

Privacy, protection, pride and passion: professional judgment in relation to images posted on Twitter (0220)

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The advent and now almost universal use of social media means that professional life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has gained a new dimension. In many professions, informal, distributed professional communities, often arising from a grassroots desire for more extended networks of support and connection, are coming together through social networking site such as Twitter and Facebook. At the same time, mobile phones have evolved into cameras, and casual communication is increasingly carried out through shared images. These developments create a new context for the exercise of professional judgment, and in turn a new aspect of professional life that student professionals in Higher Education need to be prepared for.

This paper presents research based on image-sharing practices of two professional groups based on Twitter, one comprised of primary and secondary teachers, the other of practising midwives. It proposes that informal, online conversations between professionals present potentially rich pedagogical resources that can be used to assist student professionals in Higher Education contexts to prepare for their professional futures. The research comprises three phases:

- (1) a study of two Twitter “conversations” among professional networks;
- (2) interviews with practising professionals who are active in these conversations; and
- (3) image-elicitation based workshops with student professionals in four UK universities aimed at developing students critical engagement with these conversations.

The potential impact of social media has been recognised in both teaching and midwifery, and, as a result, recent years have seen the development of detailed policies and guidelines governing both professional practice and education for professionals (General Teaching Council (Scotland) n.d.; Nursing and Midwifery Council 2012). These generally focus on protection and privacy (Fenwick 2014) – on risk avoidance, both for professional and client, and image management. Despite the ubiquitous use of images online, the guidelines rarely mention image-sharing – and when they do, they refer to sexually explicit or inappropriate images only, citing privacy and damage to professional reputations.

However, analysis of the two Twitter networks that are the focus of this study shows a rich multiplicity of images shared online. Teachers post images of classrooms, outdoor activities, students, students’ work, and teaching artefacts. Midwives post images of midwives, mothers, babies, and representations of emotion, compassion and strength. How are student professionals in Higher Education contexts to understand this, given the closing down and caution evident in the guidelines cited above?

A superficial response might be to dismiss such postings (especially those involving potentially identifiable humans or students’ work) as foolish and incautious – distinctly unprofessional. However,

a closer analysis of the online activities and interviews with professionals engaging in these spaces reveals more.

The research draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of the rhizome, and in particular the rhizome's component lines of articulation and lines of flight, as a useful lens through which to examine the exercise of professional judgment in professionals' choices regarding images to share and respond to. Building on de Freitas's (2012) proposal to use knot diagrams to map rhizomatic interactions in classrooms and extending it to the alternative space of social media, an analysis of the first two research phases reveals something of the complex interactions between lines of articulation and lines of flight – between constraining or controlling forces and urges to freedom – that influence image-sharing decisions. Choices about what images to share may be seen as the result of the interplay of multiple lines of articulation, producing tensions and energies that may give rise to lines of flight.

Professional guidelines and employer/institutional policies might be seen as lines of articulation that constrain and channel online behaviour, calling on professionals to avoid interacting online as the simplest means of avoiding risk. However a second, and in many ways contradictory, line of articulation is associated with the social networking platform itself. Twitter actively nudges its users to act, with software regularly providing updates on “popular” tweets, suggestions for who to follow, and statistics on users' own activity. These statistics, which are positioned as a proxy measure of popularity, may be particularly powerful drivers of activity; in addition, the informal conversations themselves include exhortations to tweet. Twitter's limit of 140 characters means that images inevitably seem to carry more information or emotion than can be carried in the text of a tweet – and a striking image can attract multiple reactions from other Twitter users, increasing the original user's “popularity”. In this way, the platform itself creates a line of articulation, calling on users to share both words and images.

Informal professional networks on Twitter thus exist in a space between two oppositional but knotted lines of articulation – a space full of tensions and desires. Data from the second phase of this research suggest that the sharing of particular images may sometimes represent lines of flight – bursts of energy that disrupt or challenge the status quo. Examples include images that transgress guidelines but were chosen to provoke new thinking or practice, or images that resist the erosion of autonomy and professional identity arising from increasingly managerial cultures of control by asserting strong community values. Other images may represent the creation of new lines of articulation – pathways that satisfy the demands of the social networking software while simultaneously reproducing the conventions and power structures required by professional bodies and employing organisations. Examples of these include images posted by teachers of post-it-note-based activities, described by one interviewee as the default response to an Ofsted visit.

The analysis also suggested that professional identity and values were important drivers producing these knotted lines of articulation and flight. In describing the images they choose to post and respond to, both teachers and midwives described how pride in their students, their own professional practice, their colleagues, their profession and their role in society led them to post particular images. In each case, a passionate commitment to their work, and to *sharing* their work with colleagues through the Twitter network, was a powerful force.

Recognition of these influences and values then fed into the design of the third phase of the research, involving workshops with students based around images shared in the online spaces. These were intended to encourage student professionals to engage critically with these images and reflect on aspects of professional judgment. These workshops are currently underway, and an analysis of students' experiences during them will be presented.

## References

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