### Using Social Media: practical and ethical guidance

 *(*Adapted from BMA guidance for doctors and medical students)

**Introduction**

The popularity of social media has grown rapidly in recent years. There is widespread use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter amongst trainee educational psychologists and there are a growing number of well-established blogs and internet forums that are aimed specifically at professional psychologists, such as EPNET. Educational Psychologists also increasingly make use of internet based professional networking media such as LinkedIn.

While many educational psychologists use social media without encountering any difficulties, there is the possibility that individuals may unknowingly expose themselves to risk in the way they are using these ‘web 2.0’ applications and uploading personal material onto the internet.

Although professional psychologists should be free to take advantage of the many personal and professional benefits that social media can offer, it is important that they are aware of the potential risks involved. This guidance provides practical and ethical advice on the different issues that educational psychologists may encounter when using social media.

**Key Points:**

* *Social Media can blur the boundary between an individual’s public and professional lives.*
* *All professionals should consider adopting conservative privacy settings where these are available but be aware that not all information can be protected on the web.*
* *The ethical and legal duty to protect client confidentiality applies equally on the internet as to other media.*
* *It would be inappropriate to post informal, personal or derogatory comments about clients[[1]](#footnote-1) or colleagues on public internet forums.*
* *Educational psychologists should not accept Facebook (or other social media) friend requests from current or former clients.*
* *Defamation law can apply to any comments posted on the web made in either a personal or professional capacity.*
* *All professionals should be conscious of their online image and how it may impact on their professional standing.*

**Ethical responsibilities and social media**

***Confidentiality***

Social media, through blogs and web forums, can provide professionals with a space in which they can discuss their experiences within a clinical practice. As material published on the internet often exists in the public domain however, it is important that professionals exercise caution when discussing any details relating to specific cases. Professional psychologists have a legal and ethical duty to protect client confidentiality. Disclosing identifiable information about children and young people without consent on blogs, professional forums or social networking sites would constitute a breach of BPS and HCPC ethical standards and could give rise to legal complaints. Improper disclosures may be unintentional, however, professionals should not share identifiable information about clients’ institutions or services that they work in, where it may be overheard, including internet forums. Although individual pieces of information may not breach client confidentiality, the sum of published information could be sufficient to identify a client, their families or schools.

**Maintaining boundaries**

***Privacy and personal information***

As the example below illustrates, social media can blur the boundary between an individual’s private and professional lives. People are often unaware that the personal material they intend to share with friends could be accessible to a much wider audience and that once uploaded onto the web, it may not be possible to delete material or control how widely it is shared.

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| ***Public or Private?****In 2010, a civil servant complained to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) that two newspapers had breached her privacy by publishing updates that she had posted on Twitter in a personal capacity. In the posts, the civil servant revealed that she was ‘struggling with a wine-induced hangover’ at work and posted a number of tweets that were political in nature. Although initially only intended to be shared with her 700 followers on Twitter, publication in the national press ensured that millions read her tweets. One of the newspapers also published a picture of the civil servant that she had posted on her Flickr page to accompany the article. The newspapers in question argued that the articles were justified given civil service guidelines on impartiality, and they had not invaded her privacy because access to the Twitter account had not been limited to those officially “following” her. In 2011, the PCC found in favour of the newspapers. It stated that the publicly accessible nature of the information was a key consideration in deciding whether it was private and noted that the material published on the site related directly to the civil servant’s professional life.*  |

Although educational psychologists may divulge personal information about themselves during face to face consultations, they are able to control the extent and type of this self- disclosure. The accessibility of content on social media however raises the possibility that clients or their parents may have unrestricted access to a professional’s personal information, and this can cause problems with the professional – client relationships.

Some social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, have privacy settings that allow users to control and put restrictions on who has access to their personal information. The default settings for both sites however permit various types of content to be shared beyond an individual’s network of friends. On Twitter for example, the default setting for accounts is “public”, allowing anyone to search for and access a user’s profile page, while the recommended settings on Facebook allow “everyone” to access status updates, photos and posts. Users therefore actively need to change privacy controls to ensure their content is protected to the extent they would like.

All educational psychologists should adopt conservative privacy settings where available, but they should also be aware that not all content on the web can be protected in this way. Professionals may need to be conscious at all times of who has access to their personal material online and how widely this content may be shared.

**Facebook Friend Requests**

Because of the power imbalance that can exist in any professional-client relationship, it is important that boundaries exist to maintain trust and protect clients from the possibility of exploitation. Given the greater accessibility of personal information, entering into informal relationships with clients on sites like Facebook can increase the likelihood of inappropriate boundary transgressions, particularly where previously there existed only a professional relationship between psychologist and client. Difficult ethical issues can arise if, for example, psychologists become party to information about their clients that is not disclosed as part of a consultation. We recommend that psychologists who receive friend requests from current or former clients should politely refuse and explain the reasons why it would be inappropriate for them to accept the request.

**Social networking media aimed at professionals**

A range of professional social networks exist with the aim of keeping businesses in touch with partners and customers as well allowing professionals to liaise with each other and keep in touch. Such media can help maintain a boundary between a psychologist’s personal life and professional life. They can provide the benefits of social networking at a professional level while also allowing the individual to control what personal information is shared with people they are connected to. Despite the advantages of such media all ethical considerations still apply. For example, confidential information should not be treated any differently simply because the communication takes place in a professional forum.

**Professional training and employment**

The erosion of the private-professional boundary can have a negative impact on the relationship between an individual and their employer. Organisations may have access to publicly available personal content uploaded by psychologists on social media and any material judged to be inappropriate could have a detrimental impact on their professional standing.

There have been anecdotal reports that organisations are using the web to screen applicants as part of the recruitment process. Any material on social media that shows candidates in a bad light could potentially jeopardise job applications and damage career prospects. Professional psychologists should consider reviewing their content on a regular basis and remove any material they are not comfortable with displaying online.

**Defamation**

It is important that professionals are able to engage fully in debates about issues that affect their professional lives and increasingly the internet is the forum in which this discourse takes place. The freedom that individuals have to voice their opinions on forums and blogs however is not absolute and can be restricted by the need to prevent harm to the rights and reputations of others.

Defamation law can apply to any comments posted on the web, irrespective of whether they are made in a personal or professional capacity. Defamation is the act of making an unjustified statement about a person or organisation that is considered to harm their reputation. If an individual makes a statement that is alleged to be defamatory, it could result in legal action against the individual and the organisation they are representing.

People can often feel less inhibited when posting comments online and as a result may say things they would not express in other circumstances. Posting comments under a username does not guarantee anonymity as any comments made online can be traced back to the original author. Professional psychologists need to exercise sound judgement when posting online and avoid making gratuitous, unsubstantiated or unsustainable negative comments about individuals or organisations.

**Professionalism and social media**

Binding professional duties that professional psychologists have to their clients are set out in BPS & HCPC guidance; breaches of these standards while using social media, such as improper disclosures of client information, represent clear cases of professional misconduct that can call into question fitness to practise. Other more general standards have evolved with practice over time and, while not legally binding, they represent expectations of professionals by their peers and society. Although the way professionals use social media in their private lives is a matter of their own personal judgement, individuals should consider whether the content they upload onto the internet could compromise public confidence in professional psychology.

These guidelines are not exhaustive and individuals should also use their professional judgment to guide action in a given situation and seek supervision if appropriate. EPs should discuss with their line manager in their placement LA any use of social media that might be perceived as professional advice or service provision, e.g. through a blog or Twitter profile and use disclaimers to disassociate personal views from professional, service or LA views.

**Reference:**

BPS Ethics Committee (August 2012). [Supplementary guidance on the use of social media](https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Suplementary%20Guidance%20on%20the%20Use%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf). *The Psychologist*, *25*(8), 615.

1. The term ‘clients’ is used to refer to any person to whom professional services are rendered e.g. young people, their parents or teachers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)