

## INTRODUCTION

# Mapping Social Work Practice in an Online World

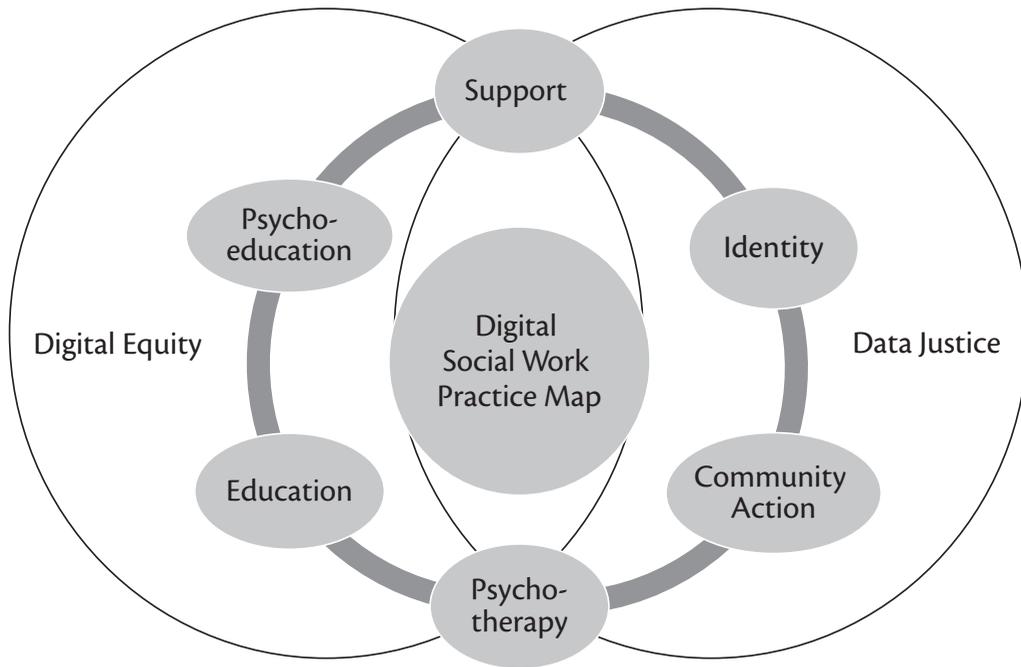
*David A. Wilkerson and Liam O'Sullivan*

In 2018, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Futures Task Force considered the field of social work in the United States to be at a crossroads. At the time, the field's adoption of digital practice had been limited. Practitioner and educator reluctance was driven by challenges and barriers associated with technology, training, client acceptance, payer reimbursement, client privacy, risk management, and the perceived limitations of online delivery for developing a treatment alliance and conveying values like trust, empathy, and caring (Berzin et al., 2015; Harst et al., 2019; LaMendola, 2010; Ramsey et al., 2016; Smith, n.d.). However, following the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, traditional, in-person service delivery was dramatically interrupted globally. What once appeared to be a crossroads became an emerging and seemingly unstoppable shift toward modern technology-mediated forms of delivery.

*Social Work in an Online World* addresses this shift and maps the changing landscape from analog to digital practice. Additionally, while the mental health field has been at the center of this emerging landscape, digital social work practice occurs with varied client systems, system needs, and system levels (micro, mezzo, and macro). Therefore, in addition to psychotherapy, a map of digital social work practice can be expanded to include support, identity, community action, education, and psychoeducation.

Technology also brings a new set of ethical issues for mapping practice. Reamer (2018) described the evolution of online social work practice, the fundamental ethical questions raised, and the standards developed for social workers' use of technology. We expand on those standards, and in Figure 1, we illustrate a landscape of digital practice embedded within the core social work value of social justice. Social justice is applied in this map as digital equity as well as the more recently developed principle of data justice.

**Figure 1:** Digital Social Work Practice Map



## DIGITAL PRACTICE LANDSCAPE

We show six practice areas in our digital social work map: support, identity, community action, psychotherapy, education, and psychoeducation, as well as ethical standards for digital equity and data justice. Practice areas are illustrated in this guidebook by the work of social workers in the United States, Europe, and New Zealand. The chapters are joined by several through lines, but the impact of COVID-19 predominates.

### Cyberfeminism

Apropos to our mapping goal, Funk and Fitch (chapter 1: Harnessing Technology for Social Justice: Radical Approaches to Digitally Revolutionize Social Work) introduce readers to a new digital social work practice identity of “cyberfeminist.” They explore cyberfeminist social justice implications for digital practice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Numerous practice examples illustrate their theoretical perspective on an evolving landscape in which service delivery is being revolutionized and moving the field toward the CSWE Futures Task Force’s scenario of “Social Work Leadership for a High-Tech World” (CSWE, 2018, p. 6). Their chapter also introduces the through line of COVID-19 in the digital practice landscape.

## Support

Online support is an area that has seen significant growth since the advent of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media websites. Facebook was launched in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006 (White & Le Cornu, 2011). Online support groups operating in social media sites are a rapidly developing and expanding area within the digital practice landscape. Sometimes called “virtual communities,” they are thematically diverse yet share a common focus on management of stress and uncertainty primarily through peer-to-peer support. Stressful life challenges and coping strategies are two key concepts associated with online support group work. Whereas stress and coping are normal parts of life, chronic stress creates numerous risks to mind, body, and spirit. Successful coping with chronic stress can be enhanced with support, and social workers have long been pivotal to the successful delivery of support services through group work. The growth of online support is based on information and communication technologies’ ease of development and use. Operated through a variety of inexpensive and readily available synchronous and asynchronous technologies, online support systems provide the means for theme/topic specialization that would be largely unavailable in face-to-face settings.

In chapter 2, “A Team-Based Approach to Moderating Online Support Groups,” O’Sullivan and Wilkerson provide a practice example for the area of “support” that illustrates the impact of COVID-19 for a reworking of the use of teams to deliver services. Initially unfunded and led by social work volunteers in Ireland, their support group uses the latest in online group functionality on a leading social media portal. The authors tell the story of the group’s formation, including the advanced use of a volunteer, peer/professional moderator support group to remotely discuss practice/moderation dilemmas. When considering the alignment of the project with social work’s principles and values, the authors suggest that digital equity and justice issues may limit participation for some clients and, in the case example described, family caregivers. However, the authors demonstrate that in some cases practitioners can actively support participants’ digital literacy.

## Digital Equity and Data Justice

The term *digital equity* refers to the social justice principle of technology access as a human right. In addition to the element of accessibility, digital equity includes digital literacy and digital citizenship. Helsper (2021) discussed digital equity and technology “divides” at three levels: (1) device and infrastructure accessibility; (2) technology literacy and skills; and (3) economic, social, cultural, and health outcomes that require digital equity.

Elswick, Peterson, Washington, and Barnes (chapter 3: Best Practices in Technology-Based Supports in Working with Children, Adolescents, and Families) provide an illuminating view of the use of a university–community collaboration to create an infrastructure for overcoming first and second levels of the digital divide for marginalized and oppressed families in the southeastern United States. As their work continues, it will be interesting to see its impact at the third level of economic, social, cultural, and health outcomes. The authors' work also illustrates the impact of COVID-19 on the development of digital social work practice in which digital inclusion is achieved through pioneering methods, including digital mentors and digital passports within a “social envelop” strategy.

The social justice principle of data justice was developed in response to the escalating *datafication* (digital information that is collected, organized, and translated into new uses that can be valued or monetized by parties other than the originators of the digital information) of society, subsequent human rights violations, and the ensuing need for data literacy and data citizenship skills to protect community members, especially members of vulnerable and oppressed groups. Taylor (2017) described *data justice* as “fairness in the way people are made visible, represented and treated as a result of their production of digital data” (p. 1). In chapter 4, “Advancing Data Justice,” Ballantyne provides readers with a critical understanding of the uses of algorithmic data and artificial intelligence for governmental decision making and services delivery. Case studies illustrate the ways human rights violations occur followed by the author's recommended methods for data justice advocacy. Critical data literacy is described, and recommendations are provided for developing competency in its practice.

## Community Action

*Community action* is defined as “collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and Indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change” (Staples, 2012, p. 288). Many social work practitioners and academics, including some of this book's authors, are of the view that social work has lost its radical roots, often best epitomized by true grassroots community action/organizing and activism. It has been argued that social workers are all too comfortable in embracing government-endorsed and legislatively informed social control activities (e.g., probation, child protection) to the detriment of more radical activities. Fisher sees activism as being about “democratic grassroots analysis and action,” which he believes is very much lacking in both traditional social work and in many radical social work perspectives (R. Fisher, professor and chair of community organizing,

University of Connecticut, personal communication, August 29, 2022). Fisher et al. (2018) argued that community efforts are fundamentally political, and whether groups like it or not, implicitly or explicitly, they are part of the social struggles of their historical context.

Clearly, group work is central to community action. Group dynamics were first theorized by Kurt Lewin nearly a century ago (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). Lewin determined that it takes the individuals who are the closest to a problem or an issue that needs to be changed to be involved in it for it to be effective and that—ultimately—it would take more than one individual within that community to create such a change.

Cuskelly and Ojeda (chapter 5: Online Opportunities for Community Action: Social Media as a Vehicle for Social Justice) describe online community actions and initiatives, informed by social work values, that focus on the macro-level change. They detail specific actions to take to promote digital equity and data justice. They describe how online collaboration with like-minded activists (but not exclusively social work practitioners) has effected legislative change and mobilized communities. They also discuss the risks of online misinformation and some governmental interventions to mitigate the worst effects of such misinformation. Their chapter provides useful tips for online activism as well as a tool kit for protecting practitioners from harm when placing themselves publicly online as part of their professional work.

## **Identity-Based Social Action**

Digital practice overlaps into community action in significant ways. The foundation for identity-based social action is *self-concept*, in which we consider the integration of our personal and social identities. Developing a sense of self can be a lengthy process and a significant struggle, especially for members of oppressed and vulnerable groups. Identity-based social action focuses on the use of community action to achieve social justice for individual or intersectional aspects of the self-concept that have been threatened, attacked, or otherwise negatively impacted by a dominant community. In one example of identity-based social action, Richez and colleagues (2020) studied a Canadian Indigenous-led political movement that used social media to mobilize political action to address legislative policy on a range of Indigenous economic, health, and safety issues. Their work is available on the internet and presents an important study of the development of a digital movement and its outcomes.

Identity-based social action is a contentious aspect within the recent development of digital movements because of the use of social media by hate groups. Trading on the use of social media for self-concept development, they build racist movements, such as those based in White superiority ideologies (Faulkner & Bliuc,

2016). This highlights the potential negative power of social media to undermine what might be described as progressive causes. For those interested in the wider area of online macro social work activism, readers are referred to #MacroSW on Twitter (Cummings & Folayan, 2019).

## **Psychotherapy**

We have noted that psychotherapy has been well represented in the digital practice map by virtue of the urgent need to resume behavioral practice following the pandemic lockdowns in 2020. Gregory and Werth (chapter 6: The Power of Online Synchronous Cognitive–Behavioral Group Intervention: A Get S-M-A-R-T Illustration) continue the through line of COVID-19’s impact on digital practice with their work in the delivery of cognitive–behavioral therapy (CBT) for substance users through online, synchronous group delivery. Their chapter tracks the development of the program and describes the principles needed for developing a virtual therapeutic alliance with their treatment population. Practitioners will appreciate the knowledge these authors share on managing antitherapeutic client actions, handling the unexpected, and weighing the pros and cons of digital practice.

## **Education**

Education is also located on the digital social work practice map because of its importance for student decision making regarding the adoption, readiness, and training for digital practice (Wilkerson et al., 2019). The Digital Professionalism Mapping Tool (Digital Professionalism Mapping Tool for Students, n.d.) is an example of a method used to explore student digital practice readiness based on their preferred patterns of engagement with the internet. A “visitor/resident” typology was developed with “visitors” preferring engagement for managing tasks and “residents” preferring engagement for interaction and identity management. The tool is used to map internet engagement in personal and professional virtual spaces and replaces older typologies like “digital native” and “immigrant” (White & Le Cornu, 2011). Taylor-Beswick (2022) applied the Digital Professionalism Mapping Tool for social work to understand students’ experiences with digital skill gaps in their education.

Wolfe-Taylor, Khaja, and Deck (chapter 7: Bridging Education and Practice with e-OSCE Simulations) address the need to strengthen digital practice in social work education with their work on the development and uses of the e-OSCE. Before COVID-19, many social work faculty and administrators were critical of online social work education, and a specific focus of this criticism is captured in the remark, “You can’t teach social work practice online!” The authors have refuted this criticism and identified ways to bridge the gap between education

and practice using an online simulation-based educational opportunity for first-year MSW students. In their pilot qualitative case study, they identify students' evaluation of their self-efficacy, how they applied theory in practice, and what they identified as their strengths and challenges as they completed the e-OSCE experience. Additionally, students' feedback on the e-OSCE experience is explored.

## Psychoeducation

The final location on the digital practice map is psychoeducation. Psychoeducation has a long history of analog practice and is still being developed for digital practice. Brown and Keesler (chapter 8: Creating a Digital School Safety Service: A Pathway from Traditional Analog to Digital Practice) demonstrate a school-based, mezzo-level application of psychoeducation that can overlap into community action. Their work demonstrates the potential for applying an aspect of psychoeducation—self-assessments—to achieve community-building outcomes in the mezzo setting of middle school to improve school safety.

Wilkerson (chapter 9: Digital Hybrid Psychoeducation: Model Development and Case Illustration) focuses on the further development of psychoeducation as a digital practice through the application of research with a digital hybrid psychoeducation program. The term “hybrid” is used to distinguish the alternating elements of digital individual and digital group work within the model. This differs from more commonplace uses of the term “hybrid,” in which practice alternates between digital and on-the-ground spaces. The chapter addresses a gap in the development of intervention designs that enable peer support to contribute to the outcomes of online psychoeducation interventions. While many digital psychoeducation programs provide strong individual training components, the design for peer support is less well developed. Methods are described using case examples for engaging participants in peer support and also amplifying the individual training components within psychoeducation.

## CONCLUSION

In this introduction, we have introduced readers to *Social Work in an Online World* with a digital practice map whose landscape reflects support, identity, community action, psychotherapy, education, and psychoeducation (see Figure 1). Each of the chapters represents a location in the landscape through which chapter authors provide a guided tour with their practice model. Authors contribute accessible theory and conceptualizations, practice examples, case studies, research, learnings, and reflections as well as the strengths and limitations of their approaches.

*Social Work in an Online World* seeks to expand the practice map beyond online mental health service delivery, which is largely individually focused and synchronously delivered. We outline a map for digital social work practice that includes group and macro work that occurs in many different environments (e.g., schools, healthcare facilities, nonprofit advocacy organizations, other community and population centers). In addition, we identify the core social work value of social justice as central to this map and as supporting the principles of digital equity and data justice.

A major through line in this work has been COVID-19. Like others who have discussed the pandemic and the resultant accelerated transition to digital practice (Earle & Freddolino, 2022), we can't deny the significant and likely enduring impact it has had on the delivery of online social work. Practices that were, at best, peripheral and criticized by mainstream social work are now commonly accepted. The pandemic's impact can also be observed by the support practitioners have received from many social work organizations and educators. A few of these include (a) the University College Cork's (n.d.) OSWP Tools through which practitioners share comprehensive tools for online professional social work practice; (b) the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), which provides e-learning for social workers using technology (SCIE, n.d.); (c) the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), which provides resources for digital social work practices (BASW, n.d.); and (d) Indiana University School of Social Work, which provides an online continuing education program on telepractice basics for social workers and educators responding to COVID-19 (Indiana University, n.d.).

These examples and the digital practice models presented in *Social Work in an Online World* demonstrate that a shift from analog practice to the inclusion of hybrid and digital practice is occurring and is largely positive for social workers and for those they seek to serve. However, for this shift to become truly transformative, the application of social justice principles of digital equity and data justice must become a standard for development. We hope that readers wishing to adopt digital practices will be inspired to apply these standards in their own applications.

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