



## Social Work and Social Media: Organizing in the Digital Age

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### Abstract

Social workers are trained to be actively involved in the lives of their clients and communities. They become seeped in the socio-cultural environments and lived realities of people negatively affected by oppression and social injustices. As such, it is easy for social workers to suffer from vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. Complicating this reality is the effect of social media on the wellbeing of social workers. The use of devices, such as smartphones and tablets, is used regularly in education and workplace settings. Whether for strictly professional purposes, or dotted with personal use throughout the day, we are one tap away from the vast world of social media and social networking sites. The majority of Americans that have these devices access news stories on sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. These stories can certainly help inform us on the broader more macro issues our clients and communities face. But they can also have a profound effect on our ability to repeatedly engage with values, beliefs, and systems that are harmful and dangerous to our clients and ourselves. Because of our dependence on our devices, and the constant barrage of especially negative news stories, how can social workers continue to do their work effectively? This perspective piece considers repeated exposure to negative news stories on Facebook and its effects on social workers engaged in community organizing. Implications for further research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Community organizing, Compassion fatigue, Macro practice, Social justice, Social work, Vicarious trauma

### Introduction

In July of 2016 Philando Castille was shot and killed by a Minnesota police officer. His girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, recorded the event with her cellphone from the passenger seat of the car in which Castille was shot. Using Facebook Live's video recording feature, Reynolds' live footage was instantly streaming on Facebook. Within a day, the shooting was the top news story both on television and online [1]. Castille's death became another statistic added to the growing number of primarily African American men killed by law enforcement officials. Coverage of these shootings went viral online, especially on social media sites. Facebook and Twitter feeds filled up with stories and videos of the killings. In response to the violence many people across the country united online under #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags, popularly used on Twitter, are now used widely across the Internet, including Facebook, to organize and emphasize specific messages [2]. They have become slogans and rally cries of online social movements, many of which have culminated in community action.

In the wake of the Castille shooting, a number of demonstrations and protests were organized and executed in Minnesota, and across

the country. The St. Paul chapter of Black Lives Matter organized a peaceful protest that ended up blocking the entrance to the Minnesota State Fair. Black Lives Matter was established in the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin shooting in 2012, and the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014. Having started as a cyber movement under #BlackLivesMatter, the group eventually took its mission and action into the community. The chapter-based organization is committed to "working for the validity of Black life" [3]. In response to the police-involved killings in black communities, Black Lives Matter organizes collective actions to raise awareness and hold law enforcement and decision-makers accountable across the nation.

### Background

We live in a technologically advanced world. In the last 20 years the Internet has grown exponentially in breadth, depth, and accessibility. Social workers, especially those engaged in community practice, are oftentimes involved directly or indirectly with many of these online and community social movements. Because social media is so accessible and so widely used it can be useful in organizing collective social action, such as the case of #BlackLivesMatter. However, as synergistic as it can be to instantly build cyber support that moves beyond the local affected community, does it come at a cost to social workers working in and with marginalized communities? Technology has changed many aspects of social work practice [4]. This includes the personal and professional use of social media by social workers [5]. Social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" [6]. One group of these Internet-based applications is social networking sites, applications that allow users to connect with others by inviting them to have access to personal profiles and send correspondence through messages [6] and wall posts. The NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice outlines ethical practice standards for the incorporation and utilization of technology in social work. This includes electronic communication such as E-mail, computer software to help track services, records databases, and websites. In terms of social media sites, the publication recommends that social workers convey themselves online in a professional manner that upholds the ethical and professional values and mission of the profession [7].

Inspired by the recent and ongoing coverage online of traumatic events, such as police-involved brutality against black communities, this perspective essay considers the extent to which exposure to negative news stories contributes to vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue in social workers involved in community organizing.

It considers the following questions:

1. How does repeated exposure to the negative stories on Facebook affect the psychological wellbeing of social workers engaged in community organizing?
2. To what extent does the psychological effects of repeated exposure to negative news stories on Facebook have an impact on the social worker's ability to continuously engage in compassionate and energetic macro-level social justice work?

### Macro Practice Social Work

Macro practice social work utilizes a wide range of methods designed to address issues within the larger social environment [8]. It seeks to prevent social problems rather than treat the effects of them [9]. The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers states, "Social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" [4]. It goes on to say, "Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people" [4]. One type of macro practice intervention is community organizing. Community organizing can be defined as, "working with people to help them recognize that they face shared problems and to discover that by joining together they can fight to overcome these problems" [10]. There are different kinds of organizing. Neighborhood and community organizing bring people from the same geographic community together, whereas functional organizing brings together like-minded people around similar interests or concerns [8]. Using the Internet and social media for organizing purposes serves as an example of functional organizing.

The use of Internet technology, including Facebook, can be used for organizing purposes. In social work, Internet technology can be used for such things as awareness raising of social issues, community building and activism, and organizing [11]. Brady, Young, and McLeod used social media technologies, including Facebook, to advocate for the relocation of the 2014 Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) conference from the Grand Hyatt in San Antonio, Texas. According to the authors, social work academics worked with UNITE HERE labor organizers to advocate for the relocation of SSWR in order to support worker rights and economic justice of marginalized hotel staff. Facebook offered a platform for visibility of the issues, and was used to mobilize constituents across the country. Secure Groups on Facebook allowed for more privacy than other similar sites in which organizers could develop collective actions [12].

Organizers mobilize communities on issues that affect their lives. They help build and support confidence and capacity among community members, and link communities with other resources such as information or organizations [10]. Because social workers work in the community, and with some of the most oppressed populations, they tend to be more aware of the social problems affecting those groups [13]. It wasn't until the 1960s that more schools of social work began to regard community organization as a concentration of professional practice [14]. Schools of social work now provide the most extensive university training for community organizers with curricula that cover macro practice methods, as well as working with diverse groups [10]. Within the last several years, schools of social work have begun to address the uses and challenges of incorporating Internet technology in practice in their curricula [15]. While beyond the scope of this article, it is something that deserves further attention given the increasing use of social networking sites for community organizing purposes.

### Online News

Today we rely less on television and newspapers for our news instead accessing stories via the Internet. Social media sites have become

some of the main news outlets [16]. One constant characteristic of the news is that it is dominated by negative stories [17]. Media bias, or how news sources influence our worldviews, can ultimately have a negative effect on social norms and day-to-day attitudes and behaviors [18]. For example, media coverage of violence and drugs influences the public's perception of racial minority communities, suggesting the best way to deal with them is through eradication [14]. The Internet has only served to hasten the shaping of public perception because it provides immediate access to stories, many of which are reported from biased angles. Internet users perpetuate skewed story frames in their news sharing behaviors online. For example, people are more likely to share stories that align with their own personal beliefs, preferences, and values [18]. The amount of diversity (e.g., race, nationality, gender identity) on a user's Facebook page or Twitter account influences their knowledge of different social issues, and associated news stories they share [16].

Using agenda setting in the media – how certain issues are highlighted by news outlets impacts the salience of those issues with the public [19]. Findings from a study of college students' usage of the Internet for news suggests that, along the lines of agenda setting, social media users are becoming "micro agenda setters" [16]. They turn reality into socially constructed senses of reality. These senses of reality are experienced differently depending on the identities of people comprising different networks and how they consume the information that may be passed through "liking" or sharing a story. Because we tend to compose our social networks of people with similar beliefs and values as our own, this can impact not only the kinds of news stories that show up on our news feeds, but also the frequency in which they show up. This results in constant, repeated exposure to certain issues.

### Facebook and the News

In 2004 Facebook began as a social networking site connecting college students. In just over 10 years its reach includes well over a billion users every month [20], of all ages, from all over the world. In recent years the face of Facebook has changed. No longer are people posting as many photos and updates of themselves, rather, they are seeing, posting, and sharing news on the site [21]. A 2016 article on Engadget entitled "2016 was the year that Facebook tried to take over the world" suggests that Facebook has become a media company. From its use of editorial boards to determine trending articles and partnering with other media organizations to produce "instant articles," to censoring videos and images due to what the site considers graphic content, "Facebook has all the markings of a media company" [22]. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study on news access on various social media platforms, Facebook was listed as the largest social networking site with a user base constituting 67 percent of the U.S. adult population. Of this, almost half used Facebook to access news stories [23]. Facebook is one of the most useful technologies because of both its widespread use and how people engage with it (e.g., information sharing, "Likes," formation of social identities, and engaging in discussions). This engagement can inform others about important issues, and inspire engaged discussion and social action [24].

Evidence exists illustrating the use of Facebook for the organization and mobilization of community action in response to social issues. In an exploration of the ways in which social networking sites were linked to the gathering of diverse individuals in the same physical space during the #Occupy movements, Facebook helped create interpersonal networks and allowed for the gathering of individuals in shared spaces through "viral communication flows" [25]. Through interviews and content analyses of Facebook comments, one study reports that Facebook is used not only to create an online movement against social issues, but also to mobilize offline activism. The author suggests that through users' interactions with Facebook to create Groups and fan pages, and engagement in discussion and sharing of

photos and videos, online activity eventually becomes social action offline [26]. Being able to connect with others online helps to foster a sense of community and collective identity. The construction of the comments shared in the online community (e.g., those urging people to take action) reifies a sense of community and helps push users offline and into the streets.

### Negative News and Social Media Burnout

Pain inflicted upon black bodies has been available for public consumption for many years [27]. Amy Ray Stewart writes about the racial impacts of the dissemination of lynching photographs and postcards in the Southern United States in the late 1800s through the mid-1900s. From a psychoanalytic framework Stewart contends that the postcards invigorated violent racist attitudes and behaviors that promulgated white supremacy [28]. Today, Facebook serves as a postal pipeline. While mailing postcards in the past was a way to share images and sentiments with others, today we can instantly post photos and videos to Facebook. This results in a constant inundation of imagery that portrays violence, mayhem, and death.

While compassion fatigue has been widely examined in studies of the wellbeing of those in helping professions, there is relevance in the mass media and the effects it has on how the public views and deals with social problems. “This mass-mediated brand of compassion fatigue is characterized as a negative societal phenomenon, with ominous implications for the way that Americans perceive and respond to social problems” [29]. Again, this has implications for community organizers who use and depend on social media to engage and mobilize constituents into action. In research on social media fatigue, the Limited Capacity Model (LCM) suggests that people are able to process only so much of the seemingly endless amount of information they are exposed to via social media sites [30]. While findings from this study pointed more toward such factors as boredom with content, unfamiliarity with new layouts and usability, and issues of privacy and confidentiality, I argue that the LCM could also be applied to our ability to process the amount of negative news stories that can fill up Facebook newsfeeds. As Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron suggested 20 years ago:

When messages about a social problem reach the point of saturation, rather than simply having no impact on an audience, they may have a negative impact on the audience, which might be measured in subjects’ affective, attitudinal, and behavioral responses to the issue. [29].

Their study suggests that compassion fatigue does not just occur from direct personal contact with the suffering, but can also be a response resulting from repeated exposure to social problems conveyed through mass media [29]. I speculate that between the high levels of compassion fatigue and VT in social workers, and the social media burnout that results from constantly being inundated with negative news, that the emotional wellbeing, attitudes toward social problems, and the subsequent work of community organizers could be negatively affected.

Technostress is the stress that can result from continuous accessing of social media and the blurring of personal and professional life [31]. In examining the effects of personal use of social media on task performance, technostress, and happiness levels, one study suggests that the more an individual uses social media, the lower their task performance and happiness levels, and the higher their technostress levels [32]. It would stand to reason, then, that repeated exposure to negative stories leads to negative emotional responses. Together with the implications of higher levels of technostress it could be hypothesized that the use of social networking sites, and the content community organizers are exposed to on them, could negatively influence subsequent attitudes and energy to continuously engage in social justice work.

### Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue in Social Work

Research focusing on experiences of vicarious trauma and compassion

fatigue among people working in helping professions such as psychology, nursing, and social work has been steadily growing. Assisting people who have been victimized can be an emotionally taxing experience for those offering help and support [33]. “The ability of humans to regulate their own emotional responses in the face of another’s pain is necessary if they are to be optimally helpful to others who are distressed” [34]. Vicarious trauma (VT) refers to the ways in which a professional’s views of themselves, and the world around them, change as a result of exposure to trauma. These changes are persistent and amass over time to result in permanent shifts in views that can negatively impact the work of the professional [35]. Compassion fatigue is another potential outcome for professionals working with traumatized individuals. Compassion fatigue refers to a syndrome among those in helping professions that mimics post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It can also occur from exposure to trauma experienced by others. Similar to VT, compassion fatigue also negatively affects the work of helping professionals [36]. “The meaning of compassion is to bear suffering. Compassion fatigue, like any other kind of fatigue, reduces our capacity or our interest in bearing the suffering of others” [37]. It should be noted the while VT and compassion fatigue differ in phenomenology, the majority of the literature uses the terms synonymously to refer to negative effects of working with trauma survivors [38].

Findings from research indicate predictors of VT and compassion fatigue, symptomatology, and the role of personal trauma history. Emotional separation and occupational stress are strong predictors of compassion fatigue [39]. This includes such things as large caseload size, long work hours [40], and position and experience within an organization [41]. Findings from a study of 532 trauma specialists reported increased levels of compassion fatigue among professionals that have higher percentages of people with PTSD on their caseloads [42]. Higher rates of compassion fatigue in child welfare workers are in younger workers, women, and those in supervisory positions [41]. In terms of personal functioning and symptomatology, in a study of 1,192 child welfare professionals, one third reported experiencing vicarious trauma that negatively influences their interpersonal functioning, as well as emotional engagement. Additionally, over half of the participants reported a desire to leave the field of child welfare because of the stress [43]. In a study of 282 social workers, the majority had experienced symptoms associated with compassion fatigue, with just over 15 percent meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD. The symptoms most often reported were intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and numbing [44]. Finally, personal trauma history of professionals has been shown to be a strong indicator of compassion fatigue. In a study of 171 licensed clinical social workers, higher rates of compassion fatigue were reported in professionals with their own personal trauma history [34]. Similarly, those professionals with a trauma history have higher compassion fatigue scores, and higher emotional exhaustion [45].

Extant literature on VT and compassion fatigue focuses on those engaged in clinical work with trauma survivors. Currently, there is no research that specifically examines VT and compassion fatigue in macro practice social workers engaged in community organizing with marginalized communities. Much of the literature cited here reports on the need for manageable caseloads and reasonable work hours. However, oftentimes the work of community organizers pushes beyond what would be considered normal working hours. Furthermore, it is worth considering that organizers using Facebook, depending on the amount of usage, are constantly plugged in to their work.

Negative stories on Facebook can also have a personal impact on the organizer. For example, if the organizer identifies as a person of color, and is working on an organizing campaign in response to police-involved shootings of people of color, exposure to these racist incidents, and subsequent repeated news coverage, may result in symptoms akin to PTSD [46]. The lifetime prevalence of PTSD is

higher among persons of color compared to whites [47]. Reactions to racism and ethnoviolence can have profound negative effects on the psychological and physical wellbeing of a person [48]. Since people of color and other marginalized groups broadly lack access to the media, their experiences are often minimized and erased, or re-crafted in such a way to perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce discrimination [49].

Writing about the 1991 police beating of Rodney King, Alexander asks, “What do black people say to each other to describe their relationship to their racial group, when that relationship is crucially forged by incidents of physical and psychic violence which boil down to the ‘fact’ of abject blackness” [27]? This question is crucial to this article because many social workers may be brought to community organizing for personal reasons such as shared identity with communities in which they work. Constantly seeing themselves and their communities brutalized or cast in a negative light can affect their wellbeing and work. News stories illustrating suffering by those who are already victimized can lead to the emotional distress of the person consuming the news story. The more violent or brutal the nature of a news story, the higher ratings of emotional distress by the consumer. Emotional testimony also contributes to higher levels of distress by the consumer [17]. For example, watching the tearful testimony of Diamond Reynolds both during the shooting of Philando Castille and at the press conference following the incident is likely to cause more emotional distress in the viewer compared to official news reports with no personal testimony. In terms of social movements, many of which take place in various forms on social media sites, especially for those who are involved in the social movement, any news of setbacks experienced by the group will negatively affect the active consumer [17]. This suggests effects by affiliation, which may be a significant factor for community organizers as oftentimes they share identities and experiences with the communities with which they are organizing [10, 50].

### Implications for Further Research

This paper identifies a gap in the literature on how exposure to negative news stories on social networking sites such as Facebook affect macro practice social workers engaged in community organizing. Organizers have and will continue to use the Internet and social networking sites as a space where the mobilization of groups of people around a cause can occur. Oftentimes, as evidenced by some of the research presented here, these online movements move offline into the community. While there is emerging research on the use of social media to organize and affect change as a response to the widespread dissemination of news stories featuring human suffering and oppression, there is little to no scholarly research examining the effects of constant exposure to such stories on the emotional wellbeing of macro practice social workers organizing with marginalized communities.

Vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue have been readily studied with clinical helping professionals, however, there appears to be a gap in the literature for how macro practice social workers are affected. Much of the emerging research on Internet use and social work focuses on ethical implications for clinical practice [11, 15, 51]. Furthermore, while research exists on the negative effects of heavy social media use on wellbeing and productivity, no research exists on how community organizers are impacted by what they are constantly exposed to on social networking sites, especially when they may rely heavily on them for their organizing and mobilizing tactics.

Implications for future research include conducting qualitative studies with social workers trained as community organizers who actively use social networking sites in their work. How organizers use social networking sites, the role of negative news in their organizing efforts, and the psychological effects of exposure to negative news should all be examined. Studies considering the effects of personal histories of trauma should also be conducted, especially because many social workers enter into the profession due to personal connections,

or shared identities and experiences with their clients or community members. In particular, the extent to which community organizers that are themselves from historically marginalized and oppressed communities experience VT and compassion fatigue as a result of repeated exposure to negative news stories about their own identities and communities should be examined. Finally, as previous research has shown, the use of the Internet and social networking sites has a positive impact in terms of consciousness-raising, visibility, and mobilization around certain social issues. Whether or not exposure to negative news stories online can be a positive motivating factor in organizing efforts should be further explored. Continued inquiry and investigation into the relationship between macro practice social work and social media use can lead to the creation and revision of macro-level interventions that consider the best interests of the communities involved, and protect and support community organizers in their compassionate social justice work.

### Conclusion

This perspective piece has considered the ways in which constant exposure to negative news stories on Facebook may impact the wellbeing of macro practice social workers that use the site in their organizing work with marginalized communities. Social workers are increasingly relying on Internet technology in their professional practice. Additionally, many people rely on social networking sites such as Facebook for news. With the ongoing coverage of police-involved violence against black and Native American communities, and a surge in hate crimes with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, we are being flooded with negative news stories. Extant literature has revealed the existence of social media burnout and fatigue when constantly exposed to negative news. Similarly, there is a growing body of research examining VT and compassion fatigue among helping professionals exposed to the traumatic experiences of their clients. However, the extent to which community organizers experience VT and compassion fatigue is far lacking in the research. Macro practice social workers using Facebook and other social media sites are constantly exposed to trauma and violence. As technology changes, and as the profession continues to incorporate it into practice, it is necessary to monitor the ways in which it affects the wellbeing of the organizer and their ability to continue to engage in compassionate social justice work.

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