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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trust and Power in the Space Between Visibility and Invisibility. Exploring Digital and Social Media Practices in Norwegian Child Welfare Services

Tillit og makt i rommet mellom synlighet og usynlighet. Utforskning av digitale og sosiale medier praksiser i norske barnevernstjenester

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore how caseworkers in the Norwegian Child Welfare Services and their clients use digital and social media in information sharing. By applying Foucault's description of Bentham's Panopticon as an analytical tool, we show how caseworkers' use of digital and social media without the client's knowledge, while making themselves invisible, contribute to increase the power asymmetry of a professional–client relationship. The clients, on the other hand, have less possibilities of making themselves invisible. If they discover that caseworkers have invaded their private information, this is experienced as a breach of trust. While some studies discuss the equalising potential of using digital and social media in welfare communication, this study reveals some of the pitfalls in using these medias for communication and information exchange. Regardless of the type of media in question, their use becomes vital for visibility, trust and power. Our findings underscore that it is not only the digital tools that needs regulation. Regulations should address the participation of clients in deciding on communication tools and the all-important openness and non-covert practices necessary to build and maintain trusting relationships between caseworkers and clients.

Sammendrag

I denne artikkelen utforsker vi hvordan ansatte og tjenestemottakere i det norske barnevernet bruker digitale og sosiale medier i informasjonsutveksling. Vi anvender Foucaults beskrivelse av Benthams Panoptikon som et analytisk verktøy for å vise til hvordan barnevernsansattes bruk av digitale og sosiale medier uten tjenestemottakeres samtykke øker maktasymmetrien i en profesjonell-klient relasjon. Vår studie viser hvordan barnevernsansatte gjør sin egen tilstedeværelse på digitale og sosiale medier usynlig, og hvordan slik praksis kan øke maktasymmetrien mellom profesjonelle og klienter ytterligere. Klienten derimot, har færre muligheter til å gjøre seg selv

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usynlig. Hvis klienten oppdager at den profesjonelle invaderer deres private informasjon, kan dette oppfattes som et tillitsbrudd. Mens noen studier viser til digitale og sosiale mediers potensiale for utjevning av makt i møte med det offentlige, viser vår studie noen av fallgruvene når slike medier anvendes til kommunikasjon og informasjonsutveksling. Våre funn understreker at det ikke er kun de digitale verktøyene i seg selv som trenger regulering. Reguleringer bør adressere viktigheten av åpenhet og klienters medvirkning i valg av digitale verktøy til kommunikasjon, for å tilrettelegge for etablering og opprettholdelse av tillit i klienters møte med det offentlige.

Introduction

Norway is considered one of the most digital countries in the world (OECD, 2021). Several documents demonstrate the Norwegian Government's emphasis and vast investment in digitalising public services (KMD, 2016, 2021; OECD, 2021). The Child Welfare Services (CWS) are no exception. A digitalisation project for the Norwegian CWS called DigiBarnevern (Digi Child welfare), promises better and more efficient services, increased availability and more user participation (Bufdir, 2021; KS, 2018). While DigiBarnevern was initiated in 2016, the planning and implementation period is ongoing, and only a few services are up and running p.t (2022).

However, the CWS professionals and clients are all part of the general developments in the society in which they live. Digital tools, such as smartphones, laptops, e-mail and SMS as well as social media platforms have been commonly used for communication and interaction between clients and professionals in social work for the past two decades (Cooner, Beddoe, Ferguson & Joy, 2020; Byrne, Kirwan & Mc Guckin, 2019; Breyette & Hill, 2015). Despite the increased use of ICT tools in professional practice, and several digitalisation reforms in recent years, there is still a lack of empirical understanding of how digital tools change the interaction between welfare caseworkers and their clients (Hansen et al., 2018; Pors & Schou, 2021).

In this article, we draw on a study on digitalisation of CWS in Norway. The empirical material for the analysis in this article consists of four group interviews with 26 child welfare caseworkers and individual interviews with five parents and four youth clients (18–23 years old). The interviews started in October 2019 and came to an unexpected halt in March 2020 due to the pandemic. In other words, the interviews were made before digital meetings were a necessity and something we all became 'experts of' overnight.

For this article we want to explore digital and social media practices and how these practices influence trust and power relations between caseworkers and clients in the space between visibility and invisibility. The communication between a caseworker and a client is asymmetrical, both in intention (goal), power and authority (Grimen, 2009). While caseworkers need information to form a full picture of the client's situation as a basis for decision making, the clients seek to be truly understood and included in decisions regarding their lives. How communication tools are used matters for how this power relation is played out and alters established forms of communication and relations between clients and caseworkers.

Reading through the interview transcripts, we coded on when digital tools were used in communication, how they were used, by whom and for which purpose. One interesting find was that caseworkers talked about either having two phones or switching the phone off after office hours. We first categorised this as making themselves unavailable. Bringing this code and category into the client's data, we discovered that the clients did not or could not use the same kind of tools to become unavailable or hide from sight. In addition, we discovered, again by reading the group discussions, that the clients were visible to the caseworkers in more ways than through direct meetings or reading case files. Upon the discovery of caseworkers gathering information about clients from social media accounts, the axis of visibility to invisibility became a tool for a new round of coding.

Our analysis has revealed that one of the more important changes in communication brought about by use of digital and social media tools, was the changes in visibility and invisibility between clients and caseworkers.

The finding that digital and social media change conditions for visibility and invisibility spurred an interest into if and how this has impacted issues of power and trust between caseworkers and clients. Michel Foucault and the image of Bentham's Panopticon, offers a frame to understand this connection, where power relations are intertwined with an asymmetric communicative relation, where one actor can see (be informed) and the other actor is seen, although with no control over how and when. Previous research also shows that this asymmetry can change as social media and digitalised communication is introduced (Byrne et al., 2019; Cooner et al., 2020).

As for a theoretical understanding of social media use, we apply a framework where the medias do not have any immanent agency, but only gets their effects or impact through its users and interpreters (Miller et al., 2016). Allowing media to be tools of communication, they become a part of the delicate balance of professionals endorsing what Mik-Meyer and Villadsen (2013), inspired by Foucault, call productive power. This refers to the power a child welfare worker must have over the means to actually help a client.

The analysis reveals that a power balance in a professional-client relationship has changed due to altered means of communication and information sharing., Basic trust between clients and professionals must be (re-) negotiated as communication and interaction is digitalized. Our study shows that even if professionals consider digital tools and social media contribute as tools to build a closer relationship with their clients, the same tools can create a distance and reinforce asymmetrical power relations when they are used without the client's knowledge.

Media use and Power in the Professional-Client Relationship

Previous studies show how digitalisation can contribute to a power shift in a professional–client relationship. Social and digital media may serve as platforms for increasing a client's influence on their own life, as in Aamodt and Mossige's study (2018) on how children in public care use social media to maintain contact with their parents. This makes it easier for children in care and their parents to control the frequency of their contact and communication, while challenging the CWS in regulating the same contact. Another study looked at how social media and participation in public debate create a space for CWS clients to exercise their citizenship and gain increased influence (Stang, 2016). Jennifer Simpson's (2017) study on clients' experience with digital and social media in social work in England reveals that both parents and youth ranked communication and relationship-based social work as very important areas of competence for social workers. The young participants expected social workers to be available via digital media such as SMS and e-mail, particularly emphasising an expectation of availability on social media platforms. This gives clients more control over which (digital) communication methods to use. Simpson (2017) uses LaMendola (2010) concept 'social presence' for this argument, stating that the use of communication and information technology allows social workers to be more socially present in a new arena, and that this can facilitate relationship-building. Simpson primarily sees the new ways of communication as a resource for clients and an opportunity for clients to gain more control in the relationship.

While the studies above are optimistic on behalf of the potential that digitalised media has in terms of levelling the field between clients and professionals, other studies are more concerned with the ethical pitfalls as well as a decreased agency for the client. Ethical challenges involve, in addition to potential breaches of privacy and confidentiality for the client, also grey zones between private and work life and a potential invasion of social workers' privacy (Mishna et al., 2012; Reamer, 2017). Mishna and colleagues describe how American social workers experienced digital media, such as SMS and e-mail, creeping into their everyday work, and that once such a method of communication was established with the client, it was difficult for the social worker to withdraw from such communication.

The present study has also showed how digital media use can contribute to change power relations, as the social workers can make themselves unavailable and refuse to give out their e-mail address and mobile phone number to clients (Kvakic, Fineide & Hansen, 2021). Studies show that clients also monitor social workers and that social workers feel the need to shield themselves from client contact on social media by making sure they have a private Facebook profile (Byrne et al., 2019; Cooner et al., 2020). Byrne et al. (2019) question if clients' surveillance of social workers may be an attempt to even out the power imbalance that a professional–client relationship is characterised by.

The practice of using social media becomes especially problematic in cases where it is done in secret as for example by using fictitious Facebook accounts (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Kvakic et al., 2021; Sage & Sage, 2016). Several studies show how child welfare workers search for clients on Facebook and other social media networking sites, to gain more information about them (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019; Cooner et al., 2020; Kvakic et al., 2021; Sage & Sage, 2016). These studies show that there is a lack of consensus among child welfare workers about whether social media should be used as an information channel. The studies point to ethical dilemmas where caseworkers on the one hand infringe on clients' right to privacy by using Facebook, while on the other hand, that information about clients obtained via social media can provide information about the child's care situation that they otherwise would not have access to. Unfortunately, authorities and regulators have not managed to review (ethical) guidelines at the same pace as new issues with digital communication emerge in social work practice (Byrne et al., 2019).

In order to obtain sufficient and good information, professionals depend on the clients trusting them, both as professionals and as individuals. In terms of what trust in practice means, Watson (2009) looks to Garfinkel's notion of trust as *constitutive expectancies in daily life.* According to this understanding, for trust to occur, it is essential that one has expectancies for rules to be followed (Watson, 2009, p. 483). In a child welfare context, a client must expect the professional to act according to rules and other (legal) regulations to be able to trust the professional. In addition, the client needs to trust the professional's judgement of their situation and circumstance.

According to Grimen (2009), trust and power relations have a similar interest-control structure, where one person's trust can become another person's power base. On the one hand, the asymmetrical power relationship between professional and client makes clients more vulnerable to the professional's power. Often, the client has no choice when dealing with the CWS, and with the lack of choice or *exit options* (Hirschman, 1970), the power gap between the child welfare worker and the client increases. Another way of escaping the power relation is a *voice option*, which is the opportunity to protest (Hirschman, 1970). On the other hand, trusting the professionals' knowledge and power needed to provide help and support, is necessary for the client to get the help they need (Grimen, 2009; Villadsen, 2003). Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2003) claim that one of the biggest paradoxes in social work is social workers' double role as both helpers and controllers. As power and control are inevitable for provision of services in a welfare state, separating these two notions is artificial. Villadsen (2003) explains this delicate balance, as a necessary exercise of power in order to empower the client. Mik-Meyer and Villadsen (2013) have later drawn on Foucault's notion of *productive power* to explore this balance.

While the studies of social media above discuss ethical concerns, we want to return to the questions of power and trust in client–caseworker relationships and communications, by turning our attention to how clients and caseworkers in our study use digital media. Here we rest on perspectives that Daniel Miller and his colleagues developed in their global study on social media use, that if a relationship is not established offline, online communication or being Facebook friends will not contribute significantly to the relationship (Miller et al., 2016). While in an already established friendship or relationship, online communication will further enhance a good relationship. Miller et al. (2016) claim that social media, or any other form of digitalised media, does not have an immanent effect on communication, but that this effect only comes to play in the way these medias are interpreted and used.

Methods

Interviews with caseworkers and clients[1]

The interviews included in our analysis are from the period of October 2019 to March 2020 in four of the largest municipalities in Norway. Four group interviews with 26 child welfare caseworkers are analyzed for this article, in addition to individual interviews with five parents and four youth clients (18–23 years old). Four of the five parents were active clients of the CWS at the time of the interviews. All four youth clients, and two of the parents, were experienced communicators. This means that they have an official role in providing feedback to the municipal CWS on how their services are experienced by clients.

In the individual interviews, the informants were asked about how they interact with caseworkers and clients, and what they thought about using different types of media for this communication. They were also asked to consider what media, such as mail, telephone, SMS, social media and face-to-face communication they found appropriate for different purposes. The clients reflected primarily on their own experience, yet at times also reflecting on other clients' experiences.

The caseworkers, who were interviewed in groups, compared, discussed and talked about their experiences with several types of media and different types of clients. The advantage of interviewing people in groups is that they rub their experiences up against each other and feel the need to clarify and discuss with each other in a session. These discussions do not only give access to different points of view, but also to an everyday reality where practices vary (Morgan, 1997).

Analysing visibility, power and trust in digital communication

Analysis is a process of reading, sorting and reading again, until patterns and categories appear. Initially, we started with the 'What' and 'How' of digital and social media use, as suggested by David Silverman (2005, pp. 105–106) when we aim to theorise about our data. This initial coding led us in two analytical directions; what are the preferred forms of communication between caseworkers and clients, and why? And what kind of relations do different media use practices cater to? Initial coding revealed many words and sentence constructions referring to what we later categorised as visibility and invisibility.

The next phase of our analysis investigated the 'Chronology' (processes) and 'Context' of how different medias were used within these dichotomies. Furthermore, and still inspired by Silverman (2005), we decided to 'follow the anomalies' that appeared in the material for this study, where we found that the increased potential for surveillance of clients through social media raised the most emotionally invested discussions. Another anomaly we followed was a case of withdrawal from media use to avoid control from CWS. Following anomalies add to the variation of practices that are at play. The analysis revealed that within these intersections of visibility and invisibility, the medias are not only means of communication, but tools for mediating and negotiating trust and power in the relationship between caseworkers and clients.

The theoretical inspiration for the analysis

The CWS has, by virtue of its position, the mandated power to see and uncover, while the client must be open to being seen and evaluated in order to get help. Michel Foucault (1995) uses Bentham's Panopticon to explain this power asymmetry of seeing and being seen. Bentham's panopticon is a round prison building surrounding a watchtower, built so that the prison guard in the tower in the middle at any time can observe the prisoners in their cells in the round building. With the help of blinds and partitions, the guard can see the prisoners, while the prisoners cannot see the guard or each other. The prisoners know they can be observed, but never when this is actually happening. Foucault describes it like this: 'He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information,

never a subject in communication' (Foucault, 1995, p. 200). Thus, the prisoners are under constant control and act accordingly, disciplined by the power that lies in the knowledge that they can be observed at any time.

This resembles the relationship between the professional and the client, where the client has few or no exit options (Hirschman, 1970), or ways to protect themselves from the gaze of CWS. Another parallel to Bentham's panoptic glance, is when child welfare professionals use social media to observe clients (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019; Cooner et al., 2020; Kvakic et al., 2021; Sage & Sage, 2016). By using Foucault's example, the client can be seen as an object of information, but not the subject of communication, and the digital media becomes a tool for surveillance. Using the dichotomy of visibility and invisibility, we can observe a different shift in the relationship between professional and client than in previous research, where digital and social media is seen as empowering clients by making the professional–client relationship more even and symmetrical and give clients a *voice option* (Hirschman, 1970), to exercise citizenship (Stang, 2016), or revoke regulations from CWS (Aamodt & Mossige, 2018).

Use of digital and social media raises expectations of visibility and availability, both for clients and professionals. LaMendola (2010) conceptualise this as social presence, and Simpson (2017) use the term relationship-based social work to emphasise the importance of using digital communication platforms for relationship-building. The panoptic power model provides an opportunity to understand both visibility and invisibility as a basis for power and trust. Analytically we have started in the dichotomy 'To see and be seen'. From this, the analysis brought us to understand the desire to come close, yet not too close, to be present, yet not exposed. This all becomes part of balancing good professional practice by the caseworker and a client's need for service and help. In addition, the notion of *productive power,* or the balance that the professional has to strike between control and help functions has to be re-negotiated when new media tools are brought into the conversations (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013).

Applying these theoretical insights to our analysis, we have landed on two practices involving digital and social media that influence power and trust in the caseworker–client relation. The first practice, we have called *Being accessible and 'being where the client is',* stemming from the caseworkers desire to be close to the client, in particular the young clients. The second practice evolves from the first, and we have chosen to name it, *Clients being seen on social media and the erosion of trust*, as this practice gives some insights into what happens when visibility and exposure challenge trust relations. Finally, we explore the strategies of *Making oneself invisible* as both strengthening the professional surveillance role as well as the client's efforts to find exit options.

To see and be seen

Being accessible and 'being where the client is'

Professionals consider digital tools and social media as tools to gain a closer relationship to their clients. They see themselves as being more accessible than before, thanks to mobile phones and digital tools such as SMS and e-mail. These medias make it easier for both clients and professionals to reach each other outside of office hours, and they are free of charge as they only demand a Wi-Fi connection. Thus, professionals talk about using digital media communication platforms as 'being where the clients are', a phrase used to indicate closeness to the client group and the potential for a better and closer relationship with the client.

Snapchat is used as an example of a media they regard being on the young clients' terms, at the same time as they can see if the message has been opened and read by the client. This is a practice the caseworkers know that the street-level social workers use, and would like to have in their own toolbox. However, there seemed to be a consensus that Snapchat and similar social media do not safeguard privacy and confidentiality, and thus most caseworkers refrained from using these as tools of communication. Still being uncertain about restrictions to the use of SMS, this was the

closest they could get to a desired platform for easy digital communication, and a tool that had become common for the service to use. A caseworker described it as follows:

> (…) Using SMS means that we can have a better contact with the families. And it is much easier to send an SMS and ask … did yesterday go well or … instead of sending a letter or having to pick up the phone every time. (Caseworker)

Professionals use SMS to check up on clients after a meeting or a school exam, or simply to wish the young client a happy birthday. It allows them to be there for their clients, without spending too much time on each point of attention. They also consider SMS as an efficient way for the clients to get a hold of them, and serve clients' need for available and fast communication. The professionals are very clear that the relationships are built face-to-face, but that SMS provides an efficient means to maintain coherent relationships with the clients.

The young clients are fine with their caseworkers using SMS, but they did not miss their caseworkers on their social media platforms. All clients talked about face-to-face meetings as their preferred form of communication. This is where you get to know each other and build initial trust and a good relationship for the future.

> (You need) to be met with a handshake, met with a smile and respect, [it] is a much better starting point. Much can be destroyed within the first 30 seconds (…) Trust starts with the very first meeting at the door. (Parent client)

Some clients did express a concern that digital media platforms will replace the physical client-professional encounters. So, while caseworkers expressed a desire to 'be where the client is' (digitally), the clients need to 'be where they have always been'; in the office, at home or in the cafe with the child welfare worker. The client's goal with digital communication was for it to serve as a medium for arranging a meeting or second best, a phone conversation. One young client expressed this:

> Ehm (…) the caseworkers should ask like «can I call you»? If it was [urgent] (…) or they could write like 'hey, I know you're in pain right now. Can we meet tomorrow at a café or something,' so that we agree on a fixed [meeting] point. Then I [think SMS is fine] … yeah. (Young client)

For the young clients, physical meetings were essential for feeling close to the professional, being seen as an individual and being heard. Clients also pointed out that trusting the caseworker is fundamental and comes before all (digital) communication. Given that you have a good and trusting relationship with your caseworker, SMS can even become a bit 'impersonal', and young clients are both open for and express a need to have their caseworkers within their social media realm.

In the cases where young clients express a distrust in their social workers or the CWS, they expressed no desire for contact with the CWS on these platforms. A young person who complained about not having a particularly good relationship with his caseworker said:

> (…) I can probably call my caseworker, but we are not close enough for me to do that (…) So I think it's important if you are going to use (…) digital media, or tools, … then it must be in a way … someone you feel you can call anytime, sort of. (…) I probably wouldn't have used Snapchat regardless of whether he [the caseworker] had it. (Young client)

> For both caseworkers and their clients, it is apparent that the medium of communication or the chosen platform for digital communication does not have an independent effect on the relation they are building. For the caseworker, a digital short message system provides an opportunity to efficiently follow up on relations that are already there, create cohesion and confirmation that clients are seen and remembered. For the client, a digital presence is desired if a good and trusting relationship already exists, but feels like an intrusion if the relationship is not already there. So 'being close' and 'seeing' the client will not happen unless the familiarity, closeness and trust is already there. In this respect, digital and social media only enhances the relation, which is already there, whether this is a good and trusting relationship or the opposite.

Clients being seen on social media and the erosion of trust

Although social media in general was not used for communication, and certainly not a formal source of information, some caseworkers did in fact use social media platforms, primarily Facebook, for observing clients gain information about them. Talking about this practice, revealing that some services have created a fake Facebook account stirred quite a discussion in two of the groups.

CW1:	If we suspect something about a client, we can use our fake social media account to see what they do on social media (…)
Moderator:	In Child Welfare Services?
CW1:	Well, it is legal. (…)
CW2:	(breaks in) Is it legal?
CW1:	… so they have been given perm ….
CW2:	I give up!
CW1:	(…) It has been authorized (…) If I search for someone [from my personal profile] then that young person would get a suggestion to become friends with me personally. Then … he will know that I have been on his profile. And so on. So it [a fake profile] is more to protect … us who work here. (Group interview with caseworkers)

Knowing that Facebook algorithms would reveal their presence through suggesting them as friends to the clients, using a fake Facebook account will protect the professionals, and at the same time give them a position for a Panoptic glance, using the fake account as a watch tower and making sure they are not being seen by the clients they observe. This gives the caseworkers an opportunity to obtain information about clients that the clients have not planned or agreed to share with the CWS.

To obtain information about others without them being aware of it is problematic in more than one way, and will, if discovered by clients, lead to a breach of trust, which of course was brought up as a concern in the groups. This combination of visibility and invisibility stir a reaction among some of the caseworkers as to the legality of it. It resembles surveillance, and a breach of confidentiality. The conversation does however reveal another interesting fact, that when the use of social media is being questioned as 'legal or not', the focus remains on the media as such, and not to its role in information sharing.

None, but one of the clients in this study brought up the fact that they were, or could be, observed on social media platforms. The following dialogue with a client (parent) demonstrates this:

Interviewer:	Have you had any contact with the child welfare service via Facebook?
Parent:	No. Never. (…) I haven't even thought of it. (…) No … (laughter) … do you think the child welfare service is on Facebook? (Parent client)

This dialogue suggests that the client is not expecting the professionals to be on social media, in line with Watson's 'constitutive expectancy' that the client's trust will not be broken (Watson, 2009). Clients also express that they do not want their caseworkers to observe their social media accounts and activities. One young client clearly said he would get angry and interpret it as a breach of trust if he found out that his caseworker used information about him acquired in secret via social media:

> (…) At least when you are 16 years old. (…) you don't want to feel that you are somehow … being watched over. You want as much freedom as possible. And you lose trust very quickly. It's like [that] ONE thing that is the KEY word with child welfare, is like … TRUST, and the fact that it can (snaps with his fingers) [vanish] like that … quite easy. (Young client)

If clients do not know or suspect that they are being observed, or that information about them on social media can be used, they will not edit their profiles to fit the CWS as a part of their audience. This seems to be a possibility the clients in this study for the most part are oblivious to, and the caseworkers panoptic power is strengthened for as long as the client believes himself to be invisible. However, it is also clear that a breach of this expectation would seriously erode any trust built into the client–caseworker relationship.

To make oneself invisible

The professional caseworker displays many strategies to shield themselves from being seen by the clients or having the clients impose on their private lives. They leave their work mobile phones at work at the end of the day in order to keep the clients at a distance, both physically and emotionally. They can refuse to give out their e-mail address and/or mobile phone numbers to their clients, making themselves difficult to reach. If being available through a mobile phone, they can choose sending a quick SMS instead of calling up the client, to make the contact points more efficient. This gives the professionals exit options from having to deal with clients outside of office hours. It also means that the professionals are in control of the communication channels. Consequently, the desire to 'be where the clients are' must be understood as 'being where the clients are, *when it suits us*'. Clients, on the other hand, do not experience caseworkers to be more available to them.

Interestingly, digital tools such as smartphones can also serve as a partition of the panoptic watchtower while in direct, physical meeting with clients, by deterring the attention from directly observing the client. Here is one example, from a professional supervising a visit between a child and his parents:

> At (…) supervised meetings, eh … which can usually last for hours, I always write on … take notes on the mobile. Ehm … because (…) we sit in the apartment and it is cramped and we watch TV, so I can just pretend that I sit and read VG (Norwegian newspaper) (on my phone), but (in fact) I sit and write down like, what they talk about and what they say, and then you get everything verbatim all the way. (…) And like, they don't know that I … observe everything they do, like. I think it's very nice to have, like that [opportunity] … (Caseworker)

In cases as demonstrated by this statement, the client is aware of the professional being present, but not necessarily that everything he says and does, is being documented. Here, the digital tool is used to make the observation inconspicuous, as it would be in a panoptic watchtower, even while in a physical meeting with the client. Smartphones, tablets and other digital tools can all be used as partitions to hide such covert monitoring (Foucault, 1995).

Clients' exit options are more limited and difficult. If clients need to hide from the CWS they have options like changing their phone number, not opening digital mail, keeping their social media accounts private, or refuse to be on digital platforms altogether. These strategies may however have an impact on decisions and measures made by the CWS regarding client's private life. Some parents choose to shield themselves completely from digital communication, due to a feeling of being constantly watched:

> (…) I am left with a feeling of being watched. You get that feeling and (…) I do not feel comfortable being as monitored, as the system allows for today. (Parent client)

This client does not use smartphones, digital mail or location services on his iPad, because of what he describes as increased surveillance of people in today's digital society. In cases where clients refuse to be 'digital', this could be a strategy for not being seen by the CWS and thus creating the exit option they lack in a system where they increasingly feel monitored and controlled.

Discussion

Previous research has shown the potential of digital and social media in social services, for example by facilitating the establishment of communities and exercising citizenship for clients (Stang, 2016). UK studies show that clients expect caseworkers to be available through digital media (Simpson, 2017), conceptualised as digital 'social presence' by La Mendola (2010). With the availability of digital and social media in a highly digitalised society (OECD, 2021), including for young children in care (Aamodt & Mossige, 2018), children and parents are said to be in a greater position to control when and how to communicate, than before digital tools were available. In short, digital and social media have been studied as something that clients can use to negotiate the power relations between clients and professionals. However, to exercise such control, clients must be

aware of being watched, or that their media presence is used as information in their case. In our study, the clients show little awareness of this, and if they are, they demonstrate few possibilities for negotiating it with their caseworkers.

Our analysis shows how using digital and social media can alter the relationship between caseworkers and clients. We have demonstrated how issues of visibility and invisibility in media practices influence power and trust relations in ways that also reinforce or even strengthen the power gap between clients and their caseworkers. We have also revealed possibilities for erosion of trust necessary for a good professional helping relationship. Without the foundation of trust, a professional cannot get in a position to help the client, and the client will oppose any help provided by the professional (Grimen, 2009). Yet, a helping position does rely on an insight into a client's life and a certain amount of productive power to be helpful. The number of communication tools, and social medias, in particular, has thus made the balancing act of trust and power more complicated for the professionals (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013).

Knowing this, we can see how problematic using information from social media without the client's consent or knowledge is. Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault, 1995) helps us illustrate the professional's position in the digital watch tower, and how the power imbalance is played out in practice. Foucault shows how the prisoner's knowledge that he can be seen by the prison guard, but not when they are seen, is enough to edit his behaviour according to the norms he, as a prisoner, must follow (Foucault, 1995). The clients in our study are, with a few exceptions, not aware of the fact that they can be watched by caseworkers in particular. This extends the professional's powerful position and increases the power gap, because clients present themselves to another public and they do not feel the need to edit their information on social media to fit the gaze of their caseworker. The caseworkers, on the other hand, can shield themselves by not linking their private Facebook accounts to the service users, while getting access to public information posted on social media about their clients, without their consent.

This ethical dilemma has been addressed in several studies (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Cooner et al., 2020; Kvakic et al., 2021; Sage & Sage, 2016). The use of digital and social media, such as SMS and Facebook, was introduced by professionals themselves as a so-called bottom-up initiative, fuelled by the desire to be close to the clients. Since this practice was not introduced by the state or local authorities, there are no guidelines to follow, and the professional power and responsibility to use digital and social media in an ethical and responsible way must be managed as they are being used. This poses a great challenge on caseworkers who individually are left to draw their own conclusions and make their own guidelines for use.

In this study, we have expanded on the empirical understanding of how digital tools change the interaction between welfare caseworkers and their clients. Our findings bear witness of digital practices where caseworkers warrant guidelines, and clients have little to no agency in terms of user participation. At the risk of institutionalising practices that contribute to eroding the client's trust in both the individual professional, and public service in general, the authorities, both local and national, need to address these practices and discuss how digital and social media ought to be used in a professional–client relationship that is characterised by power asymmetry.

Cooner et al. (2020) refer to how the British Association for Social Work has linked regulations of social media use to their Code of Ethics, where practitioners are expected to respect personal and professional boundaries. In the same article, they point out that the US has recommended the use of 'informed consent' for service user monitoring (Cooner et al., 2020). Using the framework of visibility and invisibility to understand the practices surrounding digital and social media in the Norwegian CWS, it becomes apparent that to offer more efficient services, increased availability, and more user participation, as is the pronounced goal of the DigiBarnevern project, CWS need upgraded guidelines for information sharing and how to communicate in a world where digital and social media exist.

Extending on 'informed consent', a standard familiar to CWS when opening an investigation process, could be one way of doing it. Reaffirming the Code of Ethics on proper use and user involvement also when using digital and social media would be another.

But just as pointed out by Sage & Sage in the same article 'ethical codes and policy alone are never enough to curb ethically questionable practices' (Cooner et al., 2020, p. 141). We believe that a proper revision of practices must involve professionals on all levels of the organisation, discussing how to negotiate day-to-day information sharing and communication between a caseworker and a client. Contrary to what caseworkers ask for, it is not only the digital tools, such as smartphones, laptops, e-mail, and SMS and the use of social media platforms that needs regulation. Regulations should address participation of clients in deciding on communication tools and the all-important openness and non-covert practices necessary to build and maintain trusting relationships between caseworkers and clients.

Notes

1. All informants have given their written, informed consent on participating in this study. The study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), with reference number 362643.

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