us to reflect on our approaches in this area. This paper also ends with a challenge in relation to the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on our current understanding of service provision.

The third paper, by Ruth Landau and her colleagues, reports on the findings of a study on the impact of one specific technology, looking at the ethics and attitudes of family and professional care-givers towards the use of electronic tracking for people with dementia. This controversial use of a technology that has most frequently been used in the criminal justice system explores the different attitudes of people suffering from dementia, their informal carers and the professionals involved. The authors reflect on the tensions between risk, autonomy and privacy and highlight for us the dual face of technology. Technology's impact depends on the intention behind its use and the implementation of that intention.

The information society: social inclusion, social exclusion and the digital divide

Enabling social inclusion, avoiding social exclusion and providing 'ladders out of poverty' are at the heart of the social work profession. The arrival of new technology created concerns of a new social divide, between the information 'haves' and information 'have-nots'. The inequalities in access to computers and the internet in the late 1990s seemed to support this concern. However, within a decade, computer access has become widespread and inequalities have changed, at least in the economically developed countries. The gender divide has all but disappeared; an age divide has appeared.

The first contribution in this section of the special issue describes the changing faces of the digital divide, given widespread availability of networked technology. Jan Steyaert and Nick Gould argue that while some fault lines in that divide have disappeared, others have appeared. This goes further than a change from one socio-demographic variable to another, from gender to age. The authors argue that variety in access to the technology has been replaced by variety in content preferences. It is no longer how people get access to information (fast broadband at home versus having to go to a public library to get onto the internet), but what kinds of information people access. It makes a substantial difference whether the digital opportunities are mostly used for empowering information or for entertainment. The social interventions geared towards reducing the digital divide need to reflect this changing understanding.

Second, Wong Yu Cheung and colleagues write about the same digital divide from a non-Western perspective. They describe the digital divide as it unfolds in East Asia, and the strategies that governments have put in place to bridge the gap between the digital 'haves' and the digital 'have-nots'. The authors argue that social interventions should go beyond offering public access and training, and refocus on strategies more relevant at this stage of diffusion of the internet.

The aim of this special issue is to bring together recent research on the use of technology in social work practice and to provide a substantive contribution to knowledge transfer, theory building and the debates on the use of information and communication technologies and their impact on social and community work practice both in the UK and internationally. We hope you find we have achieved our aim.

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