

## Digital social work

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# Digital social work: Conceptualising a hybrid anticipatory practice

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## Abstract

While the use of digital media and technologies has impacted social work for several years, the Covid-19 pandemic and need for physical distancing dramatically accelerated the systematic use of video calls and other digital practices to interact with service users. This article draws from our research into child protection to show how digital social work was used during the pandemic, critically analyse the policy responses, and make new concepts drawn from digital and design anthropology available to the profession to help it make sense of these developments. While policy responses downgraded digital practices to at best a last resort, we argue that the digital is now an inevitable and necessary element of social work practice, which must be understood as a hybrid practice that integrates digital practices such as video calls and face-to-face interactions. Moving forward, hybrid digital social work should be a future-ready element of practice, designed to accommodate uncertainties as they arise and sensitive to the improvisatory practice of social workers.

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Digital social work, trust, anxiety, digital intimacy, digital materiality, Covid-19 pandemic

**Introduction**

This article argues for greater attention to, and acknowledgement of, digital media and technologies in social work. Drawing on research into child protection, it critically analyses existing academic and policy references to ‘virtual social work’, which emerged in the United Kingdom during the Covid-19 pandemic. It argues for a concept of ‘digital social work’ as a hybrid practice, understood as an inevitable and necessary element of social work practice.

Conventionally child protection social work has involved face-to-face practices of assessing children’s safety and risk in their homes. Social workers’ feelings of trust or anxiety that emerge from these intimate encounters are pivotal in their evaluations. Thus, social work is inevitably an anticipatory practice. There is a continual movement between professional categories and sensory engagement as social workers anticipate what could happen next, and put processes in place to mitigate both their anxieties and risks to children. During the Covid-19 pandemic, home visits created new risks and anxieties and child protection social work was improvised and performed in new ways using digital technologies and media. The ways social workers sensed trust and evaluated safety shifted correspondingly.

This article has two purposes. First, to advance the concept of Digital Social Work as a hybrid form of social work practice, that incorporates and anticipates the physical, in-person home visit, rather than being separate to it. Second, to engage this concept to present the findings and implications of research into the use of digital technologies and media in child protection social work practice during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. Our approach builds on ethnographic-theoretical dialogues generated in digital anthropology (Horst and Miller, 2012) and digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016b) to define the digital as never separate from either our material (i.e. physical) environment and objects or our social relations. We argue that, even when a social work visit takes place entirely through video calls, it is nevertheless deeply informed by what occurs in the physical world and everyday life. In contrast, the notion of the ‘virtual’, used to describe exclusively online encounters, is treated by leading social scientists, as ‘no longer helpful’ for understanding how the internet is embedded in everyday life (Hine, 2015). Following these distinctions, we argue that the digital (rather than virtual) social work we witnessed in 2020 has had greater benefit and potential than is currently acknowledged. The UK Department of Education’s conceptualisation of ‘virtual’ social work visits (Department for Education, 2021) does not account for or properly acknowledge the value of the new forms of social work – which flexibly combine in-person visits, video calls and other digital practices.

As we elaborate below, digital social work should be understood and developed as a hybrid, anticipatory and flexible practice. By ‘hybrid’ we mean that digital social work is both digital and physical simultaneously. By ‘anticipatory’ we refer to how social workers engaged with digital media and technologies while thinking ahead towards future in-person visits in relation to the safety or risk of the families they worked with. The real physical home visit was thought of and imagined as part of digital encounters. Moving forward, digital social work could be a future-ready element of practice, designed to flexibly accommodate uncertainties as they arise and sensitive to how social workers improvise as they navigate emerging possibilities.

Digital technologies have ‘crept in to’ social work practice (Mishna et al., 2012) and brought new opportunities and challenges (Reamer, 2013). Recent academic discussion has generated valuable empirical contributions and policy implications concerning: social media and social work (Cooner et al., 2020; Megele and Buzzi, 2020); e-social work, including ‘online research, patient treatment (individual therapy, group and community dynamics), training and teaching of social workers and the monitoring of social service programmes’ (López Peláez and Marcuello-Servós, 2018: 801); digital technology use in standardising social work practice and limiting practitioner discretion (Philips, 2019); technology use of young people in care and involved with social services (Sen, 2016); social work students and practitioners’ digital literacy (Turner, 2016; Taylor, 2017); future possibilities of digital therapeutics, monitoring and communication in gerontological social work (Mois and Fortuna, 2020); using digital technology in the reconfiguration of offices and mobile, ‘agile’ working (Disney et al., 2019; Jeyashingham, 2020); and social workers’ experiences of ‘virtual social work’ during Covid-19 (Cook and Zschomler, 2020). Where it has engaged with theory, much of this work has harnessed universal theoretical narratives, including Castells (2010) theory of the network society (Sen, 2016, López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018; Megele and Buzzi, 2020), Bauman’s (2003) argument that connectivity itself has become more important than meaning transmission (Sen, 2016), Haraway’s (1984) notion of the cyborg, and McLuhan’s (1964) idea that ‘the medium is the message’ (Mishna et al., 2012, Megele and Buzzi, 2020). These developments however provide neither a unified approach, nor a mode of understanding the experiential dimensions of practice. Castells, Bauman, Haraway and McLuhan’s theoretical perspectives are different from each other. Moreover, rather than emerging from dialogues with first-hand empirical research they focus on sociological units and processes or the representational and symbolic layers of culture. We argue that to understand the evolving relationship between social work, and digital media and technology we need to account for the specificities of how people improvise in their relationships with media and technologies within the contingent circumstances of continually shifting everyday life circumstances and experiences, and to harness concepts from digital anthropology and media studies to achieve this. As Jeyashingham (2020: 239) suggests, in social work practice ‘humans, software and machines are all entangled together in the social relations, communication and sense-making

that occur in contemporary work'. Additionally, we propose digital social work is an emergent hybrid and anticipatory practice, in which particular digital, material and social configurations are ongoingly reshaped through the anticipatory modes that characterise social work as it happens *in practice* and the regulatory stances of social work *as a practice*.

## Methodology

We draw on our qualitative longitudinal study of the impact of Covid-19 on social work, child protection and families and in particular our question concerning: What innovative digital methods are being adopted and how can they be most productively used during and after the pandemic? Twenty-nine social workers, 10 social work managers and 9 family support workers, all involved in child protection, from four local authority areas in England were interviewed approximately every month during the Covid-19 pandemic between April and December 2020. Forty-one were women and 7 men. 7 participants identified as BAME. We undertook interviews remotely by video call using WhatsApp, FaceTime, Skype, Teams, and Zoom. In previous research we have adopted 'sensory ethnography' involving the researcher shadowing practitioners and families, observing practice on home visits and elsewhere (Ferguson 2018). This was impossible since the pandemic made in-person research encounters unsafe. However, by using 'digital ethnography' (Pink et al., 2016b) we observed 4 social workers' video-recorded online meetings with families, followed by a reflective interview with each social worker. We interviewed 22 family members involved with the same practitioners in our study. Our existing experiences of researching in-person social work encounters (Ferguson 2018) and our layered encounters with social workers in our 'remote' or 'distance' video-based research (Pink, 2021) engendered collaborative and empathetic learning and knowing with and about participants' experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo 12 Plus. The study was ethically approved by the participating universities and social work agencies. Participants and research sites are anonymised, informed consent was required for all data collection, and clear data storage and disposal procedures are in place.

## Digital media and technology and social work

Megele and Buzzi's (2020) important work reveals the complexities of the relationship between social work and social media as it crosses public-personal and online-offline contexts, and calls for further investigation. Growing interest in uses of digital and social media and technology in social work with children and youth, has led researchers to argue that dominant assumptions about how marginalised or vulnerable youth engage with digital media are problematic in their focus on the negative and risk. Based on empirical research with young people associated with the care system, Sen (2016) reports this group's uses of digital media and

technologies are similar to others of their age, albeit with lower access to technology. Wong's research with Scottish and Hong Kong youth (2020: 1231, 1241) queries depictions of 'hidden youth as self-isolated', to highlight positive elements of digital media in mediating the connections of marginalised young people. Drawing on empirical evidence of social workers using Facebook to investigate families, typically without their consent, Cooner et al. (2020) show how using digital platforms can infringe human rights to privacy, while also revealing risks to children. Philips (2019) auto-ethnographic work shows how professional judgement and practices are increasingly framed by standardised digital tools and technologies. This growing knowledge about how digital and social media and technologies are emerging in the professional work of social workers and amongst groups of young people cared for in child protection social work is shaping a critical agenda towards recognising the potential of the digital in these contexts. This agenda broadly concurs (but engages little) with an extensive body of ethnographic and qualitative research about social media (e.g. Miller, 2016) and digital technologies (e.g. Fors et al., 2019) in adult and family everyday life, in young people's and children's lives online (e.g. Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016), and about teenagers' hidden digital technology and media skills and practices (Scolari, 2018).

This context, where digital and social media are to varying degrees inextricable from, rather than separate to, the lives of both social workers and families is fundamental for understanding how everyday realities and politics of digital technologies and media were implicated in social work during the pandemic and beyond it. Media scholar Madianou identifies the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster beyond the 'presence of the pathogen itself', revealing and causing 'underlying inequalities' and how its course is determined by 'social, political, economic, environmental, and cultural factors' (Madianou, 2020: 1). She argues that in the United Kingdom the lack of public scrutiny of the digital practices that emerged as part of the public health response to Covid-19 'amplified' social inequalities in a context where statistics reveal that 'virtually all (97%) privately schooled children had access to a computer at home [while], one in five of those on free school meals—a common indicator used to measure disadvantage in the United Kingdom—had no access' (Madianou, 2020: 2). The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated uses of digital media and technologies in child protection social work, raising such concerns both about social work itself and the young people impacted by social inequalities, and who are most likely to be supported by child protection social workers. Indeed such digital inequalities are impacting on communities around the world and are constituted within global power relations (Lavalette et al. 2020).

Golightly and Holloway (2020: 1297) emphasise the threat that social distancing restrictions pose to the 'relationship-based skills' of traditional social work. Their comments articulate some of the concerns of social workers we interviewed at the beginning of our study, in describing '[h]ome visits using visors and other personal protection equipment; the prohibition of reassuring touch with fearful,

distressed or confused individuals; online conferencing and meetings replacing more inclusive and potentially supportive multi-professional decision-making fora' as 'changes forced upon us which challenge our preferred modes of interaction' (ibid). Publications related to social work and child protection during Covid-19 commonly cite difficulties involved in shifting from the sensory intimacy of the home visit as a central pillar of child protection practice (Ferguson, 2011; Cook and Zschomler, 2020; Golightley and Holloway, 2020); multi-agency working, video calls and conferencing (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020); safeguarding young people at risk of exploitation (Racher and Brodie, 2020); effects on staff of working from home (Cook et al., 2020); and innovative and humane ways of working, online and in person, including 'e-mentoring' (Munro, 2020).

Organisational policies and practices differed across our studied sites. Several social work organisations in our sample made WhatsApp available for use on organisation-issued mobile phones in the early weeks of the first national lockdown, which began on 23rd March 2020. This allowed social workers to make video calls to families with suitable devices. Skype, Teams and Zoom were variously used for group meetings and conferences, and sometimes also to call families directly. While SMS text messaging is an established method of communication in social work (Mishna et al. 2012), our findings suggest the introduction of WhatsApp messaging sometimes encouraged richer, more informal and more reciprocal communication than text-based exchanges. Social workers shared examples of text messages, images and videos sent to keep in regular contact with them or to share children's significant events and achievements. However, the social workers in our study also emphasised how in online interactions they missed the sensory experience of being in service users' homes and they searched for a new language to account for the modes of intimacy that participated in these assessments (Pink et al., 2020: 29). This led to feelings of anxiety that they were unable to make accurate or reliable assessments of families and their homes without a home visit, and to feelings of distrust of service users when they were unable to view the wider context of who was in the home, or feel and sense what it was like to live in, on a video call.

Cook and Zschomler's (2020: 4–5) research highlights 'virtual home visits' as missing the sensory and atmospheric elements of the in-person visit, questions of confidentiality, safety, establishing relationships with new service users and digital exclusion. They also note advantages whereby social workers became more available to families through shorter but more frequent video calls with them, in place of travelling for home visits, and that some younger people preferred this less invasive mode of communicating (Cook and Zschomler, 2020: 3–4). The first stage of our fieldwork revealed how social workers had started to create 'the sense of intimacy required to support their practice digitally' (Pink et al., 2020: 28) involving generating new modes of closeness, ways of sensing, understanding, care, responsiveness and support through video calls, as social workers and families improvised during an incremental process of learning how to do social work with digital technologies and media. Despite their reservations, some social

workers and local authorities worked to counter digital exclusion by providing devices and broadband costs and to create new ways of being close to service users using digital technologies and media, and to know when to respond to a risk assessment by visiting wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

As our nine months of fieldwork progressed, the relationship between video calls and in-person visits became increasingly blurred, as some social workers recognised some ‘face-to-face’ elements in video calls, or made video calls in combination with in-person visits. We and social workers themselves started to ask if digital home visits and online conferencing are necessarily or always less inclusive, reassuring or untrustworthy than face-to-face social work visits and meetings. The answer is contingent (ie it depends), since in a world where there is a digital element to almost everything we do, even when it remains unapparent to us, digital social work can be differently, rather than less, reassuring and effective than its face-to-face counterpart. We saw new feelings of familiarity, trust and confidence emerge for some social workers and families. While this does not suggest that face-to-face social work should be replaced by digital alternatives, it renders the UK Government’s dismissal of video calls and digital visits as only a last resort deeply problematic:

During periods of national lockdown, the use of virtual visits should be the exception and can be used as a result of public health advice or when it is not reasonably practicable to have a face-to-face visit otherwise for a reason relating to the incidence or transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) (Department for Education, 2021)

Such a stance does not acknowledge the possibilities offered by digital social work as a hybrid, rather than virtual, practice.

## **Conceptualising digital social work**

The theoretical foundations of our approach lie in: phenomenological (Ingold, 2000), design (Smith and Otto, 2016) and futures anthropology (Pink and Salazar, 2017) which examine how people experience, sense, learn and improvise in the contingent circumstances of a continually emerging world; and media phenomenology, where ‘by finding new ways to do things... the contingency of our being-in-the-world is revealed and new ways of being are made real’ (Markham, 2020: 3). This approach sees media and technologies as an inevitable part of continually changing everyday environments, and helps to understanding of what occurred as social workers and families began to engage digitally during Covid-19.

Design anthropological concepts of trust and anxiety explain how we experience and act in relation to our feelings concerning immediate or short-term futures. Existing research suggests we trust when we create or find ourselves in circumstances in which we feel familiar and confident, often generated through everyday routines (Pink et al., 2018). Concurring with critiques of transactional or interactional notions of trust (Corsin Jimenez, 2011) we understand trust and anxiety as



emerging from our wider social, sensory and material circumstances. Thus, feelings of anxiety surface in moments of crisis, when that sense of confidence cannot be experienced and where uncertainties cannot be relieved through routine actions. Here we engage these experiential concepts to express the anticipatory modes of the sensory and embodied dimensions of home visits identified by Ferguson (2018), including those undertaken digitally. We examine how social workers' experiences of trust and anxiety were related to their perceptions of safety and risk.

To understand the context of these anticipatory experiences we conceptualise home visits as involving 'digital materiality', whereby the idea of anything being purely digital, physical or face-to-face is redundant (Pink et al., 2016a). The concept of digital materiality expresses contemporary times where the digital is integral to how our everyday environments and social relations emerge and change. Social work practice likewise, in using digital technologies and media, is always constituted as a digital materiality. An actual or possible future home visit, for instance – whether undertaken in-person or digitally - is always made sense of in terms of prior experiences of being physically or digitally present in homes. Thus, we understand the anticipatory feelings – of trust and anxiety - through which social workers experienced digital social work as pivotal to how this digital materiality and the social relations associated with it are constituted.

### **Digital intimacy, safety and trust**

Above we emphasised the intimacy of face-to-face home visits. In media studies the concept of 'digital intimacy' refers to modes of intimacy generated through digital social media apps and platforms - ranging from public displays of intimacy including webcamming and youtubers, to private intimacies generated or maintained through commercial platforms, including texting and sexting (Andreassen et al., 2017; Dobson et al., 2018). Digital intimacy is constituted within technologically saturated circumstances and practices of everyday life, where people share what is important to them (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013). Evidence of such digital intimacies in digital social work emerged from the outset of the pandemic as one social worker described her experience of an early video call where she performed what Ferguson (2011) calls 'intimate child protection practice'; as she put it, 'when the young man, it is hard not to say his name actually . . . it feels so personal that you should be discussing his name but that's weird'. Other examples included detailed accounts of how workers interacted with babies through the screen and felt rapport and an intimate connection was built (Pink et al., 2020). Sometimes digital intimacy was seen as more beneficial than in-person visits wearing a mask and other PPE. As a social worker expressed it: "I would rather have a difficult conversation with somebody over video link . . . so that they can at least see my whole face, rather than going in to the home and having what I would normally always want to do in person because like half of my face would have to be covered". Such situations show how digital intimacies were generated, and that they created meaningful and beneficial outcomes for families. These insights indicate how social

work practice might employ digital intimacies in the future by building on the possibilities they offer for engaging with service users through a hybrid approach.

Our later findings after several months of the pandemic confirmed how digital intimacy enabled social workers to sense relationships of trust that assured them that the families were safe. Social workers commented on how sometimes video calls were a preferred mode of communication, even if this did not include all members of the same family. Thus, we can understand digital intimacy as emerging within an ecology of video calls and in-person relations. While family members who agreed to participate in our study do not represent all service users, the positive experiences that some had of (hybrid) social work – which included video calls, WhatsApp messaging, texting and email – make the benefits clear.

Sometimes the modes of digital intimacy generated were beneficial to and even preferred by social workers and families. As one mother put it, before she met her social worker in person: “It definitely helped. . . . In some ways it might have been better? I am a bit of a crier”. Even when expressing reservations concerning not being there in person, social workers often identified successful video call relationships with parents. For instance, three of the video calls social workers recorded for us involved women social workers talking one-to-one with mothers for extended periods. It was striking to witness the degree to which the mothers engaged with the calls as a platform on which to report in detail about their own experiences, feelings, their children and their relationships with other family members. They described the intricacies of different emotions, relationships and incidents with fathers, relatives, schools and so on, as they sought to address issues they were working on with the social workers. These deeply socially situated and intimate modes of storying experience, revealed video calls as potential safe spaces and sites of trust, a finding that resonates with reports of successful online psychotherapy and counselling during the pandemic (Simpson et al., 2020). In each of these cases the social workers felt confident that the mothers were not seeking to conceal anything.

For example, Margaret is a Black and Asian Minority Ethnicity (BAME) social worker, and thus more vulnerable to the virus herself. She was anxious about undertaking in-person visits and had mainly used WhatsApp with families and young people and had Microsoft Teams for meetings. During the pandemic, she worked from home or in a private room at work to undertake video calls. Margaret formed part of the team working with Susan, her two younger children, and her late teenaged son who had become violent at home, and was subsequently moved to a foster home. The trust between Susan and Margaret was evident during the recorded call as Margaret guided Susan in a discussion where she considered her priorities and feelings, as her case would soon be closed. Margaret described how she would know if Susan was anxious during a video call, as she would be “looking back a lot”, say her son was coming downstairs, or become quiet. Margaret felt that the one-to-one support Susan had accessed through texting and video calls had benefitted her by building her confidence and empowering her through solution-focused questions. When we interviewed Susan

(separately from Margaret) she said “I had to voice it” during the call, meaning openly express her experience and feelings. The circumstances of intimacy and trust created by the video call meant she could surface what she felt. Yet, we emphasise that the process involved was a hybrid mode of digital social work, Susan also had in person meetings at home and phone calls with another social worker, and phone calls with an organisation providing support around domestic abuse. In one instance she felt that an in-person visit was crucial since, in her words:

Maybe things wouldn't have gone in the right direction if the social worker hadn't been here. When my son was kicking off I couldn't just quickly get the phone. She was here and he was kicking off and I was pleased it made her realise the situation.

Another video shared with us, of a social worker's conversation with a young couple and a newborn baby was similarly intimate, as the couple discussed with her how they were going about navigating their relationships with family members who were associated with cases of abuse. A series of in-person visits took place before the pandemic and after lockdown in March 2020 the social work team had determined that video would be suitable, as the risk was manageable and this would protect the family from coronavirus. As national restrictions relaxed, national guidance for social work organisations encouraged visiting in-person even more strongly, with local services soon following. From 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020, it was advised that: '[w]e expect social workers to make face to face visits wherever possible' (Department for Education, 2020). However, some social workers became more skilled at judging where video calls were beneficial, and where there were risks:

some families who we know are sometimes quite deceiving will use that to their advantage whereas the families that we did video with we did trust them; we knew and we would ask and we could be really quite forthcoming with what we wanted, and that was great, but some families will just refuse as you probably can imagine.

It should also be stressed that a hybrid approach did work effectively with some families who were reluctant to be involved with social workers. With respect to working directly with children, social workers were often apprehensive about using video calls and were offered little in terms of training from their employers. They reported mixed experiences: younger children sometimes communicated successfully with social workers on video calls, but also sometimes did not engage or ended calls abruptly when they lost interest. Social workers reported more successful calls with older children, as the following put it during the first lockdown:

the teenagers that I work with have been much more chatty on the phone like on the video calls rather than in person and I don't know whether that is to do with the importance of social media in their lives or it maybe feels like it is less invasive than a social worker coming in to your home with a badge on ... it has been more difficult

for younger children . . . in terms of building those relationships and maintaining them quite often, especially with kids three or four years old it is a case of they will grab the phone off Mum and then they will put it on the sofa and go and play and forget that I am there.

Some social workers continued using video calls with certain children and families when national restrictions were relaxed and in-person visiting was expected by managers. This was usually when there were specific concerns about risk of infection or when the social worker or family were clinically vulnerable. Video calls – when judged to be appropriate – were also used to enable more regular visits to children in a different geographical area, or occasionally when a strong preference was expressed by a family member. One social worker continued to video call a young person anxious about infection risk for several months after she had resumed in-person visiting for most of her caseload. In September 2020, some six months into the pandemic, she described how her next visit would entail seeing him in person for the first time. In the meantime, however she felt video calls had been beneficial:

the video calls have been working quite well for him, so he's 14 and it's actually opened up our communication a little bit I feel, so he's actually kind of initiated video calling me sometimes when something happens in terms of, just like he got a new kitten and he wanted to show me and that's been quite nice.

Thus, when video calls become part of the routines of contact and support between social workers and families, they can create alternative sites for feelings and relationships of trust, which are differently, rather than always less, valuable than traditional social work encounters. Video calls can offer family members, including older children with independent access to mobile phones, more control in the establishment of relationships with social workers, as they can be refused or rescheduled more easily than in-person visits. Similarly Munro (2020: 181) comments on the ways professionals kept in touch with young people during Covid-19 who were in or leaving care, through professional meetings and case conference held via video calls, concluding that 'in some circumstances, remote meetings have shifted the balance of power between young people and professionals and given the former a greater sense of control over their participation in meetings, thus facilitating their engagement'. As discussed in the next section, this renegotiation of power dynamics can raise anxieties for social workers in some cases, however when effective it offers children and families opportunities to experience social work at a time and in a place that best meets their needs, which in turn can support the generation of trust.

### **Hybrid digital social work, anxiety and risk**

Social workers were anxious that by using video calls alone they would not be able to sense risks to children's safety. Significantly however, the digital home visit was

not usually undertaken in isolation from previous, or hoped for future, in-person visits. Rather it was part of the anticipatory practice of hybrid social work: even when a whole case was undertaken using video calls, it was unavoidably understood and spoken of in relation to the possibility of an in person visit – for instance, if the risk to the children’s safety was considered significant, if the social worker did not sufficiently trust in the digital visit, or as continuing care once the restrictions eased. This meant that the during the pandemic trajectories of social work practice were improvised to integrate digital and face-to-face encounters relationally and were played out in the context of what we have above called ‘digital materiality’ whereby social work was a *hybrid practice*.

For example, one social worker described how she had initially undertaken a home visit, and had not been sure if a second one would be needed in order to ensure that a mother of an eighteen-month child was keeping her apartment in order and caring for the child. However once she had undertaken the next visit as a video call, she felt confident that she would not need to visit in person on that occasion. In another example a social worker commented how:

it is probably better to ... mix the doorstep with the WhatsApp because at least on WhatsApp or Zoom you can do an activity with them .... But a lot depends on whether the parents have got the [digital] medium because a lot of parents ... still have pay as you go phones, so they don't often have data credit... I had one family where I did a window visit so I drove out and saw the little boy through the window with his Mum and then the last visit I did and that was right at the beginning of lockdown or just as lockdown was happening, and then I did the next visit via WhatsApp.

Our research suggests that combining the digital and in-person was significant to how social workers managed their anxieties and risks to families and themselves. It was important for the social workers to be able to gather sensory knowledge and physical evidence that the homes they visited were safe. Being unable to do so created anxiety for them, and their descriptions of digital home visits emphasised when they felt unsure they had the knowledge required for an assessment. For example, social workers described how on video calls they could not sense the smell of a home, see someone with anorexia properly, or to know if a partner responsible for domestic violence was hiding in a bedroom. These and similar anxieties made in-person home visits a necessary element of child protection. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, video calls, messaging and texting were used in relation to rather than instead of home visits, as part of a hybrid practice. The anxieties sensed in practice and the risks formally associated with such cases were often navigated through modes of sensing and evidence gathering that correspond with our definition of hybrid digital social work, whereby certain elements of cases were undertaken in person and others with video calls. This constituted a context where the social workers and families were able to go forward with their case in such a way

that incorporated both modes of anticipatory and hybrid practice where they could best be used.

For Alice, a recently qualified social worker, social media was part of her life and “facetimeing or video calling with friends” or family in Europe, was “second nature”. During our research Alice began undertaking video calls from home and discussed with us her work with a couple who agreed to be video recorded for our research, with a newborn baby, and a history of domestic violence and abuse relating to members of their respective families. Social work with this family combined video calls and in person visits in a number of ways. A parenting assessment was undertaken in-person by another worker with the parents during the pregnancy until lockdown. Once the baby was born, social workers undertook doorstep visits and video calls for the first months, followed by further face-to-face parenting assessment visits. Alice explained the process and her concerns, showing how the digital visits were always part of a trajectory that included doorstep or in-home visits:

We have done doorstep visits but not enough to be able to see baby, see his environment, go into the house. Yes, we’ve done videocalls and, you know, videocalls are really good but a videocall can only give you a certain view of what is happening in a particular home and it is completely controlled by the person on the phone. So that was our biggest worry so now what the parenting assessor has stated is that in order for her to, because it was a positive assessment, in order for her to continue with the parenting assessment and just say, you know, it is an overall positive assessment she needs to see the child, so what we’ve done is we’ve planned to do . . . weekly visits for six weeks until the review conference.

Here, while digital visits were viewed as less immersive than in person visits, they played a specific role. Video calls also participated in how families and social workers anticipate and experience safety and were used to dissipate anxieties and to avoid risk.

Susan, a service user introduced above, already used WhatsApp to call her children when they were at their dad’s and her partner when he was away. The social worker, Margaret’s, work with Susan began using WhatsApp video calls, and moved to face-to-face meetings once lockdown restrictions were lifted. After initial video calls, the younger children had got to know Margaret by going for walks with her once the restrictions were partially lifted, and had continued on video calls later. Susan valued a social worker’s in-person visit which had witnessed the violence, but video calls had also enabled her own safety. She described how she had improvised, using her car outside her home to call the social workers, “to talk in private. If my son heard me talking about him, he’d have been down and you know [shouting]”. She told us “When things were quite bad, I had to go and sit in my car. I had to sit in the boot of the car because the charger in the front didn’t work [because her phone ran out of charge quickly]. . . .It’s lucky that I’ve got credit and wifi”.

Susan also described a multi-agency meeting she attended via video call, while her son was in a foster placement, having weighed up the possibility of attending as follows:

First of all I wanted to go there. Then I cancelled it. I thought it is going to be easier like this [digitally]. It takes away a lot of anxiety. He might want to come home. If he has an outburst the police could end up being called. It removes that element. When he was crying and upset I wasn't there for him. But then if I had been there, it probably would have made things so much worse.... I do think from a safety aspect, it was safer. .... When he's stressed and gets anxious, he can say the worst things you can ever hear. I'd say it was a positive having the meeting online.

Margaret recounted how when the young man had become 'irate' and verbally abusive at this meeting, she had decided to leave. Later the team asked her to re-join because the young man, who was physically present with his foster carers and another social worker, wanted to apologise to her. After the apology, she followed up asking him to work on his self-management in such situations. Here, Margaret, the social worker agreed that the call had been easier to leave and safer, and that if she had been present physically she would have left earlier and suggested re-booking the meeting. Susan, the mother, also agreed that even in a non-Covid-19 situation, in such circumstances a video call would be better.

It is important to understand digital social work as hybrid and always involving anticipatory practice which engages the experience, possibility, potential or imaginary of undertaking an in-person home visit. When this is acknowledged we can better understand the successes, benefits and possible enduring legacy of digital social work. We have shown how participants improvised to accrue the benefits offered by digital social work in which physical presence was always implicated. These and many other examples from our research set the ground for the development of guidelines and training to support social workers in setting up and conducting hybrid meetings where participants might variably be together in-person with others attending digitally.

## **Digital social work as an applied concept**

Writing before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, Taylor (2017) identified significant gaps in social workers' digital literacy and awareness relating to ethical boundaries and relationships on digital platforms. She argued that 'social work should pause to consider 'digital knowledge gaps' before rushing to drive technology enhanced practice methods forward' (Taylor, 2017: 869). The spread of Covid-19 immediately brought horrendous risks that made such a pause inconceivable, and accelerated the use of digital practice methods. We have drawn on empirical findings to show how digital social work was practiced during the pandemic, to critically analyse those methods and the policy responses, and to make new concepts available to the profession to help it make sense of these developments and the

emerging nature of digital social work. Our central argument is that social work has emerged from this pandemic as a hybrid practice that integrates digital practices – such as home visits through video calls, WhatsApp messaging, texting, email – and face-to-face in-person interactions. We have introduced the concepts of ‘digital materiality’ and ‘digital intimacy’ to show how these were integral to the generation of social workers’ feelings of trust and anxiety, as they anticipated and evaluated safety and risks during the uncertainties of Covid-19, and subsequently shaped successful digital child protection social work practice. While our focus has been on child protection, our argument for promoting a hybrid, material and flexible digital social work practice is relevant to all fields of practice.

Digital social work cannot replace the in-person home visit. However, we argue that a home visit can never be exclusively ‘virtual’ – neither theoretically nor empirically. Rather than seeing the in-person visit as always being a more inclusive and ‘better’ option, it is better situated as a reference point around which to weave the qualities and possibilities afforded by digital visits. We have shown practical evidence of an anticipatory hybrid digital social work practice, where both face-to-face and digital visits are possibilities and can be effective, and demonstrated how our argument is supported by established social science concepts and theory. Social workers improvised within the ongoingly emergent, highly contingent circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic to work confidently, in response to perceived risks. The sensory and anticipatory experiences of trust and anxiety were mobilised in a hybrid digital social work in ways that could be as effective as they were in face-to-face practice.

It is a mistake to ask if digital technology provided a solution to social work practice during the pandemic, and to subsequently analyse where ‘virtual social work’ has failed. Doing so simply ascribes to what Morozov (2013) has identified as technological solutionism – the mistaken assumption that technologically driven change will solve societal and individual problems. We must be aware of the politics of solutionist uses of new technology, their tendency to obscure the rise of digital capitalism and the need to ‘collectively reimagine the future after the pandemic’ (Madianou, 2020: 4). Social work is no exception. We should learn from the creative and improvisatory modes of engagement with technology demonstrated by social workers, children and families during the pandemic and through the concepts we have engaged to surface and understand their success. These insights can be effectively mobilised to shape a framework for an adaptable digital social work practice and training that will enable social workers to better evaluate when and how digital technologies and media will best support their practice and judgments. Such a framework would both benefit social workers and families in the present digital environments of everyday life and should be future-proofed for rapid responses to as yet unknown situations of disaster, like pandemics.

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