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Abstract

Recently, professional associations have issued new guidelines that apprehensively embrace the use of social media encouraging their members to use the medium ‘appropriately’. In the academic literature, a discussion has been taking place around ‘online professionalism’ or ‘e-professionalism’ with some in professional education beginning to ponder about how to facilitate the development of this extended form of professionalism. Within both of these discourses, the trope of boundary blurring is often invoked as an indication of the challenging potentials of social media to the professions and professional education. However, little regard is given to what these boundaries actually are and how they have come to be. In this short paper reporting on research in progress, I seek not to blur the boundaries but to trouble them - to bring them more in focus and to treat them as an assemblage through an ANT analysis for the purpose of informing how we educate for professionalism.

Theoretical approach: Employing an Actor Network Theory sensibility, this research reconceptualises boundaries as networks – heterogeneous assemblage of bodies, devices, technologies, algorithms, standards, representations etc. Thus, materials move from factors in boundary practices to actors constructing the boundaries in a process of generative materiality. As they are networks, boundaries are being made and re-made as the relations are constantly being performed (Latour, 2005). Moreover, networks are not inherently consistent. Parts of the network may be in conflict creating fissures and tensions. Applying this to boundaries, therefore, would allow for an analysis that explores, as Law (1992) has put it, "the precarious mechanics of organisation" (p. 389). It will inquire about what is invited and what is excluded in the boundary practices of online professionalism as well as tracing specific ways things are enacted - what enables or constrains these enactments. It will also explore what effects these assemblages produce.

Methodology: The research will focus on two groups of pre-professional students in their final year of education, one from social work and the other from nursing. It will follow a three stage design. The initial stage is an individual interview where vignettes are employed to stimulate reflection on online professionalism and to draw out the boundaries of concern. The second stage is a group interview where participants discuss digital artefacts that may surprise or push boundaries. The last stage involves individual participants tracing their digital footprint with the research investigating the materialities that assemble into their notion of online professionalism.

Keywords

online professionalism, professional education, boundaries, boundary practices, actor network theory, assemblages

Research Context

Recently, the Scottish Government Chief Nursing Officer instigated a working group on professionalism which was prompted by two major societal shifts according to the report (2012). First, professionalism is being reshaped due to active participation by patients. Secondly, professionalism needs to respond to the “challenges of social media” (p. 7). The paper describes how social media will complexify the conditions within which nurses operate and its potential to conflate the personal with the professional. “It changes how people work and interact, how relationships are formed and how people complain, celebrate, discover and create. It does so on people’s own terms and, as such, cannot be controlled.” (p.7). Thus, social media in this report is presented as one of the biggest risks to professionalism; it will change not only the context of professional practice but also test the boundaries of professionalism.

The policy landscape is rife with discussions on the challenges that social media presents to professional boundaries. Examples include the Nursing and Midwifery council’s (NMC) guidance on social media, which the Nursing Times reported was “an acknowledgement” of social media’s boundary blurring potential (Carlowe,

2009) as well as the British Association of Social Work (BASW) directive that, "Social workers should ensure they maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries" (2012, p. 4). In a March 2015 audit of the social media policies of Scottish NHS regional boards, I found that of the 14 boards, nine had a social media policy easily accessible online. Within these, five mentioned social media as blurring the boundaries between personal and professional life and all but one (n=8) expected staff to engage in social media "appropriately" and/or avoid "inappropriate" behaviour online.

While the rhetoric on boundary blurring highlights the slipperiness of social media, discussions on what constitutes appropriate practice are vague within the policy discussions. Yet, transgressing this boundary of appropriateness can have serious ramifications, especially in the professions where fitness to practice is constantly under scrutiny. Moreover, as professional education begins to absorb these influences from the policy sphere to develop a curriculum on online professionalism, there is a possibility of doing so uncritically. As Fenwick (2014a) has illustrated, curriculum development of online professionalism has mostly fallen into two broad areas: e-skills and curriculum implementation of e-professionalism. E-skills promote the use of social media to enhance practice (e.g. Cooner, 2014; McKendrick, 2014; Agazio & Buckley, 2009; Green & Hope, 2010) but often leave issues related to professionalism or social media unproblematised in their enthusiastic embracing of the technology. E-professionalism, conversely, focuses on the hazards and risks of social media, with curriculum focused on the appropriate usage and consequences for inappropriate use (John, Cheema & Byrne, 2012; Lie et al., 2013). By focusing on risk avoidance and regulation, e-professionalism limits experimentation and instils a normative notion of professionalism by explicitly prescribing professional online behaviour (Fenwick 2014a).

Aims and Objectives

It is therefore the aim of this research to explore the dynamics of boundary work at play in students' negotiations of online professionalism. Moreover, this work will seek to open up the discussion that online professionalism is solely a challenge for professions without a clear understanding of how it changes the conditions of professional responsibility as well as altering professional work and presence. There is no denying that there is a tension between social media and professionalism where the logics of self-promotion and commerce of social media (van Dijck, 2013) conflict with those of altruism and the common good of professionalism (Freidson, 2001). However, the altruistic notion of professionalism is only one way to see professionalism. The departure point of this study, based on literature about pluralist professionalism (Fenwick 2014 a&b; Evetts, 2011; Martimianakis, Maniate, Hodges, 2009; Stronach et al., 2007; Hodgson, 2005) will position professionalism not as a singular, stable standard but as ecologically-situated and performed. Thus, when the practices of social media and the practices of professionalism collide in online professionalism, the already permeable boundaries of each are re-negotiated, enfolding practices and identities as well as bringing into presence the relationships that constitutes online professionalism. By studying this boundary work, this research looks to bring into relief these relationships and negotiations of online professionalism. It will do so within nursing and social work professional education, thereby facilitating a cross-professions exploration of the topic. Finally, the implications for professional education will form the last part of the research drawing from the empirical findings and will seek to provide a nuanced view that incorporates potentials as well as challenges.

Design

For this qualitative research, I will be using a strategy of individual and group interviewing comparing students from nursing and social work. An ANT inspired methodology will be employed which will trace the differences and similarities in the perceptions of boundaries in online professionalism as network effects by following the hybrid (Thompson, 2012; Michael, 2000). The use-value of comparative design within ANT allows the research to attend to the different trajectories of each network as well as attune to the similarities and peculiarities within the networks (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011).

Situating the study/ locating the field

While the topic of online professionalism is growing in the literature, few studies explore it outside of a specific profession (Fenwick, 2014b). This research seeks to work past the siloed approach to studying online professionalism by exploring it within two professions - nursing and social work. These professions were chosen after a scoping exercise was carried out through the literature. Both reflect strong debates about professionalism, yet present contrasting emphases for comparison: 'care' in nursing and 'social justice' in social work. Contextual factors were also taken into consideration. Both professions share similarities in their female

dominated workforce, and struggle with deprofessionalisation and accountability regimes. However, they differ in approaches to training and induction, codes of conduct and working conditions.

Another major decision in situating the research was in regards to social media forms and platforms. I have decided not to limit the research to any single platform for several reasons. First, the deployment of several platforms is currently being advocated in the literature as a strategy in online professionalism (Mostaghimi and Crotty, 2011) yet there is little in the way of empirical research that explores the strategic use of multiple platforms (Van Dijck, 2013). Secondly, the last part of the research involves participants considering their online traces which most likely will take in a range of social media forms and I would like the research to reflect current practice. Certain social media platforms have been noted to afford certain practices and personas (Vickers and Melakoski, 2014) but there is little empirical comparison examining why this may be the case. Van Dijck (2013) and Burgess (2015) have carried out comparative analysis of social media platforms' structures, theorising how they change participation and subjectification. Neither, though, explores how these change people's perceptions and practices in an empirical study.

Methods

Phase one

Given Latour's advice that, "Actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do but why and how they do it," (Latour, 1999), the first phase of the research will be an individual interview that will establish what the participants perceive are the boundaries in online professionalism. To examine this, a semi-structured interview of approximately 45min-1hour covering such topics as how they see themselves as a (future) professional, what they feel professionalism is, what does it mean to work online, what kind of social media practices do they engage in, what kind of materialities/spaces interplay in these practices as well as their initial thoughts on boundaries in online professionalism (e.g. what should/shouldn't professionals be doing online?) will be explored.

Phase two

The participants will come together to explore the boundaries and networks that are at work in social media postings. Focus group method was chosen for this stage as it allows the research to engage in dialogues that help to avoid closing down understandings and respects evidence's particularities and autonomies without assuming that it could speak for itself (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). Whatmore (2003) also draws attention to the space for frictions, discrepancies and silence that such collective encounters can create with this not being a disadvantage but a benefit in ANT research.

Phase three

The last phase of data collection will be an additional individual interview that is designed to have a dual purpose. First, it will give the participants a space to elaborate on or discuss issues of online professionalism and boundary marking that they didn't feel comfortable discussing in the group. In addition, the final stage will ask participants to talk the researcher through their digital footprint/online presence (see Ross, 2012; O'Hara, Tuffield & Shadbolt, 2009) and how they feel materialities (e.g. social media platform's structure and algorithms, social media policies) interact with it. Furthermore, the final interview will explore if their perception of the boundaries of online professionalism has changed since the first discussion.

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