

Chapter 7

Rurality and Technology

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Abstract

The third chapter in the environment section of the book will explore how the changing and ever developing use of technology has and could continue to impact on social work practice in rural settings. The global pandemic caused a seismic shift in social work practice. In an extremely short period of time, social workers had to embrace or at the very least learn to cope with practice in an online world. Whilst debate and discussion about the use of technology in social work practice is not new, the requirements to use technology since March 2020 have meant that the potential benefits of using technology have gained real traction for the first time in social work. This chapter will explore the benefits of technology for people who live rurally and use services, social workers and rural and remote communities drawing on learning from the impact of the global pandemic. It will also critically consider the dangers of suggesting the use of technology is *the* answer to the challenges of working with rural and remote people and diverse communities.

Introduction

This third chapter of the environment section of this edited collection will explore digital technology and social work in rural and remote areas. The position taken here is that rural social workers are *travelling* practitioners by necessity. Travel in this context usually means by car and whilst it is hard to imagine a situation where it would be appropriate or even possible for social work to happen without travel, the climate challenges that we all face require us all to explore ways to reduce our environmental impact (Engstrom, 2022). Digital technology may, over time, reduce the requirement for the extensive travel that rural social workers currently undertake as more aspects of practice become possible virtually. There are a range of digital, technological and electronic transformations already ongoing in our communities which have resulted in many interactions with services and society now being online or mediated through some sort of technology, usually as a result of ease and convenience from the perspective of the organisations providing the service. In this sense many of us are already experiencing significant elements of our world virtually (Kellsey and Taylor-Beswick, 2017, p.29). This shift towards the increasing use of digital technology is certainly not aimed solely at physically distanced communities; it is part of a wider societal trend. However, its specific relevance to rural social work is that digital technology could contribute to addressing some of the challenges of working across large geographical areas and the travel this requires. A reduction in travel could produce practical benefits for social workers in terms of time and workload and crucially, as referred to above, contribute to a reduction of car usage. That is not to say that there are no environmental impacts of using digital technology to connect with people, but environmental factors are a worthy consideration alongside the potential efficiencies and flexibilities a greater use of technology could bring to rural social work practice.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence and the British Association of Social Workers (SCIE and BASW, 2019) have produced a very helpful guide outlining what the term digital technology can include in

social work. Their list covers electronic systems, online resources, assistive technologies, social media, informatics, data, information management, hardware, online learning and artificial intelligence and machine learning. This chapter will take an equally broad view of the definition of digital technology but the focus here is on technology that aids communication rather than, for example, the development of specific assistive technologies or technologies that enable care, although it is recognised that these may also develop new and novel ways to communicate. Technology focused on communication in social work can be broadly categorised into two. Firstly, the use of technology to support the record keeping and management of information such as online case management systems. Such systems have increasingly replaced the paper social work file and in many ways are far more efficient, secure and easier to use than their predecessors. However, there is a robust critique of the way some such systems have contributed to the rational-technical, bureaucratic managerialism that characterizes so much of social work in the present day. There has been much concern raised about how these systems have had the unintended consequence of removing the human aspect of social work with information technology systems seemingly making decisions and undermining professional decision making (Broadhurst et al., 2010). These debates continue and remain relevant to social work whether practised in urban or rural areas. The focus of this chapter, however, is the second broad category, that is the way digital technology can be used explicitly to support communication and create connections either with people who use services or between professional colleagues.

It is to the credit of health and social care practitioners that they were so rapidly able to embrace digital technology when physical contact became restricted because of the virulent nature of Covid-19 (Maguire et al., 2021; Taylor-Beswick, 2021). These circumstances accelerated the fairly tentative steps that had already been taken prior to the global pandemic in the potential role of digital practice (López Peláez et al., 2020). We therefore find ourselves with a timely opportunity to consolidate recent learning and actively and critically consider what digital technology can contribute to rural social work practice. There can be resistance to the idea that technology can provide ways to communicate with people who use services in ways that are effective and ethical. However, resistance to new ways of 'doing things' is not new (Kellsey and Taylor-Beswick, 2017) and whilst the purpose of this chapter is not to argue that social work should whole-heartedly embrace all technology in every sense, it would be equally inappropriate to refuse to explore what technology could bring to rural social work practice given our recent experiences. As noted by Westwood (2014, p.3), there is evidence that student social workers have, for some time, considered the possibility that technology could be helpful in rural and remote locations to support communication in social work practice. The significance of this should not be underestimated – students are the social workers of the future and this is perhaps an indication of how those who have experienced all their life surrounded by technology see its benefits and potential. This chapter aims to critically explore how digital technology could enhance and contribute to communication in social work practice positively, whilst attending to the associated challenges and problems that an over reliance on digital technology could create for ethical and effective practice. It concludes with a plea for careful consideration if claiming that technology can solve some of the challenges of work in a rural setting. This chapter will encourage a forward thinking lens to consider what the legacy of the pandemic in terms of professional practice could be, whilst also recognizing that the influence of technology in professional settings was being felt well before the pandemic (Susskind and Susskind, 2015).

Access and connectivity

The most fundamental issue to address when considering the use of digital technology to support or even replace in-person social work communication is whether people who rely on services have access to suitable technology. This includes a fast and reliable internet connection. There is clear evidence that this cannot be presumed to be the case, especially in rural areas (Glass et al., 2021). Even when internet infrastructure does exist, its capacity must be sufficient to be able to support all online activities including video-calling for people to have confidence in their connectivity (Ashmore et al., 2015) and therefore believe it could have a role in supporting communication. Added to general concerns about access to suitable internet connections in rural areas, we cannot assume that people have access to appropriate devices to connect to the internet. Older people, who are in the majority in rural areas, are less likely to own a smartphone. Maguire et al., (2021) draw on interesting data from Ofcom (2019) which indicates high rates of ownership of smartphones but significantly, this reduces with age to rates of ownership being around 50% for people aged 55 and older. People with lower incomes, even if they have devices to enable digital communication, may be limited by the tariffs they can afford to pay (Honeyman et al., 2020, p.1) and there is evidence that young people in particular feel stigmatised by this (Black et al., 2019). The disadvantages created by the so called 'digital divide' affect people with reduced means and older people (Clair et al., 2021) who are often those who are most in need of services. The term 'digital natives' has been used to describe people who are comfortable and familiar with digital technology being an embedded aspect of life and 'digital immigrants' to describe those that are not. These rather crass terms capture a very important distinction between those of us who did not grow up in a world that was surrounded by (or dominated by) digital technology and instead have had to learn to use it in ways that work for our personal circumstances. The differences in responses to digital technology across generations is enormously significant for social work practice in rural areas given that many rural and remote areas have a higher proportion of older residents or 'digital immigrants'. The concern is that by adapting to digitally dominated ways of practice, social workers could disadvantage and exclude people in ways that in-person practice would not. It is imperative that services and organisations keep a close eye on digital and technological infrastructure across communities so that opportunities are not lost for developing ways of working when the infrastructure is in place, but that urban centric organisations recognize that many rural places will not be as digitally connected as urban centres. It has been suggested that we are entering a new age in relation to the use of digital connectivity but much of this thinking is urban led and without action, rural areas risk being left behind again in the continued revolution that digital technologies are thought to provoke. Cowie et al. (2020) make the case for rural places being the starting point for thinking about the future of digital technology. As social workers, we need to position ourselves to contribute meaningfully to these debates.

The question of access to online methods of communication is not solely focused on people using services in rural areas, but also how much practitioners and organisations are willing to increase their availability to others through digital technology in rural practice. Services are generally designed around organizational needs and requirements rather than how someone who uses services might prefer a service to operate. The traditional model of practitioners being based in an office, doing home visits and/or meeting service users in other mutually convenient or appropriate settings has already begun to change with increased agile working in social work. However, agility in working arrangements seems to have developed around the needs of organisations rather than people who use services. The increased use of digital technology could further transform services to include greater array of

opportunities for connection and communication utilizing online methods. These could be enormously significant for people who want or need to access services and are comfortable with the online world but have difficulties with in-person communication. For example, disabled people or people experiencing anxiety could find it helpful to have alternative ways of contact available in rural settings which would otherwise involve significant travel which can be both difficult and expensive. Denying people who use services these sorts of options because social workers are not yet comfortable or competent in using technology to communicate does not align with the value base of the social work profession (Reamer, 2013). There is some evidence that young people from both rural and urban areas find online methods to seek help positive which perhaps hints further at a generational difference to which social workers need to be alert (Best et al., 2016; Davis and Marsh, 2021.). Given the relative physical isolation that young people may experience in rural and remote places, practitioners must be willing to facilitate interactions in ways that work for young people, and this seems likely to include the use of online or digital methods. This also requires social workers to have access to the technology that enables digital communication (Ferguson et al., 2022).

Mobility and technology

The lack of public transport infrastructure in rural settings has been highlighted by social workers (Pye et al., 2020). Whilst public transport infrastructure remains poor, the car will remain essential for communities and practitioners alike when it comes to facilitating physical contact (Miller, 2020). Remaining mobile by having access to appropriate methods for travel and transportation has been an essential element of wellbeing for individuals and communities (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2020). Social workers serving remote and rural communities have always been expected to travel to those communities in order to carry out social work. It is some time ago now that Ferguson (2006) argued for social work to be considered from a *mobilities* perspective, that is to surface the subtle ways in which social work practice has come to rely on or be about movement across both time and space. The reality of working as a social worker in the UK means the car is a central feature of practice (Ferguson, 2006). Indeed, a small-scale study of rural social workers' experiences in one English county indicated that travel by car was the most prevalent practical feature of their day to day work (Pye et al., 2020). This study indicates that the car serves as a site of social work practice both in terms of direct work with people and as a site of administration and containment for social workers (Ferguson, 2009a). Whilst the required level of travel was felt to be stressful because of the demands on time and some of the practical challenges about driving in rural places, time in the car was also seen as a positive and an opportunity for reflection and appreciation of the place. Rural social workers also felt that being able to travel to see people was an essential part of their role despite some of the challenges it creates. The car is therefore an important place of practice and lack of access to this space will potentially impact negatively on practice (Ferguson, 2009b, 2010). In social work and other helping professions, the car is and should be seen as central to the success of the role (Ferguson, 2016) as a place for practice and a place of safety and containment (Smith, 2003). In this sense, the car has become much more than simply a vehicle for enabling movement from one place to another in social work practice; it is an important characteristic of working rurally albeit an often unacknowledged one. However, the increasing demands on social workers time means that the time taken up by travelling by car has been seen as an inefficient burden and social workers are increasingly under pressure to remain at their desks focused on administrative and bureaucratic tasks (Disney et al., 2019). It is not difficult to see how a solution to this pressure is to consider how the use of technology could be used to mitigate travel challenges by using technology to 'visit' people in need of services. This appears to

conflict with social workers' desire to carry out social work in communities and remain as travelling professionals because their physical presence in communities and travel by car is an important feature with wellbeing benefits attached. There is some evidence that social workers value the flexibility technology gives when it comes to record keeping and report writing (Jeyasingham, 2019). Opportunities to engage in more agile ways of working when completing such administration tasks can unshackle social workers from central offices. However, there is also evidence to indicate that so called 'hot desking' is not popular with social workers (McGregor, 2012) because of the feelings of isolation the disconnection from a team can create (Pye et al., 2020). There appears then to be mixed views about the potential use of technology to support a more agile completion of administration tasks but there is evidence to indicate that social workers are reluctant to replace face to face interactions with people using services with communication via electronic devices (Jeyasingham, 2019).

Technologically facilitated communication

There have been concerns raised in the past about how interactions mediated through technology risk losing the essential relational aspects of effective and ethical social work practice (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014). Traditionally, social work has valued the physical proximity of people so that the social worker can be fully present with the person who is using the service as this has been seen as essential element of relational practice. However, the global pandemic resulted in communication through the use of a screen becoming common place creating "*a sense of connection and disconnection simultaneously*" (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017, p.177). The relevance of physical proximity is worthy of further exploration here as there have been suggestions that when the communication is not taking place in the same location, empathy, a key aspect of relational practice, could be reduced (Dolby, 2014). Broadhurst and Mason (2014) write powerfully about the importance of 'corporeal copresence' in social work. In this paper, they recognize that the use of technology can and is used to communicate and that there could be efficiency gains as a result. Applying this view to social work in rural and remote settings where social workers are undertaking significant amounts of travel, it is not difficult to imagine the rationale for holding a 30-minute conversation via technology which avoids a car journey of at least that time at either end of the contact or visit. However, whilst these workload and associated time pressures should not be ignored, as Broadhurst and Mason (2014) articulate so clearly, social work as a profession would be well advised to draw back from a workload management approach to practice which prioritises surface level efficiency. The potential for positive working relationships to be built when people are together is powerful. The opportunity for more than just our verbal communication skills to be used is clear. Social workers can *sense* the atmosphere in the home, can *feel* the living conditions and can *perceive* emotional responses when in person in ways that are either impossible or extremely difficult when communicating via technology. This allows a far more holistic understanding of someone's circumstances and whilst the initial visit and time taken is likely to be seen increasingly as a luxury, in a pragmatic response to time management, it is an investment in time that is more than worth it. In a time when social work as a profession appears to find it hard to retain social workers (Grant and Kinman, 2012) it is essential that it does not further distance those who were drawn to the profession because of its commitment to relationships with people and communities using services. Social workers working in rural settings are often drawn to these settings because of the opportunities they give for working in a community orientated way (Turbett, 2018). To reduce the opportunity for community-based practice as a result in a shift towards digital connections rather than in person connections is likely to alienate large proportions of rural social workers. It is

hard to see how this would not be a disaster for rural and remote places which rely on the skills, knowledge and expertise of social workers who are committed to practising with the nuances and subtleties that rural practice requires. It is significant that recent work has revealed that social workers are keen to explore the possibilities of digital technologies as a way of enhancing and contributing to relationship-based practice, not as a replacement for spending time with people who use services (SCIE and BASW, 2019).

Despite the concerns about the use of technology replacing in person contact in social work, the global pandemic resulted in social workers having to adapt their practice and use technology in new ways. There is evidence that despite the worries about how this would be, social workers did find ways to adapt their practice to continue relationships and remain 'close' to families through hybrid ways of working (Ferguson et al., 2021). It is important to note here that the success in the use of digital technology does appear to have been premised on relationships already existing in the 'real' world. This indicates that a digital only method of practice could be at best ineffective and at worst disastrous. As stated above, there is evidence to suggest that social workers are interested more generally in how technology could be used to enhance and add to relational ways of working (SCIE and BASW, 2019). Writing in the context of children's social work, Pink et al (2021) make a compelling case for considering the benefits of the use of digital technology to support social work practice. One of the striking aspects of this study includes the voices of people using services who share that in some situations, the use of digital technology enables a willingness to engage with services and attend meetings that would be difficult to do in the physical world. However, this research is clear in its conclusion that the use of digital technology should be part of a hybrid approach to practice, that it has its own distinct value but does not replace in person contact with the uniqueness that brings. Establishing our presence with others involves thinking about the use of digital technologies and how we blend these with more traditional ways of being 'with' people who use services (LaMendola, 2010).

Research demonstrates that adults who use services do not feel that communication can be effective without a relationship being in place (Simpson, 2017) confirming the value of developing relationships whether that be in person or via technology. This research also indicated how essential people who use social work services felt that options to communicate in a variety of ways are and that social workers being unable to offer more than the standard telephone was considered poor. Interestingly, from this study, it seems that a motivation for people using services wanting a variety of communication options to be available was so they could avoid having to contact social workers through a bureaucratic switchboard. This is an important example demonstrating how some of the traditional ways that social work has sought to be efficiently available are experienced as barriers and create a sense of inaccessibility. The strength of voice about the centrality of relationships in practice from the perspective of people who use services is, in many ways, reassuring for social work practitioners who were drawn to social work for this very reason. However, social workers must be able to widen the scope of available communication methods to include technology to enable working relationships with service users and this may, at times, mean lobbying their employing organization to enable this. This would permit a greater sense of presence and connection with people using services and communication *on their terms*. There is developing evidence to indicate that for some people who use services, digital technology enables engagement in services by, for example, reducing the sense of intrusion that regular home visits create, or the cost and stress associated with having to attend in person planning meetings. Care must be taken in social work that we do not fail to appreciate

the potential benefits of using digital technology through fear of it and a risk adverse attitude (Best et al., 2016). However, social workers must also be alert to the fact that some people may locate themselves in rural areas as a perceived way of avoiding a digital online world (Cowie et al., 2020) so no assumptions about how service users feel about using technology should ever be made.

Technological potential

There are different ways that digital technology can be harnessed to support people (Reamer, 2013) and many of these ways are relevant for both urban and rural areas. There are practical advantages of social workers having laptops and tablets which enable them to work responsively and efficiently by, for example, recording information within meetings and visits and to access information immediately. However, social workers typing directly into a laptop whilst in a meeting or visit with a service users can be perceived as a barrier to relationships and communication (Jeyasingham, 2020) so care must be taken to balance the need for efficiency with the requirement for practice to be relational. The use of devices such as smartphones to enable a more flexible approach to communication via text messaging in its various forms and video calls means that people can communicate on the move and flexibly. However, there are disadvantages to agile working as mentioned above and in rural and remote areas, use of laptops and smartphones to access information, record notes and aid communication usually rely on internet access. It is absolutely not the case that all areas that social workers work in will be reliably connected to the internet. This is a significant point which must continue to be highlighted to those who may see digital technology as a method of mitigating the challenges of working rurally.

Digital technology includes the use of web-based information sources such as websites set up to engage people and provide information. This is an important development as there is evidence to indicate that children and young people in some situations value such non-face-to-face support methods for reasons such as flexibility and being able to seek help on their own terms (Davis and Marsh, 2021). An aspect of this type of support is the potential for anonymity. Chat functions that can be embedded in such sites could provide an attractive option for people who are facing challenges but do not feel they want to reveal these in person (Best et al., 2016). The opportunity for anonymity could make services feel more accessible to people who want to seek support but are anxious about the stigma associated with being 'in need'. Whilst anonymous help giving and support is well developed in some well-known services, this has not been a model traditionally used or even tried in statutory services. The high threshold for statutory services may mean that ways of making these services more accessible is not an avenue that statutory services want to promote at the current time. But, regardless, the principle of social services being as accessible as possible to all aligns with the professional value base of social work meaning that ideas and ways to improve the relevance of services to those who could benefit from them should never be discounted.

The urban-centric nature of the UK means that the voices of people living in rural and remote settings are often unheard and assumed to be homogenous. Connection and collaboration through the use of digital technology could mitigate some of this discrimination. The dominant model of social work in the UK is individualist casework and whilst the potential for supportive and positive relationships to be formed between people using services and social workers should not be undermined, this model does not appreciate the potential for communities to be self-actualizing, self-organizing and agentic. A critical perspective of the current dominant model of social work practice in the UK might conclude

that the casework model exists by design to help prevent poverty stricken and forgotten communities from being able to establish practices of solidarity to challenge policies and practices which continue to admonish their needs and rights (Bailey and Brake, 1980). This applies to both physically related communities which are located some distance from urban centres but also to people who experience oppression and discrimination because of who they are and their personal characteristics. Any social worker who is committed to radical and critical practices can now, more than ever before, harness technology to support connection and collaboration amongst groups of people who have been isolated, ignored discriminated and oppressed. There is some evidence to indicate that social media can be a 'portal' into participation in community action and lobbying work (Sitter and Curnew, 2016). Social workers working in a true community-based way will also recognize the possibilities for self-advocacy from within communities. The use of social media is not without a need for ethical and practical considerations in community work, but communities of people can be connected without the constraints of geography. As the profession begins to engage critically with the possibilities that digital technology brings, there are a number of issues to consider including the potential of technology but also the risks associated with it and the need for social workers to be skilled in using the technology, especially in relation to confidentiality, consent, boundaries and dual relationships (Reamer, 2013).

Risks

The use of digital technology within practice can create opportunities for everyone working and living in rural and remote settings as long as people have access to the technology, internet connections and have the skills to use these. One aspect of the growth of opportunity for connection is the use of social media as a way of communicating and connecting. The nature of social media invites users to share information about themselves and whilst this can be carefully managed by those who know how to limit what they share, the potential for individual social workers to find themselves connecting online with people that they work with is not hard to imagine. It is therefore essential that social workers consider what the ramifications might be of sharing lots of personal information online (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017, p.179). BASW (2018) state that social workers should avoid formal connections with people that they are working with in the online world, presumably to avoid the issues surrounding dual relationships discussed elsewhere in this collection. Whilst this most certainly gives a clear instruction which serves to avoid any difficult ethical dilemmas about online connections (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017), this does not go far enough in setting out how as a profession social work manages online encounters – social workers may still come across material relating to people they are working with without having them as 'friends' or 'followers'. Similarly, there are well known risks for service users in using digital technology, especially social media. The potential for exploitation through the use of social media has been well reported. An issue of note is that does not appear so well considered is how the promotion of social media and other digital technology for help seeking could mean that people in search of information may stay away from statutory or government websites and instead be drawn towards sites that might not be as regulated (Best et al., 2016). So, whilst promoting the option of the use of digital technology as a way of engaging people who want to be communicate in this way, awareness must remain about how this could increase vulnerability if it results in people accessing inaccurate information.

Skills and education

This chapter has so far focused on technology as a potential response to the specific challenge of distance faced by social workers, people using social work services and communities in remote and rural locations. Whilst this chapter urges a cautionary approach to wholeheartedly adopting a digital based approach to mitigate challenge of distance, it also recognizes that we cannot deny that the use of technology is becoming more and more embedded in our lives and communities. As explored above, there could be potential benefits to the use of technology in practice if, for example, there was fair and equitable access to broadband, hardware and skills needed to use technology which as we have seen is often seriously lacking in rural and remote areas. It is wise for us to then consider how social work practitioners (and others) should be appropriately ready and skilled to harness the benefits of digital technology in practice given the pressure that is likely to be on rural practitioners to use technology. In an extremely thought provoking article, Taylor (2017) captures the picture in relation to social work education and digital skills highlighting how social work education in the UK has in no way adequately supported students to be ready for the use of digital technology in practice. In a point made in the introduction to this edited collection, the role of social work education in preparing social work students for practice is clearly extremely important. BASWs (2018) social media policy, whilst helpful in many respects, has a tone of caution and appears to reflect a profession not being fully committed and aware of the potential of social media in practice. Having said this, it does urge social workers to develop their own skills in using social media to support practice.

The relevance of digital technology for social work educators is two-fold. Firstly, digital technology can provide important learning experiences for students especially in relation to simulated practice opportunities (Neden et al., 2021) and using social media to support effective pedagogical practices (Mugisha, 2018). It is essential that social work educators consider how to harness technology in their teaching and assessment practices to create rich and diverse learning opportunities for social work students. Secondly, social workers of the future must be given the chance to critically consider the use of digital technology in their future practice, especially students wishing to work in rural areas where there is likely to be a growing influence of technology for the reasons described above. Modules and courses that focus on communication and interpersonal skills are already in a strong position to explore and introduce how digital technology can enhance communication (Blakemore and Agllias, 2020) whilst remaining aware of the need for a critical application and consideration of them. The move to include digital communication methods needs to include an appreciation of the ethics of doing so and these should be at the forefront of both research and in teaching of these skills (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017). Social work students should also have the opportunity to critically consider how technology enables connection with colleagues and with knowledge and information to support and help their practice whilst being mobile (Turner et al., 2020) whilst again adhering to ethical practice principles especially in relation to confidentiality and boundaries. Practice placements provide an ideal place for students to put into practice the learning, guidance and policies around, for example, social media (Voshel and Wesala, 2015) and this also requires that those with responsibility for supervising student placements to be able and willing to support this area of practice development. One of the challenges that all of those involved with the education of social workers face is that many of the technological advances that surround us may be new to experienced educators so appropriate support for social workers at all stages of experience must be available (SCIE and BASW, 2019). Given that more and more of us are engaged in online lives via social media, it is imperative that social work educators include critical consideration of the implications of social media presence for individual social workers, particularly as many of those now entering the profession will never have known a

time without social media. Educators could consider how to model the use of social media with students as part of an awareness raising and educational experience around what the challenges of the blurring of the personal and private space can mean by, for example, explaining they will not accept 'friend' or 'follower' requests and why (Duncan-Daston et al., 2013). It would appear that the inappropriate use of social media, whether that is due to unawareness or purposeful use, could increasingly be a reason for referral to social work regulatory bodies.

Future

As society moves towards more use and reliance on digital technologies, it is hard to see how rural social work can avoid the ever-increasing influence. Shifting to use technology effectively and ethically is complex and needs time and the will of those involved (Maguire et al., 2021). The connections between a growing use of technology and the issues of privacy and inappropriate use of data should not be ignored (Eubanks, 2018). The potential for personal information being harvested via technology exists (Shaw et al., 2022) with organisations turning data into valuable material about people and their habits (Sadowski, 2020). Companies and organisations leading the way in the use of digital technologies have benefited enormously from the shift to use such technologies because of the pandemic. We should remember that technology is not neutral, it is part of a neoliberal world which promotes profit and marketisation rather than equality of access and social justice. The push to close the 'digital divide' to recruit more and more citizens to be active users of technology will mean more personal data will be available to those who use this to exploit others and create discriminatory algorithmic responses in automated online systems (Clair, et al, 2021) and potentially be subject to surveillance by technology giants (Garrett, 2022). Social work in the UK has already enabled the use of such algorithms in direct practice decision making in some areas (Ducasse, 2021). Hodgson et al. (2022) urge for serious and critical consideration to be given to the role that artificial intelligence may play in social work in the very near future, including in the education of student social workers.

The reliance on digital technology as a method to reduce physical travel in its extreme could lead to individual 'movements' being monitored in ways that will be an impingement on civil liberties (Urry, 2008). It is also a grave mistake to offer the use of technology as a non-environmental impactful alternative to travel by car. The use of technology is not entirely 'green' – it has an impact (Lucivero, 2020) and the more we use technologies, the greater this impact will be both in terms of the production of hardware to enable technology but also in the storage and use of data. There can be no doubt that social work must engage with these global challenges faced by society to be ready to continue to operate in the twenty-first century (Yadav, 2021).

Conclusion

No one can deny the transformative impact that the development of digital technology and the online world has had on our societies and communities. However, it is important to recognise that despite its impact, digital technology is relatively new and many people, including social workers, are likely to identify with the idea of being a 'digital immigrant'. Many people do not feel equipped with the skills and knowledge to use digital technology safely and competently. In this chapter, the possibilities of digital technology to enhance rural social work practice have been considered along with a reminder of the need to contemplate any move to digital ways of working critically and with a clear understanding of how this will impact on the person or people using the services. It is completely unethical to assume that a digital response to working with people in rural and remote settings is the

answer to the challenges caused by distance and travel. Social workers must be alert to the fact that the more we promote digital technology in practice, the more likely people are to inadvertently share their personal data with sophisticated technological organisations. Having said this, social work also must remain open to the fact that some people may find communicating via digital means preferable to in person contact. However, the reality is that until we can be confident that all remote and rural areas can access appropriate broadband internet connections, wireless technology and afford the actual devices required for online communication whether than be simple video calling or the use of social media, social work practice cannot rely on digital technology as a core tool to support practice. It is likely that progress towards a digitally well-connected world will continue, thus opening more opportunities for social work and technologically enhanced communication and contact. As this progress continues, as social workers we need to think about the ways that we can contribute to the debates about virtual and digital practice to ensure we position ourselves to tackle some of the ethical questions that the increasing use of digital technology provokes. As Rodriguez et al (2021, p.199) articulate so perfectly

“The social work profession is at a critical crossroads where we can take a proactive role in influencing the ethical use of digital technologies to benefit social work and advance social change, rather than be reactive to the whims of technology companies and developers that thus far, have dictated the rules of digital engagement and participation.”

This is one of the most significant challenges for the social work profession in current times.

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