Chapter 7
Digitisation of Youth Work and an Evaluation of Social Media as a Tool in Meeting the Profession’s Core Principles in a UK Context

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ABSTRACT

While some commentators have rightly questioned characterisations of the 20th century as the ‘Century of the child,’ sociologists have gone as far as claim a more accurate title would be that of the ‘Century of child neglect.’ In this respect, numerous provisions from the late Victorian period onward, many enacted through legislation, within the fields of social care, youth justice, education, and welfare all help to characterise the immense strides made in drawing the care and interests of children and young people more centrally into the focus and attention of policymakers and society more widely. These developments build on positivistic ideas of societal causation: that the structure of society, and in particular inequality, neglect and oppression, were contributory factors in the behaviours and vulnerabilities that people express and experience, and social welfare responses needed to aim to ameliorate such structural impositions. This chapter considers how digital technologies, specifically within the form of social media, figures as a form of youth engagement and outreach.

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INTRODUCTION

While some commentators have rightly questioned characterisations of the 20th century as the Century of the child (Cunningham, 2014, pp. 171–200), sociologist Halsey has gone as far as to claim a more accurate title would be that of the ‘Century of child neglect’ (Sacks, 1997). In this respect, numerous provisions from the late Victorian period onward, many enacted through legislation, within the fields of social care, youth justice, education and welfare all help to characterise the immense strides made in drawing the care and interests of children and young people more centrally into the focus and attention of policymakers and society more widely.

These developments built on positivistic ideas of societal causation: that the structure of society, and in particular inequality, neglect and oppression, were contributory factors in the behaviours and vulnerabilities that people express and experience, and social welfare responses needed to aim to ameliorate such structural impositions (Bourdieu, 1998). However, as we approach the third decade of the 21st century, and the consequences of neoliberalism appear clear to see, there is ample evidence that the intentions for progressing the welfare of young people are stalling if not failing altogether. Families feel less secure, education provisions are more divided and elitist, while concerns increase as to youth involvement in crime and their overall mental and physical well-being (The Prince’s Trust, 2019). At the same time with the seeming ubiquity of digital media in young people’s lives and how the Internet increasingly mediates how they communicate, learn, play and socialise, it is timely to consider what exploitation of these technologies means within youth work provisions. This chapter considers how digital technologies, specifically within the form of social media, figures as a form of youth engagement and outreach. We question whether many of the underlying issues that have affected the profession since its inception, especially in this current ‘market’-driven climate, are likely to be tackled by a stronger engagement with digital communication tools and platforms. Adopting a digital-youth and youth work practice-based perspective, but in contrast to the techno-optimist positions which focus upon the ‘opportunities,’ some have suggested can be gained from the use of social networking sites (SNS) within the sector (Davies & Cranston, 2008), we instead provide a riposte to these positions. We focus on those left-behind from a forward march of expanded digital participation, the increased exposure to ‘risk’ that comes with deeper engagement from digital engagement and how the implementation of social media within the sector is hindered by a number of structural problems including the lack of skills and motivation by practitioners against a climate of service-cuts and increasing managerialism. It is these more critical positions as to the value of digital technology, especially those encompassing the social conditions of young people and the institutional interests helping or hindering these practices, which we and others believe does not generate

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