The Implications of Cyber Technology for Social Work Education

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Purpose

- Present an overview of the implications of the cyber world & cyber technology for social work & social services education

Cyber World

The cyber world has exploded in the past few years & created a new social environment for many Canadians

Text Messaging

Twitter

Facebook

Tumblr; Snapchat

YouTube

Email

Webcams

Blogs

Unprecedented opportunities to communicate …& is always advancing…

Social Media

- Use of any information & communication technologies for social interaction
  - Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn)
  - Blogs (e.g., LiveJournal, Tumblr)
  - Micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter)

- Social networks are created, maintained & facilitated by "media circuits" that make information within the circuit available to the online community

- Critical element is that social media comprise users who are active participants in providing content & interacting with others on the site
  - In contrast with more traditional media (e.g., TV, books) that deliver content to mass populations but do not facilitate creation or sharing of content by users

- Social media are about "transforming monologue (one-to-many) into dialogue (many-to-many)"

Social Networking Sites

- Web-based services that allow individuals to:

  - Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system

  - Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection

  - View & traverse their list of connections & those made by others within the system

(boyd & Ellison, 2007)

Social Media
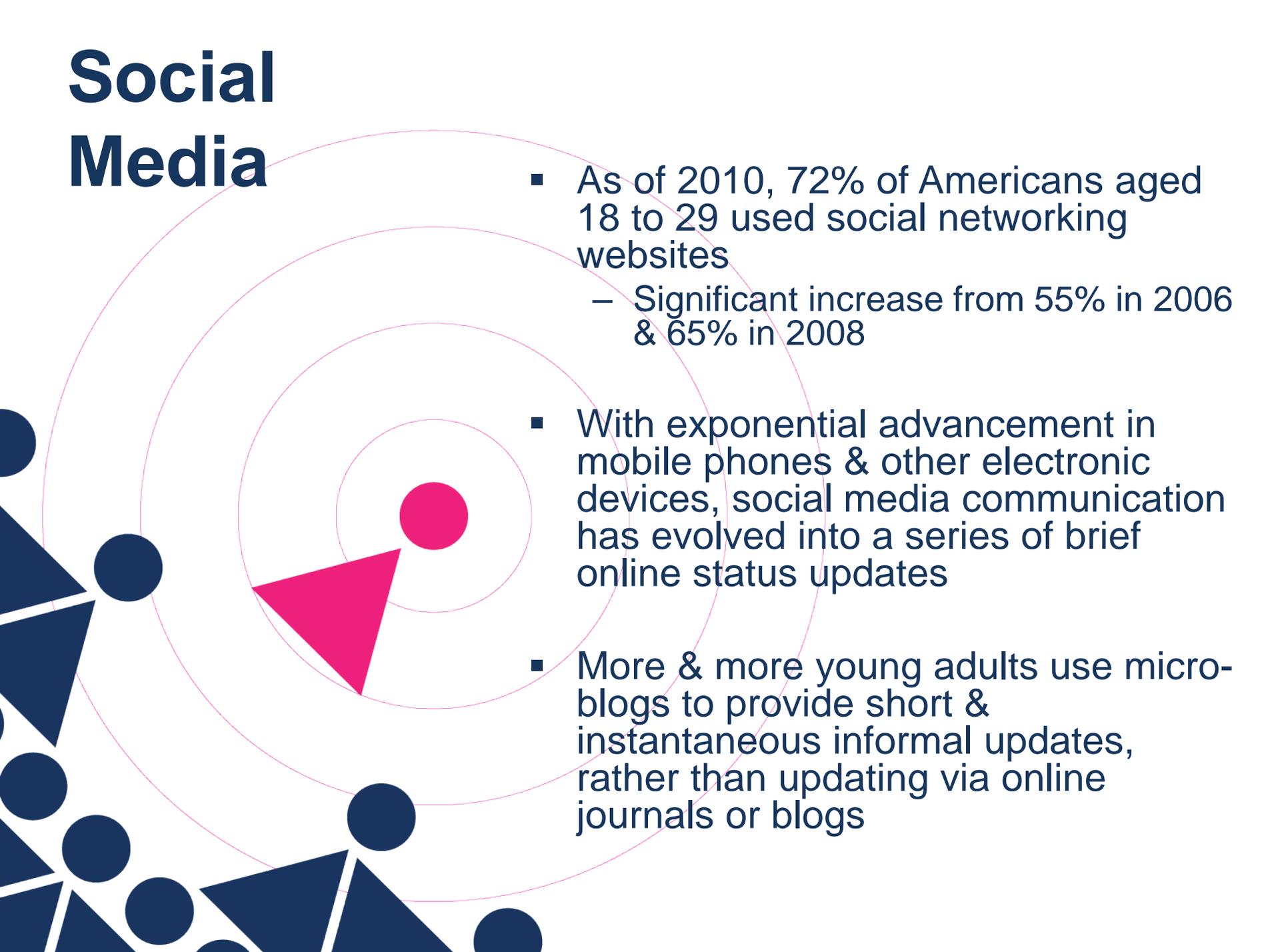
- As of 2010, 72% of Americans aged 18 to 29 used social networking websites
  - Significant increase from 55% in 2006 & 65% in 2008

- With exponential advancement in mobile phones & other electronic devices, social media communication has evolved into a series of brief online status updates

- More & more young adults use micro-blogs to provide short & instantaneous informal updates, rather than updating via online journals or blogs

The Social Media World

- Radical increase in past decade in the use of information & communication technologies

- Use of social media continues to rise

  - 970 million unique Facebook visitors worldwide

  - 41 million unique MySpace visitors worldwide

  - 160 million unique Twitter visitors worldwide

  (Google 2011a,b,c)

The Social Web

Created by Mirna Bard
www.mirnabard.com

TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'
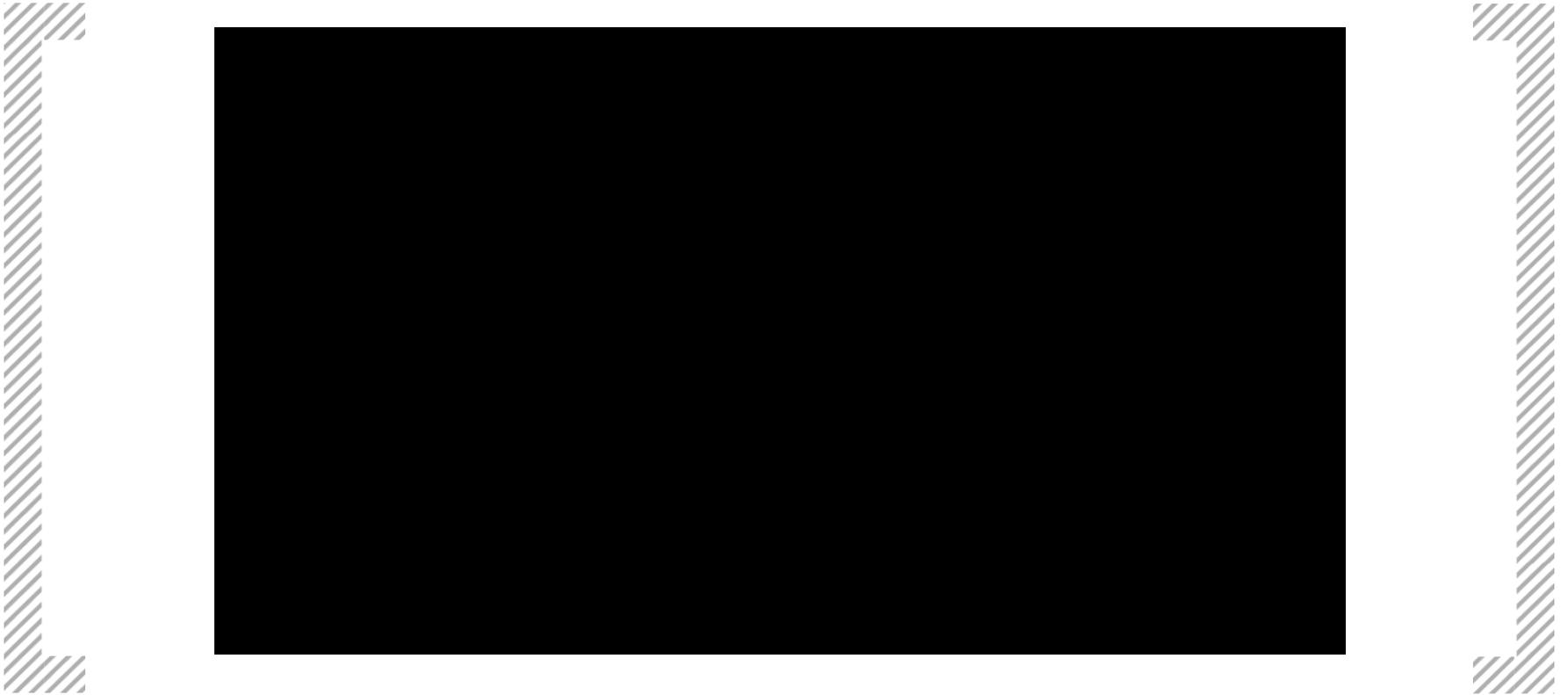
TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'

Fundamentally…

How people relate to one another has drastically changed

Boundaries of relationships have changed with technology

Cyber Technology & Social Work / Social Services
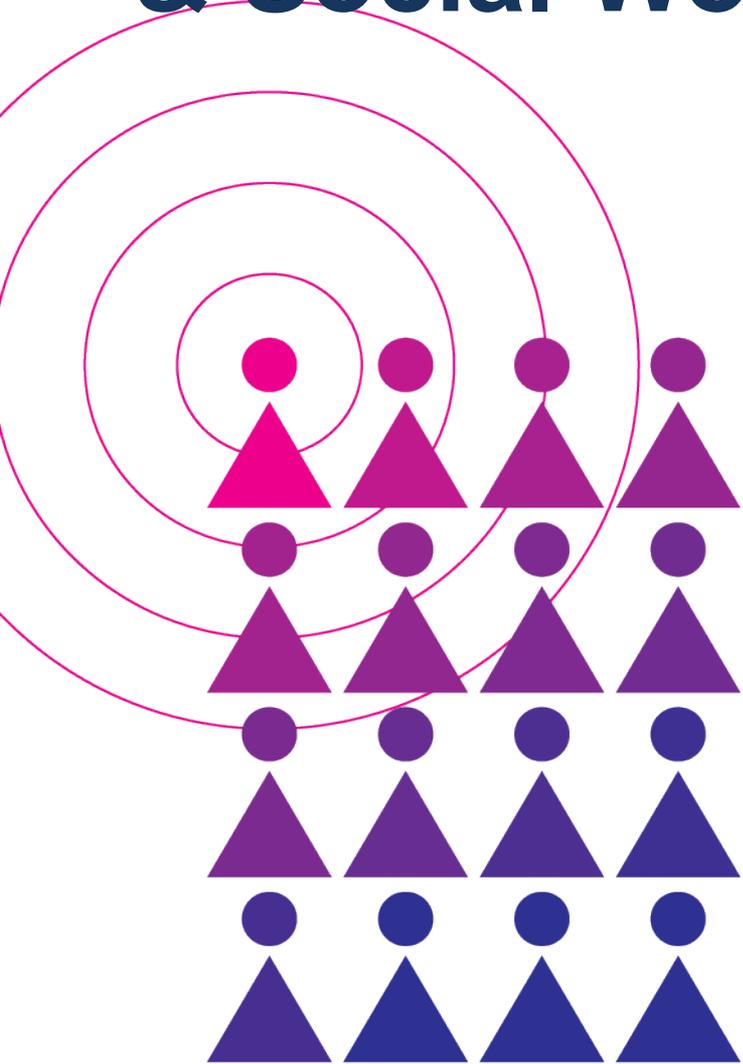
- Growing exponentially

- Has permeated how individuals seek support for a wide range of issues

- Increased use of information & communication technologies presents unique complexities for social workers & social service workers

- Increasingly, requirement for practice
  - e.g., criteria for posted job positions include experience with cyber counseling

Technology Use
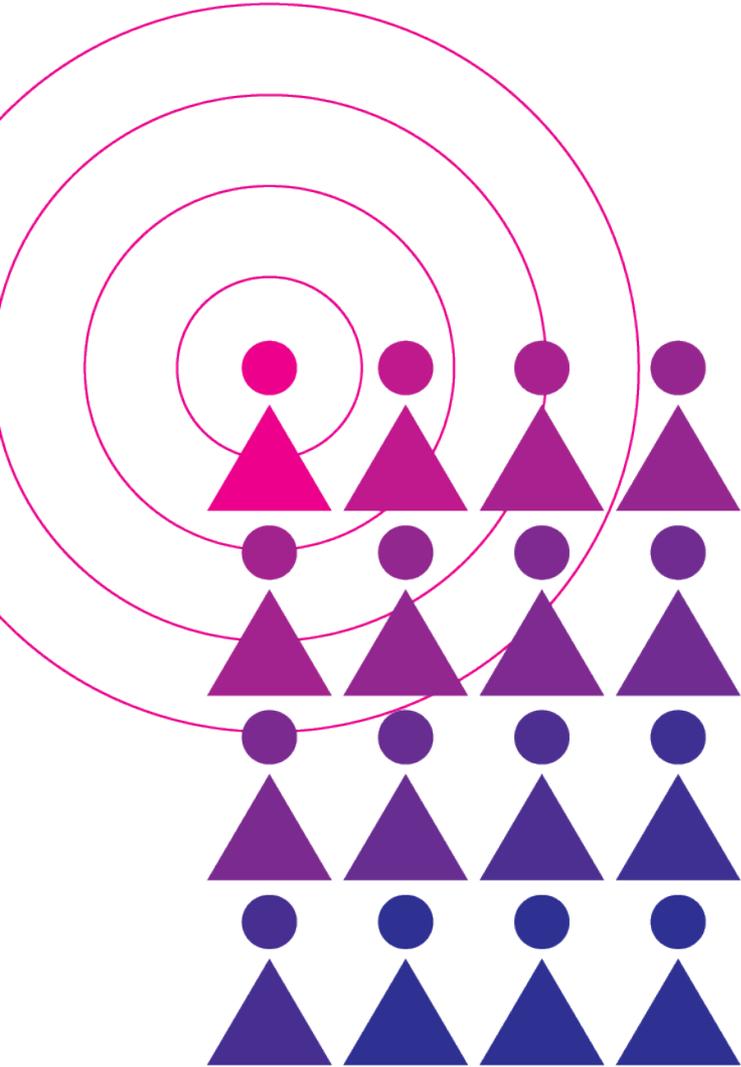
- Youth & adults rely on information & communication technologies:
  - Social connections
  - Entertainment
  - Information
  - Personal help & advice

- Cyber communication allows clients to access & communicate with practitioners / workers with newfound ease…regardless of whether worker / practitioner gives out information

Communication & Information Technologies

- Sheer amount of information publicly available highlights this dramatic shift in the landscape of practice

- Information a client obtains on the Internet is public

  - "They cannot block certain aspects of their lives from their patients, & they must learn to adapt to the new world that cyberspace has created" (Gabbard et al., 2011, p. 171-172).

  - Therapists who feel invaded because of a client accessing such information must recognize & address their reactions as **countertransference for which supervision, consultation or even therapy may be required** (Gabbard et al., 2011).

Clients will Know about Worker Outside the Agency / Office…

Survey of 332 clients

- 7 of 10 clients find personal information about their therapist on the Internet
  - Google: 78%
  - Facebook: 42%
  - LinkedIn: 17%
  - Blog: 10%

- 87% found the information intentionally
- 13% found it accidentally

(Kolmes & Taube, 2011)

What sort of PERSONAL information did you discover? (Choose all that apply.)

Category	Percentage (Count)
Family information	60.8 % (141)
Age/birthdate	54.7 % (127)
Education	50.9 % (118)
Home address	45.7 % (106)
Photos	45.3 % (105)
Hobbies/interests	37.1 % (86)
Dating/relationship...	31.5 % (73)
Friend information	21.6 % (50)
Living situation	20.3 % (47)
History	19.8 % (46)
Previous career	18.5 % (43)
Other (please specify)	17.7 % (41)
Likes and/or dislikes	15.9 % (37)
Religion	15.1 % (35)
Overlapping...	14.2 % (33)
All Other Responses	6.7 % (171)

(Kolmes & Taube, 2011)

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education
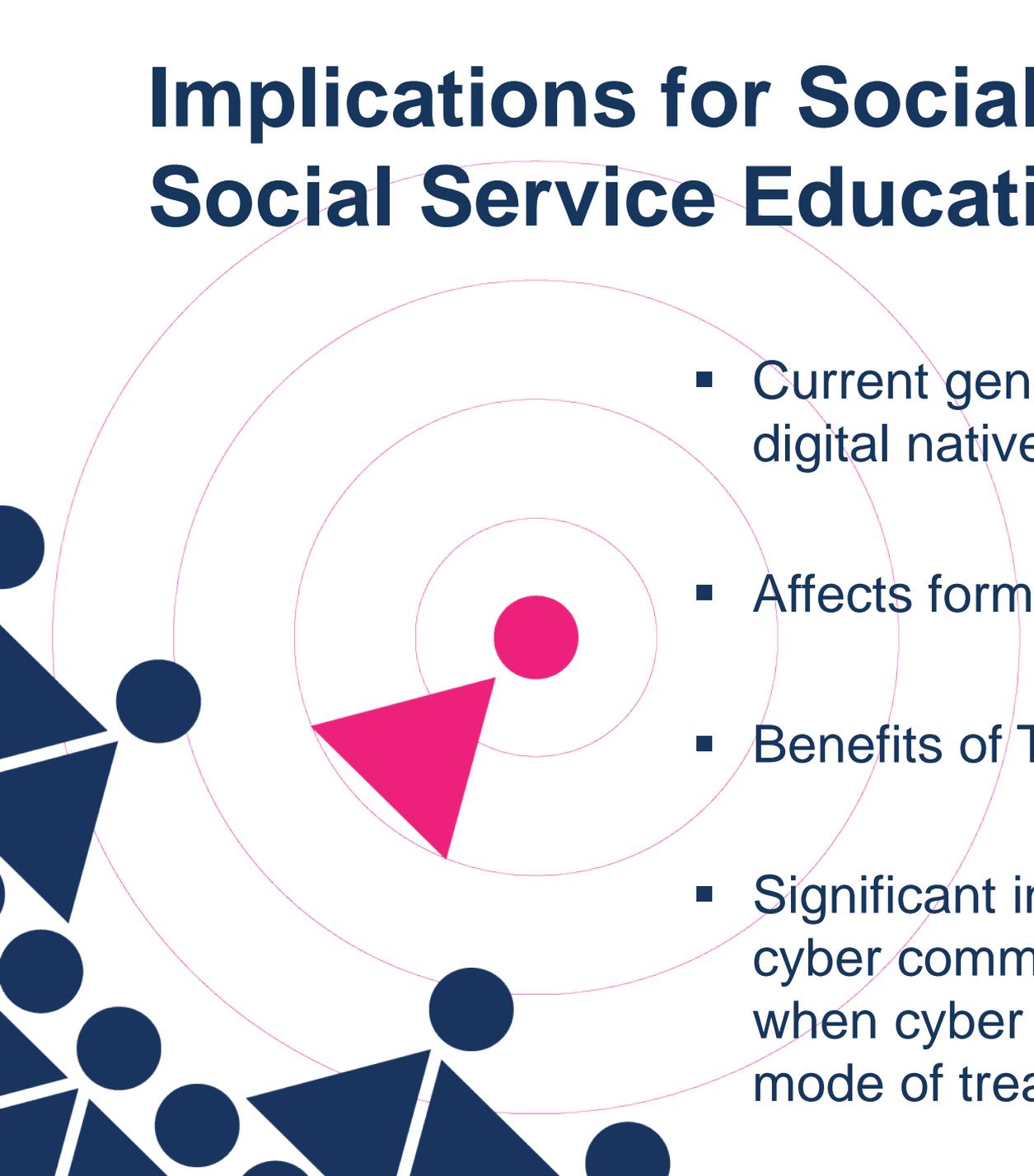
- Current generation of youth are digital natives

- Affects format of teaching

- Benefits of Technology Use

- Significant increase in use of cyber communication even when cyber is not primary mode of treatment

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- Current generation of youth are digital natives
  - **Has never experienced a world without technology**

- College students use information & communication technologies in their social interactions significantly more than individuals from other generations

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- **Affects format of teaching**

- **The end of instructor lecturing for a whole class**

  – Use of social media, social networking sites

  – Massive Online Courses (MOOCS)

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

Benefits of Technology Use

- Increased accessibility
- Faster way to communicate with clients
- May provide clients with a greater sense of control, leading to more openness & less inhibition
- May help structure the upcoming session
- May forecast emerging issues
- Can strengthen therapeutic rapport

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- **Significant increase in use of cyber communication among professions even when cyber communication is not primary mode of treatment**

    – Offers benefits & raises challenges/issues

    – Lack of research on cyber communication
        - e.g., texting, email "creeping" into traditional face-to-face clinical practice & implications

Studying the "CREEP"

- **2009**: began exploring how cyber communication has "crept" into traditional face-to-face practice

- **2009 & 2012-2013**: Focus groups & interviews with practitioners, Executive Directors & 'new' practitioners (N=35)

- Qualitative analysis of emerging themes & concepts related to associated practical, legal, & ethical issues

- Study is ongoing

Major Finding

The use of Information & Communication technologies has _dramatically_ impacted traditional practice

- *"It is kind of a given that emailing is part of the world. It's not realistic for a practitioner, an agency, or anybody to say we're not going to email."*

Initial Major Themes

4 major themes emerged from initial analysis:

1. Client Driven Practice

2. Pandora's Box

3. Ethical Grey Zone

4. Permeable Boundaries

Theme 1: Client Driven Practice

- Clients initiated cyber communication **more often, more purposefully, & more persistently** than the practitioners

Theme 1: Client Driven Practice

Practitioners related client initiated emails to:

- **Client Age:** *"younger clients are much more assuming that we'll set something up by email..."*

- **Client Preference:** *"start where the client is at"*

- **Advantages:** Complements face-to-face sessions, especially for clients with difficulty expressing themselves

- **Challenges:** Dilemma – *slippery slope – "it might start with an email to change an appointment & then can shift from that to emails about issues to a crisis."*

Theme 2: Pandora's Box

- Once cyber communication begins, **it is hard to undo**. Practitioners expressed concern about opening a 'Pandora's Box'

Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- Practitioners expressed concern about not being able to ensure client (or practitioner) **privacy or confidentiality**, along with the associated liabilities

- Concerns about social networking sites

Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- **Agency Policy**

  – Need for organization policies & codes regarding ethics

  – Organizations vary a great deal regarding policies

  – Difficulty maintaining client records without clear guidelines

 – Practitioners may decide to comply or to circumvent policy

Theme 4: Permeable Boundaries

- Clients' choices & behaviours stretch traditional boundaries

- Using email for administrative purposes opens the door to non-administrative communication

- Potential for harm that arose

- Issues related to boundaries in practice with couples & families: notion of shared communication among all members

Initial Conclusions [2009]

- Just as information & communication technologies have shaped how people of all ages communicate, these have **revolutionized communication between practitioners & clients**
  - Even those engaged in traditional face-to-face therapy

- **Elements of practice affected**
  - Boundaries (time & space)
  - Disclosure of information (practitioners' & clients')
  - Therapeutic relationship
  - Ethical & legal issues & dilemmas
  - Policies & procedures

Initial Conclusions [2009]
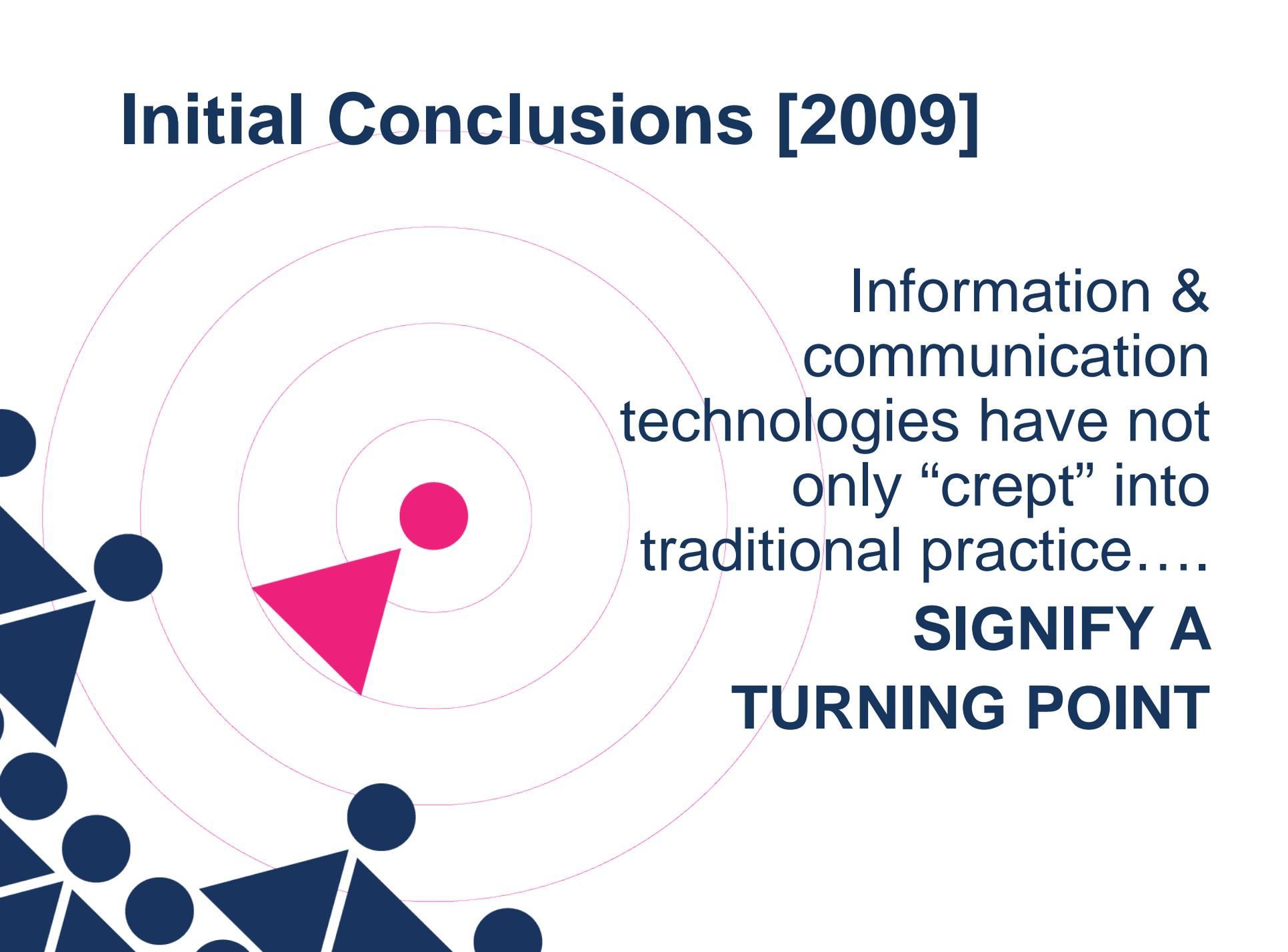
Information & communication technologies have not only "crept" into traditional practice....

SIGNIFY A TURNING POINT

3 Years Later …

- Re-interviewed Original participants
- Interviewed new practitioners

- **Social work practice transformed**

Major theme: From Reaction to Intentional Use

- Reflective practice leads to learning what works & what doesn't work

    – "Educate my instincts"

    – "Shift with the times"

    – "How is this meaningful to clients?"

    – "What is this going to mean in terms of the impact on my personal life?"

    – "How can I figure out what works?"

3 Years Later: Major Themes

1. [***Client Driven Practice***]: Recognizing therapeutic effects of cyber communication

2. [***Pandora's Box***]: Attempt to understand & discuss the range of possible issues

3. Ethical Grey Zone

   – Educating self & clients about potential vulnerability due to lack of confidentiality

4. Attempt to address the ***Permeable Boundaries*** through explaining access & expectations

Theme 1: [*Client Driven Practice*]: Recognizing Therapeutic Effects of Cyber Communication

- Adjunct to sessions

- Helps client initiate agenda for next session

- Maintains the relationship between sessions

- Helps the client regulate

Theme 2: *[Pandora's Box] Attempt to Understand & Discuss the Range of Possible Issues*

Theme 4: *Attempt to Address the Permeable Boundaries through Explaining Access & Expectations*

- Convey clear expectations / repeat discussion

- Separate email/Facebook for work & personal

Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- Variation in agency policy & procedures
  - Some have explicit procedures & secure servers whereas others do not

- Variation in practices with other providers
  - e.g., lawyers, insurance adjusters

- Educate clients about potential vulnerability due to lack of confidentiality

Young/New Practitioners

- Seamlessly integrate technology into their practice

- View technology as a reflexive tool – valuable to the clinical relationship

- Theoretically linking technology to practice – social justice & advocacy frameworks

- Frustrated by lack of organizational endorsement & policy directives OR overly constraining policy

Executive Directors

- Recognize the ascending digital world

- Recognize the complexities of developing policies / procedures related to technology

  - **Driven by professional ethics**, not organizational policy

  - **Limiting or supporting** innovative practice

Conclusions

- Practitioners are beginning to tailor their own technology-informed practices

- It's not whether to use or not use
  - It's **HOW** to use technology effectively & responsibly

Must be Aware of Policies of Particular Web-Based Services

- **4.2 Restrictions.** You may not and you agree not to:
  - (d) "use the Software or cause the Software (or any part of it) to be used within or to provide commercial products or services to third parties."

- *Includes providing counseling services*

Must be Aware of Policies of Particular Web-Based Services

5.7 Content of Communications

– Skype reserves the right (but shall have no obligation) to **review content** for the purpose of enforcing these Terms. Skype may in its sole discretion **block, prevent delivery of or otherwise remove the content of communications** as part of its effort to protect the Software, Products or its customers, or otherwise enforce these Terms.

▪ *Includes content in counseling sessions*

– *Can monitor, delete, maintain*

Questions & Issues when Posting Information Online

- What are the privacy settings of the application?

- What are the costs & benefits of posting the information?

- Understand that all posted content should be considered public & permanent

- How will the disclosure affect the relationship with clients, classmates, faculty members, colleagues, etc.?

- "Do no harm": Is there a high probability that clients, classmates, faculty members, or colleagues will be significantly & negatively affected?

(Kolmes, 2012; Lehavot, 2009; Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011)

Questions & Issues When Posting Information Online

- Can disclosure & actions online:

    – Threaten credibility & reputation among clients & colleagues?

    – Have consequences for career?

    – Undermine the public's trust in the field?

(Kolmes, 2012; Lehavot, 2009; Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011)

Engaging in Cyber Communication with Clients

- "When interacting with clients on the Internet, **maintain appropriate boundaries of the client-social worker relationship** in accordance with professional ethical guidelines just as you would in any other context."

(American Medical Association, 2012)

Social Media

- Social media can be a very powerful communication & advocacy tool when used properly

- Maintain social media presence without jeopardizing professionalism & client confidentiality

- How social media can be used to engage clients & be incorporated into practice is still in its infancy
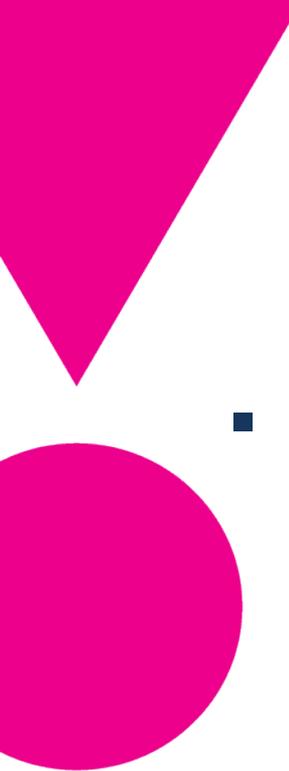
Conclusions

- Older & younger practitioners adjust differently

  - Older practitioners discuss guidelines & expectations
    - e.g., do not typically respond to email late at night

  - Younger practitioners respond to clients on clients' terms
    - Respond to email at all times
    - Examine their reactions as countertransference / triggers

Conclusions

- It is not feasible to adopt & maintain a policy that prohibits cyber communication with clients

- By "creeping" into practice, information & communication technologies have extended boundaries between worker & client

- Responsible position is to examine & understand the consequences & implications in order to inform practitioner behaviour

Conclusions

- This ascendancy of the new cyber world has significant implications for social work & social service practice & education

- Necessary for educators to prepare social work & social service students to be able to competently provide services through cyber technology

Conclusions

- Increasing recognition that e-Therapy/cyber counseling must be offered in human service programs

- Cyber Counseling emerging form of practice with particular opportunities & challenges

- Vital that educators integrate course & practicum options for cyber counseling, to provide necessary background for students

- Important that professions examine & discuss the clinical, ethical & legal uncertainties regarding cyber counseling

- Need for further research & evaluation
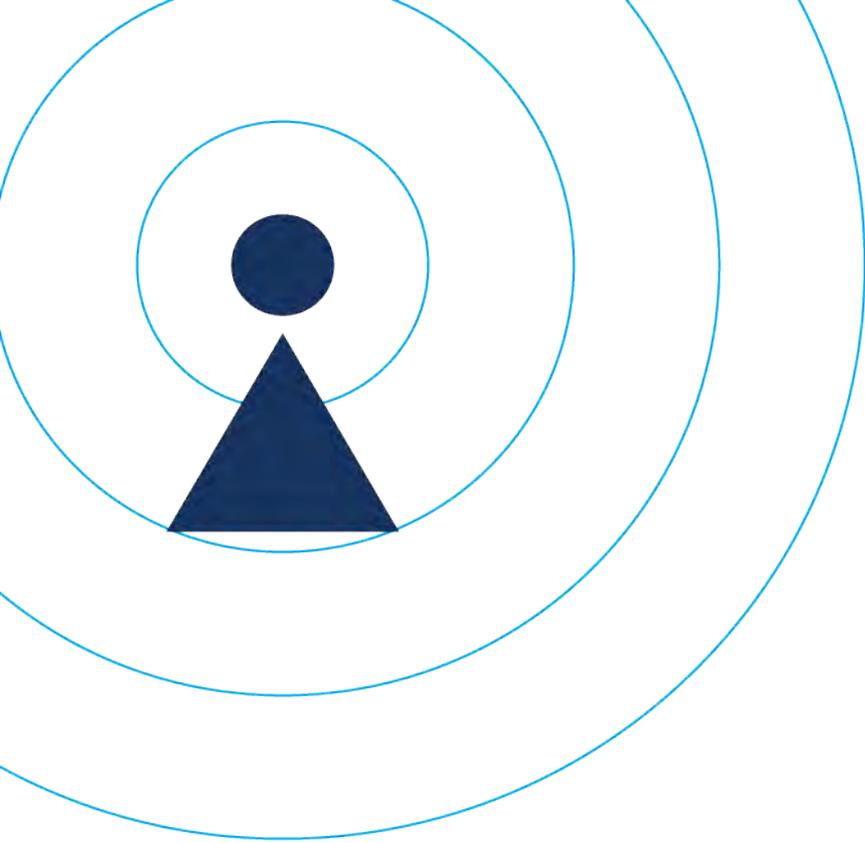
Thank you

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Thank you!