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SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE, ONLINE HARASSMENT AND SOCIAL WORK (IRELAND EDITION)

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ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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The @UCCsocialwork **Online Social Work Practice** (OSWP) series supports social workers, professionals, community organisations, and practice managers providing services through online platforms. The full OSWP @UCCsocialwork series of free tools, webinars and resources can be accessed here.

WHY IS A TOOL ABOUT ONLINE ABUSE NEEDED?

Social media apps and platforms can offer many positive benefits to users: connecting with friends and families; participating in clubs and community events; social and political activism; setting up and participating in communities of interest; as sources of information and advice; and as a creative outlet. Social media participation rates continue to increase strongly. These platforms are still relatively new and there is much to learn about their impact on our physical and mental health, well-being, loneliness or connectedness. Furthermore, countries are still figuring out how best, or even whether, to regulate these platforms, how to respond to negative content and behaviours from social media users, and how to protect those who are the focus of negative content or harmful communications.

There has been a proliferation of case-studies from young people, sports stars, celebrities, politicians, and professionals describing the abuse and harassment that they have received on social media and its impact on their well-being. In the profession of social work there is a developing focus on the uses of social media for positive change in interventions, and analysing how professionals' social media use intersects with their professional codes of conduct and ethics.

The primary aim of the tool is to support social workers and managers when addressing social media abuse in their day-to-day practice, whether it is from an external source or internally from a colleague. The tool also provides suggestions for social workers to improve their e-professionalism. Employers have signs up in waiting rooms to say that abusive and threatening behaviours towards staff will not be accepted and that incidents will be notified to An Garda Síochána. Such protections ought to be extended to the digital sphere.

As this is an emerging sphere of practice, this tool may not provide definitive answers to your practice scenario. Readers will need to combine learning from this tool with traditional themes in the profession: reflection, boundaries, confidentiality, "contract" making, being non-judgmental, relationship-building, rights-based social work, the skilful use of authority, and so on.

To keep this document short, we have included web links in blue for further detailed information.

WHAT IS MEANT BY...?

Trolling is the posting of negative and destructive comments on social media / the Internet with the purpose of creating arguments, discord or to negatively impact a debate. For some, the intention is to deliberately provoke a response, whereas for others, this may be their particular style of communication. However, it is perceived by those on the receiving end as super-critical or as an 'attack'. This type of feedback is darker in its message and intent compared with constructive criticism.

Doxing (or doxxing) is the malicious sharing of documents or personal information online or on social media about a person with malicious intent: to cause embarrassment, to damage their reputation or to exert leverage. Examples include: sharing a professional's home address, phone number, personal information about a professional and/or their family member, or posting private photos (home, children, school).

Cyberbullying means "Tormenting, humiliating, and/or threatening someone using online or mobile communication technologies" (Chandler and Munday, 2016, p. 1).

Defamatory statement "means a statement that tends to injure a person's reputation in the eyes of reasonable members of society, and "defamatory" shall be construed accordingly" (Defamation Act 2009, revised December 2020).

The **Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020** (Coco's Law) in addition to dealing with the publication of non-consensual intimate images, also amends the law relating to harassment. Under Section 4 - "distributing, publishing or sending threatening or grossly offensive communication" - a person could be found guilty, if "(a) by any means,

> (i) distributes or publishes any threatening or grossly offensive communication about another person, or
> (ii) sends any threatening or grossly offensive communication to another person, and

(b) with intent by so distributing, publishing or sending to cause harm".

'Cancel culture' is the "practice of excluding somebody from social or professional life by refusing to communicate with them online or in real life, because they have said or done something that other people do not agree with" (Oxford Dictionary).

Click for a comprehensive **Dictionary of Social Media**.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE?

Social workers, health and social care professionals, and those working in the community and voluntary sector may experience the following through social media (not an exhaustive list): harassment, harmful and abusive communications, cyber-bullying, trolling, racist / homophobic / transphobic abuse, doxing, and/or the publication of defamatory statements. Professionals may also be covertly recorded with the audio/video posted on social media without their consent. In certain practice settings like child protection and welfare, there are additional considerations such as the sharing of posts which could directly or indirectly identify children and/or posts which seek to coerce or pressure a social worker and/or other professionals in an attempt to influence their assessment / decision-making, to leverage access to a resource, or as a 'retaliatory' response to a decision made by the professional or the agency. Personal and private information may also be posted on social media about a social worker and/or their family members. Examples include: posting information about the identity of their children, the location of their children's schools, reposting family pictures with or without comments, or publicising the location of the professional's family home. On rarer occasions, there can be clear or oblique threats of violence, intimidation, or threats of unspecified repercussions if whatever the social media poster wants done is not completed or achieved.

Clearly, employing organisations have a duty of care to their workers who have a right to dignity in the workplace, to be protected from unsafe work environments, to benefit from workplace policies and protocols to maximise their welfare and safety, and to be provided with appropriate supports. When responding, employing organisations may be influenced by how the abusive social media engagement arose:

a) Abuse and harassment of a staff member through their private or employer's social media accounts, which is unrelated to their professional work.

b) Abuse and harassment of a staff member through their private social media account which is directly related to their professional work.

c) Abuse and harassment of a staff member and/or team through an employer's social media account which is related to the professional's work and/or the work of the agency.

There is a clear duty and onus on employers to provide an appropriate response to support staff and teams. However, it is not always straightforward to respond to these issues as the law, policies and social norms are still catching up with everyday social media practices. One such example is freedom of speech.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH & SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

It is an essential component of a profession that its members are accountable, and that citizens / users of the service have avenues of recourse if they have a complaint about the quality of a service. Traditionally, this has meant using an agency's complaints procedure, writing a letter to a politician or senior manager, or complaining to a professional registration body under fitness to practice.

Social media has provided citizens and users of services with a largely unmediated forum to express their concerns and to advocate directly for themselves or a family member. Freedom of speech is a crucial pillar of democratic societies, but it is not always clear where the line is drawn between constructive critical commentary/ advocacy, and harmful comments and behaviours. Professionals and services already engage with constructive critical commentary and dialogue. However, in a social media context it is well established that users can express criticism with a ferocity that is not tempered by the social interaction associated with face-to-face feedback (Phemister, 2021).

This does not mean that harmful posts, bullying, harassment, sustained trolling, etc. should be tolerated, and professionals ought be be able to respond. Furthermore, social workers may also wish to advocate and to support peers and service users who are the focus of negative uses of social media platforms. Riley (2021, p. 8) argues that "freedom of speech … does not mean freedom from the consequences of that speech". As a profession we should contribute to defending the right to freedom of speech. However, this should not extend to an absolutist position where this right encapsulates the right to express views which are harmful, abusive, harassing, racist, homophobic, transphobic, defaming, or threatening.

While a social media post might be experienced by a professional as hurtful, this does not mean that it will reach a threshold to be removed by a social media company or is actionable in court.

TOP TIPS

ORGANISATIONS

Ensure that your social media policy is up-to-date and staff are made aware of its existence. This should include what to do if the social media abuse is from a current staff member.

Develop and regularly publicise an internal reporting process for staff to notify cases of social media abuse. Use this data to assess the extent and nature of social media abuse and harassment to inform training, policy development and advocacy. Issue clear statements of support to staff and teams.

Engage and lobby social media companies on behalf of your staff in cases of social media abuse, up to and including engaging your legal department (if available).

Be proactive in providing managers on the front-line with tools and supports when working with a staff member in these cases.

Take a leadership role in highlighting this issue internally in your organisation and lobbying externally with law makers, civil society, and social media companies.

Contribute to consultations on new laws on internet safety, hate speech, and the regulation of social media.

Provide regular and accessible staff training on social media skills, IT skills and what to do in cases of social media abuse, with a specific focus on prevention.

Develop and offer tangible supports: policies, supervision, legal advice, accompaniment services, advocacy, counselling, training and guidance for front-line staff *and* managers.

In your acceptable usage policy and on your agency's social media posts, model positive and constructive communication.

If the social media abuse is in anyway associated with the discharge of a social worker's duties and/or related to the mandate of the agency, even if the abuse is through the worker's personal social media account, it is unacceptable for an agency / team to argue that it is a 'private matter'. It is the agency's responsibility to respond and to support staff.

MANAGERS

Complete the self-assessment and action tool on the next page. Undertake a risk assessment of the posts if threatening / harassing / abusive / hate speech (racism, LGBTQ+ etc.).

Ask: How are you feeling? How can I help? How can I / the team / the organisation help and support you? Do you and your family feel safe? What do you as the supervisor and the team member need?

Listen to the staff member's concerns. Document incidents. Provide an explicit statement of support.

If staff are 'tagged' in a controversial social media post, it does not mean that they endorse the post as it was written by someone else.

Access supports and training for yourself as a manager.

Raise this issue at team meetings / journal clubs / CPD sessions. Encourage team members to participate in relevant CPD.

Engage social supports in your team / network around the staff member(s). Check in on this topic regularly in professional supervision.

In cases where the staff member indicates a need for support, consider accompaniment to court and / or An Garda Síochána.

Ensure that staff are aware of the agency's social media policy and the social media abuse reporting / escalation protocol. Encourage and support staff to escalate (report) within the agency.

Advocate on behalf of the worker in cases where the agency may need to make representations with the worker to a social media platform, legal department, court, and/or An Garda Síochána. Sometimes an agency's representation may be more effective compared with an individual response.

PROFESSIONALS

Complete the reflection, self-assessment and action tool on the next page, and review the IASW's Social Media Policy and the BASW's Social Media Policy: they contain clear and practical advice on how to develop your e-professionalism.

Undertake a review of all of your social media accounts: privacy settings, posts, usage, friends, pictures, etc. Don't engage or respond to trolls. Read the Troll Counterstrategy for detailed advice.

Use the report content button within apps; consider the merits of muting vs. blocking vs. restricting. Learn how to screenshot and document all incidents. For platform specific advice on reporting abuse and harassment, see –> Twitter / YouTube / Facebook / Instagram / Snapchat / Telegram / LinkedIn / PEN Advice: Reporting to platforms / Dealing with fake social media profiles.

If the abuse and harassment is from a colleague or another professional, discuss with your supervisor / manager, access supports from human resources, or in certain cases, consider a fitness to practice referral: see, for example, s4 of the *Social Workers Registration Board Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics* (CORU, 2019).

Consider whether an informal inquiry or a formal statement to An Garda Síochána may be necessary.

Attend training; improve your social media skills; become a member of the IASW; protect yourself from doxing; read the "Online Harassment Field Manual"; exercise your right to be forgotten; learn how to avoid and deal with cyberbullying; where appropriate, use Coco's law or defamation law to protect yourself; increase security and reduce impersonation by turning on two-factor authentication (2FA) on your social media accounts; if your organisation doesn't support you, link in with the IASW or your union.

Evaluate the positives of social media for you vs. the negatives of trolling, harassment etc. There is a growing literature on the negative impacts of social media on mental health, relationships, and on sleep. Some users are deleting their social media accounts or taking social media breaks. However, leaving social media, may not on its own, resolve the issue.

REFLECTION, ASSESSMENT AND ACTIONS

What and whom are you concerned about? Clarify & list your concern(s) (include frequency + assessment of severity). Who is impacted? What are the implications? What is in the best interests of service users? Is there a justifiable reason why the person is upset, even if how they express this upset on social media is causing you distress? How might this issue impact your work with a family / community / group / individual / colleague? How might the social media poster's own experiences of trauma and the pressures associated with an intervention, influence their online behaviours? How might cultural and age differences about sharing information on social media be influencing your experience? Remember: social media is not real life; however, what happens on social media can have real-life implications.

Action plan: Apply the advice on the "Top Tips" page here. What changes do I / the agency need to make when there is constructive criticism? What actions do you personally / the agency need to take? What actions, if any, do family members and friends need to take? What role, if any, is there for a court process if a vulnerable person is impacted? (e.g. s29 & s31 of the Child Care Act, 1991 for child in care). As in real life, how does a professional / team continue to work with someone who has been abusive / threatening on social media?

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

Equality, diversity and inclusion are key values for affirmative, supportive and welcoming workspaces for staff and managers. While social media abuse and harassment directed at professionals is always inappropriate, the online targeting of professionals can focus on their personal, sexual, gender, race, ethnic and religious identities. Racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic and other discriminatory remarks aimed at staff because of their professional work is particularly distressing. When wider systemic and structural inequalities are considered, online discriminatory comments towards minority staff and service users are doubly oppressive, abusive and harmful. There is a responsibility on all professional staff, management and organisational leads to name and identify such online abuse as discrimination and hate speech. Ensuring the dignity of *all* staff and service users requires solidarity and allyship from *all* staff. Allyship places a positive onus on intervention. Social workers practice with service-users who may be deemed 'vulnerable', but this does not excuse hate speech. It is important that mechanisms within the workplace for responding to online harassment of staff do not serve to dilute, or fail to recognise discrimination and hate speech by explaining away such behaviour as *'just being his/her/their way'*. Reporting mechanisms put in place to record online abuse and harassment should explicitly ask those filing the report to consider if there is a discriminatory/hate speech aspect to online abuse experienced by the staff member or service user, and to consider what other support mechanisms and legal remedies are available.

Tackling societal discrimination and inequalities is a current focus in Ireland with the enactment of Harassment, Harmful Communication and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's law) and the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, updated defamation law, the publication of the General Schemes of the Criminal Justice (Hate Crimes) Bill 2020. The implementation of the EU's Digital Services Act is ongoing. Successful implementation of enacted and planned pieces of legislation provides organisations with tools to support staff to promote safe, affirming and inclusive working conditions. Consult the Irish Network Against Racism's (INAR) advice on how to respond to racism. Report racist incidents to An Garda Síochána and through the IREPORT racist incident reporting system.

DISCLAIMER

This series is not intended to replace any organisational, regulatory, legal or data protection frameworks. Social workers and professionals should adhere to their professional codes of conduct and ethics, contracts of employment, laws, and the policies, procedures and guidelines of their organisations. This guide does not offer a legal opinion; if necessary, consult a legal professional for advice. Whilst every care has been taken in the preparation of this guide, UCC, @UCCsocialwork and the authors of this tool offer no guarantees, no liability is accepted as a result of any errors or omissions, and the tool may not be up-to-date.

RESOURCES

British Association of Social Workers, *Social Media Policy*.

Centre for Countering Digital Hate, *Don't Feed the Trolls: A Practical Guide to Dealing with Hate on Social Media*.

Data Protection Commission (Ireland) *The Right to Erasure (Articles 17 and 19 of the GDPR)*.

GDPR.EU, *Everything You Need to Know About the "Right to be Forgotten"*.

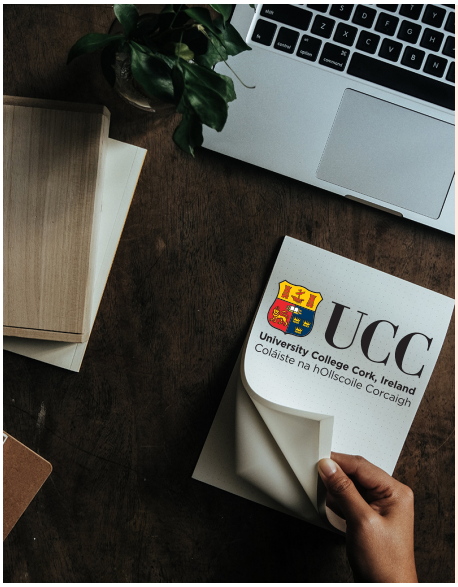
Harvard Business Review, *What to do When your Employee is Harassed Online*.

Health Service Executive, Cyberbullying / When Photos End Up Online / Sexual Harassment / What to do if You're Being Bullied.

Irish Association of Social Workers, *IASW Anti-Racism Strategy 2021-2023* and *Social Media Policy*.

PEN America, *Online Harassment Field Manual*.

Tusla staff: check the Hub for Tusla's policies and operational procedures on how to respond to threats or intimidation on social media as part of their Violence, Harassment and Abuse (VHA) materials and the NIMS reporting process.



ABOUT THIS SERIES

The **Online Social Work Practice (OSWP)** series was created by Dr Kenneth Burns and Dr Fiachra O Súilleabháin, School of Applied Social Studies (@UCCsocialwork), University College Cork, Ireland.

The full series of OSWP resources (practice tools, webinars and resources) are available here.

OSWP Tool No. Six

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