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Social Media and Young People's Involvement in Social Work Education

Abstract

While service-user involvement in social work education generally is increasing, young people's involvement has, to date, been limited, and as such their voice is missing. Social media potentially offers mechanisms for addressing this, widening young people's participation. This article presents the findings of research, conducted in partnership with young people, exploring different types of social media currently available that may have the potential to be used in social work education to provide young people with a voice.

Using methods developed from systematic review processes, the research set out to find, synthesise and collate these different resources.

The findings suggest social media could provide an appropriate mechanism for enabling young people to share experiences relevant to social care. However, whilst some resources do exist, there are fewer than expected. A need is identified to develop new sustainable ways of enabling young people to have a voice. Current approaches were found to replicate barriers associated with service provision being compartmentalised, service led, and framed by eligibility criteria.

Recommendations are made for a united response from social work education institutions supporting approaches that give ownership to young people themselves whilst promoting sustainability and continuity.

Keywords: Social media, participation, young people, sustainability, systematic review

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings of research, informed by systematic review methods, into social media resources having the potential for use in social work education. The potential of social media to promote Social Workers' skills, knowledge and understanding is recognised (Holt & Rafferty, 2005; Cooner, T.S, 2011; Westwood, 2014). There is a proliferation of Open Data, digital technologies and other social media used by service-users (Hall, Shadbolt, Tiropanis, O'Hara and Davie, 2012). However, the target audience is limited as the material has not been collated and presented in an accessible way. The voice of service-users has been lost.

The language associated with social media is new and emerging. Different terms are used interchangeably to refer to the same forms of online digital communication. Even defining social media is contentious, with numerous different versions found (<http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition>). For the purpose of this review the Merriam-Webster dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media) definition of social media was used. We considered social media to be "forms of electronic communication (as Websites for social networking and blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)."

This research, conducted in partnership with young service users, involved identifying and reviewing social media used by service-users to share experience and communicate knowledge. Once found the intention was to share these resources freely with others involved in social work education.

Background

Service-user involvement has been mandatory in the context of professional training in health and social care for many years (Molyneux & Irvine, 2004; Department of Health, 2002; The College of Social Work, 2012). Debates continue on the nature and purpose of involvement, (Palattiyil et al, 2015) and on the power dynamics involved (Cowden and Singh, 2007). However, the importance of the service-user voice and the development of a critical dialogue between service-users

and professionals has been associated with notions of welfare informed by emancipatory, rather than regulatory, imperatives. Globally, service-user movements emphasise the significance of service-users perspectives (Palattiyil et al, 2015), whilst the Global Agenda for social work calls for partnership between educators, service users, communities and policy makers with the aim of creating a more socially just society (IFSW 2012).

Participation of younger service-users reflects wider legal obligations. Children's rights to be consulted regarding decisions affecting them is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Human Rights Act 1989 and the Children Acts 1989/2004, and in increased endorsement in educational, health and social care practice in the UK. Additionally, young people collaborating in the content of professional training programmes - sharing knowledge and providing formative feedback - supports community engagement, promotes future practitioners' ability to work in partnership with young people (Molyneux & Irvine, 2004), and grounds professional education in the needs and perspectives of young service users. Additionally it stimulates socioanalysis, uncovering taken for granted ways individuals (including academics and professionals) pursue vested interests (Bourdieu, 1984/86; Houston, 2002).

There is growing awareness that age is not a determinant in conferring a right to be considered a valued member of society and a right to be heard (Ali and Davies, 2009). To promote this right, better methods of involving children and young people in social work education are needed. Research (Levin, 2004; SCIE, 2009) supports the need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to develop practices that recognise and encourage commitment, particularly in relation to young people who are underrepresented and who consequentially may face social exclusion. Use of social media has the potential to increase participation, and also widen diversity by facilitating involvement of those currently excluded by personal circumstances.

Young people can face many barriers to being heard by Social Workers and social work educators: location - as they may lack access to transport to get them to the campus or may be dependent on others; time - as they are likely to be in school, education or in some cases employment; and feelings of efficacy. The service

user/Social Worker power dynamic can be disempowering. Some of these challenges are also applicable to other service-user groups, however, for young people issues of power, perceptions of autonomy, and efficacy can also be challenged by the adult/young person relationship.

Effective communication takes place in the comfort zone of the service-user (Tyler, 2006). For some young people this comfort zone is social media. 93% of young people in the UK go "online" (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), many every day, with similar levels of using social network sites reflected across all income levels. Notably, young people are most likely to use social media as a method of expressing views and communicating (Gray & Jennings, 2008).

The perception that children and young people are difficult to engage as service-users may partly reflect the effects of social marginalisation, which calls for new means of engagement (Franklin & Sloper, 2006). Although promoting civic engagement is a stated goal in the context of increasing children and young people's participation in social and health care practice, UK government policies underpinning participation have been criticised for underplaying young people's civic rights (Williams, 2004). YoungMinds (Street & Herts, 2005) asserts potential benefits of participation include 'becoming more independent and prepared for further participation in civil society - that is, becoming empowered'.

Method

The research question was:

What social media resources are currently being used by service-users to share knowledge and experience related to health and social care?

The method was informed by systematic review principles (Gough et al, 2012). The web review was complemented by a systematic review of research literature, reported separately.

Preparing the team - Young people as research advisors

A key aspect of a systematic review is ensuring that material identified is relevant and answers the research question. As this study related to material produced and relevant for young people, it was essential the process was guided and informed by experts in this field, young people themselves. Although the initial idea was developed by academics, the views of young people on the need for the study was sought, prior to developing the specific approach by circulating a questionnaire through a local branch of Catch 22, a national charity working with young people. Eight responses were received all voicing a need for the study. Flyers inviting young people to participate were subsequently circulated via Catch 22. Repeated invitations were sent and resulted in a request to attend the agency's young people's forum where the rationale and proposed approach were discussed.

Search strategy

The search for social media used methods employed in marketing to bring digital online material to the attention of potential customers, search engine optimisation and identification of key search engines. Following a pilot search using Google, the most popular search engine internationally¹ a strategy was developed to identify the search engines most likely to find online material that was current and up-to-date. A number of websites provide statistics on search engine use, for example popularity, relevance and geographical reach:

- <http://www.thesearchenginelist.com/>
- <http://searchengineland.com/library/stats/stats-popularity>
- <http://www.smartinsights.com/search-engine-optimisation-seo/multilingual-seo/search-engine-popularity-statistics/>
- http://theword.co.uk/info/search_engine_market.html

While some minor variation existed, related to use of local services, three search engines were repeatedly rated in the top six and were selected to identify appropriate databases listing different forms of social media for review. To identify such databases terminology was clarified.

Cohen (2009) makes a distinction between social media and SNS, associated with differences in how they are used. However, as both involve forms of communication that could support young people to have a voice, both terms were used for this review. Additional search terms considered appropriate were identified through a systematic review of literature (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process), consideration of the websites previously mentioned, and through consultation with experts in the field.

Key search terms were used in each of the three search engines. These were: social media, social network, SNS, website, digital material, blog, list, database, sources, sites and resources. The search terms were used in various combinations. In each case many pages of possible sources were given. In conducting any internet search "hits" (results) are provided according to relevance. Later pages may have limited, if any, relevance to the search aims. In the case of these particular searches, each result on the page was reviewed until the result ceased to provide relevant information. In no case did this exceed the first page. Each resource listed by each database was subsequently reviewed and compared to the selection criteria. Any failing to match the inclusion criteria were excluded.

Selection criteria

Inclusion criteria were developed based on the concurrent literature review but also revised and supplemented by consulting the previously referred to online resources. The final inclusion criteria were:

- Accessible and functioning at time of review
- Content primarily in English (written or spoken)
- Content providing views of a young person
- Young people were under the age of 25
- Related to health and/or social care
- Where the information was provided through the use of social media/internet/SNS

Additionally, appropriate websites were identified through a manual search of references in the following sources:

- <http://www.timdavies.org.uk/2008/04/04/7-cs-social-media-participation/>
- http://socialreporters.net/?page_id=587
- <http://www.practicalparticipation.co.uk/yes/start>

Key social media platforms, e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, were searched via their search bar facility, using search terms derived from the inclusion criteria – young people, children, and service-user - without and including a hashtag (#).

Individual lists of potential resources matching the inclusion criteria were created for each database searched.

In May 2012 each of the websites/resources listed was reviewed by visiting the site and considering the content in relation to the inclusion criteria. Websites that did not meet these were excluded. As each site was reviewed, a note was made of any reference or link to any other potentially eligible resources replicating the technique of snowballing (Babbie, 2001) used when researching hard to locate material.

Recognising the transitory nature of social media, the currency of sites was checked twice over the duration of the project. Duplicates were then removed to create one final combined list of sites/resources.

Screening and coding

Following the initial review of potentially includable social media sites, a closer and more detailed screening was conducted by two researchers. At this point the inclusion and exclusion criteria were tightened as follows:

Inclusion

- Only where it was clear the views were given by young people

Exclusion

- Not where the views were by adults purporting to give the views of young people
- Not where the views were “marketing” for a particular service i.e. the young person was describing a service from the perspective of the service.

This led to the creation of a final list for data extraction and evaluation.

Extracting and appraising social media

A data extraction form was piloted and modified acting on feedback provided by the young people. The data extraction was independently conducted by two researchers and also by the young people involved, working together and supported by an academic researcher. Information on the type of resource – blog, website, video, etc - originators of the material, content, and relevance to the research question was collected. The young people reviewed the quality of media and information and also evaluated the relevance for professional education from their perspective. Whilst support was offered, this was purely practical and they were free to examine the sites and extract information as they chose. All involved in extracting data subsequently appraised the sites and allocated descriptive coding as they felt appropriate. Coding was then compared, agreed and results compiled into a table of characteristics.

Findings

Service-user participation

It was envisaged that inclusion in the project advisory group would establish young people as active research contributors, providing further qualitative feedback on the methods identified and perceptions of the applicability for widening access and participation. This proved to be a challenge.

While the early response from young people was positive, difficulties arose in coordinating continuing involvement. The circulation of flyers, via Catch 22, inviting young people to participate, despite the verbalised support from workers, had limited response from young people themselves. The initial hypothesis was that establishing contact with young people was limited by the procedures and processes established by the agency to protect young people considered vulnerable, and/or reluctance of practitioners to promote the project to young people due to concern over the potential impact on their wellbeing. A contrasting significant view arose. One young person, who participated in early stages, a former care leaver now using social media to promote the views of young people, suggested an alternative reason. This was that young people were fatigued by

professionals who purported to “listen to them” or “give them a voice” as views were seldom heard or acted on.

“We are always filling out forms, answering questionnaires and saying what we think, but nothing ever happens with this...no one is listening or really does anything...nothing changes”.

Catch 22’s young people’s forum was poorly attended on the day visited, only three young people from the ten expected arrived, plus one facilitator who was also a care leaver. Those present were enthusiastic, supportive of the project and said more should be done to support professionals in general and Social Workers in particular to understand the perspectives of young people. All expressed the view that they needed to be listened to by Social Workers. They shared personal experience giving examples of times they felt they had not been listened to.

As one young person said:

“Social Workers never seem to want to listen to you, you hardly see them”

They used their experience to explain why their voice needed to be heard by student Social Workers:

“If they learn how to listen when they are students, they will be more likely to do it once they are qualified”.

They spoke of the difficulty of participating in social work education:

“I wouldn’t want to go into a classroom and stand in front of people”.

The possibility of using social media to communicate with student Social Workers was welcomed.

Despite enthusiasm for the research and using social media to promote involvement, no one felt able to be involved at that time. The practical demands - time, distance, and the emotional impact of personal problems - were seen as barriers.

Some months later, one young person initiated contact and confirmed involvement. A second subsequently joined the project when they learnt of the work. Two young people were therefore involved in the review and evaluation.

Search results

Three search engines (Google, Yahoo & Bing) were selected for identification of appropriate social media databases. For two search engines, Bing and Yahoo, the results were identical. For the other, Google, while one database was common, three others were found. In total, six databases (ECRM, VANDELAY, Wikipedia, Prelovac, Social Media Websites, and Traffikd) were identified providing lists of social media sites and websites containing a social media element. All identified lists were included for review. This resulted in 1990 social media sites being considered for further review and application of the inclusion criteria (duplicates included).

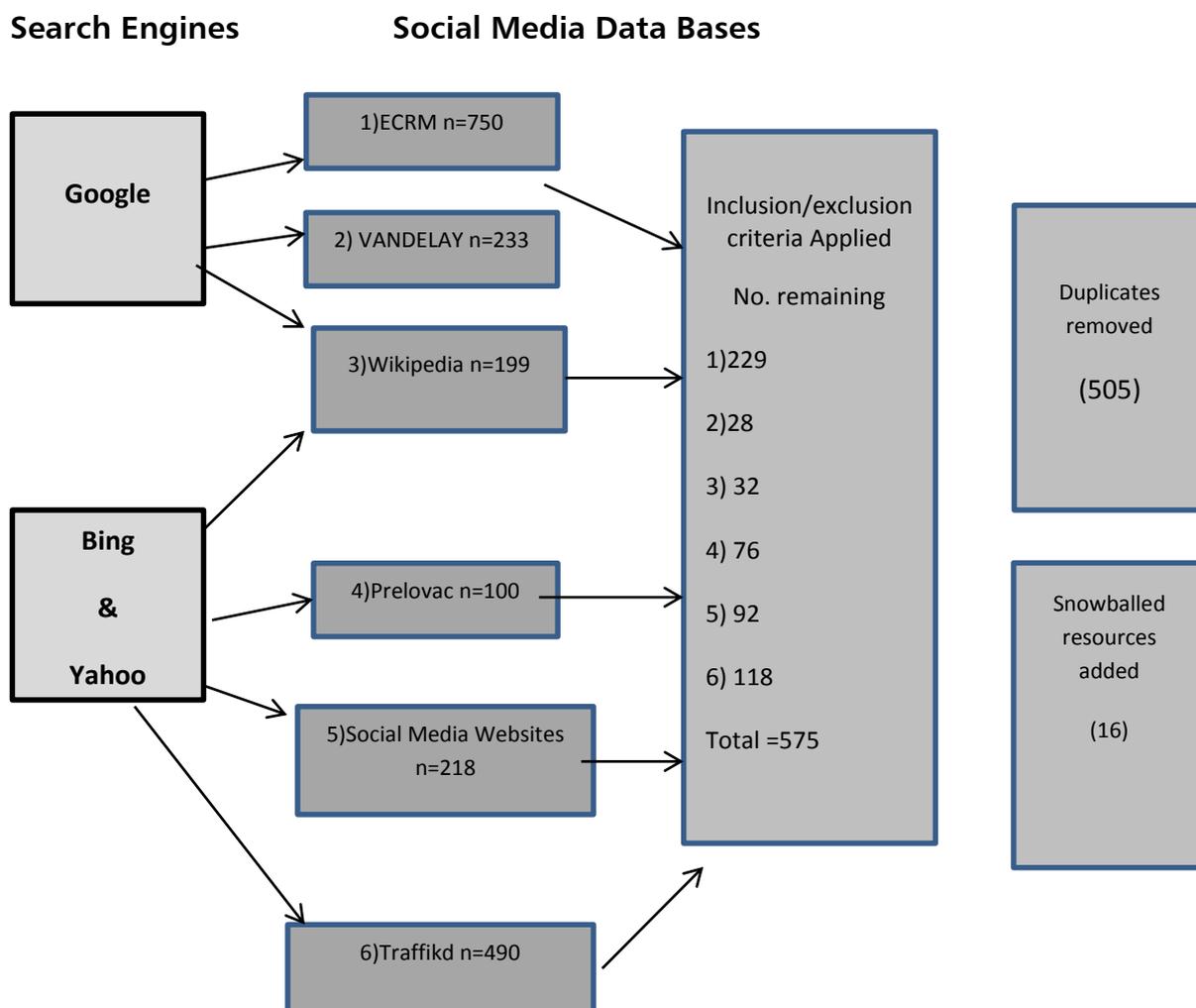


Figure 1: Flowchart of database and website selection

In May 2012 each of the websites/resources listed was reviewed by visiting the site and considering the content in relation to the inclusion criteria. Websites not meeting these were excluded. Subsequently any duplicates were removed and sites found by snowballing added. Search results at each stage are shown in figure 1.

Sites were revisited in May 2013 and January 2014 and checked to ensure that firstly, the site still existed and was accessible, and secondly, that the content continued to meet the inclusion criteria. At both times, no sites were removed due

to failing to meet inclusion criteria, however, on each occasion a number of sites were removed as hyperlinks no longer functioned, the site no longer existed or because the site had been acquired by, and subsumed into, another site. Generic sites, e.g. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, were excluded as although search functions existed, it became evident that there was no mechanism for systematic and focused searching in accordance with the search terms. This resulted in 56 sites being removed. Whilst the generic sites were removed, a number of resources contained on these, found through the focused search strategy described in the method, were included.

In January 2014, two further sites, set up and run by young people themselves, were excluded. The first (Lukespeaks.com) was excluded as the young person had closed the site, the second (the puppetproject.net) - a young person offering training - as the young person had changed the content from an open resource making it only accessible to those buying training. One site (Voice Against Violence) was maintained in the list of included sites as, although no longer updated and maintained, previously uploaded resources remained accessible and in accordance with inclusion criteria. When reviewing sites and applying the tightened inclusion/exclusion criteria, 16 were excluded on various grounds, including information being primarily marketing of a service and lack of evidence that views expressed originated from young people. 12 websites remained for review.

Discussion

This research arose from a belief that there was a wealth of digital material available in the public domain that expressed the views of young people, and that this could be used by social work educators to provide a voice for young people. Whilst some excellent material was found, it was significantly less than anticipated. Using the findings of the web review and the systematic literature review, a matrix highlighting salient features was compiled.

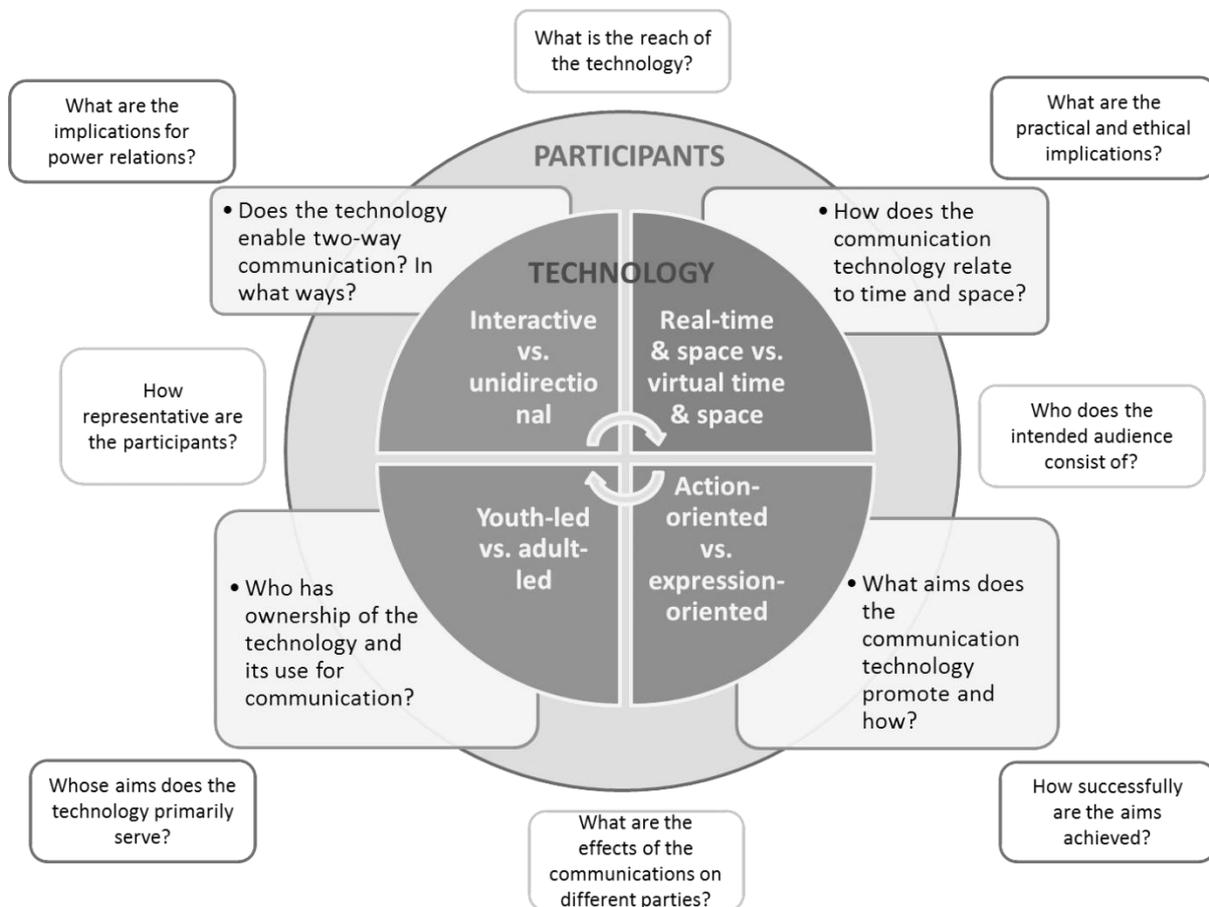


Figure 2: Design/evaluation matrix for digital participation interventions

Ownership

Two good examples of informative social media produced by young people themselves, identified early in the study, were excluded in the final stages as the young people had restricted access such that it was only available when “bought” as part of a specific training package. This suggests young people want ownership and control over what is being said on their behalf and about them.

A large number of what initially appeared to be relevant material was later excluded as the views expressed, whilst purporting to be those of young people, were in fact those of adults writing as though they were young people. In some cases ideas and comments were presenting as though the adult was speaking on behalf of an individual, in others as though speaking for all young people. In general, however, there was no evidence that these views were genuine, or that

they did in fact represent the views of young people. These sites were maintained and managed by adults associated with a particular service.

For many of the resources reviewed, it was difficult to distinguish young people's views and priorities from those of adults. The subjects explored, the method of communication and framing of the task were determined by adults, who maintained control through the ability to access financial and practical resources. As adults held power over the mechanism for digital communication, they were also responsible for recruiting young people to specific projects and determining which young people had access to the method of communication. Conversely, this also meant adults determined who was excluded.

A limited number of sites (five) were found that, whilst managed and coordinated by adults/organisations, ensured young people both initiated and retained control of the content. All but two of these were funded by private donations. Of the two remaining, one - Fixers (www.fixers.org.uk) - a project by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust - was funded by the National Lottery; the other - Voice Against Violence - a short term government funded project, although included as providing a useful resource, was no longer maintained and updated as the project had ended. This raised a key issue in terms of using social media to give young people a voice - that of sustainability.

Sustainability

Throughout the lifetime of the research, a number of potential resources ceased to exist or, where websites were still accessible, relevant material became restricted. Where websites ceased to exist, this may be for a number of reasons: young people may lack the financial resources to maintain the project, their interest in the subject may change or, more likely, their personal circumstances may change such that they no longer have the time needed as other demands take greater priority. This leads us to suggest that one of the greatest challenges to ensuring the voice of young people is heard, and continues to be heard, is development of a mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of websites and other forms of social media once they are established. The success of Fixers, at the time of writing having over 17,000 young people involved, is that the project provides a

supportive framework of open and continuing recruitment without stipulating the focus or subject content. It therefore facilitates young people, enabling self-expression, rather than directing them towards a particular form of civic action or socialising towards a preferred/desired behaviour.

Service-user participation in the research

The issue of how to establish and maintain contact with young people arose in relation to the sustainability of social media resources and also in ensuring that young people were involved in this research. Although initial interest was positive, few young people responded to flyers or engaged in meetings arranged in partnership with Catch 22 to establish a working group. Our early proposition on the reason for this, that contact with young people was being restricted by adults/organisations working with them, was neither substantiated nor refuted. Young people involved with the research support this hypothesis but also, reflecting other studies (Beresford and Croft, 2001; Campbell, 2001), considered young service-users to have become fatigued by repeated requests for involvement which, without any evidence that expressed views have had any impact, were perceived as patronising.

Furthermore, they suggested that the ability of young people to be heard was limited by the ways in which service providers defined and categorised need. Access to forums, service-user groups and other mechanisms established by service providers, actual and digital, was both determined and restricted by definitions of need controlled by professionals. Access to power was located in the prevailing culture: a source of domination reproducing and maintaining institutionalised hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984).

Young people described feeling “invisible” and as a consequence lacked confidence. This led to further reluctance in speaking out in unfamiliar situations. For young service-users, lacking in cultural and social capital derived from family, culturally defined assets and social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Adams, 2006) efficacy and power was particularly restricted.

Participation of young people in this research was only achieved by allowing time for them to make their own decisions about when and how to be involved. Practices associated with good social work, relationship based practice, provided the foundation of a continuing and effective collaborative partnership. Time was taken to create a supportive, facilitating relationship, based on trust, promoting feelings of being valued and respected as equal participants. Having established this relationship, not only did the young people play a key role in evaluating material found, but they also found their voice. They used social media, creating a Prezi, to express their views on the role of young people in social work education and the part that social media could play. They considered this essential not just to share opinion but also to be seen as a person.

“It’s very important... to actually get a voice out there and be someone that can do stuff themselves, plus show everyone else around them they can do something”.

The young people’s Prezi (Using social Media to give young people a voice)ⁱⁱ, was presented at a national social work education conference (Joint Social Work Education Conference - JSWEC - 2014) where they discussed the project and reflected on their involvement.

Equally important was the way involvement in this project enabled the young people to share their views and experience. Previously they had found speaking out a challenge:

“Me, I’m a very scared person. I don’t like talking much, so what I say...it goes through music”.

Despite this, they participated in a nationally and internationally circulated podcastⁱⁱⁱ. The ability to do so arose not just from the opportunity provided by using social media, but through the confidence that developed from interaction with others facilitated by social media enhanced through positive interaction with Social Workers and academics, from different institutions, at the conference.

A database of resources

A key aim of this research was to disseminate the resources found as widely as possible. The database created was made available to all those attending the JSWEC 2014 conference but also, to maximise impact, was presented using social media in a Googlesite^{iv} circulated via Twitter.

Conclusion

Despite the current barriers identified, we found that social media could potentially play a significant role in widening young people's involvement. Use of social media is not an "easy option" but requires consideration of the mechanisms used, funding options, potential impact and both implicit and explicit aims (figure 2).

A key finding was the need to consider new ways of creating and sustaining involvement of young people in social work education. Whilst the use of social media was indicated as an appropriate method, mechanisms that support access to, and ensure continued use of, social media are needed to facilitate this.

Lack of unity and sustainability is found in approaches used by individual HEIs to promote service-user involvement. Each institution recruits to its own service-user group and, in most cases, develops resources specifically for their institution. This approach can result in multiple demands being placed on the same individuals, groups and/or institutions competing in a desire to work with specific groups or individuals. Ownership lies with each institution rather than the service user.

This leads us to propose a need for those involved in social work education to have a joint and coordinated strategy that facilitates and supports young people's involvement as opposed to discrete individual institution based developments.

Divisions also exist in the provision of welfare services, reflected in the aims and mission statements, with threshold and eligibility criteria determining which service young people can or cannot access. The mechanisms involved in the provision of services, eligibility criteria, welfare checklists and state/voluntary sector provision determine group formation and consequently can result in some young people being located outside public interest, placed in a position of enforced privacy and silence. Sitting outside the confines of service structures, yet guided by the aims

and aspirations of the social work profession – empowerment, advocacy and promotion of social change – social work education provides the perfect location for establishing an inclusive forum through which all young people would have a voice.

Recommendations for the future

We conclude by making the following recommendations for future action:

- Development of a joint, cross-institution, strategy for involving young people in social work education
- Identify ongoing, i.e. not time-limited, funding that will provide access to appropriate digital mechanisms (website domains etc)
- Establish a supportive relationship with young people, which facilitates participation whilst ensuring ownership remains with young people
- Identify methods of providing membership to young people who fall outside established welfare services, i.e. those who do not fit conventional service led eligibility criteria
- Provide developmental support, i.e. assist new members in developing skills held by more established members, i.e. promote succession planning
- Identify and create mechanisms that promote sustainability and ensure a continuing voice

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ⁱ <https://www.reliablesoft.net/top-10-search-engines-in-the-world/>

ⁱⁱ https://prezi.com/ob-e_sb1jujp/using-social-media-to-give-young-people-a-voice/

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://socialworldpodcast.com/040-jsweconference-part-6/>

^{iv} <https://sites.google.com/site/yp2sws/>