Look who's talking: Social work podcasts as continuing professional development in England

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Abstract

In 2019 Social Work England introduced mandatory annual recording of continuing professional development (CPD) for social workers in England, placing sole responsibility for meeting this requirement on individual social workers. There is also growing evidence that social workers in England are struggling to engage effectively with their CPD, due in part to a lack of time and insufficient employer support. Alongside these developments, the number of social work podcasts has increased rapidly, with hundreds of podcasts, and thousands of podcast episodes, now available for any social worker with internet access to listen to.

This doctoral research examines the growing phenomenon of social work podcasts, with a particular focus on the potential for podcasts as social work CPD in the English context. Utilising a theoretical framework that draws primarily from the theory of the network society, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve independent social work podcasters and six social workers who listened to social work podcasts.

Podcaster participants and listener participants both overwhelmingly described social work podcasts as having a strong potential to support the CPD of social workers, in particular highlighting the value of accessibility, flexibility, variety, reach, dialogue and currency. Despite the often-presumed intimate nature of podcast listening, participants also found value in podcasts for collective engagement and even activism. Challenges were noted, including around quality assurance, algorithmic curation, voice and representation and the potential for podcasts to reinforce the hegemonic domination of social workers. Recommendations for further research, policy, activism and practice are outlined in the conclusion.

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List of Abbreviations

ASYE	Assessed and Supported Year in Employment
BASW	British Association of Social Workers
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CCETSW	Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPEL	Continuing Professional Education and Learning
CSW	Chief Social Worker
ECF	Early Career Framework
GSCC	General Social Care Council
GTI	Grief and Trauma Intervention
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
HEI	Higher Education Institute
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
KSS	Knowledge and Skills Statement
NAAS	National Assessment and Accreditation System
PCF	Professional Capabilities Framework
PQSW	Post-Qualify Social Work
PRTL	Post-Registration Training and Learning
RCTs	Randomised Controlled Trial
RSS	Rich Site Summary
SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SWAN	Social Work Action Network
SWE	Social Work England
VCoP	Virtual Communities of Practice

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines social work podcasts, with a focus on their potential use for continuing professional development (CPD), but also more generally in relation to their impact on the social work profession. This is achieved through semi-structured interviews with twelve independent social work podcasters in England and six social workers in England who have listened to social work podcasts. The key contributions made by this research relate primarily to the opportunities and challenges of social work podcasts as CPD, as well as providing an insight into the social work podcast landscape in England, a growing area not previously explored in research. There are also significant contributions stemming from this research related to the social work CPD landscape. These key contributions are described in more detail later in this chapter, following a definitions of terms, and an introduction to the motivations, research context, theoretical framework and methodology that shaped this research. This chapter culminates with an overview of the thesis, including an outline of what is covered in each chapter.

1.1 Definition of Terms

It is valuable at this early stage to define some of the most significant terms related to the research as they are used throughout this thesis, specifically: podcast, CPD, listener and service user. This is particularly important because these terms are all contested in literature and research, and lack consensus around their usage. Starting with podcasts, they are a primarily audio medium, most commonly associated with compressed MP3 files accessed through Rich Site Summary (RSS) technology, facilitating them to download automatically (Bottomly, 2015; Singer, 2019). The central characteristic of RSS technology is therefore that it is a *push* technology, meaning that once someone has subscribed to a *feed*, content is delivered automatically to their

device, as opposed to a *pull* technology, whereby someone has to actively download the content themselves. While, as is discussed in more detail in the literature review, what constitutes a podcast is increasingly detached culturally and practically from these technological roots (Berry, 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Newman and Gallo, 2019), this thesis uses this technology based definition in order to provide a clear distinction around what is or is not a podcast. This distinction became particularly important in the sampling stage of this research, as described in detail in chapter 3. In line with this, Singer's (2019) research into social work podcasting provides a congruent definition of podcasts to that was adopted:

> a combination of two technologies that were developed in the late 1990s: the MP3 file format, which compresses audio without significant loss in audio quality, and RSS (p.2).

Building on this definition, a podcaster is someone who creates a podcast, and podcasting is the process of creating and disseminating a podcast.

Also significant in relation to the terminology of podcasting, it is important to note that the term listener is used throughout this thesis to refer to those who engage with podcasts. This is the most commonly used term in the literature around podcasting (*for example,* Llinares *et al*., 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Newman *et al*., 2022), capturing that listening is by far the most common way that podcasts are engaged with (Newman *et al*., 2022; Ofcom, 2022). Furthermore, using the term listener draws attention to some of the characteristics of podcasts that have been identified as important in research, including the intimate, auditory experiences, explored more in the next chapter (Bottomly, 2015; Berry, 2016; Fronek *et al*., 2016). It is noteworthy that other terms have been suggested as alternatives to listener, including consumer. Singer (2019) argues this term is more representative of the varied ways that podcasts

are engaged with, for example through transcripts. However, the term consumer is associated with market logic and using things up, rather than the collaborative and co-production experiences that are often associated with podcasts (Miller, 2012). These market connotations are also likely to be rejected by many podcasters, who often reject market driven incentives and motivations related to their podcasts, a point discussed in detail in the next chapter (Florini, 2015; Kim *et al*., 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; PodcastIndex, 2020). Therefore, the term listener is used throughout this thesis, while recognising that it does not capture the full extent of the ways that people engage with podcasts.

Another term that is fundamental to this research, but also contested, is CPD. Alternative terms have been suggested, including continuing professional education (Beddoe, 2015; Curran *et al*., 2019; Rogowski, 2020), critical professional development (Kohli *et al*., 2015; Picower, 2015; Dover *et al*., 2019, 2020; Lisle-Johnson and Kohli, 2020), professional formation (Clark, 1995; Green, 2009; McCullough *et al*., 2020), professional learning (Comerford, 2005; Timperley, 2011; Chappell, 2014) and lifelong learning (Aspin and Chapman, 2001; Cournoyer and Stanley, 2002; Nissen *et al*., 2014). Each of these terms has advantages that are advocated for by their proponents but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to interrogate each in detail. This thesis primarily uses the term CPD because this is the terminology that is currently used and understood most widely within the social work profession (Cooper, 2008; Brady, 2014; Rees *et al*., 2018; Cordis Bright, 2019; Johnson *et al*., 2022), as well as across other professions within the UK (Karas *et al*., 2020). It is also the term used by the current social work regulator, SWE, who define CPD as:

> the reflection and learning activity that social workers undertake throughout their career to maintain and improve their practice (SWE, 2019a: 1).

There are some potential limitations with this definition that are touched on in the next chapter, including the focus on individual social worker responsibility, and the exclusion of learning and development opportunities that do not have a direct, tangible impact on practice. Therefore this definition is not utilised uncritically throughout this thesis.

The final term to be introduced here is service user, adopted throughout this thesis to refer to someone who is or was in receipt of support from social workers. Although it is the most commonly used term in social work literature (e.g. Beresford, 2008; Farrow, 2014; Casey *et al*., 2020), there are concerns about how being a service user frames individuals, in particular for those who do not choose to engage with social work services (Rogowski, 2013; Apter, 2018). Other terms that have been suggested include customer, but similar to the term consumer introduced already, and as is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, this type of market language has problematic implications for social work and social work CPD (Marthinsen, 2019; Harris, 2023). In part this is because it implies that those in receipt of social work services are active consumers, whether they feel willing or equipped for that role or not (Coleman and Harris, 2008). Therefore, the term service user is reluctantly utilised throughout the rest of this thesis, in spite of its limitations, because of its ongoing role as the primary term in social work literature and workplaces.

1.2 Motivation and Context

In November 2020 I undertook a search on the podcast amalgamator website, Podchaser (2020), for all podcasts with either the term “social work” or “social worker” in their title. I found 72. A more recent search, undertaken on Podchaser (2022) in November 2022, found 210 podcasts fitting that criteria, almost a 200% increase in just two years. These searches suggest that not only are there many social work

podcasts available, but that this offering is rapidly increasing. Significantly there are also a number of social work podcasts that do not use the terms “social work” or “social worker” in their titles that would not have been captured in this search, for example, Doing the Work, and Thoughts on the Social World. Moreover, there are immeasurable additional podcasts and podcast episodes that could be considered relevant to social work but without an explicit focus on the profession, including a growing body on topics like grief, addiction, mental health, parenting, adoption, current events and activism. Extrapolating that out, with hundreds of potentially relevant podcasts, there are thousands, likely tens of thousands, and maybe even hundreds of thousands of hours of potential free podcast content that could be relevant to social work CPD. This content has the added benefit of being available anywhere, anytime to any social worker with internet access. This could therefore represent an untapped and vital resource for the profession, and one that could have wide ranging implications.

It was the prospect and implications of these potential resources that first drew my attention to social work podcasts as a research topic, an interest that has grown commensurately with the number and influence of social work podcasts themselves. I was also undeniably drawn to undertake this research through being an avid podcast listener myself, an aspect of my positionality that I explore in-depth in chapter 3. Further motivation came from the growing interest in podcasts from a research perspective, or what Berry (2018) describes as the new field of “podcast studies” (p.17). This research, therefore, can be considered as contributing to this emerging field.

Motivation also came from the current context of social work CPD, and the pressures it places on social workers. This research was undertaken at a time of significant change and upheaval in the context of social work CPD in England, underpinning both

the importance of exploring this topic within this contemporary context, as well as that this context has ultimately shaped the findings and recommendations stemming from this research. Probably the most significant developments in this area are regulatory. When it took over regulatory responsibility for the approximately 100,000 social workers in England in 2019, SWE introduced six new professional standards for social work, with one specifically requiring social workers to maintain their CPD and provide annual evidence of this (SWE, 2019b, 2022a). The process for providing this evidence has been controversial since it was introduced, and social workers have been showing an increasing reluctance to engage with it (Carter, 2020: British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2021: Samuel, 2022; SWE, 2023a). Within these developments, SWE have repeatedly used podcasts as an example of CPD that can be undertaken by social workers and recorded to meet their CPD evidence requirements (SWE, 2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c). These developments are discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

As a final note, this research was also undertaken during what could be described as a crisis of social worker working conditions, a long-standing concern within the social work profession (Johnson *et al*., 2005; Mor Barak *et al*., 2010), but one that is increasingly dominating discussions about the profession in England (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Department for Education, 2023a, BASW, 2023a). A range of recent studies have found that social workers in England consistently rate their working conditions as some of the worst in the country, with particular concerns raised relating to limited resourcing, high vacancy rates, high workloads, lack of support, and bureaucratic burdens, all of which contribute to a large and growing number of social workers stating they plan to leave the profession in the near future (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; UNISON, 2019; Ravalier *et*

al., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; UNISON, 2022a; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a, BASW, 2023a). Linked to these challenges, social workers in England also consistently describe the difficulty they have in engaging effectively with CPD (Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; Reddington *et al*., 2021; Reddington, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; UNISON, 2022a, BASW, 2023a). The implications of this context are highlighted throughout this thesis as they relate to this research.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that I have been published (Hanley, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023, Hanley *et al*., 2021, McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021; Hanley and Kerr, 2023), and been vocal in both speaking engagements and on social media, about my concerns in relation to many of these developments and other contemporary issues impacting on social workers. Therefore, from the inception of this research I needed to recognise that this public profile may have impacted on the research process, in particular in relation to data collection, a point discussed in more detail in chapter 3 in relation to positionality. This is alongside other pertinent areas of positionality related to this research, including my gender, age, podcast listening habits, professional background and nationality, all discussed at length.

1.3 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Bryman (2012) describes ontological issues as those related to whether the social world is regarded as something external to social actors, or the nature of reality, and epistemological issues, as those related to what is regarded as appropriate knowledge about the social world, or the nature of knowledge. However, as is discussed more in chapter 3, the distinction between epistemological and ontological issues is rarely definitively drawn, with post-ontological perspectives rejecting the premise of the

distinction entirely (Lehmann *et al*., 2007). This thesis distinguishes between epistemology and ontology in line with the conceptualisation outlined by Bryman's (2012); however, both are outlined as they relate to the theoretical framework drawn primarily from network theory and the work of the sociologist Castells (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) on the network society.

The central argument of the theory of the network society as outlined by Castells (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) is that the information technology revolution that occurred around the turn of the century has influenced and shaped society to a point where networks are now the primary organising societal units, replacing individuals and organisations in this role. Within this conceptualisation, power is exercised primarily through inclusion and exclusion as it relates to these networks, with Castells (2011) identifying four interrelated forms of power within the network society that are expanded upon in the next chapter:

1. Networking power: the power of those in dominant networks over individuals and organisations not included in those networks,
2. Network power: the power resulting from the standards and rules within the network, or the protocols of communication,
3. Networked power: the power of some members of the network over others, through processes that are distinct to each network, and
4. Network-making power: the power to programme networks according to specific interests and values, and to connect, or switch, between networks.

Counterpower is also seen as significant for Castells (2015, 2019) within the network society, described as the potential for social actors to challenge embedded power relations and claim representation for their own values and interests. This theoretical framing is therefore particularly pertinent to the examination of podcasts, as both a

part of the information technology revolution that has facilitated the growth of networks and the network society, but also being a potential source for challenging the power of dominant networks within the network society through promoting openness, alternative perspectives and authenticity, all aspects of podcasting that have been identified frequently in existing literature and research (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020).

I interpret Castells' work on the network society as being in line with the social philosophy of critical theory, and in line with this understanding, in shaping the theoretical framework for this research several additional critical theorists were influential. This includes the work of Garrett (2021a) writing on dissenting social work, Fisher (2009) on capitalist realism, Gramsci (1971) on hegemony and counter-hegemony, and Fanon (1959) on colonialism. Each of these are discussed at length in chapter 3 as they relate to the theoretical framework, and I have previously written about the application of the work of most of these theorists to contemporary social work contexts, including Gramsci (Hanley and Kerr, 2023), Fisher (Hanley *et al*., 2021), Castells (Hanley, 2022a) and Garrett (Hanley, 2022b). These various theorists and their ideas are all also engaged with throughout the literature review presented in the next chapter to inform the analysis of the existing literature in this area.

Framed within the theoretical framework just described, this research was undertaken using qualitative methods, using a narrative approach, with data collection undertaken in two distinct stages:

> Stage one: Semi-structured interviews with twelve independent social work podcasters in England, referred to hereafter as podcaster participants.

Stage two: Semi-structured interviews with six social workers in England who were asked to listen to one to three social work podcast episodes prior to the interview, referred to hereafter as listener participants.

Qualitative methods were chosen in order to account for the complexity of the context of both social work podcasts and social work CPD within the network society, areas expanded upon in the next chapter, in particular as they relate to the role of power and counterpower just introduced (Castells, 2010a, 2015, 2019). Thomas (2020) describes how qualitative research helps support an understanding of professional life that acknowledges this level of complexity, in particular in light of the “dizzying pace” of technological development and the impact that is having on this our understanding of professionalism (p.137). The narrative approach adopted here placed an emphasis on the stories and experiences of participants to offer some insight into this complex context, including in relation to the underlying ideologies and values within these narratives (Mertova and Webster. 2019). A qualitative meta-analysis approach was also engaged with to compare and contrast the findings from podcaster participants and listener participants, in order to draw conclusions based on both sets of data (Timulak, 2009).

The decision to limit the research scope to England was made to ensure that the research remained focused on the distinctive context of social work in England described above. However, it is notable that, in line with the theory of the network society (Castells, 2010a), the findings suggest that social work and social work podcasts in England form part of broader global networks of both power and counterpower, promoting inclusion and engagement for some, while also inherently excluding others. Data analysis was carried out using reflexive thematic analysis, ensuring that as a researcher I remained cognisant of my own theoretical assumptions

and positionality (Braun and Clarke, 2019). An in-depth examination of this model of data analysis and my positionality are outlined in chapter 3.

1.4 Contribution to Knowledge

While the contexts of social work podcasts and CPD, noted above and explored in-depth in the next chapter, suggest that this research into social work podcasts is both significant and timely, the existing research in this area remains limited. The majority of studies that are currently available looking at podcasts and social work do so exclusively within qualifying social work contexts, with podcasts forming part of either instruction or assessment (Feit *et al*., 2008; Tjorve *et al*., 2010; Stoltenkamp *et al*., 2011; Luna and Cullen, 2011; Cartney, 2014; Pillay *et al*., 2015; McGovern, 2017; Byrne *et al*., 2017; Bowers and Pack, 2017; Asakura *et al*., 2018; Lucas and Thomas, 2020; Ferrer *et al*., 2020; Hitchcock *et al*., 2021). In the rare studies that explore openly available social work podcasts or podcasts as CPD, the researchers are almost always the podcasters themselves, and the focus remains on their own podcast rather than social work podcasts generally (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023). Furthermore, most of this research comes from outside of the English context, with one notable exception (Cartney 2014). Therefore, this research makes a novel contribution to knowledge in this area through undertaking a qualitative study of independent social work podcasts in England with a focus on their use as CPD.

Key contributions to knowledge stemming from this research are explicitly drawn out in the conclusion, and include the identification of opportunities and challenges related to the use of social work podcasts as CPD England. Opportunities identified were linked to accessibility, flexibility, variety, reach and currency of podcasts. Independence and choice were also key themes identified by both podcasters and

listeners; however, these were juxtaposed alongside themes like activism and engagement, suggesting that podcasts have the potential to have a collective impact on social workers, service users and society. There are also key contributions to knowledge related to the themes of power and counterpower. In particular the social work podcast landscape in England is shown to be influenced by podcasters who have the potential to use their platforms to promote the interests and values of dominant networks and hegemonic control, as well as to challenge those networks through the promotion of dissent, counter-hegemony and counterpower.

The findings from the interviews with listener participants also make key contributions to knowledge in relation to social work CPD generally, in particular within the context of the new regulatory approach to CPD introduced by SWE. It was clear from these interviews that SWE's CPD policy was already fundamentally shaping the way participants engaged with and described their CPD, leading to a primary focus on meeting those requirements instead of personal and professional learning and development. Building on these key contributions to knowledge that are expanded upon more throughout this thesis, recommendations for further research, policy and practice are provided in the conclusion chapter. This includes specific recommendations around harnessing the potential opportunities afforded by social work podcasts identified through this research, while also acknowledging the key challenges identified.

1.5 Overview of the Thesis

Following this introduction chapter, the remainder of this thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a more extensive introduction to the literature and research relevant to this study, organised around four sections: the network society,

the social worker, CPD and podcasts. Based on this literature review, three research questions were identified:

1. What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?
2. What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?
3. What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

These research questions then shaped the methodology that is outlined in chapter 3, with sections covering the theoretical framework, methodology, methods, sampling, process and data analysis. Chapter 3 concludes with an exploration of research positionality and ethics as they relate to this research.

The final three chapters provide a comprehensive examination of the findings and contributions of this research. This starts with chapter 4, outlining the themes identified in the interviews with podcaster participants. This is split into five sections each covering multiple themes: podcast as CPD, podcaster independence, listener influence, social impact, and voice and representation. Chapter 5 then explores the findings from listener participants. This starts by outlining the demographics and backgrounds of the six listener participants, before moving on to themes related to CPD generally, and then themes related to social work podcasts. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis, amalgamating the findings from both chapters in order to draw out key contributions and recommendations, as well as highlighting some of the limitations with the research. The findings presented in these chapters are analysed in light of how they relate to the existing literature context in this area, and the research

questions that were developed based on the exploration of that literature, as outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The previous chapter outlined that this research is examining social work podcasts and continuing professional development (CPD), and introduced some of the context surrounding these areas. This chapter builds on that introduction to present an overview of the existing literature and research relevant to this study. Initially this is done in relation to the theory of the network society and how this helps shape an analysis of contemporary social work (Castells, 2010a). The literature review then looks at this context of contemporary social work in more detail, in particular in relation to the distinction between the economy of performance and ecologies of practice (Stronach *et al*., 2002), linking these with the concepts of power and counterpower introduced in the previous chapter (Castells, 2010a). The literature related to social work CPD, followed by social work podcasts, is then examined. This all demonstrates that although this research provides a unique contribution, there is a significant amount of existing research and literature that was drawn upon to inform and contextualise its contribution. This culminates in a summary section outlining and explaining the research questions that stemmed from this literature review, linking these with the methodology that is presented in the next chapter.

Leaving the focus on podcasts to the latter part of this literature review was a conscious decision made in order to ensure that despite my own interest in this area, as outlined in the previous chapter, the technology of podcasts did not lead the research undertaken. Instead, as has been pointed out frequently in relation to both education and social work (Kirkwood and Price, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014; Fisher *et al.*, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Turner *et al*., 2020), it was important to first transparently establish the pedagogical and practical issues the technology being researched has the potential to address. The importance of this is discussed in more detail when looking

at the specific challenges of contemporary social work CPD identified in the literature, as well as when introducing what the existing literature around podcasts says about their potential to address these challenges. This approach is also informed by Castells' (2010a) theory of the network society. He highlights that while information and communication technologies (ICTs) have helped to facilitate the development of the network society, the emergence of networks as the dominant form of social organisation has been inherently shaped by social, political and economic contexts that must be examined based on specific contexts. With this understanding in mind, the theory of the network society is now introduced in more detail as it relates to the context of social work in England.

2.1 Network Society

This section introduces the theory of the network society (Castells, 2010a) as it relates to this study, including looking at relevant research shaped and framed by the theory. Initially a general introduction to the network society is provided, followed by an exploration of power and counterpower as understood within the context of the network society. As outlined in the next chapter, these concepts played a particularly significant role in shaping the methodology and findings, and therefore it is vital to present them in detail here. Following the introduction to the concepts of power and counterpower, the theory of the network society is then examined in relation to social work and social work research. The overview of the network society provided in this chapter does not include a detailed outline of the network society as it relates to the theoretical framework and methodology of this research. However, it provides important context for this being outlined in the next chapter, as well as an important understanding of how the theory of the network society can facilitate an understanding

of the research and literature related to contemporary social work practice, social work CPD and social work podcasts presented throughout the rest of this chapter.

2.1.1 Networks and Nodes

In his trilogy of books, The Information Age, Spanish sociologist Castells (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) presents a detailed account of the theory of the network society. He argues that around the turn of the millennium a number of social, technological, economic and cultural transformations took place that amounted to a new form of society: the network society. As a result, he contends that we are now living within a culture where "digitized networks of multimodal communication have become so inclusive of all cultural expressions and personal experiences that they have made virtuality a fundamental dimension of our reality" (Castells, 2010a: xxxi). This has been led by the diffusion of internet, mobile, and digital media, technology and tools that have prompted the creation of horizontal networks of communication. These allow for the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from the many to the many, or what Castells terms "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2015: 6). As a result, core societal concepts, including social distance, inclusion, exclusion and power, have all been dramatically altered (Qvortrup, 2007). This concept of mass self-communication is described in more detail in relation to its role in both spreading the power of dominant networks, and in challenging the values and interests of these networks through counterpower, below in relation to social work, social work CPD and podcasts.

Although the starting point for Castells' (2010a) analysis as presented in The Information Age trilogy is focused on the changes brought about by ICTs, as already noted, his overarching theory suggests the societal influences and changes that have led to the network society extend beyond, although remain inherently linked to, the technological. Of particular significance in this is the now dominant influence of

networks as units of social organisation, replacing previously dominant societal structures such as individuals, or hierarchical organisations like companies. Castells (2010a) identifies numerous networks in his work, including financial networks, political networks, cultural production networks, science networks, military and security networks, and criminal networks, as evidence for his assertions. While networks are recognised to be an old form of organisation within the human experience, Castells (2010a) outlines how the networking technologies that are characteristic of the information age have facilitated and assured the endless expansion and global configuration of these networks in a way that was previously inconceivable. Networks in turn have proven to be highly adaptable and well-suited to a society that is increasingly shaped by ICTs, where individuals and traditional hierarchical organisations have struggled to maintain their relevance.

Central to Castells' (2010a) theory of the network society is the differentiation between the *space of flows* and the *space of places,* concepts that are referenced throughout this thesis. The space of flows represents the flows of capital, information, technology, images, sounds and symbols that are not just an element of contemporary economic, political and social life, but are the dominant element. The space of flows should not be considered as placeless, but as acting to link up various network nodes that exercise political, economic, technological or cultural power. This can most clearly be seen through the ongoing influence of cities as central nodes, despite the technological potential to make most decisions and run most operations of advanced services free from place consideration. These concepts of networks and nodes are discussed in more detail as they relate to this research and the theoretical framework in the next chapter.

As wealth and power become concentrated within nodes and networks that are primarily shaped by the space of flows, they come into contradiction with the local, dominated instead by the influence of the space of places. Despite the growing influence of the space of flows, the vast majority of people in all countries continue to live, work and function primarily within the localised space of places (Castells, 2010a). Castells (2010a) defines a place as “a locale whose form, function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity” (p.453). However, significantly, as a result of the functions and power in our societies being organised and incentivised through the space of flows, the structural domination of the logic of flows alters the meaning and dynamic of the space of places as it relates to everyone. This creates a disconnect between the relatively few people who are able to identify with the global, cosmopolitan culture that epitomises global networks and the space of flows, and the majority of people feeling strong local or regional identity that rarely conform to the interests and values of dominant global networks. The implication of this disconnect is to create an ongoing struggle between power and counterpower in the network society (Castells, 2015), a struggle that is now examined in more detail.

2.1.2 Power and Counterpower

Castells (2011) describes power as the relational capacity of an actor to impose their will over another actor based on the structural capacity of domination embedded within the institutions of society. Within this conceptualisation, power within the network society is exercised primarily through the rules that make the communicative structure of networks possible, in particular in ways that lead to network inclusion and exclusion. Expanding on this, Castells (2011) identifies four interrelated forms of power within the network society:

1. Networking power: the power of those in dominant networks over individuals and organisations not included in those networks,
2. Network power: the power resulting from the standards and rules within the network, or the protocols of communication,
3. Networked power: the power of some members of the network over others, through processes that are distinct to each network, and
4. Network-making power: the power to programme networks according to specific interests and values, and to connect, or switch, between networks.

This conceptualisation of power is referenced throughout this thesis, in particular the importance of network-making power in linking up various networks, and network power as exercised through the protocols of communication that determine the rules and standards accepted within networks. These protocols of communication have substantial influence, becoming compelling for all nodes within the network to respect and perpetuate, with failure to do so leading to nodes being bypassed or excluded. Therefore, once they are established within a network, or programmed across networks through network-making power, their influence is difficult to challenge.

Through the enforcement of these protocols of communication, Castells (2010a) describes how dominant global networks regularly and selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions and even countries based on their relevance to the fulfilment of the goals of those networks. The idea that the information age, bringing with it the era of mass self-communication already described, would perpetuate and enshrine existing exclusion at first may seem paradoxical, but as Hacker *et al*. (2009) explains:

> once one realizes that new power in network societies is strongly linked to influence over system configuration, position within networks and control over information flows, it is no longer surprising that those with

> greater connectivity, centrality and interactivity are those in society that will benefit the most (p.861).

Significantly though, Castells (2015, 2019) also highlights that where there is power, there is counterpower, highlighting that as with networks of power, networks of counterpower have arisen and adapted to the new social structures of the network society. Castells (2015) defines counterpower as the capacity of social actors to challenge and change the embedded power relations within networks in order to claim representation for their own or alternative values and interests. The configuration of societal institutions depends on the constant interaction between power and counterpower, and through connecting up networks of counterpower Castells (2015) theorises that despite the influence of the various forms of power outlined above in maintaining dominant networks and promoting their values and interests, resistance can become powerful enough to induce disconnections between dominant networks and nodes.

In order to illustrate this Castells (2015) extensively analyses modern networked social movements. This includes two movements initiated in the early 2010s: the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government actions and protests in predominantly Arab countries, and the Occupy Movement, an international protest movement predominantly challenging social and economic inequality. These social movements, and others, are described as being linked through a number of common characteristics, such as a rejection of prevailing political parties and processes, and a lack of formal leadership or organisation. This lack of clearly defined hierarchies or leaders is described as a major benefit for these movements when considered alongside the history of resistance movements, where state responses have often concentrated on the co-option or suppression of movement leaders and organisations. For internet users, however, where horizontal organisation facilitated through mass

self-communication is the norm, this lack of vertical organisation is far more intuitive (Castells, 2015). Therefore, another core characteristic that defines networked social movements is that they are initiated and organised online through mass self-communication. It is worth reiterating, however, that Castells (2019, 2021) still sees power in the network society, as described at the start of this section, as being far more effective at perpetuating and maintaining dominant networks. The significance of network power and network-making power in perpetuating dominant networks has also been identified in social work in England, and it is to the research on the network society and networks in social work that this literature review now turns.

2.1.3 Social Work and the Network Society

O'Brien (2004) proposes that Castells' concept of the network society fits well with social work's theoretical foundations, and in particular through a mutual recognition of the complexity and intractability of many of the issues facing society. It should therefore not be surprising that the concepts behind the network society have been applied multiple times to social work and in social work research. Smith (2013) outlines several challenges for social workers stemming from the analysis provided by Castells, including a need to develop an understanding of what the structures and dynamics of the network society mean for social work practice, and to develop strategies for effective interventions. Baker *et al.* (2014) similarly suggest social workers need to develop practices that utilise the positive elements of networks and technology within the network society, while redressing the negative impacts. Smith (2013) and Baker *et al*. (2014) both also highlight that social workers need to interrogate their own role within the network society in order to avoid promoting the interests and values of dominant networks, while challenging the network exclusion of those they work with. Frost (2017), examining data from two studies into social work multi-agency working,

argues that social work is inherently a “networked profession”, with professionals habitually involved in networked work with other professionals, individuals and communities (p.174).

The theory of the network society has also been applied to the role of technology in social work interactions. For example, LaMendola (2010) suggests that a sense of presence in social work interactions can be created through the use of technologically mediated interactions, using the theory of the network society to recommend an expanded notion of space to include online space within the profession. However, as is described in more detail later in this chapter in relation to social work and the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002), it is also important to recognise the loss of professionalism social workers can experience in the face of technological innovations being imposed upon them. Specifically exploring this, Coleman and Harris (2008) used the theory of the network society to analyse the impact of local authority call centres on social work practice in England, describing how these undermined a sense of place, imposing the dominant logic of flows on social worker interactions in a way that hampered them. This study is returned to later in this chapter as it relates to the counterpower that social workers demonstrate when technology is perceived to be imposed on them.

The most common area of social work that the theory of the network society has been applied to relates to working with social exclusion. This is likely due to the specific insights that the theory is seen to provide around how exclusion, and inclusion, link with power and counterpower in contemporary society, as already described (Castells, 2010a). As an example, Ruiz-Roman *et al*. (2019) utilised Castells’ network society theory to develop and analyse an intervention aimed at expanding the networks of young people (12-18 years) from disadvantaged backgrounds in Spain. Led by social

workers and educators, this approach was shown to have a quantitative impact on reducing the number of school drop-outs and improving academic success amongst the participants.

Demonstrating more mixed findings from a qualitative perspective, Baker *et al*. (2017, 2018) report extensively on a participatory action research project in a small rural community in Australia, underpinned by Castells' theory of the network society. In one study they provided tablet computers to older people in that community (Baker *et al*., 2017), and in another they provided tablets to professionals (including social workers) working in that community (Baker *et al*., 2018), with a view toward expanding network support in these communities and reducing exclusion. These studies both found that there was some potential for this technology to be utilised in novel ways to support these communities, either independently or with the support of professionals, to access services or increase their social networks. However, there were also technological, financial, connectivity and systemic barriers, replicating the barriers already experienced by these individuals and communities in the space of places within the space of flows. This demonstrates that for switched-off individuals and communities, the provision of technology alone is unlikely to lead them to overcome their exclusion within the network society, in particular as they are unlikely to be seen as relevant to the interests and values of dominant networks perpetuated through the protocols of communication, described above as determining the rules and standards accepted within networks (Castells, 2010a). Ballantyne *et al*. (2010) and Sen (2016) have also utilised the lens of the network society in examining the use of ICT among care experienced young people in the UK. Once again there were some social benefits reported when participants were engaging with ICTs; however, ultimately, both studies found that the challenges and exclusions that care experienced young people faced

offline, including financial hardship and increased risk of harm, also negatively impacted on their online experiences.

Steiner (2021) has highlighted that social work lacks a coherent, consistent and robust theoretical or ethical foundation for understanding the influence that ICTs are having on the profession. Among the theories he suggests as having a potential role in redressing this deficit is Castells' theory of the network society, specifically highlighting the insights it can provide on the use of ICTs in social movements, as touched on in the previous section. The growing body of literature and research applying Castells' work to social work that has been outlined in this section reinforces this proposal. Further supporting this is the commensurate growth in interest in social work literature and research on the dominant networks that hold substantial decision-making power in relation to the policy and funding that impact on the profession (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020; MacGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Scourfield, 2020). This is something I have explored in more detail elsewhere, with a specific focus on Castells' theory of the network society (Hanley, 2022a, 2023). While this thesis does not repeat that previous analysis, it is important to acknowledge that Castells (2011) describes networked power as distinct to each network, and this underscores the importance of engaging with the specific context of contemporary social work within the network society in order to provide a foundation for understanding social work CPD and social work podcasts. Therefore, this thesis now shifts focus towards the social work profession, looking in particular at the influence of the economy of performance and the contrasting role of counterpower.

2.2. The Social Worker

Castells (2010a) dedicates a large amount of his work on the network society to looking at the influence of the new social structure of the network society on

workforces. He describes the new informational paradigm of work and labour within the network society as a “messy quilt” woven from management decisions, systems of industrial relations, cultural and institutional environments, and government policies (Castells, 2010a: 256). In light of this, this section explores some of this context as it relates to social work practice, and in particular elements seen as relevant to the focus of this study, around the economy of performance and counterpower. However, before moving on to these discussions it is important to reiterate the challenges faced by contemporary social work that were highlighted in the introduction, including poor working conditions and high vacancy rates (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children’s Services, 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a; British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2023a). These working conditions, and the challenges related to them around retention and recruitment fundamentally shape social work practice in England today, and as shown in particular in chapter 5, also significantly influenced the findings of this research.

2.2.1 Economy of Performance

There is a substantial body of literature exploring the concept of *profession*, with a frequent focus being around the dichotomy of *agency* versus *structure*, with agency being the capacity of individuals to act independently, and structure relating to the patterned arrangements that influence actions, limiting choices and opportunities (Priestly *et al.,* 2018). However, significantly Castells (2015) explicitly avoids the term agency in his work on networked social movements. Instead he argues for counterpower based on collective action that shares anger, and ultimately hope, through communicative processes, overcoming fear in the process. In his work on

dissenting social work, described more in the next section, Garrett (2021a) also cautions against a reliance on the agency/structure dichotomy. He similarly argues that dissent must be organised and collectivised, as opposed to being individualistic, and that the emphasis on agency triumphing over structure can act to create heroic martyrs who ultimately burnout without collective support around them. Therefore, despite the prominent place this dichotomy has in the literature in this area, it was not influential in shaping this research.

Stronach *et al*. (2002) provide a framework related to professions that was influential in this work. They examine professionalism in relation to teachers and nurses, and proposed an understanding of the professional as caught between the "economy of performance" and "ecologies of practice" (p.109). In this conceptualisation, the economy of performance is expressed primarily through audit driven quantitative performance measurements, often with a view towards making local or national comparisons in order to measure perceived performance. The economy of performance is usually framed around these types of external expectations, leaving little room for challenge, and creating an ominous level of coercion and threat related to any failure to meet the requirements. On the other hand, Stronach *et al.* (2002) refer to ecologies of practice as an accumulation of individual and collective professional experiences. These are described as less adaptable to quantification, and often more focused on local contexts.

This conceptualisation could therefore be seen as analogous to the discussions earlier in this chapter around the space of flows, represented by the flows of capital, information, technology, images, sounds and symbols that constitute the dominant element of contemporary economic, political, and social life, and the space of places, or locales whose form, function and meaning are physically self-contained (Castells,

2010a). The economy of performance is driven by the logic of the space of flows, prioritising the global flow of information, that promote the interests and values of dominant networks. Meanwhile the more locally focused ecologies of practice are predominantly attuned to the space of places, allowing professionals to adapt to the needs and interests of a specific population or context. Building on this understanding, the terms economy of performance and ecologies of practice are used throughout this thesis to reference this distinction between audit cultures and professional dispositions respectively.

There is a significant amount of literature examining the distinction between the economy of performance and ecologies of practice as they relate to social work, even though these terms are rarely explicitly utilised. For example, Rogowski (2020) outlines how in the 1970s social work could still be argued to be a “genuine profession” allowing for a high level of professional discretion (p.9). However, he argues that at least since the 1980s social work professionalism has been influenced by increasing managerialism that has eroded this. Using the terminology of Stronach *et al*. (2002), this could otherwise be deemed a shift towards the economy of performance. A substantial influence in driving this trend towards the economy of performance in social work has been consecutive governments applying the logic of markets, mostly drawn from experiences in the private sector, to social work (Marthinsen, 2019; Harris, 2023). Examples of this include a growing focus on cost efficiency, budget management, quantifiably data driven objectives, measurements based on inputs and outputs, outsourcing of services, and framing social work services in terms of customer or consumer relationships. As a result, Lavallette (2019) describes that contemporary social work has lost the potential to be profession that stands shoulder to shoulder

with the poor and marginalised, and instead increasingly social work is seen as a role that requires specified, and predominantly bureaucratic, skills.

In this context, social workers who willingly engage with this performative and bureaucratic approach are rewarded, and those who are opposed to it, or outright violate it, are punished (Lavallette, 2019). This also means that social workers become less likely to engage in practice that challenges inequality or injustice, in particular if it means stepping outside of these pre-determined parameters of practice (Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019). Returning to the theory of the network society, these parameters of practice can be seen as analogous to the protocols of communication through which network-making power is exercised and the rules and standards of networks are established, with those who fail to abide by them being bypassed or excluded (Castells, 2011). It is valuable to draw upon the work of Gramsci (1971, 1988) here also, in particular on hegemonic control as instilled through consent and acceptance through legitimising norms and ideas. In line with this, the parameters for practice, or protocols of communication, could be considered to be manufacturing consent amongst social workers facilitating hegemonic control through the economy of performance. These concepts of hegemony and manufactured consent are returned to throughout this chapter, and discussed in more detail in relation to the theoretical framework for this research in the next chapter.

The dominance of the economy of performance in social work has been shown to have demonstrably negative consequences for those social workers support. For example, Gibson (2019a) found that social workers would sometimes engage with performative processes even when they felt they may have a detrimental impact on the lives of service users. In another study Devlieghere and Gillingham (2021) demonstrated that auditable and actuarial recording requirements, usually justified primarily on the basis

of transparency, could actually inadvertently lead to reduced transparency. This is because only a relatively small fraction of the complex processes involved in any social work intervention can be captured through these processes. Harris (2023) has further argued that the focus on data collection is assumed by many to lead to enhanced competition, as all organisations will want to achieve the levels attained by the best performers. However, in reality he suggests this has led to a culture of mediocrity, with a primary focus from services on meeting performative recording and surveillance targets, rather than on service improvement.

The high level of political and media scrutiny social workers face in England compared to other jurisdictions, and the predominant focus on eliminating risk this creates in practice, likely exacerbates these issues (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King, 2016; Warner, 2018; McCulloch, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). This history of scrutiny has been shown to have created a culture of fear and anxiety whereby social workers self-regulate in relation to following procedures and data collection, largely precluding the potential for challenge and dissent (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). In his work on the network society Castells (2019) has also written extensively on the influence of fear in hindering counterpower and controlling individuals, describing fear as "the most powerful of human emotions" (p.25). He describes how climates of fear are often perpetuated by those in dominant networks to create the circumstances where individuals agree to willingly being watched and surveilled. The influence of this culture of fear in social work is described more in the next section looking at social workers overcoming fear through counterpower.

As well as creating a climate of fear and anxiety, the high level of political and media scrutiny faced by social workers in England could also be responsible for creating the widespread belief within the profession that the public holds negative opinions of social workers (Legood *et al*., 2016; Edmondson and King, 2016; Social Work England (SWE), 2021b; BASW, 2022b, 2023a; UNISON, 2022a). This belief is contrasted with research undertaking by Cragg Ross Dawson (2020) that found that the public in England generally hold positive views of social work, including 88% of participants in that study agreeing that social work was important for helping vulnerable people. This is similar to findings in a study in Scotland that found that the majority of the public hold positive views of social services, with 52% agreeing that social services are often unfairly blamed when things go wrong (McCulloch and Webb, 2020). Therefore, this common view of amongst social workers of a negative public opinion could be seen as an example of what Gramsci (1971) refers to as common sense, based on ideas that are easily accessible and related to everyday thinking, but not usually engaging with critical reflection or complexity. This concept of common sense is drawn on again several times in this chapter, and discussed in more detail in the next chapter as it relates to the theoretical framework.

This common sense belief amongst social workers of a negative public opinion of the profession is therefore more likely perpetuated by media and political networks that promote scrutiny and negativity surrounding the social work profession than by any actual evidence of negative public opinions (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King, 2016; Warner, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). The role of dominant media and political networks in this process underscores the significant role that these play in exercising network power through the protocols of communication in ways that shape

social worker practice and perceptions (Castells, 2011). The media is also noted to play a vital role in perpetuating hegemonic control and common sense according to Gramsci (1971), with the capture and control of media institutions being vital for the aforementioned manufacturing of consent. The role of political and media networks is described later in this chapter in relation to both social work CPD and social work podcasts. However, counterpower is also shown have significant implications in these areas, and so it is important to provide an overview of social work and counterpower here first.

2.2.2 Social Work and Counterpower

Castells (2015), as noted above, recognises that where there is power there is also counterpower, bringing with it the potential to create disconnects between dominant networks and nodes. Counterpower requires challenge and dissent, as demonstrated through the examples of networked social movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement. In relation to social work, there is also a growing interest in what Garrett (2021a) describes as dissenting social work, challenging and interrogating dominant understandings and approaches within the profession. However, Garrett (2021a) also highlights that not all social workers face the same risk if they engage in dissent or challenge. He highlights that experienced, permanent contract, male and white social workers are all likely to face fewer risks if engaging in dissent, something that stems in part from them having more secure financial circumstances. To illustrate this Garrett (2020a) points to the high debt levels that epitomise contemporary capitalist society, seeing debt as materially shaping behaviour in a hierarchical manner. He highlights this imposed debt as an example of how capitalism is inherently coercive, a point that is particularly pertinent to social work in England where social work students are increasingly having to take on substantial debt in order to qualify

(Considine *et al*., 2019), although less so if they qualify through government favoured routes (Hanley, 2022c). These points are further emphasised by findings from BASW (2023a) that almost a quarter of social workers don't feel secure in their jobs.

Significantly though, social workers may have more capacity to engage in challenge or dissent than they tend to believe. For example, despite high numbers of referrals for fitness to practice involving social workers, SWE (2023a) report that annually only 0.1% of all social workers in England are removed from their register due to these referrals. Potentially more significant, a recent Reassured (2023) study found that social workers have the highest level of job security of any sector in the UK today. This job security likely stems in part from the high vacancy rates experienced in the sector (Skills for Care, 2022; Department for Education, 2023a). Nevertheless, these findings suggest that social workers may not have as much to fear in their workplaces as they often believe (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). The perpetuation of the belief amongst social workers that they are not secure in their jobs, as with the belief in a negative public perception identified above, could therefore be seen as an example of common sense within the profession, proliferated in a way that serves to reinforce the hegemonic subjugation of social workers (Gramsci, 1971).

Overcoming fear, and the associated influence of the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002), will likely require collective action amongst social workers, as argued by both Castells (2015) in relation to the counterpower and Garrett (2021a) in relation to dissenting social work. This point is also made by Gramsci (1971) in relation to challenging hegemonic control. In his work he frequently highlights the importance of counter-hegemony through collective action, including engaging with social groups, trade unions and professional associations (Rogowski, 2020). There is growing

evidence that social workers have a desire to engage in this type of collective action, including multiple surveys finding strong support for industrial action within the profession (BASW, 2023b; Koutsounia, 2023). Furthermore, BASW (2023a) found that many social workers are already engaged in activism to various degrees, including that over the course of a year 73% of social workers had signed a petition, 40% had boycotted products for political reasons, 30% had contacted a politician directly with concerns, and 11% had taken part in a demonstration.

In line with these contemporary trends, social work has a long history of engaging in dissent. Over 100 years ago Attlee (1920) wrote that “every social worker is almost certain to be also an agitator”, arguing that social workers should act as leaders in social reform efforts (p.5). Throughout the history of social work, social workers, individually and collectively, have played significant roles in prominent political and protest movements in the UK and internationally, often influenced by critical and radical social work perspectives that specifically emphasise the need for social change and engaging with the root causes of societal problems (Abramovitz, 1998; Ferguson, 2008, 2019; Rogowski, 2013; Noble, 2015; Bent-Goodley, 2015; Harris, 2019; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019). It has also been suggested frequently in social work literature that professionals need to be inherently political, and even the decision that some social workers profess to exercise around remaining apolitical needs to be considered as political, in particular in the face of societal injustices (Fronek, 2017; Shokane and Masoga, 2019; Weinberg and Banks, 2019; Garrett, 2021b).

Garrett’s (2021a) highlights that social workers engaging in dissent should adopt a broad conceptualisation of politics beyond traditional political spaces, and in particular details the need for social workers to engage in a politics that is active in “subverting, disrupting and declassifying the existing ways the world is perceived” (p.111). There

are some contemporary examples of collective dissent that can be seen as engaging in political action in line with this understanding. For example, in 2004 Social Work Action Network (SWAN) were founded, a campaigning organisation with an explicit remit to challenge dominant trends of neoliberalism, marketisation and managerialism in social work in the UK (Rogowski, 2013). SWAN also have an international presence, and examples of other, similar social work campaigning organisations have been identified in other countries, including Australia (Fronek, 2017). In a study of Portuguese social workers, Albuquerque (2019) describes how social workers who join these types of community networks do so as a way of undertaking a "strategic adjustment" for social work practice away from the restrictions of their employer organisations (p.322).

Notably though, Carey and Foster (2011) suggest that activism in contemporary social work is actually more likely to be characterised by what they dub "deviant social work" or "minor, hidden, subtle, practical, shrewd or moderate acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage" such as exaggerating service user needs or ignoring performative policy edicts (p.578). Similar types of activities have been described elsewhere as "quiet challenges" (White, 2009: 129), "entrepreneurial discretionary space" (Murphy, 2023b: 10) and "daily micro practice" (O'Brien, 2010: 180). Banks and Rutter (2022) also describe how social workers dealing with the ethical challenges they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic would engage in "ethical creativity", including bending or breaking rules imposed through new laws, procedures and guidance during the pandemic. Similar experiences of social workers working during the pandemic have been captured elsewhere (Banks *et al*., 2020; Dominelli, 2021).

These discussions around dissent and counterpower also provide additional context for the way social workers engage with technology, an important consideration for this

research looking at podcasts as a technological innovation. Social workers are frequently characterised as being slow to adopt technological innovations (Schembri, 2008; Higgs, 2012; Berzin *et al*., 2015; Goldkind *et al*., 2016; Haynes, 2019; Turner *et al*., 2020; Taylor-Beswcik, 2023). However, there are a number of reasons identified in research and literature to explain why social workers may choose not to actively engage with certain technologies. These include privacy concerns, blurring of professional boundaries, poor software design, unreliability, inequitable access, the disempowering impact of technology, engrained bias, vast expenditure, lack of evidence of effectiveness, and the loss of face-to-face contact that has traditionally been central to social work practice (Wrennall, 2010; Reamer, 2013; Berzin *et al*., 2015; Goldkind and Wolf, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Ryan and Garrett, 2017; Cooner *et al*.,2019; Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2019; Steiner, 2021). In addition, social workers frequently experience technology as being imposed upon them as a management tool, rather than feeling like active partners in technological innovations (Rogowski, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014; Gillingham, 2015; Harris, 2019; SCIE, 2019). In applying Gramsci's concept of hegemony to social work, Rogowski (2020) explicitly highlights how the terminology around modernisation has been used to control social workers and reduce tendencies to resists technological innovations through instilling these as common sense improvements to services.

In the example of the research undertaken by Coleman and Harris (2008) on social work call centres described above, technological innovations were also shown to undermine the importance of the space of places in social work interactions, with the changes being driven by the logic of flows and the interests and values of dominant networks. Building on this, Smith (2013) argues that the resistance that some social workers express towards technological innovations in their practice should be

considered as an appropriate response to the imposition of the spatial logic of flows onto a profession that has long grounded itself in the importance of places.

The likelihood of this resistance to technology stemming from active dissent and counterpower rather than incapability is also backed up by research that suggests that social workers in general are actually quite adept when it comes to technology (SCIE, 2017, 2019). This was particularly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when social workers, often lacking guidance or resources to do so, rapidly shifted the majority of their working online, including qualifying education, CPD, meetings with colleagues, and meetings with service users; notably though within this context social workers continued to highlight concerns related to ethical and value implications of this increased use of technology (Banks *et al*., 2020; Pentaris *et al*., 2021; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021; Dominelli, 2021; Banks and Rutter, 2022; Bald, 2023). Further suggesting this level of technological acumen, Devlieghere and Gillingham (2021) identified in their research that some social workers were manipulating the actuarial recording systems they are required to use to achieve the outcomes they desired, in an example that sounds very much like the deviant social work already discussed. The growing number of social work podcasters further emphasises that social workers are engaging with technological innovations, as is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023).

The examples of dissent outlined in this section suggest that social work has significant potential to engage in counterpower within the network society. However, there remain challenges and limitations, including the prominent role of fear and the economy of performance in discouraging dissent and challenge amongst social workers. If the myriad “deviant social work” (Carey and Foster, 2011: 578), “quiet challenges” (White, 2009: 129), “entrepreneurial discretionary space” (Murphy, 2023b:

10), and “daily micro practices” (O’Brien, 2010: 180) in social work could be harnessed towards collective and networked counterpower, this fear is more likely to be overcome. There are examples where this has been demonstrated, for example the publication of an online, free and peer-reviewed social work magazine during the Covid-19 pandemic, titled SW2020 Under Covid, that encouraged a broad range of submissions from social workers, including on topics of activism, solidarity and communitarianism. The editors of that magazine described the experience of those contributing to be part of “everyday activism”, or the everyday talk and action engaged with which is not necessarily coordinated, but brought together in the magazine collectively through a shared desire to promote social change (Sen *et al.,* 2022: 1780). The interest in both submitting and accessing the content of that magazine led the editors to question whether we were seeing a re-emergence of radical and critically engaged social work as a result of the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and other events going on at the time, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), an international social movement focused on highlighting and tackling racial discrimination and inequality. This point has been reflected in research elsewhere around how these events triggered self-reflection within the social work profession (Cane and Tedam, 2023; Pentaris *et al*., 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Obasi, 2022).

As Castells (2015) outlines, sharing outrage and hope through communicative action in this way is an effective approach for overcoming fear and challenging dominant networks. These themes around counterpower in social work are returned to in more detail later in this chapter, showing that research suggests podcasts could facilitate alternative voices and perspectives in social work CPD, including those that promote counterpower (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). However,

before getting on to that, the wide-ranging literature around social work CPD is explored as it relates to this research.

2.3 Continuing Professional Development

Building on the analysis already provided in relation to the network society and social work, the literature and research related to social work CPD is now examined. Initially this is done through looking at the historical context, the contemporary context and the regulatory context of social work CPD, in particular in England. The focus then shifts to looking more specifically at the research in this area, first in relation to what research can tell us about the various models of social work CPD that have been adopted, and then more generally, with a particular focus on what the research says about the challenges related to social work CPD. This is provided with a view towards exploring how podcasts may be able to overcome some of these challenges later in this chapter.

2.3.1 Historical Context

Some of the earliest organisations engaged in the training of social workers in England in the mid-19th century were charities, including the Charity Organisation Society and the Toynbee Hall Settlement (Rogowski, 2020). These organisations undertook their own training of social work staff and volunteers, largely following the apprenticeship model of learning through observing others and practical application. It was not until establishment of the UK wide Council for Training in Social Work in 1962, renamed the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work (CCETSW) in 1970, that there was a statutory organisation with responsibility for regulating and promoting social work training and education (Rogowski, 2020).

In the 1970s the CCETSW developed a system of approving CPD courses for social work, which included the provision of some limited financial support to social workers

undertaking approved courses. However, Moriarty and Manthrope (2014) describe how few accessed these approved courses, with employers also reluctant to accept the validity of CPD that was carried out at a previous employer. In examining this period of social work's history, Jones (2011) and Rogowski (2020) both suggest that the focus on centrally setting standards and approving social work training stemmed, at least in part, from a political impetus to control the increasing influence of critical and radical models of social work that were becoming prominent in the 1970s.

In 1990 the CCETSW approved a new structure of CPD for social workers, the Post Qualifying Social Work (PQSW) framework, based on courses that would be undertaken by social workers largely through on-the-job learning, but in conjunction with higher education institutes (HEIs) (CCETSW, 1992). This was a two-level professional award, with the first level being an undergraduate award, followed by a second level postgraduate award focused on a specific area of practice. The completion of both elements was required to achieve the qualification; however, large numbers never progressed beyond the first level, meaning that they never received any qualification. In 1997 the post-qualifying framework was revised to make the undergraduate and postgraduate levels separate qualifications to address this limitation (Brown and Keen, 2004).

Around the turn of the millennium, widespread reforms impacted on the social work profession in England, including in relation to CPD. Of particular note, the Care Standards Act 2000 created the General Social Care Council (GSCC) responsible for the registration, regulation and training of social workers in England, taking on all the responsibilities of the CCETSW in the process. That legislation also made social work a registered profession for the first time in England, as well as making social work a protected title. It has been frequently argued that this shift towards becoming a legally

recognised profession also facilitated the shift towards social work being dominated by the economy of performance, discussed above as being characterised by quantitative performance measures and a particular focus on national comparators to measure perceived performance (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Harris, 2019, 2023; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Lavalette, 2019; Marthinsen, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020; Rogowski, 2020). Notably though research shows that social workers today place little value on professional regulation, with a BASW (2022b) study finding that wanting to be part of a recognised profession was the least prominent reason social workers entered the field, at just 2.77%, compared to 29.51% wanting to work with and support people. Johnson *et al*. (2022) similarly found that social workers in England predominantly entered the profession to make a difference, not to because of any perceived status related to being a regulated profession.

Alongside the creation of the GSCC, three separate regulators were also established in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland at this time, allowing for the highly variable regulatory expectations and requirements across the four nations of the UK we see today (Rogowski, 2020), and as reflected in the CPD research discussed below. These developments also corresponded with the social work degree becoming the minimum qualification for practice for new social workers, meaning that the existing PQSW framework, with level one set at undergraduate level, became less appealing for incoming social workers (Department of Health, 2002). That PQSW framework, first established under the CCETSW, was therefore gradually phased out, and in 2006 a new PQSW framework under the GSCC was launched, based on three award levels, specialist, higher specialist and advanced. It is noteworthy though that the new PQSW framework, despite being at postgraduate level, saw substantially lower engagement

from social workers, with only 11,964 enrolments on PQSW courses in England between 2006 and 2011, compared to 33,217 during the shorter period between 2003 and 2006 (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014).

The GSCC also implemented a post-registration training and learning (PRTL) requirement for all social workers, meaning that they had to engage in 90 hours or 15 days of training and learning every three years to maintain their registration (Wing and Whiffin, 2005). This could be through training courses (such as the PQSW), reading, studying, teaching, research or engaging in supervision (Wing and Whiffin, 2005). While the flexibility around the PRTL requirements was originally promoted by the regulator as a positive, the GSCC in 2009 declared an intention to introduce “more stringent” PRTL requirements, including suggestions that 50% of all CPD hours/days needed to be formally assessed (Community Care, 2009: para 2). These suggested changes were proposed following the substantial media and political attention targeted at social work following the death of 17-month-old Peter Connelly (Baby P) in 2007 (Jones, 2014). This scrutiny would also lead to a series of reports calling for major reforms in social work (Laming, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Munro, 2011).

Through a combination of the growing scrutiny around the GSCC stemming from these reports, and the government’s austerity measures introduced following the 2008 financial crisis, in 2012 the GSCC was closed, and regulatory responsibility transferred to the existing regulator of a range of professions, including occupational therapists, paramedics and physiotherapists: the Health Professions Council (Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020; Rogowski, 2020). Renamed the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) to reflect this new remit, they endorsed the flexible approach to CPD recording and monitoring that social workers had become used to under the GSCC, incorporating both formal opportunities like training sessions, and informal CPD

opportunities like workplace learning and independent reading (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014: Farrow, 2014). The plans for more stringent CPD requirements for social workers, including formal CPD assessments, were therefore side-lined from a regulatory perspective, although some of those ideas would be maintained in later initiatives like the National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS), discussed more in the next section.

The same year that the GSCC closed, The College of Social Work (TCSW) was established by the government with the stated goal of raising the profile of social work (TCSW, 2012). TCSW only lasted until 2015, with its demise officially blamed on a funding shortfall through failure to gain sufficient members (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016a). One lasting initiative introduced by TCSW is Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). The PCF is based on a scaffolding approach to professional development that focuses on nine core domains that social workers are required to work through at varying levels of complexity depending on the stage of their careers (BASW, 2018). The PCF is based around capabilities, rather than specific qualifications like the PQSW framework, and so it was seen as more flexible and suited to the approach taken by the HCPC towards CPD regulation (Pearce *et al*., 2015). The focus on capabilities was also seen as a way to move away from mechanistic and tick-box approaches to professional standards, with the capabilities being described as more holistic and rounded than other frameworks that social workers had experienced to this point (Taylor and Bogo, 2014: Higgins and Goodyer, 2015). Despite lacking a statutory basis, the PCF continues to be used widely in the social work profession in England to underpin both qualifying and post-qualifying training and education, and since the closure of TCSW in 2015, the

responsibility for the PCF has shifted to BASW, who updated the framework in 2018 to reflect changes and developments within the profession (BASW, 2018).

The introduction of the PCF, combined with the flexible regulatory approach of the HCPC, led to a rapid decline in engagement with the PQSW framework (Rogowski, 2020). Farrow (2014) suggests that this was also led by employers who were struggling to fund PQSW qualifications under austerity measures, and began looking for cheaper CPD options for their social workers. Therefore, the decline of the PQSW frameworks was accompanied by a growing influence of the market in social work CPD, with organisations that provide social work CPD today usually having to compete for contracts from employers or the government directly, leading to a strong emphasis on lowering costs (Weinberg and Banks, 2019; Rogowski, 2020).

The historical background outlined in this section provides important context for understanding the current relationships between employers, markets and the central government related to social work CPD that are discussed more in the next section and significantly shaped the findings of this research. However, this largely linear account of the history of social work CPD in England has been summarised and simplified here for the purposes of setting this context, and there are more in-depth accounts of the policy and regulatory changes in social work impacting on CPD, as well as those that focus on other areas and developments, that are available (*for example*, Purcell, 2020; Rogowski, 2020, Worsley *et al*., 2020; Worsley, 2023).

2.3.2 Contemporary Context

The dominant role of the market in social work CPD, that has arisen as a result of the historical developments outlined in the previous section, has also allowed the government to exercise substantial control over the CPD that social workers engage

with in England today. This includes through the influence of the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS), also referred to as the Post-Qualifying Standards, for both children and families (Department for Education, 2014) and adults (Department of Health, 2015), introduced in 2014 and 2015 respectively. The KSS were initiatives led by the Chief Social Workers (CSWs) in England, senior civil servants whose roles were introduced by the government "to challenge as well as to champion the profession" (Department for Education, 2013: para 2). The KSS outline what the government expects social workers in England to know and be able to do in their practice within statutory social work services. They provide an illustrative example of how the CPD landscape in England functions today, and therefore are discussed now in some detail.

As with the PCF, the KSS have no statutory or regulatory authority. However, unlike the PCF, the KSS have been heavily criticised for being highly prescriptive, and reflecting the technocratic and social control models of social work (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020), or what was described above as the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2022). Despite this, the KSS have garnered and maintained influence within the social work profession through being tied to government funding for several initiatives linked with social work CPD introduced over the past decade. These have included:

- Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), a programme of support for social workers in their first-year post-qualifying (Skills for Care, 2021),
- NAAS, an assessment-based accreditation model for social workers working with children and families (Preston, 2022),

- Social Work Teaching Partnerships, government sponsored partnerships between HEIs and social work employers, including a programme of support for social work CPD (Interface Associates, 2020), and
- Pathways Programme (formerly Firstline and Headline), a government commissioned leadership development programme for social workers provided by the social work charity Frontline (Frontline, 2022).

Despite the government funding behind each of these initiatives allowing them to have an incredibly advantageous place in the market driven social work CPD landscape, each of these initiatives have struggled to be effective in supporting social workers in contexts shaped by the crisis of working conditions and insufficient resources, as outlined earlier in this chapter (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b; Stevenson, 2018; Baginsky *et al*., 2019; Interface Associates, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2020; Kantar, 2020; Smith and Moore, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Moriarty *et al*., 2021; Preston, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022). Some have also faced significant acts of dissent, in particular the NAAS, which experienced a union boycott and was scrapped in 2022 (Preston, 2022; UNISON, 2022b).

Despite these challenges, these projects have been successful in enshrining the KSS within the profession. Since the KSS were introduced, any social work organisation wishing to take advantage of the large financial incentives associated with these programmes has had to imbed the KSS within their organisation. This has also included any organisation, such as HEIs, wishing to bid for the contracts associated with facilitating these programmes. Within the market driven social work CPD system, and at time when both social work employers and HEIs increasingly struggle with a lack of resources, the incentive to engage with these funded CPD opportunities has

been very strong (Cleary, 2018; House of Commons Housing Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019; House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, 2019).

The impact of this is evident in research around these projects that show high levels of employer engagement, despite the deficits and challenges of each (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b; Stevenson, 2018; Baginsky *et al*., 2019; Interface Associates, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2020; Kantar, 2020; Smith and Moore, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Moriarty *et al*., 2021; Preston, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022). This existing research also shows how imbedded the KSS have become in social work organisations as a result of these initiatives. For example, Smith and Moore (2020) found in a survey of senior leadership in children's social care that 88% were using the KSS as part of performance management processes. Similarly, Interface Associates (2020) found that 100% of the HEIs engaged in teaching partnerships had amended their curricula to focus more on the KSS (Interface Associates, 2020). Local authorities who engaged with the NAAS also described how it had led to an "urgency and pace of embedding" the KSS within their organisations (Kantar, 2020: 70).

These policies and initiatives can therefore be seen as establishing and maintaining a vision of social work that is shaped by dominant ideologies and interests, even if they fail to gain long lasting traction within the profession (Gramsci, 1971). In line with this, Tunstill (2019) highlights that the narrow and technocratic approach to social work promoted through the KSS is ideologically favoured by political networks. In this context the CSWs, in developing the KSS, could also be seen to be engaging in network-making power as described by Castells (2011), insofar as they are acting to link up social work with the interests of political networks. Furthermore, the implementation of the KSS through these government sponsored initiatives regularly involves the awarding of large contracts to private financial and consulting

organisations, suggesting that network-making power is also being exercised through linking social work with global financial networks, something that has been discussed in-depth elsewhere and is beyond the scope of this thesis to account for in detail (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Hanley, 2022a).

The English government has announced a range of additional upcoming reforms to social work CPD that will further impact on the profession and this network-making power (Department for Education, 2023b). Most prominent amongst these is the creation of a five-year Early Career Framework (ECF) that will replace the one year ASYE for children and family social workers with a new five-year programme, explicitly based on a model introduced for early career teachers in 2021 (MacAlister, 2022). The ECF is suggested to be underpinned by the introduction of a Children's Social Care National Framework that appears likely to replace the KSS, which did not get a mention in the government policy announcing these reforms (Department for Education, 2023b). Significantly though, the group developing the new framework is chaired by the CSW for Children and Families, suggesting that it will likely align ideologically with the economy of performance and the interests of political and financial networks in much the same way as the KSS (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Hanley, 2022a). The ECF and the Children's Social Care National Framework that underpins it are also going to have a stronger regulatory position than the KSS or any of the associated CPD initiatives outlined above. In line with this, the social work regulator in England, SWE, are described by the Department for Education (2023b) as having a prominent role to play in these ongoing reforms, including proposals for SWE to publicly keep track of those who complete the ECF on their register. The history and policies of SWE, including

how these new developments are likely to integrate into its current role around social work CPD, are now examined in more detail.

2.3.3 Regulatory Context

Just four years after the HCPC took over regulatory responsibility for social workers, the Department for Education (2016a) announced that they would be creating a new regulator exclusively for social workers. A range of justifications were presented for this change, including that this new regulator could develop “in-depth understanding” of the profession that previous regulators could not (Department for Education, 2018: 9). However, Murphy (2016) argues that a key political motivator was also that the HCPC was too challenging of Department for Education in relation to some of the reforms and initiatives around social work education and training. Further backing up this perspective, it is significant that much of the discourse around the development and introduction of the new regulator centred on claims that it was needed to address the training and education that has led to “poor quality” social workers (McNicoll, 2016: section 4). This discourse around the perceived lack of “quality” of social workers is something I have addressed in more detail elsewhere, where I demonstrated that it was based predominantly on repetition of discourse within policy documents and networks, rather than having any evidentiary basis (Hanley, 2021: 253).

SWE was officially created through the Children and Family Act 2017 as an arms-length government body, taking over regulatory responsibility for all social workers in England in December 2019. SWE has faced frequent controversy and challenge in its short lifespan, including for being too close to the government (Jones, 2019), lacking social worker representation (Smith, 2021a), having a poor diversity record (Samuel, 2020a, 2020b), and for poor handling of professional suitability cases (Samuel, 2020b;

Preston, 2021). This has led a BASW and Social Workers Union (2022) to comment that:

> What is becoming increasingly striking (from our membership survey and wider forums across the profession) is the growing levels of dissatisfaction with Social Work England as a regulator (p.15).

Potentially the most prominent area of criticism of SWE has been their approach to CPD. The role of CPD has been central to SWE's regulatory approach since its inception, with one of the six professional standards for social workers they introduced dedicated specifically to CPD: "Standard 4: (I will) maintain my continuing professional development" (SWE, 2019b: 9). Further underlining its significance, this is the only standard that social workers are required to provide annual evidence of in order to maintain their registration, something that is done through an online portal run by the regulator (SWE, 2022a). From the start this has included a requirement to link CPD evidence directly to an impact on practice, in line with the definition of CPD endorsed by SWE discussed in the introduction (SWE, 2019a).

While 100% of social workers are required to upload CPD evidence annually, without even exceptions for those on maternity or long term sick leave (SWE, 2022d), only a randomly selected 2.5% of social workers have their CPD evidence reviewed by the regulator each year (SWE, 2022b). This approach is a significant departure from social work regulators historically and in other jurisdictions. The much more common approach is for only those professionals who are selected for audit to have to provide evidence to the regulator. This was the approach taken for social workers by the GSCC (Wing and Whiffin, 2005) and the HCPC (2018), as well as by other comparable professional regulators in England like the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2021) and the General Osteopathic Council (2020). It is furthermore the approach taken by comparable social work regulators internationally, including in Northern Ireland

(Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2020), Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council, 2016), Republic of Ireland (CORU, 2019), Wales (Social Care Wales, 2022a), South Africa (South African Council of Social Service Professions, 2019) and Aotearoa New Zealand (Social Workers Registration Board, 2020).

It is also noteworthy that SWE were introducing these CPD requirements in 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and at a time when other regulators, for example Social Care Wales, chose instead to reduce the CPD recording and evidence requirements for social workers, in recognition of the challenging circumstances faced (BASW, 2021a). In contrast, SWE have gradually increased the CPD recording requirements for social workers despite the pandemic and the myriad other challenges facing the profession. This includes doubling the evidence required for the 2022 registration period, and introducing a new mandatory requirement for all social workers to include a “peer reflection” as part of their CPD evidence each year (SWE, 2021d: 9). Building on this, SWE (2023a) have also laid out proposals to expand their role around social work CPD through the introduction of new mandatory requirements for all newly qualified social workers. The Department for Education (2023b) have additionally proposed that SWE start to record how much time all social workers are spending in “direct practice”, and how this impacts on their professional development (p.123). This proposed broadening of the role of SWE around CPD stands alongside the new role proposed for SWE to track completion of the ECF, outlined in the previous section (Department for Education, 2023b).

Earlier in this chapter, the role of fear in social work was described, including how it perpetuates the economy of performance and reduces social workers propensity for dissent and challenge (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O’Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a).

In their short history SWE can also be seen to be playing on and perpetuating this fear, with multiple studies finding that social workers described the new regulator's approach as threatening, including in relation to campaigns highlighting the consequences of non-compliance with its CPD recording mandates (YouGov, 2021; Worsley, 2023). As was discussed above, audit requirements imposed through the economy of performance are frequently framed around these types of external expectations, leaving little scope for challenge, and creating a level of threat related to failure to meet the requirements (Stronach *et al*., 2002). This also creates a sense that meeting these performative requirements is common sense for engaging with social work CPD (Gramsci, 1971), something that is considered in more detail as it relates to the findings of this research in chapter 4.

However, there is also some early evidence that social workers are exercising dissent in relation to SWE in ways that they did not under previous regulators, something I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Hanley, 2022a). This dissent can be increasingly seen in relation to SWE's approach to CPD. For example, consultation responses to SWE's proposed CPD changes have been decreasingly positive, including only 32% of consultation respondents supporting the already discussed introduction of a peer reflection as a mandatory requirement for all social worker CPD records (SWE, 2021d). SWE's own commissioned research found that less than half of social workers found the CPD process beneficial (YouGov, 2021). Unsurprisingly then, despite SWE consistently suggesting that "good practice" is to upload CPD evidence quarterly (SWE, 2020a, 2021d, 2022a), an increasing number of social workers each year are leaving it to last month to upload any evidence, and doing only the minimum requirement, which is now two pieces of CPD evidence incorporating one peer reflection (Carter, 2020: BASW, 2021b: Samuel, 2022; SWE, 2023a). Linking

this directly with dissent, it is notable that social workers who disagreed with SWE's approach to CPD were more likely to leave their CPD until late than others (YouGov, 2021). There are also indications that this dissent is having an impact, and SWE have confirmed that the last minute push of social workers uploading their CPD puts their service under "unnecessary pressure" (SWE, 2022e: 19).

In the face of this growing dissent SWE continue to justify their approach to CPD primarily with reference to "the public", including that CPD recording by all social workers is needed for "protection of the public" (Smith, 2021b: para 13) or to "maintain public confidence in the social work profession" (SWE, 2023a: 45). However, as already discussed, despite the widespread belief amongst social workers that the public hold negative perceptions of them (Legood *et al*., 2016; Edmondson and King, 2016; SWE, 2021b; BASW, 2022b, 2023a; UNISON, 2022a), research has found that the public actually hold generally favourable views of social workers (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020; McCulloch and Webb, 2020). This suggests that the need to reassure the public through this type of increased monitoring of social workers CPD is likely overstated, and much like the influence of media and political networks in promoting scrutiny of the social work profession that was discussed above (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King, 2016; Warner, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a), these types of statements from SWE likely serve to further perpetuate the belief amongst social workers that the public holds negative perceptions of them in a way that reinforces their hegemonic subordination (Gramsci, 1971). It is therefore important to interrogate the evidence related to SWE's approach to CPD, and what existing research can tell us about the likely impact this is having on the profession.

2.3.4 Models of CPD

The previous sections explored the existing literature around CPD, with a specific focus on the historical, contemporary and regulatory contexts of social work CPD in England. This provides important groundwork for understanding the research in this area, some of which has already been discussed within these sections, and is expanded upon here and in the next section. This section in particular examines what the existing research says about the varying approaches to social work CPD. Several studies examined the previous PQSW framework in England that was provided by HEIs in partnership with employers but is no longer available to social workers following the slew of reforms already discussed. Common themes raised in that research included the need to provide workload relief and time-off in order to support social workers undertaking these courses, and that this support was not always forthcoming (Brown and Keen, 2004; Brown *et al*., 2008; Doel *et al*., 2008; Rixon and Ward, 2012). Despite these limitations, when Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) undertook a scoping review at the time that regulation of social workers in England was moving to the HCPC, they concluded that there was limited evidence to support CPD for social workers moving outside of these existing PQSW frameworks, and that the more flexible approach to CPD being promoted by the HCPC was likely to lead to significant market influence, a prescient prediction as already discussed.

Several studies have also examined the systemic challenges and opportunities related to introducing new national post-qualifying CPD frameworks in social work outside of England. For example, Taylor *et al*. (2010) explored the implementation of a new post-qualifying frameworks in Northern Ireland following the end of the UK wide PQSW. They found that there were significant tensions between HEIs and employers resulting from the mandated requirements to work together under this new framework, including

university staff who viewed the partnership as a challenge to their autonomy, and employers who struggled to find the relevance of the university content to practice. A more collaborative experience was described by Rees *et al*. (2018) in looking at the example of introducing the Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) framework in Wales, introduced in 2016 to replace the previous PQSW framework. Significantly, the CPEL was funded directly by the social work regulator, Social Care Wales, a substantial contrast with CPD under SWE (2022a) that is focused more on oversight, and less on facilitation. In the example of CPEL, Rees *et al.* (2018) found that education providers shunned a competitive approach, instead opting for collaborations and collegiality across providers and employers.

However, an evaluation of the CPEL undertaken by Cordis Bright (2019) on behalf of Social Care Wales, drawing on feedback of 988 social workers and 125 managers who engaged with the framework, found that despite this regulator provided funding, the programme experienced rapidly decreasing take-up, high attrition, and was particularly impacted by high caseloads and a lack of support from employers. That evaluation also found that the substantial time commitments required for the CPEL, up to 300 hours a year, negatively impacted on the ability of social workers to engage with any other CPD they wanted. Therefore, despite some evidence of increased knowledge amongst social workers found in that research (Cordis Bright, 2019), the CPEL was scrapped in 2020, with the post-qualifying approach to social workers in Wales currently under review (Social Care Wales, 2022b).

There is also research examining the impact of flexible regulatory approaches to CPD managed through routine CPD audits. For example, studies stemming from New Zealand (Beddoe and Duke, 2013), Ireland (Brady, 2014) and South Africa (September, 2010), jurisdictions where only a small randomly selected group of social

workers are required to upload CPD evidence for audit, have all raised concerns that this type or regulatory approach to monitoring CPD can lead to CPD being seen as a predominantly bureaucratic and performative exercise, involving minimal reflection, and primarily focused on satisfying the needs of the regulator. Because the SWE approach is unique, these studies cannot be considered analogous to the English context. However, through requiring all social workers to upload CPD evidence every year instead of a small percentage (SWE, 2022a), it is possible that the impact of SWE's approach on promoting CPD as a predominantly performative exercise may be even more acutely felt. The limited research that is available on SWE's approach to CPD suggests as much. For example YouGov (2021) found that the introduction of SWE's model of CPD has reinforced a culture whereby CPD is seen by social workers as a process of "box-ticking" (p.6).

The emphasis from SWE (2019a) on social workers demonstrating a direct "impact" of their CPD could also limit the potential for CPD to be understood in different ways (p.1). For example Asano (2019) explored the perceptions and experiences of social workers in Japan of professional learning, where they described that professional learning experiences did not always have an isolated immediate impact that could be identified, and professional development could instead require an additional "opportunity" to trigger learning and development stemming from that experience (p.1042). In this way the participants in that study emphasized professional learning as reflective, and described their CPD as relational, with one change often leading another in a cascading and unpredictable manner. This is similar to research conducted by Ferguson (2023) in Scotland, who described social work workplace learning as an "intricate web of physical and emotional elements" that includes "learning by chance" (p.2).

The central role of the SWE online platform for recording CPD, and how this frames CPD as a recording task requiring compliance and completion, could further perpetuate a shift towards this performative tick-box culture around CPD in England. Gillingham (2015) have argued that ICT systems can change meaning and definitions of concepts within social work in this way, leading to unintended consequences for the profession. It is important to highlight that SWE (2020b) stated in early CPD guidance to social workers that “you are the best person to determine your own learning needs” (p.3). However, that guidance also highlighted that any failure by social workers to record CPD evidence in their predefined way could lead to removal from the register, as determined by their annual audit. This has been further emphasised through regular emails from SWE to social workers, noted above as being perceived as threatening by some (YouGov, 2021; Worsley, 2023). Fournier (1999) notes professionals can be encouraged to exercise freedom of choice like this, but only in appropriate, and unchallenging, ways. He sees this as reinforced through the promotion of competencies that construct the subjectivity of the professional. Martin (2014), writing at the time when the HCPC were promoting their approach to CPD as flexible for professionals, sums these points up succinctly, highlighting that any claims that social work CPD is a personal choice denies the reality of the highly regulated and controlled social work profession.

As a result of the mixed picture of social work CPD research evidence, when Pearce *et al*. (2015) undertook an exploratory literature review they found no evidence available as to whether any model or approach to CPD provision improves practice or service delivery for social workers. They particularly note that studies that include claims of positive impact tend to rely on participant evaluations, which are not necessarily reflective of the impact the training has had. Similar points have been

made about a lack reliable evidence related to social work CPD elsewhere (Ogilvie-Whyte, 2006; Rixon and Ward, 2012). These issues also relate to broader debates about the knowledge base for social workers and whether this can, or should, be quantified, a point that is discussed in more detail in the next chapter as it relates to the methodology utilised in this research (Gambrill, 2001; Manthorpe *et al*., 2008; Beresford *et al*., 2008; Cornish, 2011; Beresford, 2013; Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Cossar *et al*., 2016; Domakin, 2019; Forrester *et al*., 2019, 2020; Wilberforce *et al*., 2020; Webb, 2023).

The influence of the market, discussed above to have an increasing role in shaping the contemporary context of social work CPD, for example leading to the decline of the PQSW in favour of lower cost CPD options for employers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019; Rogowski, 2020), has also been found in research in this area. This is perhaps most notable in research in Scotland where a flexible approach to CPD has been encouraged by Scottish Social Services Council (2016) since the end of the UK wide PQSW framework in 2007. Several studies have raised concerns that this more flexible regulatory model has created a confusing CPD landscape, with courses designed primarily for marketability and profitability, and content dictated by the wants and needs of specific employers with commissioning power (Kelly and Jackson, 2011; Gillies, 2015). As a result, in a 2019 study engaging 32 employers, 25 social work leads and 57 frontline social workers in Scotland, most participants were in favour of a return to a nationally accredited framework of CPD similar to the PQSW framework (Gordon *et al*., 2019). However, concerns were also raised in that study that a new national framework would ultimately do little to alleviate the negative impacts of market forces on social work CPD without broader reforms within the profession. This point is

backed up by Galpin (2009) who identified that market forces were negatively impacting social work CPD even when the PQSW framework was still in place.

The dominant role of the market in social work CPD may also be difficult to diminish because it is frequently taken for granted as having a positive influence in public services today. Fisher (2009) describes this as the influence of capitalist realism, whereby “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (p.8), or described another way, it has become taken for granted that the only solutions or options available to us are those of capitalism. As described above, this can be seen in the increasing influence of market logic in social work generally, including an increased focus on cost efficiency, budget management, quantifiably data driven objectives, measurements based on inputs and outputs, outsourcing of services, and framing social work services in terms of purchaser/provider relationships (Marthinsen, 2019; Harris, 2023). The influence of Fisher’s (2009) work around capitalist realism on the theoretical framework for this study is outlined in more depth in the next chapter.

It therefore seems unlikely that the soon to be introduced ECF, regardless of how it is eventually conceived, will alleviate the challenges currently facing social work CPD in England, as influenced by market forces. This is particularly the case because the contracts involved and the funds allocated related to the ECF are likely to be controlled directly by the Department for Education (2023b), an approach noted above to have not helped to overcome the myriad of workplace challenges social workers face when trying to engage with CPD under the NAAS, ASYE, Social Work Teaching Partnerships or Pathways (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b; Stevenson, 2018; Baginsky *et al*., 2019; Interface Associates, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2020; Kantar, 2020; Smith and Moore, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Moriarty *et al*., 2021; Preston, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022), and being more inclined towards

reinforcing and strengthening hegemonic control exercised over social workers (Gramsci, 1971).

Furthermore, the ECF for early career teachers on which the social work ECF is based has faced significant problems since its inception, including a range of surveys and reports finding that it is unnecessarily time consuming, lacking flexibility, repetitive of qualifying training, not well designed, not seen as valuable by teachers or mentors, and even likely to put off teachers joining the profession (National Association of Head Teachers, 2021; Murtagh *et al*., 2022; Institute for Employment Studies and BMG Research, 2022, 2023; Booth, 2022; Ellis, 2022; Ford *et al*., 2022; Ofsted, 2023). Similar outcomes can be seen in relation to the CPEL for Wales discussed above as having been closed down following an evaluation that found a range of challenges were leading to rapidly decreasing take-up and high attrition rates (Cordis Bright, 2019). It is therefore important to examine in more detail the nature of these challenges, and what the research says about how they impact on social work CPD. The next section focuses more specifically on the challenges of social work CPD identified in the existing research in this area.

2.3.5 CPD Challenges

Within the mixed picture of the research and evidence surrounding the various models of social work CPD just described, there were five particularly prominent themes I identified that related to challenges of social work CPD that warrant further exploration. These challenges are particularly important because, as was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, research into technological innovations in educational contexts is often undertaken with technology as the starting point, incorporating limited exploration of the pedagogical and/or practical issues that the technology is seeking to address (Kirkwood and Price, 2013; Fisher *et al.*, 2015). This point has also been

highlighted specifically in relation to the examination of technological innovations in social work, which can at times be technology led, rather than practice led (Baker *et al*., 2014; Turner *et al*., 2020). Taylor (2017) has also discussed the need for social work to “pause” and consider “digital knowledge gaps” before pushing ahead with technologically enhanced education, training and practice (p.869). Therefore, before moving on to examine social work podcasts, the five challenges I identified in the existing literature are examined here in detail: employer control, employer support, exclusion, flexibility and representation.

Challenge 1: Employer Control

Despite SWE (2019a) placing primary responsibility for meeting CPD requirements on individual social workers, the research in this area clearly demonstrates that employers have a high level of control over social work CPD. For example, social work workforce reviews undertaken by the Local Government Association (2019a, 2019b) found that few social work teams even consulted their staff about what CPD they believed they needed, being more likely to rely on CPD they had previously commissioned, discussions with commissioners or an appraisal of the wider social work sector. In their review of CPD in Scotland, Gordon *et al*. (2019) also found that contemporary social work CPD tends to revolve around specific service needs, with limited attention to research, critical analysis or even service improvement. This is similar to the findings by Beddoe and Duke (2013) in New Zealand, who found that even reflections completed by social workers on their CPD tended to be focused on individual workplaces, rarely engaging with broader systemic concerns.

Further evidencing this, Farrow (2014) undertook qualitative interviews with those involved in making decisions around the CPD undertaken by social workers in the UK. Amongst the findings were that social work managers generally want CPD to be

directly relevant to day-to-day practice, with little value being placed on reflective or challenging learning opportunities. Unsurprisingly based on this culture around employer CPD, Brown *et al*. (2008) found in their evaluation of a PQSW provision that social workers were more likely to identify positive impacts of CPD on their team and workplace, rather than on the service users they support.

This employer control over social work CPD is facilitated through the purchasing monopsony they hold in this area, consistent whether there is a national framework model in place (Galpin, 2009; Taylor, 2010; Burrows, 2012) or not (Kelly and Jackson, 2011; Gillies, 2015; Gordon *et al*., 2019). As already discussed, employers holding this level of control within a system that is heavily influenced by market forces has been shown to lead to a reliance on low cost CPD (Farrow, 2014; Rogowski, 2020), or a focus on CPD that is subsidised by the government (Interface Associates, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Preston, 2022; Frontline, 2022). This then becomes the CPD that employers make available to their social workers, or encourage them to undertake. As an example of this, in an evaluation of the government funded Firstline social work leadership training programme, 63% of those who undertook the training stated that they did so following encouragement by their line manager or employer (Moriarty *et al*., 2021).

Significantly, this suggests there is a common sense professional norm within the profession promoting hegemonic control of employers over the professional development of social workers (Gramsci, 1971). This example of common sense, however, is seemingly in conflict with the aforementioned regulatory norm of CPD being the responsibility of social workers individually, something that could also be perceived as common sense within the profession, in particular as it is perpetuated by the regulator (SWE, 2019a). This idea of common sense as contradictory in social

work is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, and notably can be further seen in the way that despite this employer control over CPD, support from employers to actually engage with CPD is frequently lacking, as is now considered.

Challenge 2: Employer Support

As well as having significant control over the types of CPD that social workers engage with, employers have also been shown consistently in research to play an important role in supporting social workers to engage with that CPD (Brown and Keen, 2004; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Pearce *et al*., 2015; Rees *et al*., 2018; Gordon *et al*., 2019; Cordis Bright, 2019; Staniforth and Appleby, 2022). However, despite the recognised importance of this support, one of the most frequent themes raised in research on social work CPD is that employer support is inadequate. This has been alluded to above, including in relation to the now scrapped CPEL in Wales, where a major challenge faced was the lack of employer support for those undertaking it, despite it being fully funded by the regulator, Social Care Wales (Rees *et al*., 2018; Cordis Bright, 2019). However, here this theme is discussed in more detail, with a particular focus on the context of social work in England.

The evidence for the lack of adequate employer support for social work CPD in England is substantial. For example, the Local Government Association (2019a, 2019b) found that in just 31% of adult local authority teams in England, and 14% of children local authority teams, were social workers able to attend all or most of the CPD they planned. A Department for Education study of children and family social workers found that only 67% of social workers felt they had access to the right learning and development opportunities, with frontline social worker being the least likely to feel positive about this access at just 61% (Johnson *et al*., 2022). In the national health

check surveys of social workers over the past few years, each involving about 10,000 social workers, or 10% of the social work population in England, social workers consistently rate CPD as the worst area of employer performance, worse than key areas like wellbeing, supervision and workloads (Reddington *et al*., 2021; Reddington, 2022; Local Government Association, 2023). This lack of employer support has also been reflected in the research commissioned by SWE on CPD, where social workers raised a lack of time for CPD as the number one barrier they faced, and only 32% of social workers reported being provided time off work to complete their CPD (YouGov, 2021). Finally, in a UNISON (2022a) survey of 3,000 social work staff, just 29% agreed their employer gave them sufficient time to undertake CPD, and only 19% said their employer gave them sufficient financial support to engage with CPD.

Therefore, while sometimes these challenges around employer support have been shown to be linked to unavoidable practice emergencies (Brady, 2014; Rees *et al*., 2018), the lack of employer support around social work CPD in England clearly extends far beyond the occasional crisis. This lack of support is likely to be linked, at least to some extent, with the wider workforce challenges faced by social workers that have already been discussed, in particular with social workers dealing with a lack of time, high vacancy rates, heavy workloads and high levels of unpaid overtime (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Reddington *et al.*, 2021; Reddington, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a, BASW, 2023a). These issues are likely also exacerbated by resource shortages, and Gordon *et al*. (2019) found that social workers in Scotland explicitly linked the lack of support they received from their

employers around CPD to austerity measures introduced following the global financial collapse in 2008.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these issues also likely extend beyond relatively recent austerity measures, and employers in England have long been found to struggle in supporting social workers to engage with CPD (Brown and Keen, 2004; Brown *et al*., 2008; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Rixon and Ward, 2012). Furthermore, as outlined earlier in this chapter, even when social work employers in England are provided with additional government funding in relation to specific CPD initiatives, they are still not particularly effective at supporting social workers undertaking these (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b; Stevenson, 2018; Baginsky *et al*., 2019; Interface Associates, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2020; Kantar, 2020; Smith and Moore, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Moriarty *et al*., 2021; Preston, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022).

Therefore, there may be other explanations as to why employers do not effectively support their social workers' CPD. One possible explanation, and a theme raised in several studies, is that managers and employers worry that CPD will lead to social workers outstripping them in knowledge, leading them to be more difficult to supervise (Burrows, 2015) or to find alternative employment (Beddoe and Duke, 2013; Gordon *et al*., 2019). This suggests that the culture of some employers seeing knowledgeable and challenging social workers as a threat, described by Rogowski (2020) as emerging in the 1970s, persists. Therefore, alternative approaches to CPD that sit outside of employer control and are less reliant on employer support may have benefits in developing analytical and critical professionals capable of effective challenge, a point considered in more detail as it relates to social work podcasts later in this chapter.

Challenge 3: Exclusion

In line with Castells' (2010a) conception of power as exercised through exclusion in the network society, social work CPD has been shown to exclude and disadvantage certain social workers who can be seen to not fit within the values and interests of dominant political and financial networks. Most significantly, research shows that social workers working outside of local authorities are more likely to feel excluded from the CPD that is available, as much of the funding for social work CPD provided by the government today remains focused on local authority practice (Interface Associates, 2019; Kantar, 2020; Frontline, 2022). Further illustrating this, YouGov (2021) found that social workers outside of local authority settings were more likely to feel that they do not get any support from their organisation to undertake CPD, as well as being less likely to have undertaken CPD in the past month. However, these feelings of exclusion were also felt under previous models of CPD, and Doel *et al*. (2008) highlighted that there was insufficient funding for social workers from the voluntary sector under the PQSW framework in England.

Although less commonly discussed, it has been highlighted in research that self-employed and agency social workers are also more likely to be excluded from CPD opportunities, something identified by Lombard (2010) in a study of South African social workers. This can also be seen in England, where a recent Department for Education study of children and family social workers found that only 79% of agency social workers had engaged in some form of CPD in the past year, compared to 92% of local authority employed social workers (Johnson *et al*., 2022). A BASW (2023a) study similarly found that 46% of agency social workers reported that having less access to professional development was a disadvantage of agency working. These points are particularly significant considering the consistently high percentage of

agency staff in social work teams in England today (Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; Johnson *et al*., 2022). As with the points about employer control and support, this further suggests that there may be a need to look at alternative sources of CPD that can support these professionals outside of that controlled by employers.

Challenge 4: Flexibility

As highlighted above, employers do not always engage with social workers about the type of CPD they commission, and it has been shown that decisions around the types of CPD to commission are more likely to be based on existing relationships with established CPD providers, usually facilitated through formal training courses (Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b). This is similar to experiences described in research into other jurisdictions, including Japan (Asano, 2019), New Zealand (Beddoe and Duke, 2013), South Africa (September, 2010), Ireland (Brady, 2014) and Scotland (Gordon *et al*., 2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, social workers regularly raise in research that they would like to have opportunities to engage in flexible and varied approaches CPD (Doel *et al*., 2008; Beddoe and Duke, 2013; Gillies, 2015; Simpson *et al*., 2017; Gordon *et al*., 2019; Asano, 2019). Several studies have also found that social workers feel they do not have sufficient access to specific types of training, including anti-racism training, an issue that was particularly spotlighted following the emergence of the BLM movement noted above (Johnson *et al*., 2022; Pentaris *et al*., 2021, 2022; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Obasi, 2022).

The ongoing focus of employers on using established CPD providers and formal training opportunities can also require social workers to attend locations away from their place of work, in a way that has been shown to exclude social workers who cannot be flexible around travel or working hours, potentially disadvantaging those with families, disabilities or caring responsibilities (Martin, 2014; Gordon *et al*., 2019;

Interface Associates, 2019; Frontline, 2022). It is notably though that the move to distance working experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic led to a vast increase in online learning for social workers, with SWE's own commissioned study on CPD finding that the most common type of CPD social workers engaged with during this time was "online training", encompassing webinars, online classrooms and self-guided e-learning (YouGov, 2021: 26). However, even with this shift towards more technologically mediated CPD opportunities, 60% of social workers in that study continued to describe a lack of time as the main barrier faced for engaging with CPD opportunities.

It is therefore important to question what is driving the expressed desire amongst social workers for more flexible CPD, and who benefits from a shift towards more flexible CPD. For overworked professionals who do not feel they have sufficient time and support to engage with their day job, but still need to meet regulatory CPD requirements, the idea of doing flexible CPD may seem self-evidently the only potential way forward, or what Gramsci (1971) would refer to as common sense. For employers or a regulator who have consistently failed to effectively support the CPD of social workers, a shift towards flexible CPD could be seen as a way to avoid having to implement real improvements in this area. In light of this it is important that any pursuit of more flexible CPD options for social workers do not get inadvertently co-opted to allow employers, and ultimately policy makers, to further abdicate their responsibility around providing adequate support to social workers to engage with CPD effectively.

Challenge 5: Representation

The final challenge that was found to be prominent in the literature in this area is that the current provision of social work CPD struggles to effectively engage with the views and perspectives of service users. For example, Burrows (2015) undertook research

in England examining the perspectives of social workers on service user involvement in their CPD. That research found that social workers felt there were benefits around areas like reflection when this involvement was facilitated; however, the impact of pressurised work environments and high caseloads meant that this learning was rarely applied to practice. Furthermore, participants in that study described that service user involvement in their CPD could actually make them feel powerless, accentuating their inability to provide the support they would like within the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002). In another study, Farrow (2014) found that while social work managers felt including service user perspectives made CPD more interesting, they did not always see the relevance of that involvement to their practice role, and therefore questioned its value. Farrow (2014) also found that social work academics involved in the provision of CPD could at times feel uncomfortable with service user involvement, seeing service user knowledge as a challenge to more traditional forms of knowledge.

Smith (2013) highlights the way the legitimacy of service user knowledge is sometimes questioned in social work like this, linking it with the exclusionary nature of power as exercised within the network society. Service user knowledge, more likely to stem from the space of places and be led by those who are switched-off from dominant networks, tends to be seen as less valuable for the goals and interests of dominant networks. In line with this, when service user voices are included in social work CPD, this is increasingly done in order to meet specific mandatory requirements imposed externally, including through regulators, rather than in recognition of the importance of the contribution made by including these perspectives (Sapouna, 2021). This means that engaging with service user voices in social work CPD can be considered as no longer an act of co-production or challenge, but a commodity that is primarily is used

to meet the requirements of the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002). As with the other challenges outlined in this section, this suggests the potential need for alternative CPD that can challenge this performative approach to representation, while offering opportunities for promoting alternative voices. The rest of this literature review looks at the current research and literature around podcasts, and in particular social work podcasts, and the potential that these may have for addressing some of these challenges.

2.4 Podcasts

The next few sections examine the current context, research and literature around podcasts, and link this with the literature already introduced in this chapter, including around the network society, social work and, in particular, social work CPD. After a brief overview of podcasting as a medium, the literature in this area is examined in relation to the themes of power and counterpower within the network society (Castells, 2010a, 2015). This leads into a discussion about independent podcasting and podcast networks. The existing research in these areas helped to underpin the decision for this research to focus on independent social work podcasters, justified in more detail in the next chapter when discussing sampling of independent social work podcasters in England. The chapter then shifts to looking at podcasts and social work, and in particular exploring what the literature says about the potential for podcasts to address the challenges around social work CPD identified above around employer control and support, exclusion, flexibility and representation.

2.4.1 Podcast Overview

The term *podcast* was coined by Guardian journalist Hammersley in 2004, a portmanteau of iPod and broadcasting (Singer, 2019). Interest in podcasts has grown

gradually since then, and in a 2022 Reuters study 25% of participants from the UK described listening to a podcast in the past month, an increase from 22% the previous year (Newman *et al*., 2021, 2022). It is also noteworthy that younger people are significantly more likely to listen to podcasts, and less likely to listen to the radio, suggesting a shift in audio listening habits amongst this demographic (Newman *et al*., 2022; Ofcom, 2022). As discussed in the introduction, most definitions of podcasting focus on the technology used, and in particular the most common means of podcast distribution: Rich Site Summary (RSS), automatically downloading content when a person has subscribed to a *feed* (Bottomly, 2015; Singer, 2019). However, it is important to recognise that not all definitions of podcasting highlight the importance of RSS technology, including the definitions used in several of the studies that are referenced below, where podcast is instead used to denote any audio file available for download through any means (Tjorve *et al*., 2010; Luna and Cullen, 2011; Cartney, 2013; Gachago, 2016).

In addition, the significance of the *push* factor, whereby podcasts are automatically downloaded onto a listener's device, is decreasing as a result of faster and more ubiquitous mobile data connections, meaning that there is less of an imperative to pre-download podcasts to listen to them on demand (Berry, 2016). These points are further complicated by many popular podcasts that are shared over RSS feeds also being shared through other mediums, including on the radio (Newman and Gallo, 2019) or on YouTube (Alexander, 2019). Larger podcast platforms like Spotify have also started to commission content that they call podcasts, but that are not available via RSS outside their specific platform (Berry, 2018). As a result of these shifts, Newman and Gallo (2019) suggest that definitions of podcasts based on RSS technology are now largely redundant, and instead podcasts should be defined based on what

differentiations them from traditional radio. They highlight aspects of podcasting including active listening, immersion, intimacy, and the democratic and open nature of the medium, as factors that make it distinct from radio. Berry (2018) has even suggested that that you simply know a podcast when you hear one, further underlining the inherent complexity surrounding identifying what is or is not a podcast.

2.4.2 Podcasts and Power

Castells (2007) contends that as part of the shift to the network society, we are now experiencing a “new media reality”, whereby traditional mass media both competes with, and has become heavily integrated into, the horizontal networks of “mass self-communication” (p.248). To recap, mass self-communication relates to the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from the many to the many, and has been discussed already in relation to its potential to promote both power and counterpower, points that are expanded upon in this section and the next section as they relate to podcasts (Castells, 2015, 2019).

The new media reality that has emerged presents challenges for traditional media networks seeking to exercise network-making power linking with political, financial, cultural and other networks. For example, prominent members of political networks can now circumvent traditional news media organisations entirely and speak to the public directly, with the example of Donald Trump and his engagement with the social media platform Twitter (now X) providing an illustrative example (Francia, 2018). Within this context, mass media networks must adapt or risk being bypassed by the political networks they rely on to maintain their dominant network positions (Castells, 2007). This has the corresponding impact of making news media organisations more susceptible to being influenced by the political networks that no longer have to rely on them exclusively for public access, thus increasingly the likelihood that media

networks that continue to get access will match the interests and values of political networks.

However, it is important to highlight that as well as the challenges faced by traditional media networks from mass self-communication, there are also opportunities. Mainstream media organisations are increasingly seeking to occupy the new media reality to inform, develop and distribute their content (Castells, 2007; Castells, 2010a). In line with this, Berry (2016) describes how traditional broadcasters have responded to podcasting not by treating it as a threat, but by embracing it and making it their own. In this way podcasting has become an important distribution mechanism for many large media organisations, as well as an important revenue stream through advertisements or promoting monetised content. This helps to explain why modern podcasts are much less likely to be independent or amateur than when podcasting was first envisaged and launched (Llinares, 2018; Berry, 2018; Pruulmann-Vengerfieldt and Buchholtz, 2018; Sullivan, 2018, 2019; Murray, 2019).

These developments can probably be most clearly seen through what is referred to as *platformisation*, whereby a small number of privately owned platforms grow to dominate and shape a market, with the most prominent examples likely being how Google dominates web searches, and Amazon dominates online shopping (Sullivan, 2019; Aufderheide *et al*., 2020; Ofcom, 2022). The most notable example in relation to podcasts is the platform Spotify, currently the most popular way that listeners in the UK access podcasts, replacing BBC sounds in 2022 (Newman *et al*., 2022). Spotify generates revenue from advertisements, paid subscriptions and the sale of user data and information (Sullivan, 2019). They have taken considerable steps in recent years to strengthen their market position, including a variety of acquisitions that allow them to influence other aspects of the marketplace beyond their role as a platform (Ofcom,

2022). As part of this they have even purchased the sole rights to certain popular podcasts (Sullivan, 2019; Millman, 2020). Castells (2007) highlights that this strategy of discretely purchasing existing and innovative media assets is a more effective model for large media organisations than trying to develop their own assets within these new mediums. He describes how contemporary audiences value authenticity, and can be particularly hostile towards content produced by large corporations. The importance of authenticity in podcasting is a theme that is returned to throughout the rest of this thesis.

Spotify can therefore be seen as part of what Ovenden (2021) describes as the growing number of “private superpowers” engaging in “surveillance capitalism” that allows them to make huge sums of money through the gathering, using and selling of user data (p.199). Developments of this nature can create opportunities for podcasters and those who invest in them to make financial gains in ways that were not previously available. However, they are also an exercise in network-making power. Through the consolidation tactics of platforms like Spotify, the podcasting landscape has become increasingly reliant on the rules and requirements imposed by specific, privately owned platforms, and the capitalist systems in which they operate, rather than the freedom and openness that the original creators of RSS technology and podcasting envisaged (Sullivan, 2018). One of the primary ways that this network-making power is exercised within the context of podcasts is through algorithmic curation, used to recommend new podcasts to listeners. While this can be framed as a valuable service for listeners for the discovery of new content, it also raises significant questions around what podcasts are prioritised within the algorithms, and what views and perspectives are marginalised (Vrikki and Malik, 2019). Spotify have already shown their willingness to alter their algorithms to promote their own financial interests, including a recent initiative

designed to disproportionately promote the music of artists on Spotify who accept lower royalty payments (Maicki, 2020).

Furthermore, any podcast content that platforms like Spotify choose to store will only be done so insofar as it helps to achieve their commercial objectives. This includes content that challenges capitalist models of distribution. In order to understand the implications of this, Fisher (2009) describes the useful concept of “interpassivity”, or how individuals actively participate in capitalist exchanges even when overtly expressing their objections to capitalist systems (p.12). As discussed more below in relation to independent podcasters, those who overtly express challenge or dissent in relation to capitalism systems on their podcasts can be seen as engaging in interpassivity in this way, being that they also have to rely on capitalist organisations to distribute their content, who can then determine how that content is distributed, and even monetise it.

Linked to this, platformisation and algorithmic curation have also contributed to podcasts becoming of increasing interest to advertisers (Berry, 2018; Llinares, 2018). Ofcom (2022) notes that advertising spending on podcasts in the UK more than doubled from 2019 to 2021, from £23m to £54m. The vast majority of advertisements on podcasts are native advertisements or sponsored content, whereby the podcaster is required to speak positively about a product or service, usually in the same style as the rest of their podcast (Sullivan, 2018). This links to the aforementioned importance of authenticity within the new media reality of mass self-communication, as identified by Castells (2007). In this way Spinelli and Dann (2019) argue that podcasters who accept advertising revenue are not just selling time, but also the trust audiences have in them. Exploring this growing culture around monetisation in podcasting through the case study of a major podcast conference, Sullivan (2018) describes how increasingly

podcasts are only seen as legitimate when they achieve monetisation, or what she describes as “legitimisation through monetisation” (p.44).

2.4.3 Podcasts and Counterpower

Alongside this picture of podcasting moving toward increased platformisation and marketisation in ways that promote the power of dominant networks, there are examples of projects and activities within podcasting that are overtly resisting these trends. As was noted above, Castells (2015) argues that where there is power there is also counterpower, and therefore it is important to examine those areas where podcasters are engaging with this counterpower. For example, it is significant that despite the growing role of monetisation in podcasting, many podcasters continue to refuse to accept advertising money, even when they have become large enough to be offered it. These podcasters instead rely on various models of direct audience donations (Spinelli and Dann, 2019) or the use of voluntary subscription or membership services (Shamburg, 2020; Newman *et al*., 2022). Notably, there is some evidence that social workers are resistant to the monetisation of podcasts as well, and Singer (2019) found that listeners to one social work podcast rated the inclusion of advertisements as one of the worst aspects. Directly contesting platformisation and the decline in importance of RSS feeds, one of the early pioneers of podcasting has recently launched a new free podcast indexing service with a specific mission to “preserve, protect and extend the open, independent podcasting ecosystem” (PodcastIndex, 2020: section 4).

Castells (2007) also acknowledges that the control afforded to individuals through the new media reality of the network society presents opportunities for counterpower. While previously social movements were reliant on communication techniques like pamphlets, sermons and rumours, the proliferation of ICTs under the network society

allows those outside of dominant networks to shape national discussions, and ultimately the minds of people, in a way that was not previously possible. Castells (2015) gives several examples of blogs and vlogs (video blogs) that have gone ‘viral’ and helped to provide a spark for networked social movements in this way, including the role a vlog by a 26 year old female student played in sparking the Egyptian revolution in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. He therefore concludes that networked ways of sharing personal stories and perspectives are becoming essential in creating political cultures of debate, activism, critical thinking and, ultimately, counterpower.

While not discussed explicitly by Castells, literature in this area suggests podcasts also have the potential to take on this role. Audio media has a long history of promoting alternative perspectives and fomenting resistance, including in the form of pirate or guerrilla radio stations (Mare, 2013; Miley and Read, 2017). As is expanded upon in the next chapter, Fanon (1959) gives the specific example of how radio played an important role in sharing revolutionary messages of hope during the Algerian Revolution in the 1950s and 60s, leading radio ownership and listening to certain stations to became acts of resistance. More recently, Mare (2013) describes the adoption of podcasts by Zimbabwean pirate radio station operating out of South Africa, showing that podcasts have started to be integrated into these traditional forms of audio resistance.

Despite these examples, Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo (2019) argue that podcasts do not share this collective revolutionary potential because they are engaged with individually and intimately, obscuring the focus on the public or political that the radio can encompass, and reflecting the individualism inherent in all forms of neoliberal dominated media. Furthermore, as described in the previous section, the increasing dominance of large corporations like Spotify over podcast distribution means that any

revolutionary content shared through podcasts would most likely be controlled, surveilled and commodified by dominant financial and media networks through what Fisher (2009) describes as “interpassivity” (p.12). As Slavina and Brym (2020) describe, this allows dominant networks to be highly effective in thwarting the progressive activism that comes to rely on the mediums they dominate and control.

However, in contrast to these perspectives and findings, there is a growing body of literature that espouses the collective and activist potential of podcasts, more in line with Castells’ (2015) perspective that digital media has the potential to spread counterpower. For example, research has shown that podcasts frequently have a collective impact, and being able to engage with others about podcast content is identified as a strong motivator by podcast listening (McClung and Johnson, 2010). Several studies have similarly found that the social aspects of listening to the true crime podcast Serial were an important reason for its huge popularity in the mid-2010s (Bouzis, 2017; Boling and Hull, 2018; Hancock and McMurty, 2018; Griffith and Sweet, 2023). This research challenges the perception that podcasts are only engaged on an individual level (Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo, 2019), and suggests the potential for more collective impacts.

In research that highlights the potential for podcasts to promote collectivism and counterpower more overtly, Kim *et al*. (2018) explored the South Korean podcast Nakkomsu, running from 2011 to 2012. They demonstrate how Nakkomsu became a major source of alternative news in the country, and played a key role in shifting political discourse at the time, in particular making class a key political topic of debate. Kim *et al*. (2018) identified that the podcasting format allowed for discussions that were not happening through other media platforms, often owned by large companies with links to political networks. Even when podcast content is not overtly political,

Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz (2018) argue that the promotion of personal experiences that characterises most podcasts is an inherently political activity. They give the example of podcasters talking about serious illness in a humorous way, noting that doing so in a public forum is a political act, as it challenges traditional medicalised discourses around illness. Several recent studies have also identified the important role that social work blogs and other free online content are playing in highlighting the personal stories of social workers in ways that challenge the media and political scrutiny that was described in detail above (Di Rosa, 2018; Aguilar-Idanez *et al*., 2020; Sen *et al*., 2020, 2022).

Several studies have similarly identified the importance of dialogue and discussions in podcasts as facilitating discussions that do not happen in other media spaces (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Copeland, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). For example, Llinares (2018) notes that podcasts as a medium are more likely to be generous to the idea that those speaking may be mistaken in their assertions, as long as they are open to critical self-reflection and interrogation. This, she explains, means podcasts can provide a space for reasoned and informed debates that are increasingly marginalised on other platforms. Llinares (2018) also describes podcasts as having the potential to explore issues and experiences of women with the focus on intimacy that the medium facilitates. Backing up this assertion, Mottram (2016) demonstrated in a grounded theory investigation of 10 female podcasters that while on other mediums a more authoritative voice, most regularly associated with a male speaker, is particularly valued, for podcasts this gendered slant is shifted towards female voices perceived to be more authentic. Copeland (2018) has also written about the potential for podcasts to offer a platform for non-male coded voices in this way. The common use of humour on podcasts, a point to be described in more detail below, may also

help facilitate this promotion of female voices. Recent research found that female speakers on digital mediums were more likely to be perceived as influential if they used humour in their talks (Miron-Spektor *et al*., 2022).

However, despite these positive findings, research has consistently found that, as with other media, male voices are still more common in podcasting than female voices (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Barrios-O'Neill, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Shamburg, 2020; Newman *et al*., 2022). Therefore, it is important to reiterate that Castells (2015) argues that we should also not delude ourselves into thinking that grassroots social activists and social movements are alone in making use of the potential of "mass self-communication" to spread their messaging, with corporate media being fully present within horizontal networks of communication described in the previous section (p.6). This is also the case in relation to social work podcasts, and while many podcasts are created by social workers independently, there are also a growing number of social work podcasts that are created by large organisations with direct links to political and financial networks, for example Frontline and SWE. Therefore, it is important to consider in more detail the significance of independent podcasters, and why they are the focus of this research.

2.4.4 Independent Podcasters and Networks

Independent podcasters are those whose podcasts are not explicitly associated with an education, media, professional or recruitment organisation. While limited, there is some research looking specifically at the experiences of independent podcasters. For example, Markman (2012) undertook a study of independent podcasters involving 147 survey respondents. A broad range of motives for engaging in podcasting were identified by those participants, including motives related to content (love of subject matter, wanting to share) and personal motives (enjoyment, skill improvement). Of

note for the theme of counterpower, a secondary motivation identified for some podcasters was a desire to be part of a “podcasting movement”, with the perceived positive benefits this could have on society (p.557). In a follow-up study with 120 independent podcasters, Markman and Sawyer (2014) found similarly broad motivations, including creativity, wanting to perform, and interest in the medium. Notably that study also examined reasons for staying in podcasting, which included podcasters wanting to get better at the medium, being part of a podcasting community, valuing expression, having a positive impact on their career/job, interpersonal benefits, and feeling that podcasting was making a difference.

In both of these studies of independent podcasters, financial motivations for podcasting were discussed; however, these were largely seen to be secondary motivations (Markman, 2012), or part of a future desire for monetisation (Markman and Sawyer, 2014). This desire for future monetisation has also been identified in independent podcasters by Sullivan (2018), who describes them as an “aspirational labour force” (p.26), providing labour now in the hope or expectation of future financial benefits when their podcasts have a big enough audience to make monetisation realistic. Significantly though, Markman and Sawyer (2014) found podcasters devoted large amounts of their time to podcasting despite most lacking any form of monetisation, with the mean number of podcast series produced by participants being 5.9, and the mean podcasting experience being 4.3 years.

Another notable finding from this existing research into independent podcasters is that they were predominantly technologically aware, older, male, and had a high level of education (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014). There is, however, also research into the experiences and motivations of non-white independent podcasters in the UK. Vrikki and Malik (2019) undertook research involving focus groups and

semi-structured interviews with 31 Black, Asian and mixed heritage podcasters in the UK. A key motivation described by the participants was to break the bounds of exclusion experienced by their communities, and to promote otherwise unheard perspectives and stories, often directly challenging the accounts of the mainstream media. This is similar to research conducted outside of the UK that found that independent podcasters from diverse backgrounds shared many of the same motivations as other independent podcasters, such as passion for the topic and a desire to help people, but that they also had a more explicit social justice mission related to promoting alternative perspectives and voices (Florini, 2015; Shamburg, 2020).

While some independent podcasters were shown in these various studies to be engaging with monetisation of their podcasts, including through advertisements, sponsorships, licensing and merchandise, Vrikki and Malik (2019) identified that the podcasters in their study were also aware of the problematic implications of marketisation, platformisation and algorithmic curation that shape contemporary podcasting. This shows that, even when podcasts have stated objectives around promoting counter-hegemonic discourses, they still, willingly or unwillingly, have to engage with the dominant structures and the wider corporate media environment they claim to stand against, in line with the explanation of “interpassivity” introduced above and examined in more detail in the next chapter (Fisher, 2009: 12). In examining how hegemony is perpetuated in a way that reflects the values and interests of the dominant class, Gramsci (1971) similarly highlights that reproduced culture is accepted and reinforced by subordinate classes without necessarily having awareness of their role in the perpetuation of their own hegemonic domination.

As a final point on independent podcasting, there is a growing interest in what are frequently described as podcast networks, or formal agreements of mutual support amongst podcasters. For example, Heeremans (2018) interviewed those involved in a number of prominent podcast networks, finding that being part of one of these networks was seen by some to be a “seal of approval” (p.60), not dissimilar to the “legitimisation through monetisation” already discussed (Sullivan, 2018: 44). It is therefore significant that financial benefits were also a draw for many participants in opting to join one of these networks, with specific advantages discussed around the sharing of resources (expertise, time, equipment) and cross promotion of podcasts. Podcast networks were also described as a way to remain independent while working collaboratively, seen as preferable to becoming an active partner of larger platforms like Spotify.

Murray (2019), undertook similar research with members of podcast networks and also found that they valued collaborative aspects of being part of these networks. Significantly though that study referred to these networks as podcast collectives, highlighting that many involved explicitly rejected being referred to as networks, seeing the term as being associated with corporate culture. Viewed in this way, these collectives could be seen to be overtly rejecting traditional models of organisation and leadership in favour of mutual sharing and support, much like the networked social movements described by Castells (2015) that were introduced towards the start of this chapter as being particularly adept at promoting counterpower within the network society. This is further backed up by the analysis of an informal network of mutual support amongst independent black podcasters undertaken by Florini (2015) in the USA, who described that the network was established as an explicit challenge to the marginalisation that black podcasters experienced from media organisations, with

participants similarly highlighting the importance of mutual support and cross-promotion.

The examination of the literature and research around podcasts thus far has focused on podcasts generally, including examining the history and terminology, power and counterpower, and the significance of independent podcasters. The discussion now turns to looking more specifically at social work podcasts, and in particular how the existing research in this area can inform an understanding of the potential for social work podcasts to address some of the challenges related to social work CPD identified earlier in this chapter around to employer control and support, exclusion, flexibility and representation.

2.4.5 Podcasts and Social Work

As outlined in the introduction, the majority of existing research looking at the use of podcasts in social work is focused on podcasts developed for specific qualifying education contexts, with podcasts forming part of either instruction or assessment (Feit *et al*., 2008; Tjorve *et al*., 2010; Stoltenkamp *et al*., 2011; Luna and Cullen, 2011; Cartney, 2014; Pillay *et al*., 2015; McGovern, 2017; Byrne *et al*., 2017; Bowers and Pack, 2017; Asakura *et al*., 2018; Lucas and Thomas, 2020; Ferrer *et al*., 2020; Hitchcock *et al*., 2021). That research is generally positive about the potential for podcasts in these contexts, with students and educators in particular highlighting the flexibility and novelty afforded by podcasts. However most do not look at the English context, with one notable exception (Cartney, 2014).

There has also been some research looking at podcasts developed for specific social work practice contexts. For example, Salloum and Smyth (2013) undertook qualitative research with ‘clinicians’ in the USA, a sample that included some social workers, as

well as social work students. Twelve Grief and Trauma Intervention (GTI) podcasts were developed to support these participants in introducing a GTI intervention with children aged 7 to 12. Advantages identified included the short length, potential to re-listen, and the ability of the podcasts to supplement other support provided and GTI training materials. Notably though the student participants in that study were more interested in the podcasts, and less likely to face technological barriers, than the qualified social workers.

There are fewer studies available looking at the use of openly available podcasts in social work, and again these mostly relate to qualifying education contexts rather than CPD, and all come from outside of the UK. For example, Blakemore and Agllias (2019) undertook research with social work students in Australia who were required to listen to two episodes of the popular journalistic podcast This American Life, on the topics of telephone communication and online communication. They found that the podcasts were effective in highlighting new areas of learning and personal reflection for the social work students, including around topics that were controversial and contested like online trolling. In a similar example, Belfiore *et al*. (2021) describe undergraduate social work students in the USA undertaking an independent study course on the history and development of structural and institutional racism, with a requirement to listen to 14 episodes of the Seeing White podcast, focused on race and history. Students again described increased understanding, knowledge and engagement with issues discussed on the podcast and the course, this time highlighting specific learning around racial privilege and identity, as well as noting that listening led to meaningful conversations on these topics with others, both on the course and outside of it.

Taking a different approach, but one that looked specifically at a social work podcast, Fox *et al*. (2023) examined social work students undertaking field placements with a

podcast team working on The Social Work Stories Podcast in Australia, a podcast designed specifically to promote varied social work voices and experiences. Fox *et al*. (2023) highlight benefits for students around reflection and learning, in particular in relation to the potential for them to engage with Aboriginal led social work stories. In a similar vein, Dennis and Minor (2019) highlighted in a content analysis of Indigenous storytelling outlets, a study that included podcasts, that these stories can provide social workers with insights and understandings that go beyond the types of clinical case studies they often engage with in training contexts.

There is also some limited research looking at the role of openly available social work podcasts as CPD, although notably these still tend to look primarily at the impact of podcasts in qualifying education contexts, with CPD discussions being secondary. Furthermore, they all come from outside the UK, and as with the example of Fox *et al*. (2023) above, the research is always focused on a single podcast, with some or all of the researchers also being the podcasters. For example, Fronek *et al*. (2016) explored the Australian social work podcast, Podsocs. As part of this research, they undertook a content analysis of feedback received around the podcast. This feedback was described as “overwhelmingly positive” (p.111), with practitioners reporting they valued the flexibility of podcasts in particular. As with the examples of social work students listening to podcasts, practitioners also gave examples of using podcasts collaboratively, for example, listening to podcasts and then discussing them with colleagues or in group settings.

In another study Singer (2019) examined the patterns of podcast use among listeners to his podcast, The Social Work Podcast. Data were collected from July 2016 to January 2019 through a quantitative and qualitative survey distributed to listeners. In total 789 people undertook this survey. Demographic information from the survey

showed listeners were more likely to be young, English speaking, white and educated to postgraduate level. Listeners were also found to be more likely to be female, a finding that likely relates to social work being a female majority profession (Haworth *et al*., 2018). The respondents reported a high level of satisfaction with the podcast, with overall quality, audio quality, content and host being the most highly rated areas (Singer, 2019). Two areas that were rated poorly were the placement of advertisements, as noted above, and the lack of frequency of new episodes, with The Social Work Podcast releasing episodes much less frequently than many other podcasts, including only 22 over the four years that study covered.

Many of these studies also included data about the number of listeners and downloads that these social work podcasts had. For example, Fox *et al*. (2023) reported that episodes of The Social Work Stories Podcast were downloaded over 250,000 times, across 96 countries and Fronek *et al*. (2016) noted that at the time of their research episodes of Podsocs had been downloaded 17,000 times across 60 countries. Significantly more than both of these, Singer (2019) describes that during the research time period (2016 – 2019) the 22 episodes of The Social Work Podcast released were downloaded 2.1 million times across 189 countries, although 94% of those downloads came from English speaking countries, in particular the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK.

2.4.6 Podcasts and CPD Challenges

Building on the discussions presented throughout this chapter, this penultimate section of the literature review looks more specifically at what the current research on social work podcasts, and podcasts generally, suggests about the potential for them to address the challenges with social work CPD highlighted above. As already discussed, it was important to identify what research says about these challenges before moving

on to discuss how podcasts may have a role to play in addressing them. This reduces the potential for technological innovations like podcasts in educational contexts to be treated as valuable as the starting point, rather than first clearly identifying the pedagogical and/or practical issues that the technology is attempting to address (Kirkwood and Price, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014; Fisher *et al.*, 2015; Taylor *et al*., 2017; Turner *et al*., 2020). Notably this point has been made in relation to social work podcasts as well, with Singer (2019) arguing that we need to ensure that the increasing popularity of podcasts is not just because they are a novel technology, and instead that they are supporting professional development and/or scholarship in social work. Therefore, this literature review now revisits the five challenges with social work CPD identified in earlier in this chapter: employer control, employer support, flexibility, exclusion and representation.

Challenges 1 & 2: Employer Control and Support

The first two challenges related to social work CPD identified above were employer control and employer support. The existing research suggests that social work employers exercise substantial control over the CPD that social workers engage with, but also that they frequently fail to adequately support social workers to engage with this CPD (Brown and Keen, 2004; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Pearce *et al*., 2015; Rees *et al*., 2018; Gordon *et al*., 2019; Cordis Bright, 2019; Staniforth and Appleby, 2022). There are some indications that podcasts, through allowing social workers to exercise more discretion over what, when and how to listen, could potentially challenge this status quo. Notably one of the most commonly cited reasons why listeners are attracted to podcasts as a medium is the control that they are afforded (McCLung and Johnson, 2010; Berry, 2015; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Utilising this control, social workers could theoretically engage with

podcasts without anyone, including their employer, ever knowing, further opening up the potential for alternative perspectives and ideas to be shared through podcasts, discussed more below in relation to representation.

In this context, listening to podcasts that an employer may not endorse could also be considered potentially as an example of “deviant social work” described above as relating to or “minor, hidden, subtle, practical, shrewd or moderate acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage” (Carey and Foster, 2011: 578). Backing up this point, Singer (2019), in his research on The Social Work Podcast, found that social workers wanted more podcast episodes that were critical of contemporary social work practice and systems. This is significant because research and analysis of podcasts suggest that a key advantage they have compared to other mediums is being able to encourage opposing perspectives and disagreements, even between hosts, in a way that supportively recognises and embraces complexity and contradictions (Llinares *et al*., 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Vrikki and Malik, 2019).

Social work podcasts could also foster connections and feelings of community for social workers outside of their employers. In social work qualifying contexts, listening to podcasts has been shown to encourage social work students to engage with colleagues on complex issues like online trolling and structural racism (Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Belfiore *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, Fronek *et al*. (2016), in looking at the experiences of listeners to the Australian social work podcast PodSocs, describe that the podcast helped to create a sense of belonging and acceptance for social workers. Fox *et al*. (2023) writing about The Social Work Stories podcast highlight that it specifically centres on sharing individual and intimate social work stories and experiences in ways that make connections like this. Singer (2019) suggests that the very nature of podcasts, whereby the host’s voice is literally in the head of the listener

when listened to using headphones, facilitates a sense of intimacy and connection with the host and the ideas being shared in a way that benefits social workers. Further influencing this feeling of connection, Berry (2016) notes that since podcasters often come from a community that the listener has a stake in, including relatively small communities like social workers, a sense of “hyper-intimacy” for listeners can be fostered (p.666). This point is echoed by Llinares *et al* (2018) who argue that being a private participant in others’ conversations, lives and experiences, on a topic you have specific interest or passion about, generates a deep sense of connection that is difficult to replicate through other mediums.

Podcasters have been shown to further play on this intimate experience through regularly adopting a conversational approach, and trying to portray themselves to their listeners as peers (Menduni, 2007; Berry, 2016; Swiatek, 2018), something also identified in relation to social work podcasts (Fronek *et al*., 2016). Furthermore, it is highlighted that humour used alongside discussions about what are frequently considered to be serious issues can be a cathartic experience for both podcaster and listener, as well as an approach that can challenge mainstream assumptions and deference towards topics like illness or disability (Collins, 2018; Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018). Humour has also been recognised to play an important role in social work practice more generally, fostering connections with colleagues and service users, and as a way to manage the stress and uncertainty inherent in the social worker role (Moran and Hughes, 2006; Gilgun and Sharma, 2011; Chiller and Crisp, 2012; Jordan, 2017).

Challenge 3: Exclusion

The next challenge identified in the existing research related to social work CPD was the exclusion of certain social workers from CPD opportunities, in particular social

workers not employed directly by the state or local authorities (Lombard, 2010; Doel *et al*., 2008; Gordon *et al*., 2019; YouGov, 2021; Johnson *et al*., 2022; BASW, 2023a). A major issue identified for social workers in these contexts was the lack of resources to engage effectively with CPD. Notably then, several studies stemming from South Africa demonstrate how podcasts can provide flexible learning opportunities in contexts where there are limited resources available, including for social workers (Pillay *et al*., 2015; Gachago *et al*., 2016). Podcasting could also open up opportunities to share alternative stories and perspectives stemming from workplaces outside of local authorities, challenging the increasingly dominant perception of social work as primarily statutory and technocratic in England (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021).

The discussions in the previous section around creating and fostering connections for social workers to engage in debates and learning outside of the control of employers should also have particular benefits for those who currently feel unable to effectively engage with CPD due to the limitations imposed by their role or employer (Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023). In this way, the networks that develop around social work podcasts could be conceptualised as virtual communities of practice (VCoP), consisting of informal groups of people engaging over ICTs who share an interest, passion or concern related to a specific topic. While VCoP in social work have been directed and organised in a centralised way (Cook-Craig and Sabah, 2009), they are more commonly developed organically through networked connection, and have been shown to be particularly beneficial for social workers employed in non-profit or community contexts to promote informal grassroots collaborations and overcome resource restrictions (Adedoyin, 2016). Recent research into teacher education has also highlighted the potential for VCoP to promote collaboration and mutual support

for those challenging policy reforms in England, including specifically those related to the ECF (Murtagh and Rushton, 2023). In this way members of these VCoP could be seen to be engaging in a similar “strategic adjustment” away from their workplaces to social workers who join campaigning organisations like SWAN, as discussed above (Albuquerque, 2019: 322).

There are, however, potential technological barriers that could act to exclude social workers from the opportunities afforded through podcasts (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Littlefield *et al*., 2015). These potential technological barriers tend to be linked in research to the age of the listeners, and as was already discussed, podcast listeners, including social work podcast listeners, tend to be younger than non-listeners (Singer, 2019; Newman *et al*., 2022). These points could have particular significance for social work in England, where the average age of the workforce is 46, and almost 14% are over 60 (SWE, 2023a). However, this also suggest that podcasts could have a role in engaging younger social workers, a role that could be important from a CPD perspective considering younger social workers have been shown to be more likely to question the value of the current CPD available and the approach to CPD taken by SWE (YouGov, 2021).

Challenges 4: Flexibility

The next challenge identified in relation to social work CPD was flexibility. It is noteworthy that almost all of the research examining podcasts in social work contexts highlights the value of the flexibility and choice afforded by podcasts, and in particular the value that this flexibility can have for social workers with family/caring responsibilities, who are geographically isolated, who have a disability or who were having to socially isolate during the Covid-19 pandemic (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023;

Belfiore *et al*., 2021). This choice and flexibility may have pedagogical benefits as well. Marud *et al*. (2010) for example in a systematic review of self-directed learning across health professionals found that being able to choose CPD content tended to lead to greater knowledge improvements. In a more recent study Curran *et al*. (2019) found that health and social care professionals, including social workers, described self-directed learning facilitated through digital technology as valuable for allowing professionals to work at their own pace and in their own time.

However, research also shows that for some educational podcasts, listeners engage with them in less flexible ways, including student listeners preferring to avoid multi-tasking while listening so that they can take notes and engage in deeper concentration (Evans, 2008; Gachago, 2016). This more intensive listening is not exclusive to educational contexts and has also been noted in research into the true-crime podcast Serial, with listeners describing re-listening, pausing, taking notes and engaging in collaborative discussions/debates with others about the content (Bouzis, 2017; Boling and Hull, 2018; Hancock and McMurty, 2018; Griffith and Sweet, 2023). This suggests that the personal choice afforded by podcast listening is not just valued in relation to what to listen to, but also how to listen, something backed up by research into social work podcasts as well (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019).

Challenge 5: Representation

The final challenge of social work CPD identified above was representation, and in particular the challenge of meaningfully including service user voices (Farrow, 2014; Burrows, 2015; Sapouna, 2021). As already discussed, podcasts have an ability to foster intimacy and kinship with the host (Berry, 2016; Singer, 2019; Dennis and Minor, 2019; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Fox *et al*., 2023). In line with this, Copeland (2018) describes the significance of audio and voice in sharing individual experiences, noting

that the sound of one's voice brings more than words, but also traces of an individual's "age, sex, gender, sexuality, culture and many more facets of collective and individual identity" (p.209). This makes the sharing of service user voices through podcasts potentially a more significant experience for all involved.

However, it should be reiterated that both podcasters and podcast listeners are more likely to be young, male and have a high level of educational attainment, meaning that any discussions are also likely to be shaped by these perspectives (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Barrios-O'Neill, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Newman *et al*., 2022). Exacerbating these issues further, there is an increasing trend in podcasting towards celebrities sharing their personal stories and challenges on podcasts, around illness or addiction for example. Collins (2018) examines this trend in-depth, highlighting that while these podcasts do have the potential to engage people on these topics who would otherwise not come across them, the accounts given by wealthy celebrities on their experiences of illness and addiction are likely to differ substantially from the realities of the vast majority of people facing similar issues.

It should also be noted that social workers having greater access to the experiences and perspectives of service users, facilitated through communication technology, may not be an unmitigated positive, and there are examples of how this access could be used in potentially oppressive ways. For example, research has shed light on how some social workers are using social media accounts on Facebook to monitor the children and families they work with (Ryan and Garrett, 2017; Cooner *et al*., 2019). It is therefore not beyond the realms of possibility to foresee a time in the near future when a social worker uses information provided by a service user on a podcast in their assessment or decision making. Griffith and Sweet (2023) also raise concerns about the approach towards gaining informed consent that podcasts often use, suggesting

that it likely falls below the standards that would be required from a HEI ethics review board.

2.5 Chapter Summary and Research Questions

This chapter examined existing literature in the areas of the network society, social work, CPD and podcasts. From this analysis three research questions were developed that shaped the methodology and findings of this study, as already outlined in the introduction.

The first research question considers the landscape of podcasting in England:

> What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?

This literature review has demonstrated that there has been some research into openly available social work podcasts (Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023); however, none of these looked at the context of England. The focus in this research question on independent social work podcasts was also seen as important stemming from the research noted above on independent podcasters and the specific motivations and contexts surrounding these (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Florini, 2015; Heeremans, 2018; Murray, 2019; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020).

In considering the specific context of independent social work podcasters and CPD in England, it is also important to consider how the concepts of power and counterpower shape that landscape (Castells, 2010a, 2015, 2019). This therefore leads onto the next research question that was developed through this literature review:

> What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?

The importance of power and counterpower within the network society were discussed in detail in this chapter as they relate to social work and social work CPD, as well as exploring the existing social work research around power, counterpower and the network society (O'Brien, 2004; Coleman and Harris, 2008; Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; LaMendola, 2010; Smith, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014, 2017, 2018; Sen, 2016; Frost, 2017; Ruiz-Roman *et al*., 2019; Hanley, 2022a). Power and counterpower were also shown have a significant influence on podcasting generally, with podcasts being shown to be capable of promoting the values and interests of dominant networks effectively (Berry, 2016; Llinares, 2018; Berry, 2018; Sullivan, 2018, 2019; Murray, 2019; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Aufderheide *et al*., 2020), while also being a potential tool for counterpower (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). Therefore, it was also seen as important for this research, in particular with a theoretical framework stemming primarily from the work of Castells on the network society, to critically examine power and counterpower as they relate to social work podcasts, in particular as a new technology of mass self-communication within the network society facilitating communication of the many to the many (Castells, 2015).

The final research question then draws the focus to looking at social work podcasts as CPD more explicitly:

> What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

This chapter presented a number of challenges that were identified in the research in relation to social work CPD, including around employer control, employer support, exclusion, flexibility and representation. It was also hypothesised that some of the unique characteristics of podcasts may have the potential to overcome these

challenges. Some evidence from the existing research in this area was presented to back up these assertions (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; the Dennis and Minor, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023; Belfiore *et al*., 2021). However, it was also clear from those discussions that the research in this area is limited. This literature review therefore justifies the general focus of this research, on social work podcasts as social work CPD, and the research questions identified, as well as suggesting that the findings could make a significant contribution to knowledge in this area,. The next chapter outlines the methodology that was used in order to address these research questions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research strategy and methodology used in planning and carrying out this research. As a reminder, the research questions, as outlined in the previous chapter, are:

1. What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?
2. What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?
3. What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

In order to explore these research questions, data collection was undertaken through two stages, compared and contrasted through a qualitative meta-analysis:

Stage one: Semi-structured interviews with twelve independent social work podcasters in England, referred to as podcaster participants.

Stage two: Semi-structured interviews with six social workers in England who were asked to listen to one to three social work podcast episodes prior to the interview, referred to as listener participants.

This chapter starts with an overview of the theoretical framework that guided the research, as well as a discussion of the methods and methodology that were engaged with. Other important areas that are covered in the chapter include sampling and recruitment, research process, and data analysis. The final two sections address research ethics and researcher positionality, highlighting the influence that these had on shaping the entirety of this research from start to finish.

3.1 Theoretical framework

As was outlined in detail in the literature review, the theoretical framework that guided this research was primarily based on Castells' (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) conception of the network society. The point has been made by Steiner (2021) that, although it is vitally important for social workers to have a reflective response grounded in theory to the changes that technologies are having on the profession, there is no uniform or universal theoretical framework accepted broadly within the profession for understanding these developments. This section therefore explains further why the work of Castells was utilised in this study as the primary influence on the theoretical framework for understanding podcasts and their role in social work and CPD.

This starts with a further discussion of the theory of the network society, including a more specific focus on how the epistemology of the network society guided the research approach. The ontology of network theory is then introduced, in particular drawing on the work of Eriksson (2005) on network ontology. This leads into discussion of the critical theory that shaped the research approach, including debates around whether Castells' work on the network society is inherently sociologically and technologically deterministic, or invites social change and transformation in line with critical perspectives. This opens up links to additional critical theorists who were also significant in guiding this research, in particular the work of Garrett (2021a), Gramsci (1971), Fisher (2009) and Fanon (1959), all of whom were introduced to some extent in the previous chapter, and expanded upon here.

A visual breakdown of the theoretical framework of this study can be seen in Figure 1. This diagram, although presented somewhat in a linear fashion, should be thought of as iterative, with the various theories interacting to create a theoretical understanding and framing of this research on social work podcasts and CPD that influenced the

study throughout. This is in line with the eclectic approach to theory development that has influenced social work throughout its history, and acts as a strength in promoting progressive developments within the profession (Garrett, 2021a). It demonstrates the influence of network ontology in shaping an understanding of the theory of the network society as formulated by Castells (2010a), and how counterpower is used as the key link between network theory and critical theory, in particular dissenting social work (Garrett, 2021a). The other critical theorists that are discussed in this chapter, Fisher (2009), Gramsci (1971) and Fanon (1959), all then further inform areas of this research and analysis.

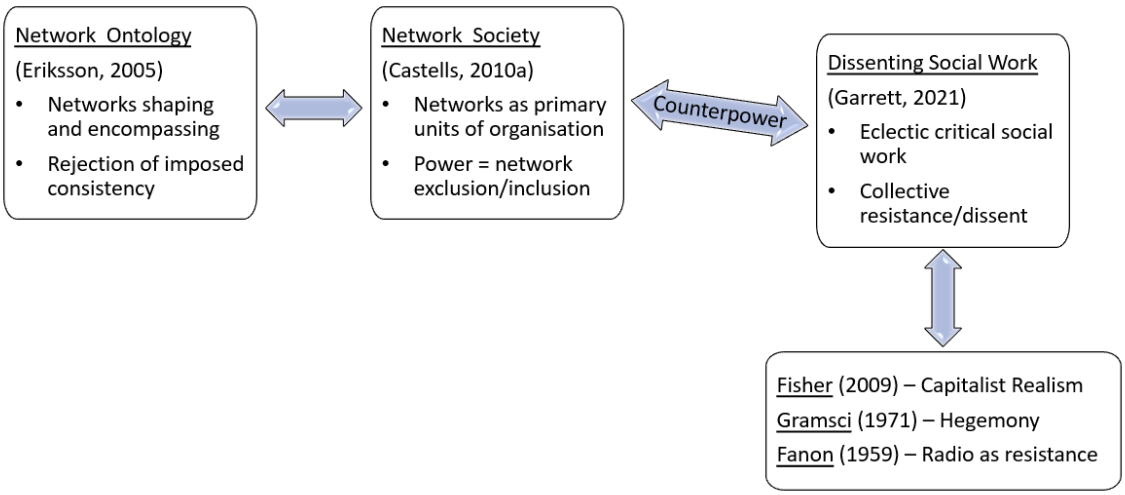

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

As outlined in the introduction, ontological issues relate to whether the social world is regarded as something external to social actors, or the nature of reality, while epistemological issues are those related to what is regarded as appropriate knowledge about the social world, or the nature of knowledge (Bryman, 2012). However, it needs to be acknowledged that the distinction between epistemological and ontological issues is rarely definitive within theory, with some even arguing for a post-ontological

perspective where these distinctions are no longer considered pertinent. For example, Lehmann *et al*. (2007) propose a post-ontological approach to network theory, highlighting in particular that any description of the network society must inherently stem from that same society. This means that the theory of the network society itself constitutes part of the network society, rendering any analysis based on that perspective as autological, and self-referential. Therefore, if we are to accept Castells' (2010a) hypothesis that the information age has introduced a novel understanding of the social world, then it also must also be acknowledged that the conditions for describing that social world have changed, and at times it can be difficult to distinguish between the two (Lehmann *et al*., 2007). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine post-ontological perspectives of network theory in more depth, in particular as the distinction between ontology and epistemology is maintained for the purposes of outlining the theoretical framework in this chapter. However, these discussions, and the theoretical framework itself, are underpinned by an understanding of the potential fluidity between these ontological and epistemological dimensions, reflected in the iterative nature of the theoretical framework outlined in figure 1, and how this is applied throughout the rest of the thesis.

3.1.1 Network Society

The majority of the discussions in the previous chapter around the theory of the network society could be perceived as examining epistemological issues as they relate to that theory (Bryman 2012), including how it supports the development of knowledge and understanding about contemporary society and social work, in particular through empirical research. This section reiterates some of these discussions with a more specific focus on how they shaped the theoretical framework and this research, before

moving on to look at ontological issues through the lens of network ontology (Eriksson, 2005).

As the analysis in the previous chapter outlined, the theory of the network society has particular relevance to the topic of podcasts, being that podcasts can be seen as an inherent part of the information technology revolution that has helped the proliferation of networks as the constitutive unit of societal organisation (Castells, 2010a), while also being a potential tool for counterpower to challenge the dominant networks of power within that society through the promotion of alternative voices and dissenting perspectives (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). To further recap from the previous chapter, Castells (2011) describes power in the network society as primarily exercised through the rules that make the communicative structure of networks possible, and in particular how this leads to exclusion and inclusion in a way that supports the values and interests of dominant networks. In contrast counterpower is the potential capacity of social actors to challenge the embedded power relations in order to claim representation for their own, or alternative, values and interests (Castells, 2015).

The interplay between power and counterpower can be seen as a key constitutive element in shaping the rules and functions of the network society, something that was noted in the previous chapter to have also been applied to the context of social work specifically (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Sen, 2016; Frost, 2017; Baker *et al*., 2017, 2018; Ruiz-Roman *et al*., 2019; Hanley, 2022a). This further underpins the significance of these concepts for the focus of this research, including devoting a specific research question to identifying how power and counterpower influence the areas being looked at in this research, as discussed in the final section

of the previous chapter. Power and counterpower were both therefore instrumental in designing and undertaking this research from start to finish. This can also be seen for example in the approach taken towards the current context of social work CPD, and in particular the new Social Work England (SWE) mandatory CPD recording requirements, in the previous chapter. These were approached critically, looking at the networks of power behind current regulatory policy and practice, as well as the potential for counterpower, something I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Hanley, 2022a).

The interplay between power and counterpower was also significant in the approach taken to podcasts, including the decision to focus on independent podcasters instead of podcasters generally. Independent podcasters were seen as those more likely to be able to express counterpower, something backed up to an extent by the existing research on independent podcasters (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Florini, 2015; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). Independent social work podcasters were also seen to be less likely to be encumbered by the organisational constraints of network power exercised through logic and cultures of dominant networks (Castells, 2010a, 2011). However, it was important to recognise that independent podcasters can have their own links to dominant networks in less overt ways, something explored with participants in the interviews, as can be seen in the interview guide that was used and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (Appendix 1).

Taking a critical approach rooted in an understanding of power and counterpower from the inception of this research ensured that these concepts remained of key focus throughout, and ultimately were central in shaping any conclusions around the potential for podcasts as social work CPD, the overarching focus of this research, and

the three research questions. The various ways in which these concepts were integrated into the methodology are outlined and discussed throughout the rest of this chapter; however, first it is important to highlight other aspects of the theoretical framework that were influential to this work, starting with the ontological foundations of the network society, before moving on to look at the influence of critical theory.

3.1.2 Network Ontology

While frequently described as an overlooked aspect of network theory, there has been some exploration of the ontological foundations of the network society (Eriksson, 2005; Lehmann *et al*., 2007). An apt starting point for considering the ontological dimension of networks is to recognise that although Castells' writing on the subject of the network society is particularly prominent in relation to its influence across academia, media and even policy, there are a number of related, but diverse, sociological theories that also consider contemporary society to be primarily shaped by networks (Lehmann *et al*., 2007). These include actor network theory, a theoretical perspective that highlights the importance of networked relationships similar to Castells, but placing more emphasis on the relational nature of actors, human or otherwise (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1990). This makes nodes, or the point where a network intersects itself, less significant than they are in Castells' approach. For this reason, actor network theory was not seen as appropriate to frame this study, because, as I have explored in the literature review, and expanded upon elsewhere (Hanley, 2022a), networks of power and counterpower in social work are characterised by prominent nodes, whether individual or organisational (examples given in the literature review include the Chief Social Workers (CSWs), Frontline and SWE). Another prominent network theory is scale-free network theory, which seeks to formulate a comprehensive and potentially even universal, understanding of the function of networks (Barabasi, 2002). However,

Castells (2010a) argues that this understanding cannot be reached, and rejects the potential for a unified or static model of networks within his framework, instead seeing networks as requiring analysis based on their specific contexts, as I have previous undertaken with regards to social work (Hanley, 2022a, 2023).

What this range of network theories shows though is that there is an increasing recognition in some areas of theory that networks play a fundamental role in shaping society, and therefore, as Eriksson (2005) outlines, it is important to look beyond the various theoretical models and consider whether networks instead need to be understood from a unique ontological perspective. Within this understanding he argues that networks should be seen as not only an instrument for thinking about pre-existing objects, but also a precondition for these objects, or an inherent part of our world. Therefore, the concept of networks can be understood as neither representing nor uncovering, but instead constituting, and truth can be revealed through an understanding built upon networks. Eriksson (2005) describes the ontology of networks as represented in two simultaneous directions, with networks shaping and encompassing the totality of our world, through a system of interrelationships between nodes and lines, and on the other hand rejecting the consistency imposed by this totality. This allows for an understating of a single, meaningful whole, while also resisting the presumptions that are usually attached to this kind of imposed uniformity. This is the feature that distinguishes the concept of network from alternative ontological models, providing a new lens and new horizon for truth.

There have been suggestions that Castells work should be considered within existing ontological understandings, in particular critical realism (David, 2010; Reed, 2012). Critical realism rejects both constructivist and objectivist ontologies, adopting the perspective that social phenomenon are generated by mechanisms that exist and

cannot be directly observed, but can be seen through their impact (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000). Viewed within this ontological perspective, networks could be seen as generative mechanisms, and as Houston and Swords (2022) argue, if we come across harmful generative mechanisms, there is an obligation to challenge them, including through research. Therefore this understanding could be seen to provide an ontological framework not just for understanding networks and power, but also justification for promoting counterpower, counter-hegemony or dissent to challenge dominant networks.

However, what is lost in situating network theory within the ontology of critical realism is the unique understanding that network ontology provides. While Bhaskar (1979) describes networks, in particular social networks, as part of the open systems that shape and influence society and social change within critical realism, Castells (2010) describes networks as the very fabric of society, or a constitutive concept of this new period of history, requiring a new understanding of that society. As outlined in the previous chapter, he describes the rise of networks as the primary organisational units of contemporary society having had innumerable consequences for society, fundamentally changing our understanding of core concepts like distance, power, exclusion and inclusion (Qvortrup, 2007). This requires an ontological framework that can provide an understanding stemming from this new version of society.

The implications of network ontology for this study therefore stem from an understanding of reality and knowledge that is not rooted in an established system or structure but instead one that is seen to be influenced by persistently changing relationships involving networks (Eriksson, 2005). This facilitates an exploration of complex and irreducible phenomena in a uniform way, while also not implying any particular unified structure and allowing for the maintenance of multiplicity within the

framework of knowledge. Baecker (2007) argues that empirical research can and should stem from this ontological understanding, including looking at the structuring of interactions, the organisation of networks and the balancing of these organisations towards non-members. Baecker (2007) makes specific reference to the value of Castells' theory of the network society underpinning critical research on power and dissent through this ontological lens.

3.1.3 Critical Theory

Critical perspectives have an extensive history in social work, informing the theory and development of the profession for over 100 years (Rogowski, 2013; Herrero and Charnley, 2019). Critical theory can be understood as theory based on an analysing social systems with a conscious focus on the need to change and challenge power and domination (Salas *et al*., 2010). In relation to professional contexts, Apple (2013a, 2013b) argues that critical theory has a primary function in highlighting the links between policy and practice, and experiences of domination and exploitation. In relation to social work, Rogowski (2013) notes that critical theory helps to provide a theoretical perspective that challenges and confronts the unjust and unequal social order, but in a way that can be accessed and engaged with by social workers widely, through encouraging them to actively imagine and promote alternative social realities.

Before moving on to a more in-depth exploration of the critical theory that informed this research, it is important to acknowledge that Castells' theory of the network society is not universally accepted as being part of the tradition of critical theory. For example, David (2010) cautions against fusing what he sees as the critical realist perspectives of Castells' work that were discussed above, with critical theory, arguing that Castells' work is both sociologically and technologically deterministic. Joseph (2010) similarly criticises the technological determinism they see in Castells' theory, proposing that it

represents a “flattening out” of society, precluding the potential for collective action or social transformation (p.141). Taking these points further, Qvortrup (2007) even describes the ontology of networks as inherently dystopian, as it sees the complexity and uncertainty of networks stifling any and all attempts to understand or shape social change.

In light of these discussions, it is noteworthy that Castells (1996) in his early writing on the network society deemed it to be a “critical theory of the informational society” (p.9). Castells also identified as a Marxist throughout much of his early writing, a theorist who is central to critical traditions, including in social work (Rogowski, 2013; Garrett, 2021a). Even though Castells has since stopped explicitly using the designation of Marxist, the ongoing influences of Marxism can be seen in this work, in particular around his ongoing critique of capitalist and financial networks (Castells, 2015, 2019). In his more recent work, Castells (2015, 2019) has also shifted towards a more central focus on counterpower, including specifically identifying the facets of networked social movements that make them particularly suited to societal transformation within the network society. Further emphasising this shift, contemporary critics of Castells are actually more likely to highlight his “techno-optimism” and suggest that he is too positive about the potential for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to create positive social change and civic activism (Slavina and Brym, 2020: 201). Castells (2010a) also wrote his original three volume work on the network society explicitly as a challenge to postmodern perspectives that he argues suggest society is powerless in the face of the end of history or reason. He therefore presents his theory of the network society as a challenge to this “intellectual nihilism” (p. 4).

Based on this analysis, I reject the idea that network society theory, and network ontology, are inherently dystopian and preclude the potential for promoting societal

change or transformation. I read Castells' work in its totality as being fundamentally grounded in the tradition of critical theory. Building on this understanding of Castells as a critical theorist, and in order to further explore the potential for dissent and counterpower with a specific focus on social work CPD and podcasts, some additional theoretical perspectives were also integrated into the theoretical framework and influenced this study, as already discussed and outlined in Figure 1. Eriksson (2005) details that within network ontology it is important to review and explore theories that are not specifically network focused in this way, allowing for a re-evaluation of their significance within this networked understanding.

A particularly influential critical theorist in shaping this study was Garrett (2021a), and specifically his work on dissenting social work, already referenced several places in the literature review in order to provide an understanding of how counterpower, or to use his terminology, dissenting social work, exists within contemporary practice. Engaging with this work provided an important theoretical lens for understanding counterpower as it exists within social work, and shaped the approach to data collection and analysis of this research. Notably, Garrett's work can be seen as part of a wider growing interest in dissent in social work internationally, something prominently seen in a 2022 special edition of the Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Journal specifically on the topic of dissent. In the introduction to that edition, Hyslop *et al*. (2022) define dissent as:

> the right and capacity to disagree, challenge orthodox views, and articulate alternative ways of seeing and knowing… dissenting analysis troubles the status quo by questioning the official truths which favour vested interests and perpetuate structural inequality (p.1).

In developing his model of dissenting social work, Garrett (2021b) notes that it is primarily aimed at countering the passivity and defeatism that underpins many

discussions around social work today, providing theoretical dimension for progressive and counter-hegemonic social work. However, rather than seeing dissenting social work in terms of a specific blueprint or action plan, Garrett (2021a) outlines a number of “commitments” that social workers should uphold in order to engage in dissenting social work (p.4).

One commitment that is particularly relevant to this research is that dissenting social work “appreciates the tremendous gains which technology brings, but is alert to the threats of techno-authoritarianism” (p.5). This can be seen as reflected in the attitudes from social workers towards technology as outlined in the previous chapter, including rejecting technology that they feel is being imposed upon them and those they work with (Wrennall, 2010; Reamer, 2013; Berzin *et al*., 2015; Goldkind and Wolf, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Ryan and Garrett, 2017; Cooner *et al*.,2019; Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2019; Steiner, 2021). This critical focus was also important in tempering any potential for the “techno-optimism” that Castells more recent work has been criticised for adopting, as noted above (Slavina and Brym, 2020: 201). Reflecting on this and integrating this analysis was particularly important for this research due to me being an avid podcast listener, as analysed in more detail in relation to researcher positionality below, and in the conclusion reflecting on whether this research could be perceived as an example of techno-optimism. The commitments and theoretical foundations of dissenting social work significantly influenced the data analysis and drawing of conclusions for this research, in particular when themes of activism and service user voice were raised by participants. Therefore, they are discussed more in these later chapters as these themes arise, as well as later in this chapter in how they shaped the research design and process.

One theorist that Garrett (2021a) draws upon in developing his model of dissenting social work is Gramsci, and in particular his conceptualisation of hegemony, or the dominance of one group over another. As discussed in the previous chapter, hegemonic control is perpetuated and reinforced through societal norms and ideas (Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, hegemonic power differs from purely coercive power, because it relies on the manufactured consent of those subordinate to it. A range of societal institutions, including state and educational institutions, play a role in the maintenance of hegemony and the manufacturing of consent in ways that ensure that the values and interests of dominant classes become synonymous with the values and interests of wider society (Mearns, 2014). The media's role in this is of particular significance to this research examining podcasts within the aforementioned new media reality of the information age. In a similar vein to how power is exercised by media networks within Castells' (2010a) theory of the network society, Gramsci (1971) argues that control of media institutions is a central aspect of the maintenance of consent for hegemonic control.

In previous work I have engaged with these concepts around hegemonic control and manufactured consent to examine how neoliberal reforms in social work in England have reinforced the subjugation of the vast majority of social work, and considered counter-hegemonic perspectives within this context (Hanley and Kerr, 2023). Counter-hegemony involves the promotion of alternative ideas, ideologies or cultures that resist the hegemonic order, calling for it to be either replaced or reformed (Gramsci, 1971). This counter-hegemony can be engaged with through discursive struggles such as the deconstruction of common sense, discussed more below, but it must also involve collective action and struggle, including through social groups, trade unions and professional associations (Rogowski, 2020).

Hegemonic control is maintained by the ruling class through ensuring that their own values and interests constitute the core perceptions, or the “common sense”, of the subjugated (Garrett, 2021a: 214). Common sense is therefore fundamental to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Hall and O’Shea (2015) outline how common sense, in Gramscian terms, relates to a type of everyday thinking or easily accessible, sometimes contradictory, knowledge that provides frameworks for understanding the world. This contradictory nature of common sense was touched on in the previous chapter in relation to the juxtaposition between employer control over social work CPD and the responsibility of meeting CPD requirements imposed upon individual social workers. Common sense is also perpetuated and utilised in relation to social work by media and political networks. This is sometimes done overtly using the terminology of “common sense” in ways that promote a narrowed, deprofessionalised and technician model of social work, increasingly devoid of complex ideas, critical reflection, deep thought or sophisticated arguments (Garrett, 2013: 47; Jones, 2019: 43).

However, despite its function in the perpetuation of hegemony, Gramsci (1988) sees common sense as something to be engaged with and transcended, rather than just rejected, as part of any counter-hegemonic project. Therefore it is important to understand and deconstruct common sense, including in social work (Mearns, 2014). Linked to this deconstruction is Gramsci’s (1971) concept of good sense. Whereas common sense refers to implicit ideology and ideas, almost the philosophy of non-philosophers, good sense is related to intellectual knowledge and philosophy that goes beyond common sense (Liguori, 2021). Gramsci (1971) notes that good sense is therefore the “criticism and the superseding” of common sense (p.326). This can therefore be considered a site for potential counter-hegemony, where a deeper understanding of the social order challenges dominant ideological positioning and

hegemonic control, leading to the potential for social transformation. Notably though, as with common sense, good sense is also historically and socially situated, and political networks will often attach their policies to ideas that are considered good sense in order to promote them and impose them upon those subordinate to them (Apple, 2013a).

The work of Gramsci (1971) on hegemony and counter-hegemony has strong parallels with Castells work on the network society, despite being developed within differing historical contexts. Notably, Castells (2010a, 2021) overtly draws on the work of Gramsci in developing his theoretical model, including in recognising the significance of power making exercised not just through coercion, but also through the construction of consent. Both Castells (2010a) and Gramsci (1971) highlight that power is decentralised and exercised outside of strictly coercive and hierarchical structures, linking this with the perpetuation of cultural ideas. There are also strong parallels between the concepts of counterpower and counter-hegemony, including the importance of challenging dominant ideas and ideology through promoting alternatives and collective action.

Therefore, Castells work on the network society could be considered what Gramsci (1971) refers to as the historical conjunction of the information age. The historical conjunction refers to the unique alignment of factors that creates a specific historical moment, and Gramsci (1971) stresses the importance of identifying explicitly the opportunities and challenges to develop and generate change within each historical conjunction. In line with this, what Castells (2010a) has done with his theory of the network society, and in particular his more recent work with a focus on counterpower and networked social movements (Castells, 2015, 2019), is arguably to present an understanding of the historical conjunction of the information age. In applying this

theoretical understanding to this research, it is therefore also important to consider how my own views and perspectives are shaped by this historical conjunction, and the autological dimensions of the analysis presented here, a point already noted above in relation to network ontology (Lehmann *et al*., 2007). Some of these points are returned to later in this chapter in relation to positionality and in the conclusion in discussing techno-optimism.

Another theorist that Garrett (2021a) draws on within his dissenting social work approach is Fanon. Garrett highlights that unlike many of the most influential theorists in social work, Fanon was not a tenured academic, and instead his writing was primarily influenced by his experience in the fight against colonialism and fascism as an activist and propagandist. In highlighting the links between Fanon's revolutionary struggled and social work, Garrett (2020b, 2021c) outlines how Fanon's work mirrors that of Gramsci in identifying hegemonic control and constructing a sustainable counter-hegemony within his revolutionary struggle. Garrett (2021c) further notes that Fanon has particular relevance to contemporary social work, with his insights into self-reflection, the dangers of narrow classifications of individuals, and his fight for the liberation of people's all resonating with social work values on an international level (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). The anti-colonialist perspective of Fanon as applied to social work can provide important insights into the nature of power and counterpower within a profession that historically has at times found itself on the side of colonial oppression, a legacy that continues to impact on the profession today (Singh, 2019; Shokane and Masoga, 2019; Maylea, 2021; Ioakimidis and Wyllie, 2023).

Of particular interest for this study is Fanon's writing on the use of radio as a tool for resistance. Fanon (1959) describes radio prominently in relation to its role in resisting

French colonialism in Algeria in the 1950s. Fanon chronicles the journey of radio as a tool for capitalism and colonialism, reminding those in charge of their colonial power through content and ownership, to its eventual use as a tool of resistance, being actively suppressed by that same ruling colonial power class. Within this context, radio ownership, tuning into certain stations and even buying batteries (the primary way radios were powered) all became acts of resistance, as radio transformed from an oppressive object to a revolutionary object. Fanon (1959) describes radio as having a significant positive impact on the hope felt amongst native Algerians at the time, whereby “hope, the spirit of resistance to the oppressor, were then given daily sustenance and kept alive” (p.93). This focus on hope is significant when looked at alongside Castells’ (2015) own focus on spreading hope through communicative action as an element in the spread of networked counterpower. This also further underpins the ongoing relevance of Fanon’s (1959) analysis within the network society, and that new insights can be uncovered through using a network lens to explore existing theoretical perspectives, as noted above (Eriksson, 2005).

Also significant for this research is that Fanon’s (1959) analysis of the radio demonstrates that even when technology is being utilised most effectively by dominant networks of power, its usage can, gradually or rapidly, change towards acting as a tool for networks of counterpower and dissent. Therefore, while podcasting should be considered as a distinct cultural object to radio, something explored in detail the pervious chapter, Fanon’s (1959) work helps to understand the usage of podcasts as counterpower, and how this relates to other usages of podcasts by dominant media, political and financial networks (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020).

These points are discussed in more detail as they relate to the findings of this research in across the next three chapters.

This concept of capitalist realism, as presented by Fisher (2009), was briefly introduced in the previous chapter as it informed an analysis of the increasingly market driven culture surrounding social work CPD in England (Marthinsen, 2019; Harris, 2023). The crux of his argument is that today “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (p.8), or described another way, it has become taken for granted that the only solutions or options available to us are those of capitalism. Fisher (2009) further describes a “business ontology” that now dominates public sector decision making, whereby it is seen as “simply obvious” that everything in society, from hospitals to education, needs to be run as a business (p.17). This business ontology can be seen reflected in the current context of podcasts, described in the previous chapter as increasingly dominated by market influences and incentives, despite the history of podcasts being perceived of as a disruptive medium (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). In order to understand trends of this nature, Fisher (2009) describes how resistance becomes gradually subsumed into capitalism, looking at how books, music and films that on their face challenge capitalism are inherently shared and marketed by capitalist tools and platforms. This phenomenon is described by Fisher (2009) as “interpassivity”, whereby consumers become convinced that as long as they believe in their hearts that capitalism is harmful, they are free to continue to participate in the capitalist exchanges that perpetuate it (p.12). This was applied in more detail to podcasts in the previous chapter, as well as examining existing literature that touches on these points (Sullivan, 2018, 2019; Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

This perspective helped to shape the interview questions and data analysis in relation to the influence that capitalism has on social work podcasts and CPD, and in particular the analysis of independent social work podcasters when describing the significance of their independence. This can be seen reflected in the interview guides (Appendices 1 & 2). Fisher's (2009) analysis also further underscores the importance of dissenting social work to this research, being a model of social work that overtly challenges these capitalist presumptions that could otherwise have subsumed this research through the inadvertent "interpassivity" of the researcher (p.12). In this regard it is also therefore notable that another of Garrett's (2021a) proposed commitments for dissenting social work is that it needs to be "attuned to and seeks to eradicate the harms caused to humans, other species and the planet by capitalism" (p.4).

Engaging with these critical perspectives on capitalism in light of Castells' (2010a) description of the network society can help to shift the focus away from any technological and sociological determinism towards the more overtly critical aspects of the theory of the network society. That said, Castells (2010a) has always been overt in his criticisms of the damaging impact of capitalism too, describing it as "alive and well" within the network society (p.211). Therefore what an understanding of the network society adds to the already crowded landscape of those critical of capitalism is an understanding of how the already elusive structural logic and power of capitalism has become further obscured through hidden network influences (Castells, 2011). This brief discussion around capitalism illustrates how the various theories that are being drawn into the theoretical framework for this study interact and can inform each other effectively to present a coherent analysis of social work podcasts as CPD as it relates to this research. This is an important point to highlight as this chapter shifts to looking more specifically at the research design and process for this study, starting with a

discussion of methodology, and the importance of the qualitative approach and how this relates back to the theoretical framework.

3.2 Methodology

As outlined in the literature review, there were no similar studies found examining independent social work podcasts and CPD in England. The few studies that did consider social work podcasts focused on a single podcast, usually developed by the researchers themselves (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023). Therefore, I can state with a high level of confidence that there are no existing studies directly analogous to this research, and the methodology was therefore developed based primarily on the research questions developed in the previous chapter and the theoretical framework just presented, while also being attuned to the methodologies that were used in the few studies that could be considered comparative. This approach has its advantages, and as Crotty (1998) suggests researchers should not feel compelled to choose a research approach that is based on pre-established processes and procedures, and instead the goal should be to identify a research process that best serves the purposes of the research. However, it also meant that all methodological decisions had to be considered carefully and critically, as there was no available research model to replicate.

Qualitative methods were chosen for this research, building on an understanding outlined in the literature review of the complexity of the network society, and how this relates to an understanding of social work, podcasts and CPD. As noted in the introduction, Thomas (2020) describes qualitative methods as particularly significant in supporting an understanding of the complex concepts inherent in professional life like these, as well as helping to understand the “dizzying pace” of technological development and the impact on our understanding of professionalism (p.137). The

existing literature applying the theory of the network society to social work has similarly stressed the importance of social workers understanding the implications of technology, both the positives and negatives (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Smith, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014; Frost, 2017). Within this existing literature, qualitative research has been shown to be effective in gaining an understanding of the interplay between power and counterpower in social work, and in particular how this relates to exclusion, a prominent theme discussed in the literature review (Sen, 2016; Baker *et al*., 2017, 2018). The decision to utilise a qualitative approach was also rooted in an understanding drawn from network ontology, whereby reality and knowledge are not seen as rooted in established systems or structures, but instead need to be understood as involving persistently changing network relationships (Eriksson, 2005). A qualitative approach was therefore identified as most appropriate, engaging with complex and irreducible phenomena rooted in networks while maintaining an acceptance of the multiplicity of frameworks of knowledge.

More precisely, a narrative approach was utilised, seeking to understand the stories and experiences of both podcasters participants and listener participants (Mertova and Webster, 2019), and to compare these through a qualitative meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009). This narrative approach was chosen in order to engage in-depth with the experiences of participants, promoting free flowing discourse (Bryman, 2012). This emphasis on narrative can be seen reflected in the podcaster interview guide (Appendix 1), which demonstrates how podcasters were asked about their introduction to podcasting, their motivations for starting their own podcasts, the challenges and barriers they encountered and their plans for the future of the podcast.

However, as described in more detail below, because the research was focused on understanding an area that is currently under-researched, an emphasis was also

placed on facilitating the participants to engage with and raise the themes they felt most pertinent to the research, with me as the researcher seeking to act as a “traveller” within their stories (Kvale, 1996: 3). In line with narrative approach, therefore, my focus was to identify and interpret underlying messages, ideologies and values within these experiences (Mertova and Webster, 2019), something that is supported by the theoretical framework already introduced, including in relation to interpreting the influence of power and counterpower within these accounts (Castells, 2010a). The emphasis on language within the narrative approach in understanding these stories was also fundamental in analysing the language used in the interviews, as highlighted in the next chapter, in particular in relation to the themes like “banter” (Mertova and Webster, 2019).

The small population size of independent social work podcasters in England lent itself particularly well to a narrative approach, as there was the potential to interview in-depth every member of that small population who agreed to take part and allow them to tell their stories. The value of quantitative methods in being able to capture the views of a larger population would therefore have been largely mitigated for that stage of the research (Bryman, 2012). This was not the case for the social work population though, and it is important to recognise that the six social workers interviewed only make up a very small number of the estimated 100,000 social workers in England (SWE, 2022e). The challenges in recruiting a larger sample of social workers for that stage of the research are discussed in more detail below. However, this small sample size did allow for specific insights into the stories and experiences of these social workers as they related to social work CPD and podcasts, and it is for this reason that a small sample size is usually recommended for narrative approach (Bryman, 2012). Gathering and analysing data on the demographics of participants and comparing this to the broader

social work population also helped to place these insights in the context of the wider social work population, and provide additional details for the narratives being explored. However, despite this methodological congruence, at all times I was cognisant of the scope of the study and the limits on generalising any findings from this small sample, as well as recognising the strong possibility that self-selection of participants at the recruitment stage influenced the findings, discussed more below.

For the listener participants, this narrative approach was further instilled through developing an understanding not only their views on podcasting, but also their experiences of podcasts (Mertova and Webster, 2019). As reflected in listener interview guide (Appendix 2), this was done through asking them about their own history with podcasts, as well as their experience of accessing and listening to social work podcasts. For this reason, it was important to ask the listener participants to listen to social work podcasts prior to the interview, so they could narrate their experiences, including any barriers or challenges they encountered in engaging with podcasts. For those who had not engaged with social work podcasts prior to the interviews, this facilitated discussions around their experience of engaging with podcasts once prompted to do so. The approach taken to doing these interviews, and the processes followed, are discussed in more detail below.

The decision to use qualitative methods in this study was also taken with full knowledge of the political trajectory of social work research towards quantitative research and randomised control trials (RCTs) (Tunstill, 2019). As was alluded to in the literature review, this forms part of broader debates around the knowledge base for social work, and whether social work activities can be quantified (Gambrill, 2001; Manthorpe *et al*., 2008; Beresford *et al*., 2008; Cornish, 2011; Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Cossar *et al*., 2016; Domakin, 2019; Forrester *et al*., 2019, 2020; Wilberforce *et al*.,

2020; Webb, 2023). Contemporary social work policy in England has come down firmly on the side of claims that social work knowledge and activities can and should be quantified. This is epitomised through ‘what works’ perspectives and models, focused on creating a delineation between professional practices that are considered to have an impact and those that are not, with the emphasis on efficiencies and outcomes, as opposed to professionalism (Krauss, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Webb, 2023). However, this focus on ‘what works’ often ignores key elements of professional practice, in particular in relation to determining what counts as ‘working’ within professional contexts, and whose interests, ideology and perspectives are prioritised in making that determination (Biesta, 2007, 2017).

Furthermore the promotion of RCTs as the gold standard in fields like social work and education also ignores the well-documented methodological limitations in applying RCTs to complex social phenomenon and open systems, such as poor replicability (Open Science Collaboration, 2015), exaggerated results (Sims *et al*., 2022), poorly distributed traits, neglected contributing factors, and participants being only partially blind (Krauss, 2018). As a result, Webb (2023) in looking at the impact of ‘what works’ models in children’s social care over the past decade, found that the promised increase in effectiveness had not materialised, and instead effectiveness of children’s social care interventions appears to have declined alongside the promotion of an ideological perspective rooted in demonstrating effect.

Therefore, alongside firmly believing that it was the best way to answer the research questions for this study, the decision to use a qualitative methodology could also be considered as an extension of counterpower within the network society being enacted by the researcher (Castells, 2010a). I believe that for social work, which is concerned with people and communities, there is a need to look beyond the politically palatable

binary conclusions that many claim RCTs can provide and accept the nuances of social lives and the human condition (Murphy and Speer, 2019). As Calder (2020) describes, one of the most important values of qualitative research is that it can give a voice to the people who would otherwise not be heard. In contrast, Cushing (2023) highlights that 'what works' agendas overlook local contexts, socio-political conditions and state crafted inequalities.

One of the primary critiques levelled against qualitative research, including a narrative approach, is that it can be overly subjective and open to manipulation by the researcher (Bryman, 2012). While this criticism is increasingly challenged, recognising the value that a researcher's experience and perspectives can have in shaping the findings and outcomes of qualitative research, it remains important that insofar as possible the subjectivity of the researcher does not deleteriously bias the data collection or analysis processes (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015; Folkes, 2022). Therefore, engaging with these issues around counterpower as they relate to the methodology required a transparent, critical, and reflective acknowledgement and awareness of my researcher positionality. These issues are examined in detail later in this chapter in a specific section on positionality. However, first more on the specific methods and process that this research engaged with is outlined.

3.3 Methods

Bryman (2012) describes interviews as the most widely employed approach to qualitative research. He points in particular to the flexibility that interviews provide as being advantageous for qualitative research, especially for studies like this where there is limited existing research to draw upon. Interviews are also vital for a narrative approach, allowing for in depth exploration and contextual understanding, with a particular focus on the participants' voices (Mertova and Webster, 2019). Within this

understanding, Bryman (2012) describes semi-structured interviews as interviews that are based on an interview guide outlining a fairly specific set of topics and/or questions to discuss, but with substantial flexibility for both interviewer and participant. He contrasts these with unstructured interviews, which are more akin to a conversation, with very little planned structure or focus. In drawing a slightly different distinction, Marvasti and Tanner (2020) describe in-depth interviews as fluid and improvisation, with minimal structure and high levels flexibility. They contrast this with survey interviews, based on pre-determined questions. Within this distinction Marvasti and Tanner (2020) describe semi-structured interviews as falling somewhere between survey and in-depth interviews.

In outlining these distinctions, both Bryman (2012) and Marvasti and Tanner (2020) highlight that the distinction between interview types is malleable, with few interviews or research approaches fitting into a single model in practice. In light of these insights, while I set out to engage in semi-structured interviews, and developed interview guides to support this (Appendices 1 & 2), my primary focus was engaging the interviews in the way that was applicable to this research and the research questions posed. Honan (2014) describes interviews as “an assemblage of meaning created within that particular moment” (p.8). This focus on meaning making was vital to my approach, and as noted above I approached the interviews insofar as possible as what Kvale (1996) describes as a “traveller”, as opposed to a “miner” (p.3). Whereas a miner looks to extract information from an interview, a traveller can be seen to be wandering the landscape of the interview context, searching for meaning. The influence this had on the interviews themselves is described in more detail later in this chapter in relation to process.

This traveller role was also supported by the narrative approach engaged with, whereby I was able to adapt the interviews to follow interesting points raised by participants, allowing for a more responsive exploration of their stories and narratives (Bryman, 2012). This flexibility became all the more crucial because this research was being carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring all interviews to be undertaken remotely to avoid putting the researcher, participants or the public in unnecessary danger (Lobe *et al*., 2020). Therefore, all the interviews described throughout this thesis utilised synchronous audio/video technology that allowed the interviewer and participant to both see and hear each other while not being in the same location. The documented limitations of remote interviewing include the loss of context (Weller, 2017) and the potential for technological issues to arise (Archibald *et al*., 2019). Participants, or potential participants, could also feel embarrassed or uncomfortable seeing themselves on film during an interview, in particular as on most of the available platforms the participant can see themselves during the discussion (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014).

While the increasing use of synchronous audio/video technology during the Covid-19 pandemic may have led to a higher comfort level for many of the participants within the remote interactions, reducing the impact of some of these limitations (Johnson *et al*., 2022; Pink *et al*., 2022), this is not assumed to be the case, and it also raises other issues, such as the potential for what is colloquially known as “Zoom fatigue” or the negative impact on engagement caused by spending too much time in remote meetings (Shockley *et al*., 2021; 1137). Other recognised limitations of remote interviews include that certain cues may not be picked up by the researcher, as well as the potential for rapport building and creating a welcoming environment to be negatively impacted (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst,

2017; Renosa *et al*., 2021). This point about rapport is significant because narrative research relies on developing rapport and a comfortable engagement with participants to be able to authentically articulate their experiences and personal narratives (Mertova and Webster, 2019). Furthermore impeding the building of rapport, it is impossible through synchronous audio/video technologies to make genuine eye contact, because the screen and camera are not in the same place (Weller, 2017). It is also usually impossible to make full use of body language in communication, because only the face and/or upper torso are usually visible (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017).

This means that these interactions can never fully replicate the in-person experience of interviewing, and this should therefore not be the goal of remote interviewing. Instead there is a need to understand and build on the potential strengths of remote interviewing in light of its own unique dynamics (Campbell, 2021). Renosa *et al*. (2021) for example describes advantages of remote interviewing that include the potential to record both audio and video easily, allowing for more straightforward transcriptions, and also for a review of non-verbal cues that are not captured through audio recording only. Other advantages they describe include the lower costs and reduced impact on the environment as a result of not having to travel for the interviews. This reduction in travel and expenses also has the potential to create a more inclusive sample for some research studies, in most cases allowing for those geographically isolated, with caring responsibilities, or with physical disabilities to more easily engage (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014).

Nevertheless, as highlighted in the literature review, it should not be assumed that connectivity alone is sufficient to support those who are switched-off in the network society to engage effectively (Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Sen, 2016; Baker *et al*., 2017,

2018). If remote interviewing becomes dominated by the logic of the space of flows that represent the dominant elements of contemporary economic, political and social live, then those who live, work and function primarily within the space of places may feel excluded from the process (Castells, 2010a). This is in line with the research conducted by Coleman and Harris (2008), discussed in the previous chapter, whereby the influence of call centres on social work practice in England was shown to lead to the loss of significance of the space of places within some social work interactions, in favour of the logic of the space of flows, reinforcing market logic around consumerism and cost-cutting. However, conversely a number of studies have also found that some participants find remote interviews less daunting than face-to-face interactions, and therefore they could actually reduce exclusion, in particular when discussing sensitive topics (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Weller, 2017; Renosa *et al*., 2021).

There may even be unique opportunities for rapport building in remote interviewing contexts that are not present in face-to-face interactions, such as through the joint experience of overcoming technological difficulties (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Archibald *et al*., 2019). Additionally, Renosa *et al* (2021) suggest a number of ways to improve rapport building for remote interviews in the pre-interview stages, including allowing participants to choose the software and the time/date of interview, collaboratively developing a plan in case the technology fails, and encouraging participants to find somewhere private, quiet and with good internet connectivity for the duration of the interview. The importance of developing rapport in this way was particularly significant to this research, where some of questions being asked encouraged participants to reflect on potentially sensitive areas. Failure to take these steps to build rapport and create a comfortable interview atmosphere could have also precluded opportunities for participants to express perspectives around counterpower

or dissent, in particular in a profession that is often influenced by a culture of fear, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a).

The importance of this rapport building was also vital for the sampling and recruitment process, where a number of participants asked follow-up questions about the research, and in particular about my motivations for looking at this area, before agreeing to take part. As discussed in relation to positionality later in this chapter, some of these queries likely stemmed from existing knowledge participants had about my critical approach towards contemporary social work policy through my public profile, including articles and research I have published (Hanley, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023; Hanley *et al*., 2021; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021; Hanley and Kerr, 2023). However, before moving on to look at this positionality in more detail, first the sampling process itself is discussed, starting with the sampling and recruitment of podcasters, followed by the sampling and recruitment of listeners.

3.4 Sampling and Recruitment for Stage One: Podcaster Participants

The first step in sampling podcasters for stage one of this research involved a systematic review of all independent social work podcasts that were available. In July 2021 the three most popular podcasting platforms in the UK were searched: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Sounds, Apple Podcasts and Spotify (Newman *et al*., 2022), as well as the podcast amalgamator service Podchaser. Podcasts were searched for the terms "social work" and "social worker" in their title and description. An internet search was also undertaken using Google to ensure that podcasts not on these platforms were not missed, using the search terms "podcast" and "social work".

However, only podcasts with a Rich Site Summary (RSS) feeds were included, in line with the definition of podcasts being used for this research:

> a combination of two technologies that were developed in the late 1990s: the MP3 file format, which compresses audio without significant loss in audio quality, and RSS (Singer, 2019: 2).

All independent podcasts on the topic of social work that had released an episode in the past six months based in England were included, excluding podcasts that were overtly associated with a particular professional, educational, media or recruitment organisation, in line with the criteria applied in research into independent podcasts elsewhere (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). The decision to limit the study to podcasts that had released an episode within the last six months was made to ensure that the participants could be considered social work podcasters, and not former social work podcasters. While an extensive search was carried out, this does not preclude the potential that a social worker podcast or podcaster was missed, in particular if they do not identify themselves in the podcast title or description as such.

An initial finding from the podcast search was that most social work podcasts are based outside of England, in particular in the USA and Australia. Of the social work podcasts produced in England, many are created by large organisations and were therefore excluded from this study. These included:

- SWE, the social work regulator in England discussed extensively in the literature review,
- Community Care, a news organisation aimed specifically at social workers,
- British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the professional association of social workers, and

- Frontline, a fast-track qualifying training provider in England.

There are also several podcasts available from university social work programmes that were excluded. Ultimately ten podcasts were found to meet the inclusion criteria of this study. These are outlined in Table 1 with their names redacted, alongside some information about each of the podcasts.

Podcast Name	Average Episode Length (6 months)	Number of Podcast Episodes Available	Frequency (6 months or from first available)	Date of First Available Podcast
Podcast 1	95 minutes	6	Weekly	2021
Podcast 2	64 minutes	3	Every two months	2020
Podcast 3	32 minutes	50	Every two weeks	2018
Podcast 4	48 minutes	14	Monthly	2019
Podcast 5	46 minutes	5	Every two weeks	2021
Podcast 6	26 minutes	120	Monthly	2013

Podcast 7	55 minutes	121	2 per week	2019
Podcast 8	43 minutes	56	Every two weeks	2018
Podcast 9	51 minutes	2	Monthly	2021
Podcast 10	45 minutes	38	Monthly	2019

Table 1: July 2021 Podcast Search Results

The information in Table 1 needs to be considered within the context of podcasts as non-fixed entities, with many being altered or removed from the platforms that distribute them after release (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). This means that the number of publicly available podcast episodes on a given RSS feed may not reflect the number of podcasts that have at some time been released under that title. This also means that some podcasts in Table 1 may have been started a long time before the earliest available podcast episode that can be accessed today. However, despite this, it is still noteworthy that for seven out of ten podcasts the first available episode was 2019 or later, suggesting a significant increase in the number of these podcasts over the past few years, reaffirming the point already identified and discussed in chapter 1.

Another point to note in relation to this table is that the average length of podcast episodes can be misleading because podcasts sometimes have very short episodes of only a few minutes, usually when they want to provide a short piece of information to listeners or to introduce a new series. For some of the podcasts included in Table

1, episodes of this nature brought down the average length significantly. However, the researcher chose not to exclude these podcast episodes from consideration of the average length as it would have necessitated a judgement call on what were episodes and what were announcements, something that also was not always fully clear.

It was even difficult to comprehensively determine frequency of podcast episodes just over the past six months for the purposes of this table, because podcasters vary in how they release their episodes. For example, some podcasts engage in bulk releasing multiple episodes on the same date, and others took long breaks at times that were inconsistent with their general approach to releasing episodes. In some cases the podcasts were also so new it was unclear what pattern of release they may eventually settle into, if any. Further impacting on this, the point was made in a number of the interviews with podcaster participants that the Covid-19 pandemic had altered the frequency of their release schedule, both increasing and decreasing the frequency of some of the podcasts included in Table 1. The specific influence of the Covid-19 pandemic is discussed in more detail in the next chapter as it relates to the interviews with podcaster participants, including how participants described its influence on their release schedules, but also how it influenced their podcasts more generally, especially in how they engaged with current events.

As a final point on Table 1, no statistical information about the number of listeners or podcast popularity was included. This decision was taken because this information is usually held across various platforms, with varying degrees of public and private visibility, making any attempt to quantify it unlikely to provide an accurate picture. However, all podcaster participants were asked about subscriber and listener numbers and how these influenced them in their interviews, as can be seen in the interview guide (Appendix 1), and discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Once all

podcasts that met the inclusion criteria were found, the podcast hosts were identified through publicly available information, usually on the podcasts themselves, the podcast's website or via social media. The majority of podcasts that were identified were hosted by one or two social workers, although several had more, and even variable, hosts. Some of the podcasts had changed hosts since they had started, but only current hosts were approached for interview. For podcasts where not all the hosts were social workers, only the social workers were approached for an interview.

Ultimately 21 independent social work podcasters in England were identified through this process, and this relatively small population size meant that all 21 podcasters were approached for an interview. To do this each podcast host was contacted via email (Appendix 3) outlining the remits of the study and asking them to confirm that they meet the criteria. This included specifically asking them to confirm their podcast is not associated with any organisation and that they are based in England. It was important to confirm their independence at this stage because sometimes podcasts can be associated with organisations and not be clearly labelled as such, as in the case of The IMO Podcast, that is affiliated with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, but does not clearly brand itself as such through its RSS feed (De Souza, 2023). In cases where there was more than one podcast host, the podcasters were offered the choice of either a joint interview or individual interviews. The joint interviews were offered for convenience of participants, but also for the potential to capture some of the discussions and interactions between podcast hosts about their experiences. Joint interviews have also been identified as being able to provide additional insights on how multiple perspectives co-construct meaning and shared experiences within a narrative approach (Sakellariou *et al*., 2013). The value of this for the data collection is considered in more detail in the next chapter.

As discussed in the ethics section later in this chapter, specific demographic information was not collected from podcaster participants to avoid potential issues related to breaching confidentiality for such a small population. However, I was able to analyse some publicly available information on the population as a whole, although the extent of available information varied across podcasts. I was able to ascertain that 12 of the 21 podcasters are men, accounting for approximately 57% of independent social work podcasters in England, a high percentage compared to 17% of the broader social worker population who identify as men (SWE, 2022b), and consistent with the predominantly male podcaster population identified elsewhere (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Copeland, 2018; Shamburg, 2020). The majority of the podcasters are also believed by the researcher to be white, but it was not possible to confirm the ethnicity of podcasters so no more specific figure can be provided on this. Although it was not possible to determine the job role of all the podcasters, it was clear that many of the podcasters were out of frontline practice, including several holding senior roles within local authorities, educational institutions, private companies and national organisations. This was also reflected in the findings from the interviews, as is discussed more in the next chapter.

Once they were contacted, 12 of the 21 potential participants agreed to be included in the research, representing approximately 57% of the population. The reason for this relatively high rate of engagement from podcasters, in particular compared to the listener participant recruitment described in the next section, could be that these participants were used to speaking publicly about their experiences and social work on their podcasts, and so they may have been more likely to feel comfortable talking about similar issues with a researcher. The fact that these participants have chosen to engage in podcasting also suggests that they may already feel they have something

to contribute to the discourse around the profession, increasing the likelihood they may want to also share their views with a researcher. Additionally, this response rate could relate to many of the participants holding senior roles within the profession, reducing the fear that research suggests often influences the decisions of social workers in frontline practice who may be more reluctant to engage as a result (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). This could further explain why the relatively positive response rate from podcasters stands in such stark contrast to the difficulties found in recruiting listener participants. The sampling of these social workers and how that was managed is now discussed.

3.5 Sampling and Recruitment for Stage Two: Listener Participants

The participants for stage two of this research were social workers who were asked to listen to social work podcasts prior to the interview. Therefore, although there was no requirement that these participants had previously listened to podcasts or had an interest in this area prior to being recruited, they are still referred to as listener participants throughout this research in order to differentiate them from podcaster participants. This was seen to be preferable to referring to them as social worker participants, considering all participants in this study are social workers.

Listener participants were recruited via social media, specifically Twitter (now X). The wording used for recruitment can be found in Appendix 4. Using social media in this way has been shown to be effective in recruiting participants for research being undertaken remotely elsewhere, and is becoming increasingly popular as a research recruitment approach (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Archibald *et al*., 2019). The decision was made to not contact social work employers directly to recruit social workers, despite the potential for widening the sampling pool, because doing so would

allow employers to have too much influence over the social workers who were put forward. As highlighted in the literature review, employers can have their own motivations and incentives when it comes to social worker CPD and how their employees engage in this (Kelly and Jackson, 2011; Gillies, 2015; Rogowski, 2020). Encouraging social workers to put themselves forward also allowed for those who may be more inclined towards counterpower and dissent to participate, without having to worry about the oversight of their employer. It is important to acknowledge that although recruitment over social media can be an effective way of engaging participants from a wide range of backgrounds, there are limitations. For example, demographic differences are likely to emerge between the general population and those who come forward to participate on social media (Stern *et al*., 2017). Most notably, social media users are significantly more likely to be younger than those who are not using social media (Tankovska, 2021).

The aim was to recruit approximately twelve listener participants, hoping to keep the number similar to the number of podcaster participants who took part and provide a balance between the two perspectives. However, ultimately only six social workers got in touch to take part. This is despite the initial call for participants being seen over 35,000 times according to the analytics available on Twitter (now X). Potential alternative approaches that could have been engaged with to gather a larger sample on reflection, including online surveys, are discussed in more detail in the conclusion chapter in relation to limitations. The reasons for this low response rate may stem from the challenging working conditions that social workers currently experience, already described as including a lack of time, high caseloads and habitual unpaid overtime (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen

et al., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a; BASW, 2023a). The call for participants going out during the Covid-19 pandemic also likely exacerbated this, as research has shown that social workers felt particularly overworked and stressed during that time (Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022).

Other factors that could have contributed to the low engagement rate include the aforementioned fear that dominates a lot of the decisions that social workers take in relation to their practice, meaning they may feel uncomfortable openly discussing their professional role with a researcher (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). A final potential reason could be that social workers already feel over-researched as a result of the large number of studies they are asked to be involved in each year, including academic studies like this, but also a growing number of internal and external data collection processes they are asked to be involved in (McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021; Harris, 2023). I have highlighted previously my concerns in carrying out research with social work students that the economy of performance in higher education, whereby so much of the student experience is subject to data collection targeted at students, creates a barrier to engaging students in research in this way, including research that could help us understand the impact and influence of that same economy of performance (Hanley, 2020). Framed in this way, refusal to engage in research like this could also be considered as an expression of dissent against the economy of performance, something not dissimilar to the discussion in the previous chapter of dissent being expressed by social workers through their minimal

engagement with SWE's CPD recording requirements (Carter, 2020: BASW, 2021b: Samuel, 2022; BASW and Social Workers Union, 2022; Hanley, 2022b).

As a white male academic, I also cannot discount the potential that dissent was being expressed towards me as a result of my perceived position of power and authority. Some participants also may have been reluctant to come forward because of my public profile, and previous public comments and publications, that took a decidedly critical perspective towards contemporary social work reforms and policies (Hanley, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023, Hanley *et al*., 2021, McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021; Hanley and Kerr, 2023). These points are described in more detail in the positionality section below. The reason for the lack of engagement from social workers can only be speculated upon because those participants who did come forward to take part were by definition those who did not feel encumbered by these factors. However, themes around social worker voice and willingness to speak out were prominent in all interviews with participants, and discussed more in chapter 5 as they relate to social work podcasts and social work CPD.

These challenges around recruitment and sampling mean it is important to examine how the listener participants who did take part reflect the wider population. Due to the fact that just six participants came forward to be involved in the research, meaning all six were interviewed, the planned purposive sampling was not possible. However, unlike podcast participants, listener participants were asked for demographic information as this was not seen to risk a breach of confidentiality due to the comparatively larger population they were drawn from. This data provides important insights into how the sample reflects the wider social work population in England. The demographic and biographic information gather from listener participants is outlined in detail at the start of chapter 5.

3.6 Process

All participants, podcasters and listeners, were provided with a participant information sheet (Appendices 5 & 6) and consent form (Appendices 7 & 8) to sign, and for those who agreed, interviews were arranged. All interviews with a single participant took place on Zoom, as agreed between the participant and interviewer. The benefits of Zoom for research interviews has been highlighted elsewhere, including that it is widely used, can be accessed without an account through a simple hyperlink, and has strong privacy features, such as password enablement and a lobby function (Lobe *et al*., 2020). Zoom was also free for unlimited one-to-one use at the time of the interviews (this is no longer the case since July 2022). However, for three or more people using Zoom the sessions were limited to 40 minutes by the software without a subscription, and therefore an alternative platform was agreed with the participants who chose to be interviewed together. In all cases we agreed to use Microsoft Teams in those interviews instead. In all of the interviews that were undertaken using Microsoft Teams the participants were familiar with the platform from their workplaces, and this meant they were confident about the technological and privacy features of the platform. The interviews all lasted between 25 to 75 minutes, with the longer interviews tending to be those with multiple participants.

A number of steps were taken to ensure the interviews ran as smoothly as possible. This included ensuring that my own technology was working prior to the interview, and that there was appropriate lighting so that the participants could see me clearly. Furthermore, a pilot interview was carried out to ensure that no unforeseen issues arose, and to make adjustments as required (this interview is not included in the data). Interview guides (Appendices 1 & 2) based on memory prompts were developed for the semi-structured interviews to keep the interviews focused on the research

questions. The theoretical framework described above and the literature review outlined in the previous chapter were both vital in designing these interview guides. For example, questions were asked about the perspectives of podcaster participants on advertisements on their podcast, a point that was noted to be contentious in the literature in this area (Berry, 2018; Sullivan, 2018, 2019; Llinares, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019), but also one that elicited discussions around key issues highlighted in the theoretical framework, including counterpower, dissent, hegemony, capitalism, and the use of audio mediums as tools for both oppressive and revolutionary action (Fanon, 1959; Gramsci, 1971; Fisher, 2009; Castells, 2010a; Garrett, 2021a).

However, it was important that the interviews also remained as open as possible to identify new and novel themes. This was particularly significant because there is no existing research in this area, and setting the remit of the interviews too narrowly could preclude significant findings (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, as already discussed, I approached the interviews insofar as possible as what Kvale (1996) describes as a “traveller” instead of a “miner” (p.3), focused primarily on searching for meaning. As a result, although I set out to undertake semi-structured interviews with pre-determined interview guides, some of the interviews could be considered to have been more in line with what Marvasti and Tanner (2020) describe as in-depth interviews, being more fluid and improvisational. On reflection this approach was particularly identified in the interviews with some podcasters, where the discussions at times veered significantly off the pre-prepared interview guide, with the podcasters taking a more improvisational approach to the interview that I did not discourage, in particular when the themes being discussed remained of relevance to the research focus and questions. Interestingly I also noted that podcasters who delved into these more flexible discussions to some

extent mirrored the approach of their own podcasts, likely reflective of their comfort with that particular style of engagement.

Due to all the interviews taking place remotely, I integrated the suggestions made by Renosa *et al*. (2021) around building rapport through interview preparation. This included allowing the participants to pick the time/date of the interviews. This led to several of the interviews taking place late in the evening to facilitate those who were unable to take time off during their workdays. Additionally, before starting each interview I agreed with participants what we would do if there were technical issues that arose. Usually this involved taking about five minutes to overcome whatever issues presented themselves, and if nothing could be done during that time looking to re-arrange the interview to avoid wasting too much time. There were some minor technical issues during some interviews, mostly related to temporarily slow internet connections or poor sound quality, but these were all quickly overcome and no interviews had to be stopped despite this planning. In line with the point noted above from Archibald *et al* (2019), I felt that overcoming these issues together helped to build rapport with participants, as we shared our frustrations, but also our solutions.

Stage two of the research, involving the six social workers, required some additional steps in this process. Before any interview was arranged with this group they were asked to listen to one to three social work podcast episodes and given one month to do so. This number was kept purposely low to avoid placing additional burden on the participants, a point discussed in more detail under ethics below, as well as to give the social workers the potential to listen to more if they desired, and to explore the reasons behind this in the interviews. No specific guidance on accessing podcasts was provided, as an important part of this research was examining the experiences of participants accessing podcasts. No specific podcasts were suggested to participants,

just that they should be social work podcasts. This decision was made because, as noted in the literature review, choice and flexibility are considered to be important advantages of podcast listening, and this research sought to capture social worker experiences of exercising that choice as part of the data collection (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023; Belfiore *et al*., 2021).

Furthermore, despite some attempts to develop frameworks for assessing the quality of educational or professional development podcasts, these remain inconsistent, limited and lacking in evidence of effectiveness (Carvalho *et al*., 2009; Fernandez *et al*., 2015; Paterson *et al*., 2015; Lin *et al*., 2015, 2023; Littlefield *et al*., 2015; Drew, 2017; Nwosu *et al*., 2017). As an illustrative example, these frameworks often promote vastly differing views on the ideal length for educational podcasts, with most suggesting that educational podcasts should be short to avoid providing too much information at once (Frydenberg, 2007; Evans, 2008; Paterson *et al*., 2015), and others highlighting the importance of longer podcasts that can go in-depth into a topic (Gachago *et al*, 2016; Drew, 2017; Loesing, 2020). Therefore, direction to participants about what podcasts to listen to would have ultimately come down to a subjective decision by me. As an avid podcast listener, a point noted in chapter 1 to have led in part to my motivations for undertaking this research, my own experiences and opinions would unavoidably have come to bear on this selection process, potentially biasing the data collection.

All listener participants were also sent a short follow-up questionnaire (Appendix 9) three months after their interview, asking them two questions: if they continued to listen to podcasts, and why/why not. There was no participant attrition, so all six participants remained involved throughout and completed this. Therefore, in total, across stage

one involving podcasters and stage two involving social workers, a total fifteen interviews were carried out, covering eighteen participants, alongside the findings of six follow-up questionnaires received from the listener participants. This provided a large amount of data covering a range of multifaceted themes, necessitating an approach to data analysis that was robust, while also supporting an examination of contested issues, including those around networks, power and counterpower. This is also in line with the approach taken to the interviews as a “traveller”, described above, whereby data collection is not treated as an isolated activity, but seen as part of a journey to discover meaning (Kvale, 1996: 3). In order to facilitate analysis of the data based on this, reflexive thematic analysis was utilised (Braun and Clarke, 2019), alongside a qualitative meta-analysis comparing the different sets of data (Timulak, 2009), approaches now examined in more depth.

3.7 Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed the recordings were transcribed, removing all identifying information, and then deleted. The data gathered were then analysed based on reflexive thematic analysis, which involves the researcher undertaking thematic analysis while being actively cognisant of their philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Therefore, understanding my positionality as researcher, and treating this as important for shaping the analytical work, was fundamental to the research process, a discussion that is expanded upon in the next section. A six-phased approach to data analysis was undertaken in line with the reflexive thematic analysis model:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data,

Step 2: Generate initial codes,

Step 3: Search for themes,

Step 4: Review themes,

Step 5: Define themes,

Step 6: Write-up (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Notably, however, this process was engaged with iteratively, and data analysis undoubtedly started at the point of collection, including in how the semi-structured interviews were guided, which areas were probed and further explored, and which were not.

In applying this process of reflexive thematic analysis, I was aware of the need to make regular decisions about how to analyse the data and draw out themes, and engaged in making these in a transparent way, including through discussions with my supervisors, as recorded in the minutes of these meetings. Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest that steps like this support researcher subjectivity to be understood and utilised as a resource, rather than being seen as a limitation. They describe that qualitative research should be about meaning making, and therefore data analysis becomes about interpreting and creating, not discovering an objective truth. Themes can therefore be seen not as emerging from the data, but instead being constructed, tested and refined over multiple iterative phases, a process that never really concludes (Terry and Hayfield, 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis is therefore an approach that is philosophically aligned with network ontology, whereby understanding and knowledge are sought based on a recognition of our world as a system of open and irreducible interrelationships between networks and nodes (Eriksson, 2005). However, in outlining their model of reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2019) also

stress the importance of not taking theoretical assumptions for granted, and incorporating analysis and interrogation of these into the analytical process too.

Following an initial stage of familiarising myself with the data, a process that was helped significantly by transcribing the interviews myself, a coding process was carried out based on the iterative approach outlined above (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In line with this approach, codes and themes were identified based primarily based on what was found to be “interesting”, shaped inherently by the research questions, literature review and the data collected, but also by me as the researcher (Terry and Hayfield, 2020: 436). The data were reviewed until no new themes emerged, meaning data saturation was seen to be reached (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Expanding on this understanding of data analysis as iterative, it is important to highlight that the data analysis of the podcaster participant and listener participant interviews impacted on each other, and there were times where the themes arising from one set of interviews influenced the analysis of the other. Therefore, this research could also be considered as a qualitative meta-analysis, in that it compares the data collected from podcasters with the data collected from listeners (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative research, a meta-analysis, also referred to as a meta-synthesis or meta-ethnography, helps to generate new insights and interpretations going beyond what can be provided by a single set of data (Timulak, 2009). In this research, the two sets of interview data can be considered to be in dialogue with each other, a process that extended throughout the data analysis process and write up of the findings. Through this data integration, new patterns and themes emerged, and rigour and trustworthiness were increased through looking for confirmation of some of the themes and findings across both sets of interview data. Congruent with reflexive thematic analysis approach, meta-analysis of qualitative research also requires going beyond

the findings to consider their broader context (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This was further facilitated through the critical approach that engaged with these wider contextual factors, as discussed in detail earlier in this chapter (Rogowski, 2013). This meta-analysis and the ways that both sets of data informed each other are explored more throughout the next 3 chapters.

Once themes were identified, these were reviewed and the themes that best explained the dataset were chosen and included in the findings, with some themes merged or split over time depending on how they helped answer the research questions and were altered through the qualitative meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009). One of the hardest aspects of this stage in the process was setting aside themes that I found to be interesting, or had spent significant time on developing, but were ultimately not relevant or significant for answering the research questions. However, Terry and Hayfield (2020) describe the importance of seeing early themes like these in the data analysis process as prototypes, and that constructing and deconstructing these themes, even if not included in any final results, helps to develop a more in-depth understanding of the data and research questions, and ultimately a better understanding of the themes and findings that are included in the final analysis.

Reflexive thematic analysis was also seen as important in engaging with the critical aspects of this research, including those related to counterpower, counter-hegemony and dissent. Garrett (2021a) notes that dissent has to be a collective endeavour, and therefore in drawing out these the themes around counterpower during both the interviews and analysis I could be considered to be collectively engaged with the participants in engaging in counterpower or counter-hegemony. This can be seen in particular when I applied labels like dissent or activism to the activities of participants in ways they may not explicitly do so themselves. This could also be seen as extending

these discussions and their analysis beyond the realm of common sense, and applying criticality and reflection in ways more akin to what Gramsci (1971) describes as good sense. Taking these steps to find meaning and context behind the data was important. For example, in in unpicking these themes around dissent, as noted in the literature review, it is often the case in social work that dissenting activities are hidden, subtle, individualised and not recognised by those involved necessarily as dissent (Carey and Foster, 2011; Devlieghere and Gillingham, 2021). The meta-analysis further underpinned this, through developing collective understandings across both listener and podcaster participants (Timulak, 2009). Recognising my role in constructing this meaning, the influence of my own positionality, including as a critical academic with a public profile, becomes all the more significant, and this is now explored.

3.8 Researcher positionality

This chapter has made regular mention of the importance of interrogating my researcher positionality, including as a white male, an avid podcast listener and a critical academic with a public profile. It was therefore vital that throughout the research process I remained cognisant of where potential issues related to my positionality arose. This is opposed to taking what Folkes (2022) describes as a shopping list approach to positionality, amounting to simply listing off the characteristics of the researcher and noting whether these are shared or not shared with participants. Instead, Folkes (2022) suggests that positionality should be understood as fluid, developing and changing throughout the research process, and requiring deeper reflexivity and discussions, including with participants. A similar point has been made by Hamdan (2009) who argues that listing off the various characteristics of the researcher is not always necessary, and instead the decision

about what aspects of researcher positionality should be explored will depend on the nature of the research.

In light of these debates and reflecting on my own researcher positionality, there were a number of areas that I felt were important to address and reflect on throughout the research process. The first of these is my ethnicity as a white researcher. This research was undertaken during a time of substantial social challenge, and not just in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic that has been discussed already, but also the global rejuvenation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement following the death of George Floyd. As well as the broader activism related to this movement, these developments led to a revaluation along anti-racist principles by many social workers and social work organisations of the systems and structures that shape the profession (Sen *et al*., 2022; Cane and Tedam, 2023; Pentaris *et al*., 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Obasi, 2022).

While my research and writing in the past has frequently raised issues related to inequalities based on ethnicity in social work education (Hanley, 2021b, 2022c, 2022d), the ongoing context of BLM, and how it shaped this research context, emphasised to me the importance evaluating the impact of my own ethnicity. This included recognising the privileges that being a white researcher has likely had for me getting to the point where I am able to undertake this research, and how I could be perceived by participants as a result. In their research with social workers, Cane and Tedam (2022) identified the lack of diversity in social work academia as being a barrier to engaging social workers about issues like racism. As has been noted by Pentaris *et al*. (2022), open discussions and explicitly addressing these issues are beneficial for social work in all contexts, and this includes in research contexts. I felt that being able to discuss these developments and my reflections with my supervisors,

colleagues, research peers, and both sets of participants, as well as engaging in my own personal reflections, helped shape this research and the findings for the better. Some of these factors, in particular the impact of BLM, therefore form prominent themes in the analysis discussed in the next two chapters.

These considerations around ethnicity also link to my own background as an Irish-American living in England. There are aspects of this positionality that could have impacted on my approach to the research, and even my motivations for undertaking the research. For example, although it was highlighted in the previous chapter that the UK has comparatively low rates of podcast listeners (Reuters, 2021, 2022), those same studies have found that Ireland has consistently the highest podcast listener rate among the countries included. Therefore, I need to consider whether my background and culture of being Irish impacted on my initial interest in podcasting. As evidence of this potential impact, I can recall family and friends, often from Irish backgrounds themselves, recommending podcasts and discussing them with me in the very early days of podcasts being available in the mid-2000s. Notably, reflecting on this experience also highlights the impact of some of the social aspects of podcasting on me specifically, similar to what was identified in research outlined in the previous chapter (McClung and Johnson, 2010; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Florini, 2015; Bouzis, 2017; Boling and Hull, 2018; Hancock and McMurty, 2018; Heeremans, 2018; Murray, 2019; Griffith and Sweet, 2023).

There is also the potential that participants, in picking up on various aspects of my accent, may have engaged differently with me throughout the interviews than they may have otherwise. As Hall (2020) highlights, research is frequently received and engaged with depending on social positioning, and accent plays a role in that. There are some indications that this was the case in the data collection, including in at least

two interviews where the participants asked me about my background and where I was from, presumably prompted by my accent. However, these considerations are complicated by the fact that I have lived in three different countries for almost the same length of time during the majority of my life, including several moves between them. I hold citizenship of two of these (USA and Ireland), and am resident in the other (UK). Therefore, I do not, nor have I ever, felt strong nationalistic affiliations towards any of these. In line with the theory of the network society, this may be an indication of my own position of privilege, in that I am able to associate my identity with global, cosmopolitan cultures situated in the space of flows, rather than physical contiguity in the space of places. However, most of my moves between countries have been made based on economic necessity, not something associated with the way dominant networks engage with global flows of capital and influence (Castells, 2010a).

Further complicating the potential impact my national background could have had on this research, due to these frequent moves, I have been informed at various times that my accent sounds Irish, American, Canadian, Australian, Scottish, South African and Dutch. The challenges with recognising my accent tend to be particularly prominent in formal settings, for example when I am speaking in public, as I am often trying to speak in a neutral way that can be understood most clearly by all. It is notably, therefore, that it is often following speaking engagements that I have been approached by delegates to ask where my unique accent stems from. Therefore, I cannot confidently predict what assumptions participants in the formal setting of a research interview, rightly or wrongly, made about me based on my accent, nor the impact this had on the research. However, as already noted at times this led to discussions around my background, a point returned to below in relation to building rapport.

As a male researcher, undertaking research in a field where the vast majority of registered social workers are female (SWE, 2022b), I also needed to be aware of how gender dynamics impacted on this research at all stages. Notably, despite being a female majority profession, at the highest levels of the social work profession, reflecting both seniority and compensation, a disproportionate number of positions remain occupied by men, and significantly, white men (Haworth *et al*., 2018; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Obasi, 2022). This has been described as the 'glass escalator effect', highlighting that in female majority professions, societal assumptions about men being better suited to leadership roles means that men quickly rise the professional ranks, despite being a numerical minority (Wingfield, 2009; Williams, 2013). Therefore, I was aware not only aware of the power inherent in my role as a male social worker researching in a female dominated profession, but also that my gender may have played a role in getting me to a point in my career where I am afforded the opportunity to do so.

Lustick (2021) describes the importance of qualitative researchers recognising their roles in the perpetuation of larger systems of oppression in this way, confronting our own privilege and the impact this may have had on our research. This positionality is also important in the context of the theoretical framework being used to shape this research. For example, within the network society, it is important that researchers seek to understand not only the networks that influence them and their work, but also their own positions within those networks, including dominant networks (Castells, 2010a). This point has also been made in relation to social workers, and literature applying the theory of the network society to social work makes frequent reference to the need for social workers to critically analyse their own roles in perpetuating exclusion and promoting dominant networks (Smith, 2013; Baker *et al*., 2014).

In reflecting on these points, I considered specifically what aspects of my research may have been impacted as a result of being a male researcher. For example, there is the potential that female participants may not have felt as comfortable sharing information with me. Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) identify this in relation to social work specifically, describing how female researchers in the social work field can at times facilitate conversations that a male researcher would be precluded from. These points became significant for this research when there were particular gendered themes raised in the interviews, including around the use of “banter” on podcasts, and because these were not the focus of my research questions, I did not always probe these issues with participants further. As a male researcher these themes likely did not seem significant to me in the way they may have to a female researcher, who would have been more likely to have experienced the negative impacts of “banter” (Whittle *et al*., 2019; Cameron, 2020; Buglass *et al*., 2021). It was only on reflection after the interviews, in going through the data analysis, and through helpful engagement and challenge from my doctoral supervisors (notably both female), that these elements even became revealed to me as a researcher. These issues, and the potential for further research stemming from them, are discussed in more detail in the next three chapters, including a specific theme in the next chapter looking at “banter”.

My gender was potentially also significant in relation to the focus of this research on podcasts, being that podcasters and podcast listeners tend to be disproportionately male (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Barrios-O’Neill, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Shamburg, 2020; Newman *et al*., 2022). A point that was identified in the literature review in several places is that research into technological innovations in education is often undertaken with the technology as a starting point, leaving the pedagogical issues under-defined (Kirkwood and Price, 2013). This was mitigated to

an extent in the literature review through engaging with what existing literature and research says about the challenges related to social work CPD provision first, and linking these explicitly with the literature on podcasts. However, Kirkwood and Price (2013) highlight that researchers are likely to be positive about the technology they are researching, in particular because they are likely to have interest in that technology by virtue of choosing to research it. As Pring (2004) notes, a researcher can therefore, knowing the conclusions they desire, find the data and arguments to justify them.

In the case of this research, I am an avid podcast listener, and unavoidably this is where my interest in this area derived from, as discussed in chapter 1. The importance of those who listen to podcasts regularly recognising this positionality and the impact it may have when undertaking research into podcasts has also be raised elsewhere (Griffith and Sweet, 2023). It was vital to recognise that as a man in my early 30s, I am substantially more likely to be a podcast listener, and to have positive attitudes towards podcasts, based on both age and gender (Ofcom, 2022; Newman *et al*., 2022). Therefore, an awareness of this positionality was important throughout the research process, recognising the potential for my passion in this area, and my gender and age, to impact on the data collection and analysis. This made the engagement with critical theory, in particular Garrett's (2021a) critique of "techno-authoritarianism", and the need to be alert to the threats of technology, all the more significant to shaping this study and avoiding these proclivities as a podcast listener (p.5).

Potentially the most significant factor I found when reflecting on my positionality, and the potential impact on this study, is that I am a social worker. I have not only worked extensively in practice settings, but I have also been involved in the education of hundreds of social workers over the past eight years. In addition, I have written a number of recent articles that are highly critical of contemporary social work policy

directions, including those related to CPD (Hanley, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023; Hanley *et al*., 2021; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2021; Hanley and Kerr, 2023), and regularly post publicly on social media in relation to my views on social work reforms and policy networks. The influence of this experience can be seen evident in my decision to underpin this research in critical theory, and to interpret Castells theory of the network society in line with this tradition, as discussed extensively at the start of this chapter. I unavoidably bring this critical positionality to this research, and needed to be aware of this throughout all stages of the research process, including research design, sampling, data collection and analysis. Just as participants bring their views and perspectives to the research, so too does the researcher, and therefore my approach to this topic may be very different from someone from a different professional or ideological perspective (Pring, 2004). For example, as noted above, at times I used labels such as dissent and counterpower to describe the activities of participants in ways that they didn't explicitly identify with this terminology themselves, something akin to the work on dissenting activities in social work elsewhere. (Carey and Foster, 2011; Devlieghere and Gillingham, 2021)

My existing public profile, through publications, speaking engagements and social media, also likely influenced the research process. As already noted, at the sampling stage several potential participants asked follow-up questions about the research, with at least one participant linking this back to their awareness of my existing writing in on social work. Notably though, none of the participants, upon receiving responses to their queries, declined to engaged, suggesting they were satisfied with the responses. However, this does not discount the potential that some participants declined to even make initial contact with me about the research based on my profile in this area. This means that the recruitment process may have inadvertently attracted only a subset of

individuals, what is referred to popularly as an echo-chamber, or in research as an epistemic bubble, where I was inadvertently being exposed to only those participants most likely to reflect and reinforce my existing beliefs (Nguyen, 2020). This may have been particularly significant in the recruitment of listeners over social media, where concerns about echo-chambers are prevalent (O'Neill, 2017; Cinelli *et al*., 2021). However, it is noteworthy that the vast majority my publications and public comments on social work policy and practice came after I started this doctorate, and to a large degree were shaped by my doctoral journey and the people I engaged with through this process (as noted in the acknowledgements at the start of this thesis). My critical social media activity did not start actively until this time also. Most of these activities and publications, in particular those that have received national attention, would have also been after the data collection process was already completed, further reducing the potential impact that this existing profile had on the process.

Regardless, there were definitely participants who were aware of my public profile and the content of some of the pieces that I have previously published previously. This public profile therefore undoubtedly impacted on the interviews themselves. Perryman (2011) has described the difficulty in interviewing people who already know some of your views on the issues being discussed, and how in these circumstances it would be artificial to pretend to act on an objectivity that everyone present knows does not exist. Therefore, while I did my utmost to avoid injecting any of my preconceived views into the interviews, on the rare occasions when a participant made reference to a view on something they knew I had previously professed, I did not shy away from confirming those views and allowing the discussion to develop as a result, drawing on those critical elements. Participants responded positively towards this approach, and on numerous occasions it opened up additional areas of discussion. However, at all times

I did my best to ensure that the focus remained on the research questions and the importance of the participant's views and narrative, instead of my own.

At times these conversations were important in developing rapport with participants, particularly in light of the interviews being remote and the challenges around developing rapport in that context already discussed (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Renosa *et al*., 2021). Addressing the importance of this, Folkes (2022) describes that sharing some information about yourself before or during an interview can help to build rapport with participants, in particular in efforts to find commonalities between researcher and participant. This was also found to be the case in this research, and commonalities discussed with participants included shared personal and professional backgrounds. As already noted, on two occasions I was asked about my interesting accent and then where I was from, with participants looking for similarities in their own backgrounds. In one instance this involved discussing a shared former colleague. Gibson and Abrams (2003) suggest that taking the time to consider how much information to disclose to participants like this is important, and it was something that I think I got better at as the research went on. However, in my experience these discussions tended to be led by the participants rather than me as the researcher, and this made it all the more important to not be dismissive and to engage in the discussions to a suitable extent, building rapport and encouraging the participants towards feeling comfortable (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Renosa *et al*., 2021).

To some extent then I was an insider, a social worker interviewing exclusively other social workers. This insider role has some advantages, including in gaining access to participants (Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt, 2008). Several of the participants, both podcasters and listeners, confirmed they had read some of my work before, or

followed me on social media, and that helped them to feel more comfortable in being part of the study. Taylor (2011) also highlights that being an insider can bring benefits around knowing the terminology or context being discussed. It is likely, therefore, that at times participants did not take time to explain terminology, or were more confident using that terminology, because they knew of my background as a social worker. Taylor (2011) notes that this shared lingo can help to build rapport and trust more quickly between researchers and participants, and this may have helped to facilitate certain conversations that otherwise would have been more restricted. This may also have been the case when talking about podcasts, where participants may have assumed my knowledge and awareness of some of the terminology around podcasts and ICTs, not just because I was doing research on podcasts, but also because I am a male researcher in my 30s, and therefore more likely to be a podcast listener than the majority of social workers (SWE, 2022b).

Notably though O'Connor (2004) urges caution on this front, highlighting that being an insider can diminish a researcher's interpretive ability, as assumptions can be made where an outsider researcher may have reached for additional clarity or explanation. Bhopal (2010) similarly notes that when researchers and participants have a shared experience or identity the researcher may take certain things for granted. It is therefore likely that my experience of being embedded in social work practice and academia for the past twelve years meant that I was not always aware of when I was taking certain aspects of what was being discussed for granted. Ryan *et al*. (2011) also add that being interviewed by an insider can lead participants to have concerns about being judged by a peer, or worry about breaches of confidentiality, reducing their likelihood to share openly with the researcher.

Another potential influence of being an insider researcher is that the participants end up conforming to the norms and expectations associated with the questions asked, in a way they may not if interviewed by someone who they see as an outsider (Hamdan, 2009). In my case, this may extend to them potentially conforming to my own specific views on certain topics that they could be aware of due to my public profile. Therefore, as outlined by Bhopal (2010), it was important for me to keep a certain distance from the topic and the participants during the interviews. Balancing this with a desire to be genuine, build rapport and create comfort was not always straightforward or easy. For example, there were certainly times when participants, in particular the podcasters, asked me for my opinions about their podcasts, or whether I had listened to them. At these times I refused to answer, stating that it was about their views not mine, as I felt any other answer to these questions was liable to bias their responses going forward in the interview, in particular as I had listened to some podcasts frequently, and others I had never even tried.

While being a social worker does, at least to some degree, make me an insider, as someone who has been out of frontline practice for about eight years, an argument could be made that in other ways I am also an outsider. In line with this, it is notable that the point has frequently been made that the dichotomy between being an insider and outsider researcher is reductive, and that researchers can never presume totality in their positions on this spectrum, with the boundaries of such positionality always remaining permeable (Hamdan, 2009; Taylor, 2011). I am sure that many of the participants, in particular those still in frontline practice, saw me as an outsider rather than an insider, even if they recognised my background in social work practice and my ongoing registration as a social worker. Bhopal (2010) describes a similar experience in relation to conducting research where she shared many characteristics with the

participants, but being part of the academic elite made her an outsider nonetheless. In research with social workers Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) similarly described that being a social worker researcher made them an insider, but they were also an outsider, even just by virtue of not being an employee on the sites they were researching.

As an academic undertaking a doctorate alongside working as a full time lecturer, for half of the duration of this doctorate in the same institution I was studying in, I was also aware of the impact of this on my positionality. Billot *et al*. (2021) argue that dual-status academics like me dwell in a form of boundary crossing, often moving between student and staff roles several times a day. This leads to overlapping identities and a negotiation of relationships between these roles, something I definitely experienced, and which at times made my doctoral experience feel as different to colleagues also studying in the same department. There were benefits to the role of being a dual-status academic that I found. It provided me with an understanding of the perspective of the university staff, and the challenges they face, including my supervisors. I feel this led to a greater level of comfort between us from the start, allowing for more open and critical discussions related to the research, as well as on topics like university working culture. Furthermore, I am aware that I brought existing capital to my researcher role, in particular as someone who has been involved in research and published in academic journals previously. I was therefore potentially more aware than some of my peers about the requirements for academic writing at this level.

There were also challenges related to this dual role. Taylor and Adams (2019) undertook research with dual-status academics like me undertaking a professional doctorate, and noted for those participants there was a clear tension between the neoliberal ideologies of the professions in which they worked, including the pressures

of marketisation and precarious working conditions, and the more transformative vision of most doctoral studies. The impact of this contrast was felt by me throughout the research, and definitely influenced some of the more critical aspects of my research, in particular in relation to the market for social work CPD, and my awareness of how this is negatively impacting on university provision of both qualifying and post-qualifying social work training, something identified in research elsewhere (Cleary, 2018). Gravett (2011) suggests that to understand and reflect on the influence of these types of experiences, the doctoral process needs to be seen not as a journey with a fixed end-point, but instead as non-linear, always in flux and evolving. As Folkes (2022) articulates, researcher positionality is therefore omnipresent throughout the research process, from picking a topic to publishing findings, and something I could not, and still cannot, lose sight of at any stage.

3.9 Ethics

As the previous section outlined, there were a large number of ethical considerations that needed to be accounted for in relation to my researcher positionality, and these continued to be important throughout all stages of the research process. As Calder (2020) argues the challenges of doing things ethically in qualitative research “never quite goes away”, even once the research is published (p.93). He further notes that there is no specific roadmap for engaging with ethics as they relate to research, and that there is a fine line between ethics and methods, with methodological concerns often inherently being ethical concerns, and vice versa. Therefore, I took an approach where all decisions made in the research process were considered for their ethical implications, meaning that positionality was only one part of this broader ethical engagement related to this research. This section addresses some additional ethical considerations as they relate to this research; however, it is important to note that this

only provides a snapshot of the totality of the ethical thinking and reflection that went into this study. Ethical approval was obtained to undertake this study from the Brunel University London College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 10).

The most central ethical consideration I had in my mind throughout this research was to reduce, insofar as possible, any potential negative impact on the participants. Most ethical research statements emphasise the importance of avoiding harm to participants while maximising benefits in this way, for example the British Educational Research Association (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. However, as Calder (2020) describes, harm is a complex term, not limited to direct physical or psychological harm, and can involve more complex and indirect harm as well. A number of approaches were utilised in order to minimise the potential for harm in this study, considering both direct harm and indirect harm, and also how the concept of harm relates to the wider field of social work in which all participants were involved. Of particular significance then were the aforementioned poor working conditions social workers in England are subjected to, including large workloads and lack of time social workers habitually experience (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; BASW, 2023a). As a result, a major ethical consideration throughout this research was seeking ways of reducing the impact of the study on participants' time, while still maximising benefits to the profession stemming from the research.

As an example of how this was done, the questionnaires (Appendix 9) emailed to listener participants three months after the interviews were as short as possible and

designed in a way that was simple and straightforward. This meant they could be completed in a matter of minutes, and this may have contributed to the lack of attrition at that stage. The listener participants were also asked to listen to between one to three social work podcast episodes, with this number being kept purposefully low to reduce what was required of participants, while still ensuring they could bring reflections on their experiences of social work podcasts to bear on the research.

It was also important to consider potential harm to participants through the interview process. Renosa *et al*. (2021) found in their study of remote interviewing that participants started getting fatigued the longer the interviews continued. Therefore I aimed to keep all interviews to below 45 minutes, and while the actual length of interviews did vary from 25 to 75 minutes, the longer interviews tended to be those undertaken with more than one participant. Remote interviewing further reduced the time and financial implications for participants related to interviews, in particular in relation to travel (Renosa *et al*., 2021). Many of the health and safety issues related to face-to-face interviews were also mitigated due to the exclusive use of remote interviewing, including around the need for all parties to appoint someone to contact when the interview was over to ensure they were safe (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014), as well as the specific health risks around meeting in person during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lobe *et al*., 2020; Campbell, 2021; Shockley *et al*., 2021).

Confidentiality was also an important ethical consideration, and efforts were made at all times to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Steps taken to maintain confidentiality for all participants included not recording names on any of the data collected, and assigning each participant a pseudonym that helped the researcher to keep track of the data without the need for actual names. As outlined above, recordings of the interviews were transcribed shortly after the interviews, removing

any identifying information, and then the recordings were deleted. Participants were assured that their confidential data would not be shared with anyone for any reason except in the case of an immediate risk to themselves or someone else, and this point was reiterated in both the participant information sheets (Appendices 5 & 6) and the consent forms (Appendices 7 & 8). Participants were also given more information about data protection and who to contact if they have concerns about anything in these documents.

As a result of these steps, all names that are included in the findings and conclusion chapters are pseudonyms, and they are used only to allow the reader to gain a broader picture of the participants in a way I feel adds additional significance to the data and findings. However, in presenting the findings from the podcaster interviews, there are certain themes, most notably in relation to voice and representation, where even the pseudonyms are excluded. On reflection it was felt that the quotes used in discussing those themes, if correlated with some of the quotes used under other themes, could have inadvertently identified a participant to someone familiar with the social work podcaster landscape, or at minimum allowed them to narrow down who they may be, due to the inherently small population size. The alternatives considered by the researcher were to completely avoid quotes in certain places, or to substantially reduce the analysis presented, both of which were seen as undesirable due to the importance of the data that would have been impacted.

In addition, throughout the findings chapters some quotes were reduced, or not used, specifically because they too clearly identified an individual podcaster participant, or another party. In all instances where a quote has been reduced or otherwise edited this is indicated clearly. In order to further protect their identities, unlike the listener participants, podcaster participants were not asked for specific demographic

information during the interviews. Having this data attached to specific interview transcripts would have substantially increased the risk of a participant being identified if for any reason the transcripts were seen by someone else. Furthermore, it was determined that the small number of potential participants making up the population of independent podcasters in England would mean that any specific exploration of the demographics of the participants would have allowed for identification of which podcasters took part in the interviews and those who declined, further risking a breach of confidentiality.

Another important ethical issue for this research related to consent. All participants were provided with a comprehensive participant information sheet (Appendices 5 & 6) that outlined the scope of the research, the association of the researcher, and what the research would entail for them. It was clearly outlined that not taking part would have no negative impact on them or their careers as social workers, and participants were asked to sign consent forms (Appendices 7 & 8) confirming they understood the research and agreed to partake. Several participants asked questions at this stage before signing the consent form, and in each of these cases upon receiving answers the participants signed the consent form and still took part in the research. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw their consent at any point, and this was repeated at the start of each interview, alongside reiterating the recording that would be taking place. It was particularly important to re-iterate this in remote interviews, where the recording process is not necessarily as obvious as in face-to-face interviews where a recording device is usually placed between participant and researcher (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014).

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored a wide range of areas that underpinned this research. Initially the ontology and epistemology were discussed, including the significance of network ontology, the network society and the role of critical theory, in developing the theoretical framework for the study. This framework then underpinned the discussions throughout the rest of the chapter, including around the methodology and methods, sampling and recruitment, process, and data analysis. The final sections engaged in a more in-depth exploration of researcher positionality and ethics, highlighting how these shaped the research and decisions made at various stages, as well as aspects where they could have been engaged with more effectively. These reflections are integrated into the next three chapters, the first of which examines the findings from the podcaster participant interviews, the next the findings from listener participant, and then a final conclusion chapter drawing these findings together and considering the implications of the research, recommendations, the contribution to knowledge, and some of the limitations of the research.

Chapter 4: Podcaster Participants - Findings and Discussion

This chapter explores the themes that were identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the data gathered in interviews with the twelve podcaster participants (the next chapter presents the findings of the listener participant interviews). As outlined in the previous chapter, reflexive thematic analysis involves the researcher engaging with thematic analysis through an iterative process, cognisant of their own philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions throughout (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The first section of this chapter examines themes related to podcasts as continuing professional development (CPD), covering the various perceived benefits and limitations that participants raised in relation to the potential for podcasts being used for social work CPD. This relates directly to the research question 3:

> What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

The focus then shifts to looking at social work podcasts more broadly under the headings of podcaster independence, listener influence and social impact. Each of these sections covers a range of themes, and collectively they provide substantial data for considering research question 1:

> What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?

The final section of the chapter covers voice and representation, which includes themes that deal most directly with research question 3:

> What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?

It is important, however, not to read each of these sections, and the themes therein, as specifically delineated towards answering an individual research question. The approach taken through the reflexive thematic analysis model was more holistic and iterative, seeing the various research questions and themes as interlinked and interwoven (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The conclusion chapter draws these themes together more cohesively alongside more consideration of the findings from the qualitative meta-analysis comparing them with data from listener participants presented in the next chapter (Timulak, 2009).

4.1 Podcasts as CPD

This first section explores themes related to one of the major areas discussed in the interviews with podcaster participants: the advantages and disadvantages of social work podcasts as CPD. The centrality of this within the interviews was to be expected based on the focus of this research and the research questions. Participants who agreed to take part were aware of this focus through the participant information sheet (Appendix 3), and two podcaster participants even came prepared with notes where they had written down specific benefits of podcasting for CPD that they wanted to share during the interview. This is indicative of the predominantly positive views on podcasting as CPD that were apparent in the interviews and are outlined throughout this section. As a result, four of the five themes in this section relate predominantly to the perceived benefits of podcasts as social work CPD: accessibility and flexibility, variety and reach, dialogue, and currency. However, it is important to re-iterate at this stage that as podcasters, each of the participants could be said to have an explicit bias towards promoting the medium they have dedicated their time and resources to.

The only clear disadvantage raised prominently by podcaster participants specifically in relation to podcasts as CPD is then discussed: quality assurance. Notably though,

some of the later discussions in this chapter could also be considered to encapsulate disadvantages of podcasting, in particular themes highlighting the challenges around engaging a wider range of voices and perspectives on podcasts. However, those themes were seen to be more appropriately addressed in their own section, seeing as the significance and implications raised often extended greatly beyond social work CPD.

4.1.1 Accessibility and Flexibility

In all twelve of the interviews, participants described podcasts as beneficial for social work CPD because they are seen to be accessible and flexible. Sam and Jon both made direct reference to podcasts being free to listen to for anyone with access to a device that has the capacity to download and play them. As is seen frequently throughout the themes in this chapter, to make this point the participants compared podcasts to other types of CPD and media. Sam in particular compared podcasts directly to CPD “like hearing people speak, books or whatever”, noting that “this is expensive… you know you are going out and spending £200 on a half a day training”. In making these comments Sam seems to be lending some credence to concerns discussed in detail in chapter 2 around the negative impact that a marketised approach is having on social work CPD (Kelly and Jackson, 2011; Gillies, 2015’ Rogowski, 2020), including the potential for CPD to exclude those without sufficient resources (Lombard, 2010; Doel *et al*., 2008; Gordon *et al*., 2019; YouGov, 2021; Johnson *et al*., 2022; BASW, 2023a).

However, ten of the twelve participants made no direct reference to podcasts being free, suggesting that in general this was not seen as significant for them when considering the potential for social work podcasts as CPD. It is possible that the lack of discussion around podcasts being free could stem from this being a taken for

granted characteristic for those who are familiar with the medium, and therefore not something that needed to be stated (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). As discussed in relation to my positionality above, the participants may also have assumed that as a male in my thirties researching podcasts this would be obvious to me and therefore did not require explicit attention.

There are some statements from participants that would seem to back this up, in particular when participants were discussing the benefits of podcasts as widely accessible, and where the associated benefit of podcasts being free could be seen as implied. As an example, Alfie discussed the value of the back catalogue of his podcasts:

> the aim and the ambition is that it becomes a bit of a repository for students and for practitioners, and when I saw the subject of your research looking at the potential for CPD, well that was absolutely in my mind when I set it up, was that this is an ideal way for people to you know to meet the CPD needs of registration.

However, it should be noted that, as discussed in the next chapter, podcasts being free was also not a prominent theme to the listener participants. Therefore, podcasts being free of financial costs may not be a particular draw from a social work perspective, something considered in more detail in the next two chapters.

Returning to the previous quote from Alife, it is noteworthy that he has linked the flexibility around podcasts as being beneficial for meeting the CPD requirements around professional registration. Alfie was one of only two podcaster participants who explicitly discussed the potential of podcasts as CPD in relation to registration requirements. Later in that interview, Alfie expanded on his views on SWE and their CPD recording requirements:

> For me it’s quite modest what their expectation is. So just listening to one episode and reflecting on it would kind of meet their requirements at

> the moment. I know they're looking to double that for two pieces of CPD a year, which for me still is very, very modest in comparison to other professions.

It is clear here that Alfie not only agrees that social workers should be expected to complete SWE's CPD recording process, but that these requirements should be expanded. Although he believes that listening to a single podcast episode would likely fulfil the current requirements, he also suggests that this should not be enough. The only other podcaster to make a reference to the registration requirements in this way was Sam, who similarly felt that SWE's CPD requirements could be met through a podcast, as well as stating that social workers "need to get their act together and take responsibility" for meeting these CPD requirements. Ten of the twelve podcaster participants made no reference to the registration requirements around CPD. This is in contrast to the interviews with listener participants, who all defaulted to discussing CPD as a registration requirement first and foremost, a point that is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Much more prominent than discussions about podcasts being free or registration requirements were the discussions around podcasts being flexible for social workers to engage with. In discussing this theme, all participants highlighted that podcasts could be listened to while undertaking other activities, specifically mentioning commuting, exercising, doing housework, gardening and walking a dog. This suggestion that podcasts could fit around other activities was linked to social workers not having sufficient time for CPD. In making this point, podcaster participants regularly contrasted and compared podcasts with other forms of CPD. Most prominently, five participants compared podcasts with books, including Jon:

> the thing that always absolutely hamstrings social workers and that's finding time to do anything. I mean how many social workers after they

> actually left college or left and gone into work actually find time to read social work books? I bet you could count them on one hand.

However, two participants, also described that social workers who are tired or overworked were less likely to be able to engage with social work podcasts or dedicate their time to them, despite their potential flexibility in comparison to other forms of CPD:

> Like if you're overwhelmed and tired and you've just had it… it depends how much bandwidth you've got in your head doesn't it and there's a lot of things being jammed in our heads nowadays (Amy).

> I think it's quite a big ask of someone to invest that much time in something that is, like, can be quite tough lesson, is quite tough content (Rick)

All these discussions around listening to podcasts while doing something else also seem to implicitly suggest that podcasts, even as CPD, are not something that are listened to during work time. Participants therefore did not necessarily see podcasts as having the same status as other CPD activities within social work organisations where time off may be the expectation. However, as highlighted in the literature review, increasingly social workers are struggling to take time off to engage with any CPD, meaning this may also just be the norm in contemporary social work workplaces (Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; Reddington *et al*., 2021; Reddington, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; UNISON, 2022a; British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2023a). The appropriateness of listening to podcasts during work hours is discussed more explicitly with listener participants in the next chapter, but they similarly seemed to take for granted that podcasts, even as CPD, were not something that was done during work time.

Glenn, Lisa and Jon all made reference to a hypothetical example of a social worker listening to a short podcast, recognising the importance of a topic, and then choosing to read more about it as CPD. This again could suggest that these participants felt

their content alone may not be sufficient for CPD, needing to be supplemented by other sources, or what would be considered more traditional forms of CPD, like reading books or academic articles. This is despite SWE (2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c) regularly highlighting that listening to podcasts should be considered CPD for the purposes of their recording requirements. This is therefore also further evidence that podcaster participants did not frame their understanding of CPD along the lines dictated by SWE, in contrast to the listener participants to be discussed in the next chapter.

Notably though Amy and Jason discussed that some universities and workplaces are now using their podcasts in workforce development and supporting reflection. Both spoke with apparent pride about this, despite both also acknowledging that they received no monetary compensation from organisations using their content. The fact that podcasters will put time and resources into creating content, that they are hopeful will be used as CPD by social workers, and do not expect financial compensation, suggests that podcasts cannot be understood exclusively by considering market of social work CPD today, and may even sit outside, or in conflict with this market.

However, it is important to recall the discussions in the literature about independent podcasters as an “aspirational labour force”, and the potential that some of these podcasters may see their investments in podcasting as either helping to promote future earnings through their podcasts, or to bolster earnings in other aspects of their professional lives (Sullivan, 2018: 26). Indeed, market terminology was frequently used in the interviews, with five podcaster participants using the specific term “market” to describe the podcast landscape in England today. As an example, Jon, when discussing how podcasts could be listened to while undertaking other activities like commuting, said he felt that this is “why the market accepts them in such numbers”.

These sometimes contradictory discussions about the role of markets in social work podcasts are returned to below, in particular in relation to how they shape podcaster independence in relation to themes like advertisements.

The only negative point raised by participants around the accessibility of podcasts for social work CPD related to those who are hearing impaired, and would struggled to engage with podcast content as a result. For example, Tara noted that “you have to hear it, and I know that’s a limitation”. This suggests that any normalisation of podcasts as social work CPD, including that currently being promoted by SWE (2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c), could end up excluding large numbers of social workers from important content. Therefore, as with any technological innovation, and as discussed extensively in chapter 2, it is important to urge caution about the enthusiasm around podcasts as a new medium for social work CPD due to the potential of leaving a significant number of social workers excluded as a result (Castells, 2010a). The potential for podcasts to have an extensive, international reach, linking people with ideas and concepts they would otherwise not have come across, further underpins the importance of not excluding some social workers. This idea of podcast reach, and the variety that it entails, that are now explored.

4.1.2 Variety and Reach

As with the previous theme where flexibility and accessibility were discussed cohesively, this theme incorporates variety and reach, seeing these concepts as interdependent in the way they were raised in interviews. This is because the variety being described was dependent on podcasts being able to reach a large number of listeners, and reach was described as facilitating that same variety. As an illustrative example, Jon described a social work podcast “smorgasbord” available alongside talking about the importance of reaching social workers at the local level on specific

topics. Sam similarly made note of the potential for social workers to exercise choice through “cherry picking” the podcasts that they felt were relevant to them, and in particular those that are relevant to them at a particular time, or for a particular context or situation.

Dani and Rick both described the variety and choice afforded by podcasts through comparisons to radio, showing that as with the discussions in the literature review (Berry, 2016, 2018), they also saw podcasts as a unique medium from radio. This included highlighting that the variety of podcasts available could connect with more niche audiences and allow more autonomy to the listener than radio. For example:

> It beats listening to the radio, I guess because you've got a real choice of what you want to listen to and then you can kind of turn off and on (Dani)
>
> Podcasting is kind of a way of unlike radio of being able to accommodate and play to much smaller audiences who are interested in more specific things (Rick)

While in the second quote Rick sees the ability to engage smaller niche audiences as something that makes social work content more viable on podcasts, participants generally stated that podcasts provided them with opportunities to engage with larger audiences than other formats or platforms they had experience with. This was particularly prominent when comparing podcasts to other types of CPD the participants had been involved in, like face-to-face training sessions:

> We tended to do sessions with the kind of twenty people. If fifty people listen to a podcast then that would be amazing. So it would be twice as many people as we normally get to talk to (Tara).

The apparent contradiction here between podcasts facilitating larger, but also smaller more niche, audiences has been discussed elsewhere. Llinares *et al*. (2018) for example suggest that podcasts exemplify the maxim that “the specific is universal”,

drawing attention to the ability of podcasts to reach niche audiences that facilitates their reach and growth (p.2).

Participants also highlighted that podcasting allowed them to reach international audiences, including some describing their podcasts as reaching over 100 countries, extending the potential audiences substantially, even on a niche subject like social work. This reflects Castells' (2010a) perspective that in the network society national state boarders have become less important when compared to global networks of power and counterpower. However, he also details how many are excluded from these networks. Indications of this can be seen in where the podcast audiences tended to come from, with the participants who described their international reach all indicating that the vast majority of their listeners still came from countries where English is the dominant spoken language. The most common was undoubtedly the UK, but also prominent were Ireland, Australia, USA, Canada and New Zealand. This is similar to findings from Singer (2019) in relation to the international audience of his English language podcast.

This international reach is still significant from a social work CPD perspective through, and stands in contrast to the general wariness towards social work's international role and influence in most policy networks and reforms around social work training and education in England today (Garrett, 2021a). This international reach of social work podcasts stemming from England, and the related potential for international podcasts to reach social workers in England, could therefore potentially facilitate social workers in England to engage with more dissenting perspectives on social work. However, it is important to reiterate that, as noted in the methodology, and reflecting their listeners, social work podcasters tend to be people in predominantly English speaking countries, most notably in industrial, capitalist countries of North America, Europe, Australia and

New Zealand. This may preclude the potential for voices from the Global South to be heard, even if social work podcasts become more mainstream, and Castells (2010a) highlights that within the network society those outside of networks become switched off in this way, sometimes encompassing entire countries or populations.

An important commitment of Garrett's (2021a) model of dissenting social workers is to engage with critical perspectives that move beyond a "set list" of social work reading, and therefore, while there may be some potential to facilitate this through podcasts and their international reach, the limitations of the model and the potential for them act in promoting hegemonic control also needs to be considered (p.5). Notably though, Garrett (2021a) also describes that a significant requirement for facilitating social workers to engage beyond their typical reading lists is open dialogue and debate, and as noted in the literature review, podcasts may have the potential to facilitate this in ways other mediums struggle to (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Copeland, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). The next theme discusses this as it relate to the findings of this research on social work podcasts. These themes about voice and representation on podcasts are also discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter and the next.

4.1.3 Dialogue

In line with a number of existing studies looking at podcasts (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Copeland, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020), participants in this study felt that there was something unique about podcasting that allowed for open discussions and dialogue in ways that are not replicated regularly on other mediums. Lisa specifically described that she thinks there is "something quite special" about engaging with social work concepts and issues on podcasts, particularly emphasising podcasts that involve "a fairly easy conversation". Indeed, when participants were

asked to define what a podcast is, the most prominent factor was the importance of the dialogue facilitated through the audio medium. Not a single participant defined podcasts in relation to the Rich Site Summary (RSS) technology that was used to identify them for the purposes of sampling in this study, and is used prominently in the literature as discussed in chapter 1 and 2 (Bottomly, 2015; Singer, 2019).

This focus on dialogue was seen as something that could be particularly relevant to social work, including by Sam who stated:

> I'm comfortable the podcast is broad enough that you can encompass a place where people who come on and have a conversation where they do not know the answers and that's what I love about social work is it sits in the grey and our podcast sits in the grey.

The importance of podcasts for facilitating these "in the grey" discussions, was a prominent point made by other participants also. For Tara, this included a recognition that creating the podcast and engaging in largely unstructured discussions had made her "more comfortable to live in uncertainty". Tara would later highlight that while her podcast does provide a lot of information for social workers, she felt that this may be less important than the reflective conversations it modelled:

> in a sense that material is secondary because people could go and look for that stuff themselves. It's more about modelling that conversation.

This is also similar to the points already noted whereby podcaster participants highlighted that listening to a podcast alone may lead to further interest in a topic, but not necessarily be relevant as CPD on its own. This all suggests that, similar to research into social work CPD elsewhere (Asano, 2019; Ferguson, 2023), participants considered CPD as complex, and not as simple as a single event leading to a single impact, contrasting with the definition of CPD provided by SWE introduced in chapter 1:

> the reflection and learning activity that social workers undertake throughout their career to maintain and improve their practice (SWE, 2019a: 1).

When discussing the importance of dialogue and discussions on podcasts, Shane made a similar point in relation to how being a more experienced social worker, but still showing a willingness to recognise and accept uncertainty, was something they wanted to model for newer social workers:

> We’re battling with these ideas as much as they are and I think that's an important thing for people to realise… you’ll never know everything about the subject because we're dealing with human beings and it’s so complex. And that's OK. It's OK not to know everything. So I think that's what we offer.

In Gramscian terms, these discussions could therefore be considered as having the potential to engage good sense, rather than common sense, in that they promote a deeper understanding in ways that can could challenge the dominant ideological positioning of hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971). In the above quotes, both Shane and Tara are also suggesting that it is important for social workers to be comfortable with uncertainty. This acceptance of uncertainty stands in contrast to the economy of performance that dominates social work practice today, as described in detail in the literature review, whereby the focus is usually on quantifying absolutes and using these to make comparative determinations around quality (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Harris, 2019, 2023; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Lavalette, 2019; Marthinsen, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020; Rogowski, 2020). Again here then this perspective around CPD stands in contrast to that provided by SWE, whose model of CPD recording is designed to make an explicit determination of what counts as social work CPD and whether or not it has a specific impact through an annual auditing process (SWE, 2019a).

This is further evidence that podcasts may have the potential to engage in in discussions and critical analysis more akin to good sense than common sense (Gramsci, 1971). However, the representation of social work podcasters, noted in the previous chapter to be disproportionately male, white and in senior roles, means that it is important to interrogate the impact of these discussions, and whether any good sense discussions engaged with on social work podcasts may still be promoting and engraining hegemonic control. It is also important to acknowledge that in other instances it was clear that the podcasters were engaging with discussions more akin to common sense, sometimes overtly so, a point considered in more detail under the theme of “banter” below.

The promotion of open dialogue and debate is prominent in Castells (2015) conception of counterpower, which he sees as being exercised primarily through communication and dialogue. His examples of networked social movements, which place an emphasis on facilitating open public spaces for debate (both physically, in the space of places, and electronically, in the space of flows), stand in stark contrast to the highly controlled spaces for engagement usually provided by dominant media, political and financial networks. Indeed he argues that it is the precisely these types of open engagements, and the networked experiences they facilitate, that are the material production of social change. This stands in contrast to “productivist” visions of social change that argue that specific goals need to be set for social change, and the suggestion that if these are not met the movement is a failure (Castells, 2015: 140).

In line with this, dialogue on podcasts was also described in interviews as important for engaging with topics that social workers may not have the opportunity to engage with elsewhere, in particular within professional contexts dominated by an economy of

performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002). Some examples from participants discussing this engagement include:

> So we try to be authentic about that in our conversations because one of the things that we're wanting to do is to help social workers have difficult conversations and to help them be aware of the fact that it's these really difficult issues that are at the heart of what makes humans behave the way they do (Amy)
>
> Yeah in some ways the kind of whole point of the podcast is to try to broach stuff that people would feel uncomfortable talking about and making it a bit more comfortable and making it a bit more yeah accessible and human (Rick).

Considering listening to podcasts is something done largely without involving others (Bottomly, 2015; Berry, 2016), it is interesting that both Amy and Rick in those quotes discussed engaging with these topics as if the listeners were direct participants in the conversation. This suggests that while podcasts are engaged with on an individual level, they can have a collective impact. These collectivist elements are described in more detail in the themes covered in the section below on social impact. However, it is noteworthy at this stage to identify that one of the ways that participants described their podcasts as keeping listeners engaged and active was through discussing current or contemporary issues in social work. This idea of currency, and in particular how participants engaged with the experience of Covid-19, is now discussed.

4.1.4 Currency and Covid-19

Nine of the twelve podcaster participants emphasised the value of podcasts as something that could be recorded, produced and released rapidly, allowing them to engage with contemporary topics in a way that other mediums, including academic articles and books (both specifically mentioned by participants), do not. Contemporary issues that were highlighted as discussed on participant's podcasts included the #MeToo movement, an international social movement aimed at raising awareness

about and challenging sexual abuse and sexual harassment, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, discussed in more detail in the previous two chapters in relation to the impact it has had on the social work profession (Pentaris *et al*., 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; SWE, 2023a).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic was by far the most prominent contemporary topic discussed in this regard, with all participants describing how their podcast content was shaped in some way by the global pandemic. Within the context of Covid-19, that included social distancing, lockdowns, facemasks and much wider use of working from home than social workers had ever experienced before, podcasts were described by participants as providing social workers with important guidance, support and connection. The need for this additional guidance and support during this time can be seen as all the more important because several studies have found that social workers felt they did not get clear guidance from SWE or the government during the pandemic (Pentaris *et al*., 2020; BASW, 2020; Banks *et al*., 2020; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021).

Amy specifically noted that the pandemic had encouraged her to engage more with current events:

> It's made us much more willing to tackle core and important issues I think because it's been quite profound hasn't it. It's been profound for social work, it's been profound for all of us. It's a shared human trauma.

Amy further expands that reflecting on the pandemic led her to try to speak more directly to listeners through her podcast, and to think more about the listeners and what they may be going through. Lisa, who invites guests on her podcast, similarly spoke about the value of talking and engagement on their podcast during the pandemic:

> I think people valued the opportunity to talk even more because it was about talking to somebody else and it was not, you know, everybody was kind of isolated.

While Amy and Lisa described these experiences as improving their podcasts, the Covid-19 pandemic was more likely to be described as having a mixed or negative impact on the podcasters, in particular in relation to recording episodes. Half of those interviewed specifically stated that they preferred to record face-to-face with either guests or other hosts, and so they ended up recording fewer episodes during the pandemic, or limiting the types of podcasts they created. Others talked about plans for expanding their podcast offering or changing format being put on hold due to the limitations imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this view was not universal, and Rick in particular raised that the Covid-19 pandemic had normalised remote recording, making their podcast more feasible and removing some of the barriers that existed with trying to always arrange interviews face-to-face. These points are returned to in relation to the theme of barriers to access.

4.1.5 Quality Assurance

The previous four themes looking at accessibility and flexibility, variety and reach, dialogue, and currency, have shown that all participants predominantly believed that free, open access podcasts have significant potential to be used by social workers as CPD. However, it is important to reiterate that, as highlighted in the previous chapter, attempts to implement standard quality indicators for the use of podcasts in education and professional development have been inconsistent, limited and lacking in evidence of effectiveness (Carvalho *et al*., 2009; Fernandez *et al*., 2015; Paterson *et al*., 2015; Littlefield *et al*., 2015; Lin *et al*., 2015, 2023; Drew, 2017; Nwosu *et al*., 2017). This limitation of quality assurance was also raised by three of the participants as a disadvantage of social work podcasts as CPD: Sam, Jon and Tara. As is discussed in

the next chapter, quality assurance was also a prominent theme in the findings from listener participants, lending the concerns expressed by these podcasters participants additional weight through the qualitative meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009).

Tara, for example, outlined:

> The caveat that I would have around continued professional development, is like with any other kind of learning, you've just got to be really thoughtful about the information, you know, the provenance of the information.

In this quote Tara is clear that she sees these concerns about quality assurance as being a problem for all types of CPD, not exclusively social work podcasts. Tara would later describe the responsibility for ensuring that the podcasts were appropriate for CPD as falling on individual social workers: "it's making sure that if you're using something for your professional development that you're really confident in it". Notably this individual responsibility around CPD would appear to be in line with the model imposed by SWE (2022a), who place sole responsibility for undertaking CPD and providing evidence on individual social workers, as described in detail the chapter 2. This can therefore be seen as an example of how Tara has internalised this responsibility and is treating it as the taken for granted common sense within the profession (Gramsci, 1971), something discussed in more detail in the next chapter as it relates to the way SWE's (2020b) model of CPD surveillance has been internalised by listener participants.

Sam, Jon and Tara also described variability within their own podcasts, suggesting some episodes are more relevant to social work CPD than others. Both Sam and Jon described that some of their episodes were more "jokey" than others, and that those ones would be less appropriate as CPD for social workers. Seemingly contradicting this point though, both Sam and Jon also described the informal approach to their podcasts was a key way that they attracted listeners, and that a major benefit of

podcasting was the ability to discuss important topics and relay information in a light-hearted way. However, there is also the potential that in focusing on this informal approach, these podcasters are promoting common sense understandings of social work, precluding the potential for podcasts to promote good sense discussions that could have the potential to challenge hegemonic control as discussed above (Gramsci, 1988). These concepts are returned to under the theme of “banter” below.

In all of this though, these contradictions around quality assurance suggest that the participants are in agreement with Berry (2018), who maintained that the decentralised nature of podcasts is both their greatest challenge and greatest strength, with no consistent oversight for quality, but with this lack of oversight also allowing them to engage listeners in ways other mediums cannot. The role of podcaster independence is therefore a central theme in the literature around podcasts, as discussed in the literature review (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Llinares, 2018; Sullivan, 2018, 2019; Vrikki and Malik, 2019). This was also prominent amongst the podcaster participants in this study, and for many the value that they saw their podcasts having for social work CPD, and beyond, was tied up with them being able to exercise their independence and choice. The next section examines the themes around podcaster independence in more detail.

4.2 Podcaster Independence

Considering Castells’ (2010a) assertion that the information technology revolution that occurred around the turn of the century, of which podcasts are undoubtedly a part, has led to a new form of society constituted primarily through networks, it is perhaps unsurprising that the next three sections of this chapter relate to the networks that surround the podcaster participants. This first section explores themes related to podcaster independence, including “banter”, curation and advertisements. Castells

(2015) describes that the development of mass self-communication, described in several places in this thesis already as the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from the many to the many, has helped to facilitate a culture that emphasises individual autonomy as outlined by participants in this section. However, these themes around independence need to be considered alongside the next two sections on listener influence and social impact that demonstrate these podcasters were also influenced substantially by the networks that they form a part of, both in the space of flows and in the space of places (Castells, 2010a). The themes in these sections taken together provide a comprehensive overview of the landscape of independent social work podcasts in England today from the perspective of the participants in this study, the main focus of research question 1. However, each theme should also be considered as significant for the other two research questions, and in particular the issues discussed in these sections cannot be disconnected from any consideration of the potential that podcasts have for social work CPD, the focus of research question 3.

4.2.1 “Banter”

Some of the most prominent ways that participants described their independence related to the style that they utilised on their podcasts. All participants interviewed highlighted the importance of informality to some degree, including describing a desire for their podcast not to feel “engineered” (Mike) or to avoid a “question answer, question answer” approach (Rick). For some, this informality was described as significant in promoting the dialogues that were discussed above. For example:

> It’s a much more agreeable in my view, and a much more seductive in my view, way of transmitting information, education and entertainment and if you can combine the three of them that’s a damn sight better landscape for learning (Jon)

For many of the participants this informality was linked to humour, with the term "banter" also being used, although significantly only by five participants, all male. "Banter" can be loosely defined as a rapid exchange of humour orientated towards a common theme, primarily for the purposes of mutual entertainment of those involved (Clarke, 2018). Although the significance of humour for podcasts (Collins, 2018; Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018), social work podcasts (Fronek *et al*., 2016) and social work practice (Moran and Hughes, 2006; Gilgun and Sharma, 2011; Chiller and Crisp, 2012; Jordan, 2017) were highlighted in the literature review, it is important to interrogate the use of humour, and in particular the concept of "banter" here as it was raised by podcaster participants.

Some examples of how the term "banter" was used by participants included:

> Elements of humour are strong, I think. The best podcasts of all have got a bit of that jovial, banterish, I think that's why lot comedians have got podcasts… A conversation has to have a bit free flowing banter about it (Glenn)

> There's a sense of you listening in on two people having a pint and, you know, the banter (Sam).

Sam specifically references friends having a pint as a model for an informal, but still worthwhile, conversation. Two other participants made similar references to their podcasts being like "that conversation in the pub" (Mike) or listening to a "drunk guy at the bar" (Glenn). For Glenn this "banter" and pub discussion approach were contrasted with the "dry academic" way he felt social work issues are usually talked about. Drawing similarly on a desire to be less academic in the discussions they have, Sam described himself as "the common man's social worker, you know, earthy". In this way, as already noted, the informality promoted through podcasts could be considered as promoting common sense approaches to social work, potentially precluding the potential for good sense engagement that could legitimately challenge hegemonic

domination (Gramsci, 1971). In these examples, the podcasters are almost explicitly presenting the philosophy of non-philosophers, thereby rejecting intellectual knowledge that goes beyond common sense. This is notably in line with the perspective highlighted by Collins (2018) that the focus on authenticity and approachability on podcasts has reduced the importance of expertise and credentials, linking this to a broader contemporary trend of anti-intellectualism, something that could also encompass the black and white ideology of what works approaches described in the previous chapter (Krauss, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Webb, 2023).

While the term “banter” was used exclusively by male participants, it is important to recognise that both male and female participants who co-hosted podcasts spoke about the value of the friendships that they developed through the podcast, and both male and female participants also talked about their comfort in making fun of their fellow hosts. Indeed, I witnessed some of this during the joint interviews from both male and female participants. This point is in line with the use of humour identified on podcasts more generally, where the jokes engaged with by podcasters were found to be predominantly self-deprecating, with hosts making fun of themselves or their co-hosts, rather than listeners, guests or other parties (Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018). As was discussed in the literature review, it has been suggested that the importance of factors like authenticity, intimacy and humour on podcasts may also have the potential to promote female voices (Mottram, 2016; Llinares, 2018; Copeland, 2018; Miron-Spektor *et al*., 2022).

However, it is worth recalling that despite these claims, research has consistently found that male voices are more common in podcasting (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Barrios-O’Neill, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Shamburg, 2020; Newman *et al*., 2022), something that was also found when identifying the

independent social worker podcaster population for this research, as outlined in the previous chapter. Furthermore, what is perceived as “banter” by one person can also be problematic in justifying or normalising behaviours or actions that would otherwise be considered as bullying, racism, misogyny, sexual harassment or even sexual assault (Whittle *et al*., 2019; Cameron, 2020; Buglass *et al*., 2021). Returning to the work of Gramsci (1971) on hegemony, the public broadcast and perpetuation of “banter” that may, even inadvertently, perpetuate these problematic behaviours on podcasts could therefore play a role in manufacturing consent, normalising and further embedding the hegemonic subjugation of women, ethnic minorities and other groups.

As a result, although those involved in these podcasts may perceive what was occurring as “banter”, this may not always be the case for listeners. The public broadcasting of podcasts featuring “banter” increases the likelihood of missing the cues and context that would often come from “banter” amongst friends. Illustrative of the variability of perceptions and perspectives in this regard, Ofcom (2022) found that women, people from minoritised ethnic groups and children were the most likely groups to think that podcasts with offensive language or discussing certain topics should come with clear warnings. This could help to further explain why these groups are underrepresented in the podcasting landscape, including the social work podcasting landscape, as they may not feel as welcome on a medium that could be perceived as placing an emphasis on informality and “banter”, over inclusion and equality of access. This could also help to explain why podcasters highlighted the challenges of engaging service user and social worker voices on podcasts, points discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

Is also important to acknowledge that most podcaster participants in this study also tended be careful about the content and discussions put out on their podcasts, often

relating these decisions to social work values and ethics, and the way that the podcast would be perceived by listeners, something also discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Notably though, when it came to humour specifically this was often framed around the podcasters themselves having an enjoyable time, something that can be seen as implied in the discussions above about mirroring discussions had in pubs. However, as with all these points around independence, this enjoyment was also linked directly to the experiences of listeners, with Sam suggesting of listeners that "they want to listen and have a laugh", and Shane similar arguing that "it's important to get across it is a bit of fun. You learn more when you are having fun".

Furthermore, the value of humour in these contexts could also play a role in counter-hegemony, including challenging dominant networks and the economy of performance in social work. Higgins and Goodyear (2015) have previously suggested a similar approach to dissent, advocating for an "ironic response" to the problematic contradictions inherent in contemporary social work that "neither denies nor rejects the ambiguities in social work. Instead, it engages with the aporias" (p. 758). Stronach *et al*. (2002) discussing the economy of performance more generally, also conclude their analysis by suggesting that the economy of performance is "easily mocked" for its absurdity, and that this should lead to its gradual weakening and replacement (p.130). Publicly communicated humour has also been noted to have the potential to challenge hegemonic control, with critical humourists creatively confronting hegemonic subjugation in a way that subverts and promotes counter-hegemony (Rossing, 2016).

Nevertheless, five of the participants still explicitly questioned whether the informality of their podcast was always appropriate considering the serious nature of many of the topics that they discussed, and the serious nature of many of the challenges that social workers face on a daily basis. This is similar to the conflict that Jordan (2017) identified

with social workers wanting to use humour in their practice more generally, while also feeling that they could be perceived as minimising the issues they were working with in the process, marginalising some people in the process. Ultimately again though personal ownership and independence came through in how these issues were resolved, with Jason for example stating that despite recognising these concerns as valid, they've "kind of just gone with it" in creating the podcast in an informal way. Similarly, Alfie described his dilemma in deciding on the tone of the podcast, noting his desire not to be "flippant" or "make light" of certain issues that a listener may have personal experience with. However, he then went on to justify the informality of the podcast by the value of the learning and discussions that tend to come through better in this way, and again their ownership, and what the podcaster themselves wanted, was a strong theme: "I wanted it to be light, I wanted to be informal, I wanted to be accessible". The decision of tone laying squarely with the podcaster, is therefore in many ways part of the curation process, deciding what they do and do not want as part of their podcast. This idea of curation is now considered in more depth as it was discussed by the participants and relates to podcaster independence.

4.2.2 Curation

The term curation was chosen to frame this discussion about the ways that podcaster participants made decisions about their podcasts because these decisions were frequently discussed in ways that go beyond mere design or content choices. Curation is described by Ovenden (2021) as being a broad encapsulating term, including decisions about what to discard, what to keep, what to make publicly available and what to hide away. He therefore describes curation as the "key to the fate of knowledge" (p.93). Considering the aforementioned lack of external quality assurance some participants highlighted about podcasts, this curation role could therefore be

seen as placing quality assurance predominantly with the podcaster themselves, and the ability to exercise this was an important aspect of the independence participants described during the interviews.

Participants were all asked about how they design and plan their podcast episodes. Responses ranged from those who described having clear plans from the start, to those who relied only on a few prompt points in case the conversation was perceived to be faltering. All participants, however, noted that they would go into their podcast recording with at least a topic (or several topics) in mind to discuss, and all participants described care in choosing topics, and, relatedly, guests, a point that is returned to on a specific theme around prominent guests below. Nevertheless, as discussed above, for some participants the ability to discuss topics that they felt social workers struggled to engage with in other contexts was an important benefit of podcasts. This could be seen in relation to the choice of topics to discuss as well. For example, Rick described being “careful and cautious” about the choice of topics, before reiterating the importance of podcasts being able to “broach stuff” that can be uncomfortable. Other participants also stressed the importance of being able to engage with “meaty topics” (Shane) or “controversial topics” (Mike).

Before continuing this discussion, it is important to reiterate that most of the independent social work podcasters in England are relatively experienced and in senior roles, including some with extensive media experience. Therefore, they may have felt comfortable and confident in engaging with these controversial and difficult topics in a public forum already, and may have had experience of doing so beyond their podcasts. This point can be seen in suggestions from four different participants that despite their contentions that the topics and conversations on their podcasts were of the type that social workers *should* be having, they themselves were in fact already

having these types of discussions. A desire to share these discussions they were already having more broadly and publicly was even seen to be a motivating factor for some when starting their podcasts. Amy, for example, described how she was having discussions of this nature, and that is what led a colleague of hers to suggest that she start a podcast.

Dani also discussed that they felt that when senior members of the profession were able to model these discussions it can help free up social workers to have those discussions more often themselves, and maybe overcome the fear they have around discussing certain topics. As was highlighted in the literature review, fear is a major motivating factor in contemporary social work in preventing social workers from speaking out and perpetuating the economy of performance, and therefore the participants here are suggesting that podcasts could be a tool in supporting podcasters to overcome this fear (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). In one example Tara described how the experience of podcasting had helped to improve her own confidence to talk publicly about certain issues:

> Initially I think, so I can only really speak for myself, but I was quite cautious about what would be publicly shared and recorded and then put into the public domain. But as you get more used to podcasting and people listening to it, and also because I've got more used to speaking publicly about a range of things, I think it just gives you more confidence.

The significance of podcasts as a communicative process for overcoming fear suggests their potential within Castells' (2015) model of counterpower and networked social movements, a point discussed in more detail under the theme of activism below.

However, as well as describing the topics that they discussed on their podcasts, some participants mentioned that there were also topics that they avoided. For some this related to the guests on the podcast, and Lisa and Sam both described having a

discussion with guests prior to recording about any areas they would want to avoid. Taking this further, Tara described being “careful about every single thing I say on the podcast”, with a key motivation for this being “a professional reason of not wanting to say things outside of my expertise or, you know, mislead people”. In this case Tara can be seen to be linking her concerns about what she says directly to her social work professionalism, suggesting that the resistance to speak out on certain topics may not just stem from the economy of performance and fear associated with this, but also ecologies of practice or what were described in chapter 2 as the accumulation of individual and collective professional experiences (Stronach *et al*., 2002).

Two specific topics that Tara said she did not feel confident to speak about on her podcast were “the situation in Israel/Palestine” and “gender identity”. While Tara pointed to her lack of knowledge in these areas as a “professional reason” for avoiding them, she also discussed that “the other reason is a kind of personal reason of not wanting to be in anyway kind of unethical about what I might say”. This does suggest that in this instance Tara is, at least to some extent, being led by fear in relation to saying the wrong thing on her podcasts, rather than strictly ecologies of practice. Alife similarly described that as a professional he has a responsibility to be careful about what he said, and Amy took this further and discussed specifically feeling fear around recording the podcast:

> So yeah we try and be brave but you can hear us sometimes like I think if you listen to the podcast you hear us kind of going, oh shit this is, you know, this is a bit scary. I mean we might even say something wrong.

For other participants this fear was less explicitly expressed, but it could potentially be seen in the decisions that they make. For example, Jon highlighted that he likes to remain “relatively neutral” in approach, specifically so that he avoids any “vitriol”. Notably, Jon did not relay any experiences of receiving negative feedback about his

podcast, but instead related the desire to avoid “vitriol” to criticisms he has faced elsewhere, both as a frontline social worker, and in other media contexts. Taken together, these discussions all suggest that even for social workers who are experienced in speaking on a public platform, and do so voluntarily through their own podcast, the culture of fear in social work remains a prominent motivating factor in their behaviour.

All the participants also described that their podcasts went through a process of editing, either done by the podcaster themselves or by another party. Unlike decisions made about choosing or avoiding topics, editing was described to involve actively taking out information and discussions that had already taken place, suggesting that the podcasts were presenting only a partial picture of the conversations that were held. This could have implications around transparency; however, editing was much more likely to be described by participants in relation to improving the listener experience, such as taking out long pauses or filler words like “um”. For some this went further and included taking out things they had said in error, or discussions that they felt had lost relevance to the podcast topic. Other than this participants said they largely left all content in, with the notable exception being content a guest did not want shared, a point returned to when discussing prominent guests as a later theme in this chapter. Also prominent in these discussions, and perhaps most prominent, were discussions around the time and resources that went into editing. In contrast to discussion around the relatively enjoyable podcast creation process generally, editing was a process that all participants who undertook it described negatively. Sam put it in the clearest terms: “I hate editing”.

These discussion around curation have demonstrated that all the participants, to various degrees, were careful about the podcast content they released. While

decisions around curation were principally the remit of the podcasters themselves, it is noteworthy that in all instances the podcasters were discussing these decisions in terms of how they would be perceived by listeners. This suggests that even when the theme of independence was prominent in the interviews, this could not be fully detached from discussions about listener influence, as discussed in the next section. However, before moving on to that, the next theme explores podcaster independence as it relates to advertisements, where again these links between podcaster independence and listener influence are prominently seen sitting alongside independence.

4.2.3. Advertisements

The theme where participants discussed the importance of their independence most explicitly related to the potential for advertisements on their podcasts. None of the participants had paid advertising on their podcasts at the time the interviews were undertaken, with the idea being dismissed as unrealistic at the present time by most. As an example, Shane highlighted that his podcast does not have sufficient listener numbers to warrant advertiser interest:

> I'm not kind of keen on that, but I suppose everyone has their price, do they not [laughing]. We keep social work values until we have a big fat cheque, which seems highly unlikely to be fair. No yeah, and I think probably the advertisers will take one look at us and go, we do not want to be associated with that.

In that quote Shane is touching again on authenticity, and how podcasters, and in particular independent podcasters, can be perceived as selling their authenticity alongside their time when they take on advertisements, losing it to some extent in the process (McClung and Johnson, 2010; Sullivan, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Significantly though, Shane here is also linking his reluctance to take on advertisements with "social work values", suggesting these provide additional

motivation to maintain authenticity and independence for social work podcasters. The significance social work values and ethics for their podcasts, and the potential conflict of these with the motivations of advertisers, was echoed by all participants to some degree when discussing advertising. Therefore, although it was noted in the literature review that podcasts are increasingly seen to be legitimised by monetisation (Sullivan, 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018), social work podcasters may seek legitimacy elsewhere.

In relation to the potential for social work podcasts to promote alternative perspectives, or to engage in counterpower or dissent, this rejection of advertising revenue may be significant, as it precludes the potential for government suppression via financial control mechanisms, shown to be effective in shutting down pirate radio stations in the past (Miley and Read, 2017). However, there is an important caveat to highlight here. None of the podcaster participants described currently taking advertising revenue, and most felt it was unrealistic based on their current reach. Therefore, these discussions around the ethical implications of accepting advertising revenue were decidedly abstract for these participants, in contrast to podcasters who have the option of advertising and discussed this as being positive elsewhere (Sullivan, 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018).

This is further backed up by the four participants who agreed that they would consider accepting some type of advertisements in the future. However, even for these participants, they all stressed that they would be careful about who they would accept as an advertiser, ensuring that the advertising organisations aligned with their own, and social work's, values and principles. For example, Jon outlined that he may take on advertising for one of the "big charities" or for "humanitarian advocacy" or "homelessness". However, he acknowledged that he did not feel that this would actually be advertising, but more promoting those causes, even if he accepted some

financial support for the podcast in return. In all these discussions, it was important to Jon that he was the decision maker “you know that’s sort of an advertising but it’s very discretional on my part”.

Concerns about including advertisements were not restricted to ethical issues or loss of independence, but also stylistic, with two participants describing that they felt that advertisements negatively impacted on listener experiences. Glenn in particular talked of his frustration with having to “scroll for like 5-10 minutes” to get past the advertisements on some of his favourite podcasts. Glenn would continue by detailing examples where podcasters would start a podcast, build an audience and then “sell their soul” by taking on advertisements. This view correlates with the findings of research carried out by Singer (2019) who found that on his social work podcast the lowest rated aspect by listeners was his inclusion of advertisements. Notably, as with Shane above, Glenn also described pervasiveness of particular advertisers on podcasts: “it’s mattress this, it’s this sort of massager, it’s these protein shakes and it’s just so terrible and you can actually see is sort of the good faith of the listeners depleting”. Once again here Glenn is touching on the importance of authenticity in podcasting and concerns that advertisements could negatively impact on this, a point highlighted in the literature review (Sullivan, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

For the most part the participants were all willing to discuss the potential conflict between independence and commerce openly. This stands in contrast to the situation in podcasting more generally as described Sullivan (2018) whereby podcasters tend to downplay this conflict when they are presented with it. Therefore, the fact that the majority of participants in this study were willing to address the potential conflict openly may suggest that social work podcasters are more willing to address this conflict than other podcasters. As highlighted by Shane above, this could relate to social work

values, and notably in Garrett's (2021a) model of dissenting social work, he highlights the importance of being attuned to, and seeking to eradicate the harms caused by capitalism.

However, it is also true that all of these participants were also using platforms owned by large companies like Spotify and Apple to share their podcasts, and therefore their podcasts cannot be seen as separate to capitalist systems and models. This is the case even if the podcasts are highlighting concerns related to these systems, in line with Fisher (2009) describing how capitalism has a tendency to subsume resistance through "interpassivity" (p.12). The podcasters here could therefore also be inadvertently reproducing culture in ways that reflects the values and interests of dominant classes, acting to instil consent and acceptance of capitalist systems, even if they are sometimes overtly criticising those systems (Gramsci, 1988).

This interpassivity can also be seen in the ways that, despite the concerns expressed by participants in relation to monetisation of their podcasts, market terminology was frequently used in the interviews by participants when describing podcasts. For example, Jon described podcasts as "the growth marketing tool on the block these days", despite his wariness around advertising revenue. The use of marketing language here in spite of the professed wariness of monetisation suggests, as Fisher (2009) describes, that even for those who are resistant to market incentives and logic, "capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (p.8). This can also be seen in other participant's use of market terms, including half of the participants using of the terms "consume", "consumer" or "consumption" to describe engagement with their podcasts.

In all of these discussions, as with the previous two themes of "banter" and curation, the importance of independence was stressed. Alfie even went so far as to call it "the

joy of independence" that he felt in his podcasting. As noted by Berry (2018), this independence has been considered a central feature of podcasting throughout its history, in contrast to radio where creators are usually seen to be more beholden to editorial decision making and advertisers, something even evidenced in relation to pirate radio (Miley and Read, 2017). However, in most of these discussions it was also clear that this independence was only valuable insofar as it allowed the participants to create a better experience for their listeners, or to have a wider impact. Whether it was discussing the fun they had making the podcasts, the editing choices they made, or the authenticity they tried to cultivate, participants were frequently referencing back to their listeners as well as the broader social impact their podcasts could have. Therefore, although independence was a central theme in the interviews, podcasters can be seen to be always beholden to a network of influences around them, most significantly, their listeners. It is this listener influence that the themes in the next section explore in-depth.

4.3 Listener Influence

Every podcaster participant had made the decision to share recordings of themselves publicly in the form of a podcast, and therefore unsurprisingly they framed much of the discussions in the interviews around the experiences of the listeners they were reaching, or hoping to reach. This section explores themes around listener influence under the themes of metrics, feedback and engagement. As with the previous section, looking at podcaster independence, this section on listener influence is particularly pertinent in relation to the research question 1, looking at the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England. However, as with each of these sections and the themes within them, these themes can also be seen as relevant to other research questions. In particular, exploring the theme of listener influence helped

to further understand how participants saw their podcasts as being used and engaged with by social workers, including around CPD, the focus of research question 3. In addition, the themes in this section provide insights into how podcaster participants understand and measure the influence of their podcasts as it relates to power and counterpower, the focus of research question 2. This includes through the use of metrics, the focus of the first theme discussed in this section.

4.3.1 Metrics

All participants spoke about metrics related to their podcasts, which included download numbers, the number of countries where they have listeners, and ratings they received on various platforms. As was discussed in the previous two chapters, podcast metrics are difficult to quantify and are held in a variety of places, with various levels of public and private visibility. Unsurprisingly then, no participant was able to provide definitive metrics about the number of listeners they have per episode, and difficulties described in obtaining this data included the myriad and disparate ways that people access podcasts, the difference between paid for and free metrics they can access, and uncertainty about whether a download actually equates to a listen. As highlighted by Sam, the metrics are therefore “really deceptive”. Jason similarly noted that they have an “estimated audience” number, but also that “I do not know what an estimated audience means”.

There were three distinct ways that participants spoke about how they approached the metrics they did have access to, and the impact these had on them and their podcasts. The first was metrics acting as a motivator. For example, Tara described:

> So it’s the stats. So you can clearly see downloads going up. More people listening. More people listening from different places. So that’s really positive.

The second way that metrics were described was negatively, for example Mike described how he found metrics “disheartening”, and therefore did not like looking at them. By far the most commonly expressed perspective on metrics was apathy. Amy, for example, highlighted she sees the number of downloads her podcast achieves on some platforms, and that “I just think it’s funny to tell you the truth” while noting she could not even remember how many downloads her episodes usually get. Alfie also stated that he is “not bothered” about metrics, Jason suggested that he is aware of the number of downloads but for him it just sort of “ticks along”, and Lisa predicted that she may be more attentive to numbers “later on” but not now.

Often a participant would express more than one of these perspectives during an interview. For example, Sam discussed how he spent a significant amount of time looking into metrics and the motivations he got from them, in particular in relation to seeing all the countries they had listeners in. However, later he shifted into a perspective more aligned with apathy:

> In some ways it’s like a mad folly because you’re chasing. It raises the question what does it matter? You know if three people listen and find it helpful does it matter, or if 1,000 people listen and do not find it helpful and listen.

This general apathy towards metrics could be linked to the lack of interest most participants described in advertising revenue. Sullivan (2018) describes that being able to quantify audience numbers is becoming increasingly important for podcast monetisation. Therefore, for these podcasters, focused on social work, and with a noted lack of interest in monetisation, the incentives towards quantification would be significantly reduced.

It is interesting that in some ways these discussions about metrics seemed to be disembodied from the listeners they are supposed to represent. It was almost as if

metrics were something that exist as a phenomenon in and of themselves, and entirely out of the control of the participants. Tara addressed this point explicitly, suggesting that because metrics that were available were largely quantitative in nature, they are limited in what they could do with that data. This could be linked to the importance of podcaster independence that was discussed above, whereby podcasters feel that they are creating something they enjoy, and may not want to change it even in response to negative metrics. Indeed none of the participants discussed specific changes that they made to their podcasts in response to metrics. This stands in contrast to the more influential qualitative feedback the participants received, which is now considered.

4.3.2 Feedback

The term feedback is used here and throughout the rest of the findings and conclusion chapter to denote qualitative feedback that participants received, as opposed to the quantitative metrics discussed under the previous theme. Notably feedback was an area that participants discussed in far more detail than metrics, showing that it was a more significant area of listener influence. The feedback discussed by participants was received in a number of ways, including through reviews on platforms where the podcasts are downloaded, or through the podcast's associated website. This is similar to the experience of independent podcasters generally, who have described receiving feedback through a variety of means and finding this helpful and influential (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014).

The feedback that seemed to resonate most with participants was feedback that they received directly from people they knew, often from friends or colleagues. Rick discussed that they received feedback from friends or "friends of friends" who had listened and had told him the podcast was "a bit eye opening for them". Dani similarly talked about colleagues telling her that they had listened to the podcast and "would

email me saying, oh, I listened to you over the weekend. I'm like, did ya? Still there's that kind of a bit of a shock that people are listening". Most of the feedback that was described involved these types of general supportive statements, usually people saying that they had listened and enjoyed the podcast or found it interesting.

Listeners were described as providing feedback on a range of areas, including style, content, audio quality, guest choices, the podcast's name, episode names and the impact the podcasts were having. Unlike metrics, when participants were discussing feedback they were often able to point more directly to how it had influenced the decisions that they make, although many of these specific examples were such that to give more details could inadvertently identify a participant. More generally, Alfie described the importance of feedback in the early stages of his podcast, and his desire to "adapt and evolve" based on this feedback. Alfie also described his desire for more feedback than he currently receives, noting that "it will be, you know, quite good to get some ideas really in terms of what works for different people". This desire for more feedback than they currently receive was something described by five participants, in particular those participants whose podcasts were in their early stages.

While almost all the feedback discussed was positive or supportive, this was not always the case. Sam for example stated that he had received negative feedback at times, but also that he generally dismissed this:

> So we've got a few trolls out there that you know try to say how crap we are. That's crap, that's crazy… It's just people taking their handbags and trying to hit us with them.

In this instance Sam appears to be dismissing the negative feedback as not necessarily related to the quality of his podcast, evoking the term "trolls", usually used to describe someone engaged in harassment with malicious intent, particularly in an attempt to provoke the target (Ortiz, 2020). Interestingly Sam uses gendered language

here around “people taking their handbags and trying to hit us”, in an apparent attempt to diminish the significance of the negative feedback received. Considering Sam is a male social work podcaster speaking on public forum about a female majority profession, this language being aimed at those who challenge him could be reflective of the privilege and authority male professionals often come to experience and assume in social work, as described in the previous chapter (Wingfield, 2009; Williams, 2013).

As was also highlighted in the previous chapter, despite social work being a female majority profession, the highest levels of the profession in relation to both compensation and seniority are dominated by men (Haworth *et al*., 2018). In their study of male social workers and social work students in England, Parker and Crabtree (2014) found that men in social work often felt pressure to take on more leadership roles and responsibilities, even as students. Therefore, Sam may be expressing a level of socialisation here in a way that further instils the status quo of hegemonic control of men within the social work profession (Gramsci, 1971). As with the above section on “banter”, on reflection I would have liked to have explored this language and usage more with the participant during the interview, in particular because Sam was also a participant who used the term “banter” prominently. However, I did not do this. Therefore, I cannot avoid the prospect that I may have been influenced by my own positionality and bias as a male researcher and social worker in not interrogating this further with him. Much like the gendered issues related to “banter”, it was mainly through discussions with my doctoral supervisors (again both female) that this gendered language and its significance was identified.

Whether by virtue of him feeling that he did not need to take on the feedback because of his position of authority in the profession, or because Sam had accurately identified that those providing that feedback were in fact “trolls” looking to get a reaction from

him, it was clear from the discussions that Sam did not put much stock in the negative feedback he received. He instead suggests an alternative: “we measure it on ‘do we think we’ve made a difference?’. Yeah actually I think we do” (Sam). This idea of making a difference was also prominent in other interviews, and is discussed in more detail below under the theme of activism in particular. However, a final theme related to listener influence is first discussed, shifting the focus from listeners providing feedback to how podcaster participants actively engage their listeners.

4.3.3 Engagement

Returning to the concept of “mass self-communication”, Castells (2015: 6) argues that as a result of this new model of communication from the many to the many, media increasingly involves ongoing engagement with audiences, in ways that extend beyond just the types of one-way feedback that were discussed under the previous two themes. In line with this, podcaster participants in this study spoke frequently about their desire to engage listeners through two-way interactions. As was discussed in the literature review, podcasters generally describe the importance engagement with listeners and others beyond their podcasts in this way (Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Kim *et al*., 2018; Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018; Llinares, 2018; Hancock and McMurtry, 2018; Singer, 2019).

The participants described the importance of using social media platforms specifically to build audiences, something also recognised in research and literature around podcasts elsewhere (Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018; Llinares, 2018; Hancock and McMurtry, 2018). A number of platforms were mentioned by participants, including Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram, but Twitter (now X) was by far the most prominent platform in these discussions, being used by nine of the twelve participants to engage with people around their podcast. For example:

> Twitter is the main one with the most followers on that (Alfie)
>
> That's been the main way we promoted it, it's been through twitter (Rick).

It is also noteworthy that this use of multiple media platforms is not restricted to social work podcasts, and social work blogs and websites have been similarly been shown to find social media as vital to promoting themselves and growing audiences (Di Rosa *et al*., 2018; Aguilar-Idanez *et al*., 2020).

Although social media platforms were described as positive for growing audiences and engaging listeners, most participants also described their hope to engage listeners beyond social media. This included a desire to meet with listeners face-to-face, or to use the podcast to organise campaigning or in raising money for charities. The links with campaigning here suggest an activist element to this desired engagement, and can be considered in line with Castells (2015) conception of counterpower, which he sees as being built around networking in both the space of flows through ICTs, and the space of places, through space based campaigning and the occupying of symbolic spaces. This is also aligned with Garrett's (2021a) description of dissenting social work, that sees dissent as being energised from oppositional activities on the ground, including those stemming from social movements, trade unions, community organisations and 'user' networks. These concepts are discussed more in the theme of activism below.

The potential of having a live audience when recording a podcast was discussed by three participants, including prominently by Mike who described the engagement that this could facilitate, linking this directly to CPD:

> I do wonder whether it be nice to do a live one with an invited audience. You know whether that could be some sort of CPD type thing. Say you know, come along and chip in and throw a comment into the mix.

Live audiences as a way to enhance and encourage listener engagement have been increasingly used effectively by podcasts, with some very popular podcasts internationally involving a live audience all, or most, of the time (Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly shaped the discussions around listener engagement, in particular when discussing what level of engagement was possible. For example, Amy noted that despite her desire to engage more with listeners, this engagement at the time was largely limited to replying to messages and reviews electronically. Even with these limitations it was clear that podcaster participants were actively engaging people about their podcast, and seeking was to enhance this engagement. Notably though, as is discussed in the next few themes, and was alluded to throughout the chapter up to now, the majority of the participants did not see the impact of their podcast as limited just to their listeners, but instead had desires towards a broader social impact, as discussed prominently in the next section.

4.4 Social Impact

The themes in this section expand on the themes around listener engagement already discussed, broadening the scope to consider how participants felt that they wanted their podcasts to impact on the social work profession and society. Castells (2015) highlights the importance of networks of counterpower seeking to gain influence for alternative interests and values in society, and the importance of sharing experiences, anger and hope digitally to challenge the dominant interests and values that influence systems. Therefore, this section should be considered as particularly important in answering research question 2, looking at the interplay between power and counterpower in social work. It is also important in relation to research question 1 looking at the landscape of independent social work podcasters, in particular when

considering this landscape as extended beyond the podcasts themselves to their broader networks. These discussions as they relate to the findings of this research are presented in this section under two key themes: activism and podcast networks.

4.4.1 Activism

The most consistent and prominent motivation noted by podcaster participants for starting a podcast was a desire to have a positive impact. Even when considering the impact on listeners, podcaster participants were frequently also mentioning the wider positive impact that their podcast could have through these listeners. For example, Amy described her goal that her podcast would encourage people to “act in ways that create a humane and just society”. Amy was not alone amongst participants in her desire to have this broader societal impact through her podcast. Tara outlined that on her podcast, when discussing contemporary concerns related to the profession, she will sometimes suggest “what individual and collective action social workers might take” to address those concerns, in the process seeking to promote a “collective community, and in particular a global community”. These podcasts could therefore be considered as having a political purpose, an approach that could make them particularly appealing to social workers, described in chapter 2 as displaying high levels of political interest and engagement (BASW, 2023a).

Linked to his previously discussed desire to remain “relatively neutral” in how he engaged with certain topics in order to avoid “vitriol”, Jon also stated, “I would not do anything political even though I’ve got particular views myself politically”. However, later in the interview Jon would highlight that his podcast was in fact political, suggesting that it was unavoidably so due to his interpretation of what social work is:

> Well yeah, I mean everything's political yeah. I mean partly because my belief in what social work is, it's political, so therefore you talk about it, you're talking about a political subject.

This idea of social work podcasts being inherently political was further suggested by Sam, who stated that "it's all political". Significantly though, for Sam once again the dichotomy between not wanting to be political and being inherently political was expressed, and later in the same interview he described, "We're a bit spiky but we're not nasty. We're not out to make a political career or not journalists". In this instance Sam describes himself as not political, but also not a journalist, suggesting that there is a third way between being overtly political and being subjectively journalistic. This could be related back to a previously discussed comment from Sam that he is the "common man's social worker", a position that he presents as avoiding either of these connotations, appealing to all, or at least to most, social workers. This also suggests again the potential that some podcasts, rather than promoting dialogue and critical discussion that could equate to good sense, may be more inclined towards what Gramsci (1971) describes as common sense, thereby perpetuating the hegemonic status quo within the profession of social work.

Therefore, as outlined in the literature review, decisions to remain apolitical need to also be considered as inherently political, in particular in the face of injustice (Shokane and Masoga, 2019; Weinberg and Banks, 2019; Garrett, 2021b; Ioakimidis and Wyllie, 2023). As a result, whatever their perspective or stated motivations, social work podcasters may be unable to maintain political neutrality due to the area they are choosing to podcast about. The points made by podcasters about their professed political transcendence could also be resulting from the nature of social activism in the network society, and as described by Castells (2019), modern networked social movements engaging in counterpower tend to reject traditional political parties and

processes. Therefore, podcasters may not see what they are doing as inherently political, by virtue of the fact that it does not fit within traditional political processes. The point has also been made that even when podcast content is not overtly political, it can have a political impact, as in the case of the podcasts discussing serious illness in a humorous way that challenges traditional medicalised discourses (Pruulmann-Vangerfeldt and Buchholtz, 2018).

This is not dissimilar to the conception of political activity in social work as articulated by Garrett (2021a), who sees it as “subverting, disrupting and declassifying the existing ways the world is perceived” (p.111). This is also in line with the concept of deviant social worker as described by Carey and Foster (2011) who, as already discussed, found that the dissent social workers are more likely to engage with is usually hidden, minor, shrewd and practical in nature. In this way the participants in this study, through many of the activities outlined in this chapter, such as promoting independence, modelling difficult conversations, and highlighting contemporary or controversial topics, could be seen to be politically engaged even if they wrestle with that conceptualisation, or outright reject it. This point has also been highlighted by David *et al*. (2017) who noted that those engaging in economic counterpower, which can include dissemination of free content that challenges the monopoly of paid for content, do not necessarily have to acknowledge their role as activism for it to be classified as counterpower.

This political framing was also acknowledged overtly by participants at times. For example, Alfie linked the sharing of research content free online through podcasts with the “open access” movement in academia that challenges academic publishing models and the profit that is generated from them. The significance of social workers challenging the exploitative academic publishing industry has also been detailed

elsewhere and podcasts could be seen to form part of this (Sen *et al*., 2020; Gair *et al*., 2021; Ballantyne, 2022). Llinares *et al*. (2018) and Barrios-O'Neill (2018) both also explicitly link podcasts sharing research or academic content for free as being part of a wider open source movement in academia, suggesting that podcasts may even come to challenge the dominant text/image model of academic dissemination in the future.

Podcasts were also seen as valuable for the access they could provide outside of the specific content of the podcasts. For example, Jon described his podcast as a tool for engagement, suggesting that "the podcast gets you in a lot of doors". He described how for some influential people in social work and children's services, he was only able to speak to them or interview them because, according to him, they overestimated the reach or influence of his podcast:

> they think of it as if it's the BBC talking to them or something like that, whereas in effect we know there was X million podcasts floating around out there.

However, notably, as discussed already, Jon also describes his approach specifically as avoiding controversy, and therefore this "relatively neutral" approach to podcasting may also be a determining factor in allowing him through these "doors". Sam expressed similar sentiments about the potential for his podcast to be used to gain access to influential individuals, and much like Jon he suggested that there is a tendency for the reach of his podcast to be over-estimated:

> What I've seen is that I do not need people to listen to my podcast, I just need people to believe that people are listening. So that's how you garner influence isn't it… So I think that's how I want to approach it, is to affect policy change and to create narratives specific to us.

In this quote, and unlike Jon, Sam is explicitly recognising that the access that his podcast affords him can have a political impact, and may even influence policy.

It is also interesting that for Sam here, the importance of listener numbers or downloads is placed as secondary compared to the importance of the impact that he can have using his podcast as a tool. This, alongside the generally noted apathy participants had towards metrics, and their motivations to make a difference, may suggest that independent social work podcasters have different set of motivations and goals than the majority of independent podcasters, described in the literature review as engaging in “aspirational labour” based on the hope of future monetisation (Sullivan, 2018: 26). Indeed the themes discussed in this chapter thus far suggest an alternative aspiration from social work podcasters, what could more accurately deemed “aspirational impact”. More specifically, all participants discussed their aspirations to have more of an impact in the future, often suggesting that their podcast was too new or the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was too significant for them have their desired impact at the moment. Two participants even specifically lamented that they should be having a greater impact, including Jason suggesting that they feel “really comfortable at the moment” while expressing his desire to “move it on a little bit and make it perhaps a little bit more meaningful”.

It is worth re-iterating yet again that the majority of independent social work podcasters in England are relatively senior and experienced, and therefore the podcaster participants in this study may be professionally or financially invested in the status quo and hegemony within the profession, which could be influential in keeping much of the potential impact their podcasts could have as aspirational. Castells (2010a) describes that for networked individuals this can be a strong motivator, as exhibiting challenge can lead participants to be bypassed by the network, losing the myriad of advantages that come with network connectivity. Castells (2015) has also highlighted this in his conceptualisation of counterpower, whereby online content is described as having the

potential to be a major catalyst for sparking and perpetuating social movements, but that this can make those who create that content targets of suppression, something participants may be, consciously or subconsciously, seeking to avoid.

However, as Oliver *et al*. (2017) notes, it is in the instances where social workers have something to lose that it is the most important to speak up, in particular if those involved want to act as an inspiration to others, as several podcaster participants in this research have stated. This can also be seen in Fanon's (1959) description of the radio as a tool for the anti-colonialism movement during the Algerian revolution. He describes how broadcasting and listening to the radio became an act of resistance in itself, and indeed as the Algerian revolution went on communities coalesced around the radio and the radio helped to keep the spirit of resistance alive. Unlike the use of radio as described by Fanon, in considering podcasts as a means of protest against economic inequality and injustice, it is important to reiterate that despite podcasts being free to access, they are distributed primarily by platforms run by large profit-driven corporations (Sullivan, 2018, 2019). Therefore, the social activism impacts that podcasters described in this research as being aspirational may remain aspirational as a symptom of capitalist realism and "interpassivity" in line with Fisher (2009), whereby even activities that are aimed at resisting the impact and influence of capitalism are subsumed by the logic and parameters of that same capitalism (p.12).

4.4.2 Podcast Networks

As was outlined in the literature review, there is a growing research interest in the informal and formal networks that develop around independent podcasts (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Florini, 2015; Heeremans, 2018; Murray, 2019; Vrikki and Malik, 2019). Participants in this study also indicated that there were networks that had developed around their podcasts, including some limited networking

with other podcasters. These networks did not necessarily relate to being active listeners to other social work podcasts. In fact, while all podcaster participants described being podcast listeners as well as podcasters, none described being a regular listeners to any other social work podcasts. Instead they spoke about podcasts they listened to on topics including sport, film, psychology, parenting, music, comedy, business, writing, self-development, economics and news. The relevance of some of these podcasts to social work, even though they were not necessarily social work focused, was discussed. For example:

> I suppose I, I think I tend to listen to stuff that sits around the periphery of social work and then feed that into my thinking about social work (Mike).

Participants were positive about the podcasts they listened to generally, but less enthusiastic when speaking about their experiences of listening to podcasts that were focused specifically on the topic of social work. Only four of the twelve participants described having any experience of listening to social work podcasts at all prior to starting their own, and all four of them described being disappointed with the existing offering, using this as a partial motivation for starting their own. For example, Tara highlighted the lack of podcasts that were available, and Sam described those social work podcasts that were available as “dull as dishwater”. Considering then that none of the participants were regular listeners to other social work podcasts, it may not be surprising that the current networking amongst independent social work podcasters was described by participants as limited, and informal where it does exist. This stands in contrast to the sometimes well-established, and even formalised, podcast networks described in chapter 2 (Heeremans, 2018; Murray, 2019).

However, when examples of engagement with other podcasters were given, these were only addressed in positive terms, and significantly no participant described

feeling that they were in competition with other social work podcasters for listeners. This rejection of a competitive ethos is in line with the rejection of market incentives described earlier in this chapter around advertisements. The importance of engaging with other podcasters was most prominently discussed when participants described starting their podcasts. Alfie, for example, noted that when he was starting his podcast he was contacted by a “prominent” social work podcaster who offered support, something that he had not expected, but was grateful for. Amy also described the help that she received on the technical side from an experienced podcaster. I checked with her and it was not the same podcaster who helped Alfie. Amy described this support as particularly helpful at the beginning of her podcast when she described herself as “complete rubbish” at it.

Amy also discussed the mutual support and sharing that podcasters engage in on social media, in particular over Twitter (now X), and that while she does not really know many social work podcasters personally, she is aware of them and supports them when she can. Several of the podcasters discussed that they engaged in supportive discussion and mutual promotion with international social work podcasters, suggesting that the podcast community connections stretch across international boundaries. This further suggests that social work podcasters in England do not see themselves and their influence limited to the national context, but instead are engaging with social work on an international level, with potential implications for strengthening the global community of the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). In writing on the influence of ICTs for the development of the network society, Castells (2010a) highlights that they have had a particular impact on broadening networks of both power and counterpower beyond the local or regional in this way.

However, as noted above and in the previous chapter, social work podcasts tend to stem predominantly from developed English speaking countries, and their reach tends to be similarly confined primarily to these countries. Therefore, any engagement with social work podcast networks, including internationally, is likely to remain Anglo-centric and potentially exclude the Global South. There is some evidence of this as a wider issue in contemporary networked social movements also. For example, Slavina and Brym (2020), in investigating Castells' theory of networked counterpower, identified that while regular use of ICTs did act as a predictor for involvement in political demonstrations, the global nature of this activism was overstated by Castells, with most movements still confined to national borders.

Tara described the networks of support around social work podcasting as a "podcast community", the only participant to use that term explicitly. As with Alfie and Amy, Tara described the importance of networks in particular when starting off, but she also expanded on the importance she ascribes to the community she identified with:

> So podcasters quite often share each other's podcasts. I tend to share the podcasts of organisations that I've worked with, or work with, and also the person who initially helped with some advice about setting up the new platform, I tend to share his podcast.

Interestingly here, Tara also states here that network connections exist between independent podcasters and podcasts run by established organisations. This suggests that the delineation between independent podcasts and those created by established organisations is at least in some ways malleable, and Tara sees those organisational podcasts as part of the "podcast community" she was describing.

In these instances, the podcast communities seem to reflect more the virtual communities of practice (VCoP) described in the literature review as communities of people sharing interests, passions or concerns about a topic or area, and engaging

regularly utilising information communication technologies (ICTs) (Cook-Craig and Sabah, 2009; Adedoyin, 2016; Murtagh and Rushton, 2023), rather than the formalised podcast networks of mutual support described in the literature review as providing some podcasts with a seal of approval (Heeremans, 2018: Murray, 2019). Although, notably some of the podcast networks identified in previous research, in particular those with a specific focus on non-white podcasters, were described as more informal in this way (Florini, 2015; Vrikki and Malik, 2019).

Later in her interview Tara brought up this idea of a "podcast community" again, highlighting another benefit related to promotion:

> So the other thing that happens with the podcast community I guess is that people make lists of podcasts that they like and then share those. So that's happened. We've found our way onto a few social work podcast lists, both here and in America, and that again kind of helps people pick things up.

In this instance the "podcast community" being described does not seem to be restricted to only podcasters, but also to those who listen to and share podcasts, in this case through the curation of "podcasts lists". Therefore, any podcast community or network may also incorporate many of the elements of listener engagement already discussed. For social workers, connecting in podcast communities like these could also provide opportunities for them to engage with the more political aspects of social work outside of their employers, or what Albuquerque (2019) describes as undertaking a "strategic adjustment" in relation to their social work role (p.322), as discussed in more detail in chapter 2. This could therefore also provide social workers with opportunities for engagement with alternative perspectives and counterpower in ways that are restricted within many contemporary social work workplaces dominated by the economy of performance, as described throughout this thesis (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Harris, 2019, 2023; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Lavalette, 2019;

Marthinsen, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020; Rogowski, 2020).

However, as highlighted in the literature review, ICTs have been used far more effectively by networks of power to promote and perpetuate their values and interests than by those looking to promote counterpower and alternative perspectives or approaches (Castells, 2021). Therefore, as well as the issues related to the potential exclusion of the Global South from these networks noted already, it should also not be assumed that any developing podcast network or community will promote alternative voices and perspectives in England either, and indeed considering most independent social work podcasters tend to be more experienced and senior compared to the majority of social workers, they may be more inclined to be influenced by network power through the established protocols of communication than social movements or counterpower. As discussed above, network power as exercised through the protocols of communication determines the standards and rules that become compelling for all nodes within the network, with failure to respect and perpetuate these leading to exclusion (Castells, 2011). This process could therefore limit the perspectives and voices heard on these podcasts, something that the final section of this chapter now delves into as it relates to the findings of this research.

4.5 Voice and Representation

As was highlighted in the literature review, while the proliferation of ICTs and the rise of the network society has created almost unlimited potential for networking and engaging with others, the same barriers and exclusions that exist offline are often replicated in the online world (Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Sen, 2016; Baker *et al*., 2017, 2018). However, ICTs also have the potential to provide a space for alternative voices and counterpower, and several examples of podcasts doing just that were given in the

literature review (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). Therefore, in order to answer research question 2 of this study, looking at the interplay between power and counterpower in social work podcasts and social work CPD, it is vital to consider the role of voice and representation as it relates to the findings of this study in more detail. This is done under five themes in this section: existing platforms, barriers to access, influential guests, social worker voice and service user voice. As with each section of this chapter, however, these themes can also be seen to be relevant to the other research questions, and in the case of research question 3, examining the potential of social work podcasts for CPD, it should be considered imperative that voice and representation are key considerations for weighing up that potential. As outlined in the previous chapter, a decision was made to not use the podcaster pseudonyms used throughout this chapter so far in presenting this theme to avoid the potential that they could inadvertently identify a participant.

4.5.1 Existing Platforms

As highlighted in chapter 2, podcasting, a medium that was originally conceived to support and promote amateur or alternative voices, is increasingly dominated by those who already have existing platforms, including a growing number of politicians, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics and academics (Llinares, 2018; Berry, 2018; Pruulmann-Vengerfieldt and Buchholtz, 2018). In line with this, and as discussed in the methodology chapter, most independent social work podcasters in England are experienced, and often senior, social workers, some with existing national, and even international, platforms and profiles. The significance of these existing roles was also apparent in the interviews with podcaster participants. The majority of participants described having some existing platform prior to starting a social work podcast,

including being on other people's podcasts, blogging, social media followings, radio appearances, book authorship, roles in national organisations, conference presentations, training provision, journal publications, media publications, and roles in education institutes. In these cases then podcasts were not a way for these participants to have their voices heard, but *another* way for them to have their voices heard. Some participants also described using their existing platforms, networks and resources to develop and grow their podcasts, something that could further limit the potential for social work podcasts to be a medium where alternative, dissenting or typically unheard voices are able to be heard.

This could therefore be seen as limiting the democratic potential of the medium of podcasting, a role that some describe as central feature of the medium (Newman and Gallo, 2019). However, the situation is demonstrably more complicated than this, most notably because not all of the podcaster participants in the study had these existing platforms, meaning that for these social workers this was the first time they had a public platform. Furthermore, with more and more national organisations starting their own podcasts, including BASW, SWE, Frontline and others, these independent podcasters could be seen to be using their platforms to resist the dominance of these large established organisations in the arena of podcasting, despite their existing platforms. This point could be particularly significant if social work podcast networks were to become more developed, because as discussed in chapter 2, these are more commonly described in relation to their potential to disrupt the domination of traditional media in the medium (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Heeremans, 2018; Murray, 2019). However, in considering concepts like counterpower (Castells, 2015) and counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), and the potential for podcasts or podcast networks to promote alternative perspectives, it is

vital to understand in more detail what voices and interests are represented on podcasts, and the barriers that are faced by those seeking to gain representation. These barriers are the focus of the next theme.

4.5.2 Barriers to Access

The majority of independent social work podcasters having existing platforms before starting their podcasts could be explained in part by the various barriers that participants raised when it came to starting a social work podcast. These barriers may have been easier to overcome for those with these existing platforms and the networks and resources that come from these, as highlighted in the previous theme. One of the barriers raised by participants was financial cost. The idea of cost barriers may seem counter-intuitive for a medium that is frequently described as being free and open to all (Bottomly, 2015; Pillay *et al*., 2015; Gachago *et al*., 2016), and indeed many of the participants discussed that a major benefit of podcasting is that the production costs are low. Five of the participants described using all free platforms and software, and at times participants therefore described no costs related to their podcasts, or at least professed that “there isn’t any cost other than our time”.

However, even for these participants, when asked probing questions about financial costs, they all recognised that there were some, even if these were perceived to be “minor” or “one-off”, like buying microphones or other equipment. For others, their existing websites gave them the ability to host the podcast at no extra cost, meaning that they did not incur a cost someone without an existing web-presence may have. Nevertheless, they were still paying for that website which could be considered a cost, even if it has other uses. The majority of participants were able to point to specific regular financial costs of creating their podcasts, for example:

> So that's like 120 quid or something and that is literally it, that just compresses my sound and stuff and makes it better because yeah so I can get it… Yeah I mean its 120 quid a year.
>
> I pay a small amount every month and they give me the stats.
>
> Yes it does cost. It costs something like, it probably costs about, it's about 15 quid a month to host it and then the editing is about 600 a year, so that's about it.

In each of these quotes, the costs are dismissed as almost insignificant, "a small amount", "that's about it" or "that is literally it". The seniority and experience of many of the participants could be influencing these statements, with these participants potentially being more insulated from some of the financial struggles social workers are facing in England today (BASW, 2022a; Public First, 2022).

Participants also discussed the potential for technological barriers. However, similar to cost barriers, when discussing technological barriers participants tended to suggest that they had minimal impact on them. For example, one participant noted that "on the whole it's pretty user friendly and pretty intuitive" but added "if you're relatively kind of tech savvy". Three participants described that they had just "Googled it" when looking to set up a podcast and figured it out from there. As well as using the internet to learn how to podcast, as was discussed above in relation to the podcast networks, several participants also relied on a friend or colleague for technical support. For the majority of participants, the technology involved their laptop or phone, and the use of a free software like Zoom or Skype. However, others described using additional hardware, including audio mixers and microphones.

Four participants described the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their use of technology specifically. This included highlighting that the necessity to use platforms including Zoom and Skype in social work practice during the pandemic had led people to have increased confidence in engaging through them, improving the quality of

recordings and interactions with guests through these medium. One participant even described moving from an approach that involved a lot of additional hardware to just using Skype to record their podcast as a result of their positive engagement over this platform during the pandemic:

> First of all we tried using a proper audio, um what do you call it, I'm not very techie but we tried using a proper audio programme to record with but in the end we just do it by Skype. So we just ring each other by Skype… We're very, very, very low tech.

Despite this participant referring to themselves as "not very techie", they do describe moving between various technologies to record their podcast, and that their current approach as "very, very, very low tech", suggesting that they do have confidence in using technology and chose the best approach for their purposes. Much like the cost barriers, these discussions around technology barriers, and the way they were largely minimised by participants, could be seen as stemming from the fact that they were overcome by those being interviewed, and this research cannot capture the views of those who found them insurmountable and therefore did not start a podcast.

However, as noted in the literature review, despite social workers often being characterised as struggling to engage with technology (Schembri, 2008; Higgs, 2012; Berzin *et al*., 2015; Goldkind *et al*., 2016; Haynes, 2019; Turner *et al*., 2020; Taylor-Beswcik, 2023), there is growing research that suggests they are actually quite confident and capable when using technology (SCIE, 2017, 2019; Pentaris *et al*., 2021; Devlieghere and Gillingham, 2021). This all makes it difficult to ascertain exactly how much of a barrier technology would be for the average social worker looking to start a podcast. These points are touched on further in the next chapter with listener participants in discussing the potential for them to start or join a podcast.

The only additional barrier that participants spoke about was time, and unlike cost and technology barriers, time barriers were less likely to be minimised or dismissed by participants. Even when participants did describe the time they committed as not particularly prohibitive, these points tended to be couched in participant's belief that podcasting was enjoyable and therefore worth their time, for example:

> I would say at least three hours a week on a basic week… but I enjoy it you know it's not like, it, it's not a job, it's a passion.

All podcaster participants described podcasting as something that was fun, or done for their own enjoyment in some way, including three describing it explicitly as a "hobby". One participant even discussed coming out of recording the podcast "absolutely buzzing".

However, despite this, no participants denied the significant time commitments they made to podcasting. The actual time commitments described by participants varied, and often depended on the type of podcast. Podcasts that invited guests or podcasts with multiple hosts were described as more challenging in relation to preparation. The frequency of podcasts also influenced how much time each participant committed. Much like the cost barriers described above having the potential to limit access within contemporary contexts, for social workers who are increasingly finding themselves working in understaffed teams, with unmanageable workloads, and having to engage in unpaid overtime, these time barriers are likely to be prohibitive for many (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a; BASW, 2023a).

These barriers to access and the fact that the majority of social work podcasters are relatively senior and have some form of existing platform therefore suggests that independent podcasts may be repeating the exclusion of particular voices that has been a major issue in social work throughout its history (Garrett, 2021a, 2021b). If podcasts do become increasingly significant in social work, it will be important to recognise these barriers, and critically examine how, through podcasts, hegemonic control may be extended and reinforced over the majority of social workers through controlling content, and prioritising certain views and perspectives (Gramsci, 1971). In this way, dissenting voices could be controlled through ensuring that only those who are in privileged positions or who have already shown themselves to use their public platform in ways that promote existing hegemony and the status quo are able to effectively engage in podcasting, or achieve a significant enough audience to have an impact through their podcasting.

However, it is important to highlight that despite these issues, podcasting still has a significantly lower bar for entry than many other comparable platforms, such as radio, which in the UK remains heavily controlled British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and commercial interests (Llinares *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, as evidenced by the participants who used their phones or laptops and no other technology to record their podcasts, technical barriers to podcasting have greatly reduced in recent years, something also recognised elsewhere (Berry, 2018; Llinares, 2018). Therefore, it is worth interrogating the impact that these barriers have had in more detail, and this is done under the next three themes: influential guests, service user voice and social worker voice.

4.5.3 Influential Guests

A third of participants described always or sometimes having guests on the podcast. Although in some cases the focus was on promoting voices that were felt to be excluded, including those of social workers and service users as discussed in the next two themes, guests were also described as being important for the clout, influence or promotional potential they brought with them. This included a desire to get people who could speak with authority on a topic:

> Really I was hoping to get people of note on to the podcast and kind of come on and just chat. Maybe people who've got a specialism to share their knowledge.

Getting a notable guest on the podcast was also viewed as a way to promote podcasts outside of the usual channels, or to reach a broader audience, in particular over social media. Below are examples from two different participants:

> You hope as well that if it's a notable guest that they would retweet it and you would copy them into the, you'd tag them in the tweet, in the Facebook post.

> Make sure that you have a guest that's got a big wheelbarrow full of social media followers themselves because they can't help themselves telling everybody.

In these quotes it is clear that the participants saw benefits in having guests on their podcasts who have extensive networks and could share the podcast through these. One participant even spoke about wanting to have high profile individuals like government ministers on the podcast to raise its profile. This suggests that those with existing networks and influence, and in particular those with connections to dominant networks (Castells, 2010a), may be perceived as being more valuable guests than promoting alternative or marginalised voices.

The influence of the participants' own networks were also seen as influential in the process of choosing guests for all participants who invited them on their podcasts. This

included inviting on people they had worked with before, or who they knew personally. In some cases it also involved inviting on guests they were not personally familiar with, but who had written something interesting they had read, were referred to them through their network, or were active on social media. Significantly though this still requires those guests to have either existing network connections or an existing platform, before being invited on. This pattern of inviting on predominantly prominent guests, and in the process implicitly excluding others, could mean that podcasts not only reflect, but also reinforce, existing societal hierarchies. This may therefore be an example of how hegemony operates through consent, with podcasters, even those who may espouse dissenting views, internalising and reproducing the values and interests of dominant classes through their choice of guests (Gramsci, 1988).

Considering these discussions, it is noteworthy that Castells (2010a) highlights that being part of a network brings benefits that replicate exponentially, and in this case it was clear that having existing network connections was beneficial in gaining further network influence through exposure on podcasts. It is also important to reiterate that the dominant form of power in the network society remains that of exclusion, and while the benefits or being part of a network are significant, the costs of being outside that network are even more pronounced (Castells, 2010a). Therefore, instead of focusing just on those who are included in podcasts, it is also important to consider voice and representation as they related to the excluded. The next themes, around service user and social worker voices, explore in more detail how participants felt they supported these frequently excluded voices to be heard.

4.5.4 Service User Voice

As well as prominent guests who were known to the participants or could spread their podcast amongst their own networks, participants also described their desire to

engage service user voices, although only three of the participants could point to examples of having service users actually speak on their podcasts. One of these described their motivations for this as:

> So kind of yeah helping professionals to really hear that service user voice and experience and hear you know some of the negatives.

This potential to capture the voice and experience of service users may be all the more significant because listeners and podcasters have been shown to specifically value authenticity and intimacy in relation to podcasts, as discussed in the literature review (Berry, 2016; Singer, 2019; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018) and throughout this thesis. Another participant explicitly noted the potential for podcasts to provide a voice to those who may not otherwise have a platform:

> And I think I really enjoy the kind of diversity that podcasts allow. So people who would not usually get a platform to share their experiences or describe an event or something that they can really get an opportunity to do that. And I like the way it, kind of a lot of podcasts have a similar format to how we do, so it's really unstructured, really natural.

These points are seemingly in line with discussions around the significance of podcasts as a format having benefits in promoting alternative voices, and thereby diversity and inclusion, as outlined in chapter 2 (Florini, 2015; Mottram, 2016; Kim *et al*., 2018; Llinares *et al*., 2018; Copeland, 2018; Swiatek, 2018; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020). This could also relate to the flexibility that participants described in relation to podcasts, contrasted with the economy of performance that promotes compliance and performance indicators, that was shown in chapter 2 to negatively impacts on the role of service user voices within social work and social work CPD (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Harris, 2019, 2023; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Lavalette, 2019; Marthinsen, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020; Rogowski, 2020).

Notably though participants also described the practical difficulties they experienced in engaging service users on their podcasts:

> Obviously there's difficulties around how you do that because you know we cannot approach people that we support in our day to day role.

The specific reasons why this participant described they could not approach people they work with included the importance of confidentiality, for both their employer and the service user. The alternative approach utilised by one participant was to invite service users onto the podcast who “have a bit of experience already of talking about their experiences publicly”. They described the importance of this as relating to their desire to ensure anyone coming on the podcast would feel comfortable and understand the ramifications of doing so. Notably this suggests that the participant was aware of the importance of not doing harm to the guest, and of informed consent, something Griffith and Sweet (2023) describe podcasters don’t always engage with effectively. Significantly though, that participant also described wanting to be confident that the participant would “make a good guest for the interview”. Therefore, although this participant did discuss the desire to invite on guests with experience of social work services, when they actually looked to make that happen a number of reasons were found for restricting who they invited on, including thinking about the listener experience.

Another participant who discussed inviting on service users as guests also described that they would use Twitter (now X) and get people on who seemed to have an interesting story to tell. However again this suggests that they would be largely inviting on those with existing platforms, or who were already publicly speaking out about their experiences. These experiences are not dissimilar to those experienced by social workers elsewhere, including social work educators who have described having to rely

on their own judgement, networks, and financial incentives/barriers in determining what service user voices to provide a platform to on qualifying courses (Casey *et al*., 2020; Sapouna, 2021).

More common than those who have had service users on the podcast as guests were participants who described their desire to do so but had not taken steps to actualise this. In this way the discussions around service user voices were not dissimilar to the discussions around aspirational impact already outlined, whereby participants aspired to have a bigger impact with their podcasts. Here the discussions usually involved a desire to engage more diverse voices and perspectives but with a recognition that they were not yet achieving this. Frequently this came up when discussing contemporary topics like BLM, #MeToo and the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that as with social work more broadly, these events led social work podcasters to re-evaluate their positions from an anti-discriminatory perspective (Pentaris *et al*., 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Obasi, 2022). These discussions mirror research discussed in the literature review that found a growing interest from some podcasters in promoting difference and diversity as it relates to podcasts, influenced by contemporary events like the BLM movement (Vrikki and Malik, 2019).

One participant explicitly described that they try their best to engage black and ethnic minority guests on their podcast, stating that it was important to for “giving people a bit of a platform so their voices can be heard”. In contrast four participants also made reference to the fact that they were either “white” or “male”, recognising that people like them already tend to have their voices heard widely, and that they would like to inject more diversity into their podcasts. One participant described actively making attempts to get another person on the podcast to promote diversity, but that when they had approached colleagues they had declined. Linking this back to the discussion in

the previous chapter and the work of Castells (2010a), he noted that people outside of dominant networks can be reluctant to accept invitations to engage with those who are perceived to be in power, treating these invitations with suspicion.

Fanon (1959) similarly highlighted that the colonised will often refuse to accept invitations from colonisers based on the historical oppression they have been subjected to. This could therefore provide further insight into the reasons why voices the Global South are rarely represented on social work podcasts. Fanon (1959) also highlights the dangers of gestures and habits, and in the case of podcasts, bringing guests on from minoritised ethnic groups, or from the Global South, could be seen to be feeding into this if not accompanied by real relinquishing of control over the medium, or if this is done without reflection and criticality. However, as highlighted in the literature review, when podcast ownership is felt by communities, they can be effective in promoting diverse voices and perspectives (Vrikki and Malik, 2019). Therefore, in order to effectively engage these voices, it may require some social work podcasters currently active to take a step back and relinquish control and influence.

4.5.5 Social Worker Voice

The role that podcasts can play in promoting the voice and perspective of social workers has been acknowledge in research in this area, as outlined in the literature review (Fronek *et al*., 2016; Fox *et al*., 2023). Eleven out of the twelve participants expressed their desires to promote social work, or some aspect of social work, through their podcasts, suggesting that this was also a strong motivating factor for the podcaster participants in this study. For example:

> Good news stories need to be out there all the time so that when tomorrow morning the social worker turns up in a particularly new difficult case on the doorstep where there's been allegations they are less likely to be either turned away or treated with the suspicion.

Half of the podcaster participants also described that they would like their podcasts to encourage more people to join social work as a profession through telling positive stories and providing a positive perspective on the profession. There was even some evidence provided by participants that this had been successful, including two participants describing that they had been contacted by individuals who said that the podcast had helped them make a decision to become a social worker. This could be considered an example of what Steiner (2021) describes as the importance of creating alternative places for discussions outside of mainstream media, and how this can promote a better public understanding of social work. Berzin *et al*. (2015) have also suggested that podcasts can play an important role in presenting a positive perspective on social work in this way, highlighting that this is something that is particularly needed following high-profile cases of child death or abuse where social workers can be the subject of blame and even abuse from political and media networks.

The role of media and political scrutiny like this in promoting fear and an economy of performance was discussed in detail in chapter 2 (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King, 2016; Warner, 2018; McCulloch, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). However, it is also important to restate that although social workers tend to think there is a negative public opinion about them (Legood *et al*., 2016; Edmondson and King, 2016; SWE, 2021b; BASW, 2022b, 2023a; UNISON, 2022a), this is contrasted with research that shows the public have generally positive opinions about social workers (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020; McCulloch and Webb, 2020). Therefore, this alternative space for discussions on social work may be particular beneficial for social workers themselves in gaining a more nuanced understanding of their

profession, and maybe challenging the common sense view around a negative public perception (Gramsci, 1971).

Perhaps for this reason, the majority of discussions from podcaster participants around wanting to present positive stories about social work focused not on engaging the public or potential social work recruits, but instead on engaging current social workers. For one participant, they described how they would have liked to have been able to listen to podcasts when they first qualified, noting that “when I qualified, I felt really lonely those first few years”. Another participant spoke about the importance of having minoritised ethnic social worker voices represented on podcasts, noting that “it’s almost like a bit of a kind of a role modelling”.

Despite this desire to promote the social work voice on podcasts, concerns were also raised about barriers to social workers speaking on podcasts. One participant discussed their difficulty in getting social workers to come on the podcast as a guest:

> Social workers are hard to get on actually. Of all the people… we get the occasional private message from social workers who just do not want to stick their head above the parapet.

Another participant stated that they had not had difficulty getting anyone to speak on the podcast, but then later corrected themselves noting that they had not had any success in getting frontline social workers to speak on the podcast.

The influence of fear on social workers could again be a factor in this regard (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O’Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). One of the participants specifically described that “fear” was a reason why social workers do not often speak out publicly, including on podcasts. Another participant discussed similarly that social workers tended not to want to speak on podcasts, and that this could relate to the high

levels of control employers tend to wield, a point noted in the literature review to negatively impact on social work CPD generally (Farrow, 2014; Lavalette, 2019; Rogowski, 2020; Harris, 2023). That participant also suggested that this is something unique to England:

> In this country they are far more at the beck and call of the employer, whereas in other countries, even some, so some aspects of social work in the states are far more independent and I think that's what we really should be here.

Significantly though, and as is discussed more in the next chapter, the listener participants tended to be relatively positive about the potential of speaking on a podcast. Therefore, these concerns may not be as widespread as the participants here suggest, and could be an example of how common sense in the belief that social workers do not wish to speak out is internalised in the profession in a way that precludes the majority of social workers from being offered the opportunity to have their voices heard (Gramsci, 1971).

4.6 Chapter Summary

The themes discussed in this chapter have provided a large amount of information related to research question 1:

> What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?

They have outlined how podcasters are a diverse group in many respects, including in how they describe their experience, representation, motivations, approach and engagement. However, it was also highlighted that there are a number of similarities between most of the participants, including having an existing platforms, strongly valuing their independence, and a desire to engage more diverse voices or opinions, but up to now most having not achieved this. When it came to representation, it is

notable that when looking for prominent guests, this seemed to be something that participants were able to facilitate in a straightforward way. In contrast, when looking at promoting service user or social work voices, a number of barriers were discussed, and therefore for many promoting these voices remains aspirational rather than something that has been achieved. These discussions therefore reinforce the point discussed above that the provision of technology or even opportunities to engage within the network society is insufficient to support those who remain decidedly 'switched-off' to become networked, and in many instances the same challenges related to access and engagement are faced online as offline (Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Sen, 2016; Baker *et al*., 2017, 2018).

These discussions also provide significant data about the interplay of power and counterpower around podcasts in social work, the focus of research question 2:

> What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?

Considering this in the context of the network society (Castells, 2010), podcasts may have the potential to act as a disruptive force, with some podcasters highlighting that they would like to encourage collective action and promote alternative voices, and others being able to provide concrete examples of when they have done so. That said, the idea of not being "controversial" and fears about negative feedback were also discussed by participants. As highlighted in the literature review, when someone in the dominant network chooses to speak out against the values and interests of that network in any significant or substantial way, they are liable to be bypassed by that network, and excluded from future engagement (Castells, 2010a). Through seeking to avoid negative attention, the podcasters therefore could be seen to be reflecting their

concerns about being cut off in this way, in particular as many of the podcasters have prominent platforms, positions and connections already.

These concerns further emphasise the importance of engaging more diverse voices, both in existing podcasts but also in setting up new podcasts, and if counterpower is going to be represented on podcasts then there may be a need for those currently active to step aside and encourage others to engage. The experiences described by Fanon (1959) of the role of the radio shifting gradually from a tool of colonialism and capitalism to a symbolic tool of revolution suggests that this shift can happen. Furthermore, the participants in the study seem willing to do so, in particular motivated by recent events like Covid-19 and Black Lives Matters, but it remains to be seen if this willingness will turn into action for most.

The value of social work podcasting for CPD was also shown to be widely accepted as positive by participants, providing important data for research question 3:

> What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

Participants highlighted the importance of accessibility flexibility, variety and reach, dialogue, and currency, with some also cautioning about quality assurance. However, without more diverse voices, the CPD potential of podcasting may also continue to face the same challenges as other social work CPD, potentially just reproducing and reinforcing existing hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971), a point discussed in more detail in chapter 2, as well as in the next chapter as it relates to listener participants.

Chapter 5: Listener Participants - Findings and Discussion

This chapter explores the themes that were identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the data gathered in interviews with the six listener participants. As outlined in the process section of chapter 3, there were some additional steps in the data collection process with listener participants. All listener participants were asked to listen to one to three podcasts in preparation for their interview, and they were also all sent a follow-up questionnaire three months post-interview to ask them if they continued to listen to podcasts, and why/why not. All six participants responded to that questionnaire and the feedback is integrated into the analysis in this chapter. This chapter is also informed by the qualitative meta-analysis with the data outlined in the previous chapter (Timulak, 2009). The comparison and insights gained from this analysis are considered in more detail in the next chapter in drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

This chapter is split into two sections. The first examines the themes identified in the data related to social work continuing professional development (CPD) generally: performativity, employers, and markets and networks. These themes help to underpin the analysis of podcasts as CPD in line with research questions 2 and 3:

> What is the interplay of power and counterpower as it relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?
>
> *and*
>
> What potential do free, open access podcasts have for the CPD of social workers in England?

The second half of this chapter focuses on themes more specific to social work podcasts as related to these research questions, under the themes of podcasts as

CPD, individualism, collectivism and social worker voice. As with the previous chapter there is of course overlap across these themes and all of the research questions, and the reflexive thematic analysis was holistic and iterative, seeing the various themes and research questions as interlinked (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Therefore, all of the themes in this chapter should also be considered as providing significant data towards answering all research questions, including research question 1:

> What is the landscape of independent social work podcasting in England?

Particularly relevant to that research question are the listener participant's perceptions of social work podcasts in England, and how these perceptions echo or contrast with the perspectives of podcaster participants presented in the previous chapter.

Pseudonyms are used in this chapter when describing the participants, in line with the approach taken in the previous chapter. However, unlike the podcaster participants, some additional information is provided on demographics and backgrounds of the listener participants, without the risk of breaching confidentiality. This is because the podcaster participants were selected from a population of 21, and the listener participants were selected from the population of approximately 100,000 registered social workers in England (Social Work England (SWE), 2022). This also provides important information related to the narrative approach and understanding some broader contexts in which the experiences described by participants are taking place (Mertova and Webster. 2019). Therefore, a short background to each participant, based on information provided by the participants themselves is provided to start this chapter and provide context for their contributions.

5.1 Participant Demographics and Backgrounds

This section outlines the participant demographics and backgrounds for the six listener participants who took part in the second stage of this research. This data is summarised in Table 2.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Caring role	Experience as SW
Jack	55	Male	White British	No	Children	15 years
Mags	36	Female	White British	No	Children	6 months
Lou	37	Male	White British	No	Children	5 years
Gav	51	Male	White British	No	Children	20 years
Deb	48	Female	Jewish	No	No	20 years
Kim	39	Female	Black British	No	Children	3 years

Table 2: Listener Participant Demographics

Table 2 demonstrates that despite the small sample size, a broad range of experience of social workers was captured amongst these participants, from newly qualified to 20 years. With the average working life of a social worker being approximately eight years according to Curtis *et al*. (2010), this was seen as an adequate range of experience, although in light of the poor social worker working conditions cited throughout this

study (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2023a), that average working life could now be significantly lower. The gender breakdown of participants was evenly split at 50% male and female. This is not representative of the broader social work population, where the most recent figures are that approximately 83% of social workers identify as female (SWE, 2023a). While with a small sample it is difficult to generalise the reasons for this disparity, it could be because, broadly speaking, podcast listeners are more likely to be male (Ofcom, 2022) and therefore those who came forward with an interest in this area may have also been more likely to be male. This could therefore be reflective of a potential echo-chamber or epistemic bubble discussed in chapter 3, whereby I may have inadvertently been only hearing from a subset of the social work population, in this case one that is more likely to be male (Nguyen, 2020).

The age of participants ranged from 36 to 55, with an average age of 44. Notably this suggests that the participants were older than the average podcast audience, who Ofcom (2022) report are 71% under 45. However, it does compare well to the average age of practicing social workers of 46 (SWE, 2023a). Two thirds of the participants described themselves as white British, and this is also in line with the broader statistics of social workers, where 63.2% described themselves as white British (SWE, 2023a). Significantly though, with such a small sample size, it was not realistically possible, even if purposive sampling had been used, to get a sample that represents the wide range of ethnicities of social workers in England, something considered in more detail in the next chapter as it relates to recommendations for future research. None of the

six participants disclosed a disability; however, only 9.5% of social workers describe having a disability nationally, meaning this should not be surprising for a sample of this size (SWE, 2023a). More specific narrative background information about each of the six listener participants is now outlined.

Jack

Jack is a male social worker aged 55. He is white British, does not have a disability and has children, but no other caring responsibilities. He had extensive experience of working in residential care before studying to be a social worker, supported through his employer local authority 15 years ago. Since then he has worked primarily with adults with disabilities. He now also has a learning and development role in supporting newly qualified social workers and students. In preparation for his interview, Jack said he listened to seven social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up Jack said that he continues to listen to social work podcasts monthly.

Mags

Mags is a female social worker aged 36. She is white British, has no disability and has children, but no other caring responsibilities. Mags described extensive experience of working as a youth worker before training to become a social worker. Mags is a newly qualified social worker who only qualified a few months before the interview. She now works in a Youth Offending Team. In preparation for her interview Mags said she listened to three social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up Mags said she continues to listen to social work podcasts weekly.

Lou

Lou is a male social worker aged 37. He is white British, has no disability and has children, but no other caring responsibilities. Lou qualified as a social worker five years

ago, having previously worked as a teacher and a regulatory inspector. He worked in a variety of children and families teams, including teenage crisis support, and now works for a specialist fostering service. In preparation for his interview Lou said he listened to three social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up he said that he has not continued to listen to social work podcasts.

Gav

Gav is a male social worker aged 51. He is white British, has no disability and has children, but no other caring responsibilities. Gav qualified as a social worker 20 years ago, and has worked in a variety of children and family teams, mostly focused on child protection, but also with children with disabilities and youth offending. About 6 months prior to the interview Gav left frontline social work and now has a role in education, but maintains his social work registration. In preparation for the interview, Gav described listening to five social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up he said that he continues to listen to several social work podcasts a month.

Deb

Deb is a female social worker aged 48. She is Jewish, does not have a disability and has no caring responsibilities. Prior to qualifying as a social worker, she worked extensively in residential care for people with learning disabilities. She qualified as a social worker about 20 years ago, and has worked primarily in generic adult teams since then. In preparation for her interview Deb said she listened to three social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up she said that she continues to listen to social work podcasts monthly.

Kim

Kim is a 39 year old female social worker. She is Black British, has no disability and has children, but no other caring responsibilities. Kim studied as a mature student and has three years' experience as a social worker, all working within a hospice for adults. In preparation for her interview Kim said she listened to five to six social work podcasts and at three-month follow-up she said she has listened to one social work podcast since the interview.

5.2 Continuing Professional Development

As can be seen in the interview guide (Appendix 2) the interviews with listener participants all started with questions about experiences and perspectives on CPD, including the new requirements from SWE for all social workers to record evidence of their CPD annually through an online portal (2022a). The focus then shifted to social work podcasts. Inevitably there was overlap between these discussions, but this section aims to focus primarily on the themes that were raised about social work CPD generally: performativity, employers, and markets and networks.

5.2.1 Performativity

As outlined in chapter 2, there is a growing recognition of the dominance of the economy of performance in social work in England (Coleman and Harris, 2008; Harris, 2019, 2023; Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Lavalette, 2019; Marthinsen, 2019; McGrath-Brookes *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020; Rogowski, 2020). The economy of performance is described as being dominated by quantitative, often externally referential, performance measures (Stronach *et al*., 2002). This economy of performance was also found to be a major theme in the interviews with listener

participants when describing their views and experiences of CPD, in particular in relation to the performativity that is often required of them.

These discussions around performativity were largely focused on the new CPD recording requirements implemented by SWE (2019a), and notably all listener participants described their CPD in relation to the SWE requirements unprompted. This is in contrast to the podcaster participants, where only two participants brought up SWE when discussing CPD. For example, in the below interaction Kim was asked about CPD, and without hesitation started talking about SWE and aligning her framing of CPD to their criteria:

> Researcher: How do you decide what CPD to do?
>
> Kim: Usually when we have to kind of record CPD I look at what the format is and I try to do a kind of varied CPD based on what I have previously done, I try to do something else. So a lot of the time it may be sparked from like a webinar or a training session that I have done and I might kind of give a bit of insight into that, or it might be sort of spurred off some feedback, positive or negative, or kind of reflective exercises, so yeah it just really depends on what I might have done more recently.
>
> Researcher: When you say that you are looking to record CPD are you talking about Social Work England?
>
> Kim: Yeah sorry I was thinking about Social Work England yeah sorry.

Similarly, when Jack was describing his approach to CPD, a broad discussion around workplace influence and collaborative approaches to CPD suddenly revealed itself to have been couched predominantly in SWE's recording requirements:

> It's a tough one actually… because my manager isn't [a] social worker. My manager is part of organisational development. So my manager although has a sociology background. So a lot is collaborative and so you know I would not necessarily say I attend training sessions but when I'm creating my own training sessions and collaborating with others and learning from them. So sort of anything I upload onto Social Work England is often, you know, it's my learning is through that kind of thing.

Both Kim and Jack seem to be demonstrating that SWE's requirements are now the taken for granted context in which social work CPD is discussed, as I had not mentioned SWE in either of those interviews prior to those quotes. For Jack this is confirmed in later discussions where he was asked more pointed questions about what he felt about SWE's new approach to CPD, and he suggests that he had not really thought about the implications of these new CPD recording requirements:

> I think generally it's kind of a yeah. I think it kind of does what it says on the tin. It's kind of CPD is CPD. I mean haven't given that one much thought.

The point here that "CPD is CPD" suggests that Jack has accepted the SWE requirements as determining his, and his colleagues, CPD approach, and that he does not perceive these to be a substantial departure from his previous approach or previous requirements, despite, as was outlined in chapter 2, the very different requirements they entail. This also makes assertions from SWE (2020b) that "you are the best person to determine your own learning needs" unlikely to become actualised (p.3), in particular when they come alongside external audit processes that social workers have described as threatening (YouGov, 2021; Worsley, 2023). As described by Olssen (2006), this creates a situation whereby professionals, despite being encouraged to exercise freedom in relation to their CPD, are actually required to "learn to recognise what to learn" (p.224). This could also be considered an example of participants internalising common sense related to their own responsibility around CPD, instilled through policies and processes imposed on them, despite the control actually wielded over their CPD by employers and SWE (Gramsci, 1971).

Considering the implications of this, it is worth highlighting that Jack also has a role around supporting and developing newly qualified social workers, and similarly defaulted to SWE's CPD requirements when discussing the support that he provides

to them around learning and development. Therefore, it is likely these newly qualified social workers will be similarly instilled with this culture of self-regulation through professional norms in the context of social work CPD. In this way, hegemonic power can create consenting social workers from an early stage as they internalise the norms of the profession that perpetuate and reinforce subordination through acceptance and consent (Gramsci, 1971). Further reinforcing this understanding, is the example of Mags, the only participant who was a newly qualified social worker. Mags' understanding of CPD as shaped by SWE's recording requirements was already apparent in her interview, even though she had yet to go through the recording process herself:

> Yeah so I've actually I'm trying to keep on top of that so it doesn't all come to me at November. So I did there's an organisation [name redacted]. I did some training with them around sort of unconscious bias and stuff like that so I got all that would be a good one to have a go at doing the Social Work England CPD thing.

In this instance Mags described her perception of the CPD she had undertaken as being shaped by whether it would be "a good one" for SWE's recording requirements. Personal and professional learning or development seems to have taken a backseat to these recording requirements for this newly qualified social worker.

This can also be seen reflected in the discussions with other participants. For example, Jack described how many pieces of evidence he had uploaded "It was three or four actually I think. Three or four. Please do not ask me what they were". The suggestion here being that Jack knows he has met the regulators requirements, and the actual experiences of learning was less important, and not even remembered in this instance. Deb also described that she records CPD evidence so that she can reassure herself that she has done so: "I'll put maybe a few sentences but then my mental process is that I've got CPD on there". As was discussed in the literature review, social workers

are increasingly required to record almost every element of their practice in this way, with those who willingly engage with the process rewarded, if nothing else with peace of mind (Harris, 2019). This creates a culture of self-regulation that social workers willingly consent to, as they feel obliged to record information about themselves even when they find it largely meaningless (Kamali and Jonsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Simpson *et al*., 2020).

When asked more specifically about what they thought of the new SWE CPD recording requirements, all participants described SWE's CPD requirements with some level of criticality. For example, Lou described his concerns about what is implied about the social work profession in these new requirements:

> I think there's something uncomfortable about being mandated to do it if I'm being really frank. I think there's an undercurrent that suggests that as a profession you know we're not autonomous and able to do those things ourselves.

Here Lou is seemingly picking up on the history of political scrutiny that social workers have faced in England as driving this new approach to CPD (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King, 2016; Warner, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). His focus on the requirements being mandated also suggest he is touching on the distinction between the economy of performance and ecologies of practice that has been engaged with throughout this thesis (Stronach *et al*., 2002), seeing these new requirements as indicating a further shift towards the economy of performance, in line with the discussion at the start of this theme.

Other participants similarly picked up on this point. This included participants questioning if SWE's recording model was capable of accurately representing the CPD of social workers. Kim described the process as "tick-boxy", noting that it was unlikely

to be a “true reflection” of her CPD. These comments are similar to findings from YouGov (2021) on the experiences of social workers going through this CPD recording process, whereby they described it as creating a culture of “box-ticking” around CPD (p.6). Deb also questioned the focus of the recording requirements on showing “impact”, picking up on the requirement for all social work CPD evidence records for SWE to demonstrate some form of impact (SWE, 2022a). Deb described that CPD is not always clearly linked to impact in this way:

> Yeah I think it’s really difficult and I think this is where I find the Social Work England bit is difficult as I cannot see like one piece of CPD necessarily having one particular impact. It’s about growing professionally, growing with your knowledge of the subject area and it all building a more confident practitioner who can then challenge.

Again here Deb is presenting a perspective that would be more in line with the ecologies of practice, or the accumulation of individual and collective professional experiences (Stronach *et al*., 2002), as well as one similar to research on social work CPD elsewhere that has stressed the unpredictable and reflective aspects of social work CPD (Asano, 2019; Ferguson, 2023). Deb here identifies that continuing professional development is not necessarily about a single learning event instilling specific knowledge and followed by an identifiable impact on practice. Instead she sees continuing professional development as something more iterative, complex and contested.

Although all listener participants expressed critical views of the SWE annual recording requirements, there were more mixed feelings expressed about one specific aspect of these requirements: whether they are too onerous for social workers. Four participants expressed clear opinions on this, two stating that the requirements were too onerous, two that they were not, and the other two participants remaining relatively neutral or unsure. This divided opinion was notably correlated with experience. As described

above, Jack was one of the more experienced participants, and he did not feel that the CPD requirements were particularly difficult for social workers to achieve. Similarly, Gav, another of the more experienced participants, described his disbelief that SWE were struggling to get social workers to upload CPD evidence:

> we could all say we are busy and we've got timeframes but I think that that's probably to be honest the only common sense thing that I've seen them do as yet.

In contrast two of the less experienced participants outlined their concerns about time constraints and difficulties in meeting the SWE recording requirements. Lou, for example, described that he thought the requirements were unfair to social workers who are overworked, and that he just "did the minimum requirement" as a result. Kim was also critical of the time taken to complete SWE's requirements, and also linked this to just doing the minimum required at the last minute:

> then also just timewise because I left it to the last minute then other things come along as always and so it just kind of got swept down the priorities list.

Notably, these correlations between having more negative opinions of SWE's CPD requirements and leaving the process to the last month and doing just the minimum mirror those found by YouGov (2021) in their research into social work CPD with a much larger sample of 504 social workers. That research also found similarly that younger social workers, who are more likely to be less experienced, were less likely to find the value in SWE's recording requirements.

This therefore suggests that the different perspectives expressed by listener participants in this research may be indicative of a level of professional socialisation that has taken place over time for those with more experience, creating more acceptance of professional norms geared towards the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002). As noted by Gramsci (1971), manufactured consent instilling

hegemonic control needs to be maintained and reinforced in this way, and over time it is likely that social workers become internalise and actively perpetuate it. Significantly for this research, Gramsci also highlights the impact of media in manufacturing this consent, something that podcasts could be playing a potential role in, in particular considering the points about voice and representation noted in the previous chapter (Gramsci, 1988). Further backing this up, both participants who described the CPD process as too onerous for social workers linked this to the pressures they face in their practice, something that a previous study found impacted on the CPD of social workers in less senior roles more (Johnson *et al*., 2022). However, these workplace pressures were identified by all participants, regardless of seniority, and this theme of employers as it relates to CPD is now explored in more detail.

5.2.2 Employers

The role of employers in CPD was a major theme throughout the interviews with listener participants. As with performativity this was another area that was also highlighted in the literature review, where it was noted that the support of employers is seen by social workers to be vital to their CPD, and employers exercise significant control over the CPD that is engaged with by social workers (Brown and Keen, 2004; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Farrow, 2014; Gillies, 2015; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Pearce *et al*., 2015; Rees *et al*., 2018; Cordis Bright, 2019; Gordon *et al*., 2019). Kim for example described how in working in a hospice she felt “fortunate” to have a lot of access to CPD opportunities that were provided by her employer. Mags described that working in a local authority meant CPD was predominantly related to doing “mandatory courses”, further emphasising the control of employers. Mags also stated that her local authority “is very into” trauma informed practice, and therefore they are currently doing a lot of training around that.

This idea of employers focusing on a particular model and this shaping CPD was likewise described by Lou, outlining how his local authority employer had a particular CPD focus on restorative practice at the time of the interview and a lot of his training therefore revolved around this. Gav described the control of various employers he has had over his CPD, noting in particular that in his experience of being an agency social worker, some employers would invite him to attend all the CPD that staff were undertaking, while others would refuse to because he was from an agency. As discussed in the literature review, agency social workers have been shown to be more likely to describe feeling excluded from CPD opportunities like this (Lombard, 2010; Johnson *et al*., 2022).

Three participants emphasised the flexible approach to CPD that was present in their workplace or implemented by their manager. This included Deb, who described the influence of her manager in creating this approach:

> I think my manager is fantastic but he doesn't, he's the opposite of hand holding. So he basically says you get on with it. I want to know what you do but he's more interested in what we do for CPD as a curiosity rather than a checking that we've done it.

Jack similarly described how he was "given a lot of freedom" linking this to the fact that his manager isn't a social worker, and Gav described that his current employer allowed him to "cherry pick CPD", usually online courses that he finds himself. These experiences described by Deb, Jack and Gav could be indicative of supportive and flexible workplaces. However, they could also be indicative of the influence of SWE's (2021) approach to CPD placing responsibility for CPD on individual social workers. Jack explicitly explained: "you know it's my responsibility is to maintain my registration". Experience may once again play a role in this, in particular because it was the three most experienced participants who described the freedom and control

they have over their own CPD. As with the acceptance of SWE's CPD requirements described under the previous theme, this may suggest that professional norms engrained over time have led to an acceptance of social workers being responsible for their own professional development amongst these participants.

In all these discussions, it was clear that the role of the employer, either as supportive or unsupportive, flexible or rigid, involved or distant, shaped the CPD that the participants engaged in and the way that they described that CPD. As has been highlighted above, this could be seen to create a contradiction in relation to the common sense that is pervasive in the profession around CPD (Gramsci, 1971), whereby on the one hand social workers recognise that employers have substantial control over the CPD that they engage in, but at the same time social workers who are not allocated time or resources to engage with their CPD see the responsibility for this as being their own. This in turn serves to maintain hegemonic control over professionals and reduce their tendencies towards questioning and challenging this lack of support from employers. However, it was also clear that for all participants, whether they were describing the CPD they would find themselves, or that which was provided or commissioned by their employer, there were other factors also influencing it. These influences, specifically markets and networks, are now examined under the final theme in this section.

5.2.3 Markets and Networks

As highlighted in chapter 2, there are existing concerns expressed in the literature about the increasingly marketised approach to social work CPD in the UK, with underfunded social work employers usually focusing on low cost provision (Gillies, 2015; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Gordon *et al*., 2019), or programmes that are government subsidised (Interface Associates, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Preston,

2022; Frontline, 2022). The influence of market forces was also very apparent in the way that the participants in this research described the CPD they undertake. For example, CPD contracts between employers and private providers were described by three of the participants as shaping the CPD in their workplaces. Jack noted that his workplace has a number of contracts related to social work CPD, and that staff therefore primarily tend to engage in the CPD offered by those contracted organisations. Mags described similarly having her CPD shaped by the contracts between her employer and private providers. She linked this to concerns about the lack of flexibility in CPD that is available to her, stating that she had “done them all”. Mags would later pull back on this comment a bit suggesting her workplace did provide new opportunities, but still indicated that she felt the training was repetitive: “they are quite good at buying in new things but I think you can get to a point where you’re like a bit stuck with it”.

It was therefore clear that employers have substantial control over the CPD undertaken by these participants, but there is also a recognition that employers are making these decisions in ways that are dictated by market forces, including through contracts and commissioning. For Kim the experience of working in a charity was described differently, and she spoke positively about the range of training sessions available in her workplace. However, even for Kim’s workplace she explained that a major motivation for providing this varied training is that professionals from other organisations will purchase places on the training, adding to the revenue of the organisation.

In all of these discussions the marketplace was largely described as beneficial to social work CPD, with Jack, Lou, Gave and Deb in particular highlighting the variety of CPD that the market creates. Of these only Deb noted concerns about the CPD available

through the market being of “varying quality”, despite the myriad of issues identified when discussing other aspects of CPD. This is therefore a potential example of hegemonic control perpetuated through manufactured consent leading to acceptance and consent in relation to the subjugation of social workers to market forces that benefit dominant classes (Gramsci, 1971). This general acceptance of the market by participants can also be seen as yet another example of the capitalist realism and how “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable”, similar to the way some of the podcaster participants took the role of the market in podcasting for granted, described in the previous chapter (Fisher, 2009: 8). Further emphasising this, there seemed to be little consideration amongst listener participants of the potential for alternative approaches to CPD that were not primarily market driven, and also similar to the podcaster participants, listener participants frequently used market language to describe the CPD they engaged with, including terms like “marketplace” and “consumer”.

Jack in particular stressed his confidence in the marketplace to meet the needs of social work CPD, suggesting that “if you tell someone there’s a need you know a company is going to fill that” and “capitalism being the beautiful thing it is people fill it”. The suggestion here is that the market is responsive to the needs of social workers, and that companies will develop or adapt training to meet these needs. However, later in the interview, Jack was also clear that there were other influences and incentives in that marketplace:

> There’s people you can just say, we need this and you know the nature of businesses they will go and do their own research and come back with their package and we at that point, because we’ve got a dynamic purchasing system.

What is being suggested here are that there are particular contacts that Jack's organisation relies on to provide CPD, with others filtered out through the dynamic purchasing system, and therefore it is not necessarily an openly competitive market. This is in line with findings from Local Government Association (2019a, 2019b) that the most common way that CPD decisions are made by social worker employers is through reference to previously commissioned programmes of CPD.

Notably there is also an expectation from Jack in that quote that whatever training is needed will be met by those he knows and regularly engages with, rather than with reference to the role of market competition in filling needs, or even reference to trying to engage those with specific experience or specialist knowledge in the area of practice the CPD is being procured for. This can therefore be seen as yet another example of the role of networks in contemporary society and social work, something Jack appears to accept uncritically (Castells, 2010a). This strong influence of employers, the marketplace and networks in the current provision of social work CPD makes the role of social work podcasts, freely available to anyone and arguably sitting outside of these influences, potentially very significant. As is discussed in the next section, this is something that listener participants also felt was the case, in line with the similar perspectives presented by podcaster participants in the previous chapter.

5.3 Social Work Podcasts

The second half of this chapter explores the themes identified in the data from the listener participant interviews and questionnaires related to social work podcasts. Mirroring the analysis of the data drawn from interviews with podcaster participants in the previous chapter, this section starts with a theme broadly looking at the views of listener participants of podcasts as CPD. The contrasting themes of individualism and collectivism are then examined in relation to how they shaped the experiences of

participants of podcasts, including looking at how networks of power and counterpower influenced these (Castells, 2010a). A final theme then looks at social worker voice and how participants largely agreed they would speak on podcasts if offered the opportunity, in contrast to the perspectives of many of the podcaster participants in the previous chapter who felt social workers were reluctant to do so. Some potential reasons for why this difference in perspective arose are also discussed, in line with the qualitative meta-analysis approach (Timulak, 2009).

5.3.1 Podcasts as CPD

All six participants described having listened to at least one social work podcast before taking part in this research, although as with the podcaster participants none described themselves as regular listeners to any social work podcasts. Also similar to the podcaster participants, listener participants all described listening to podcasts while undertaking a number of other activities, including driving, commuting, gardening, sunbathing, eating lunch and walking. All six listener participants described the informal tone of podcasts and the conversations that the podcasting format facilitated as providing an accessible way to engage with issues and obtain information related to social work. For example, Kim spoke about the “easy breezy conversation” that was easier to listen to than a lot of CPD she engaged with, while also being able to “slip a lot of information in”. The suggestion here being that she was able to learn, but in a less mentally taxing way.

However, in contrast to the previous chapter, humour was not a particularly prominent theme from listener participants when describing this informality. This suggests that the role of humour as improving the listener experience was potentially overstated by podcaster participants, and therefore may, as posited under the theme of “banter” above, actually instead be primarily playing a role promoting hegemonic control

through controlling the podcasting space, excluding certain voices and perspectives, and reducing the potential for good sense critical reflection that could promote counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Indeed only one listener participant, Jack, specifically mentioned the importance of humour in social work podcasts: “there’s got to be a certain amount of fun and humour to it”. He contrasted this to a specific podcast that he had listened to when preparing for his research interview: “it is very dry and I kind of get angry at myself because they are clearly brains the size of planets and just so much to learn but I’m just not listening after a while”. Gav, in contrast, described his annoyance with podcasts that would focus too much on “chit chat and the kind of the laughter and funny business”, instead of talking about the issue that was the topic of the podcast.

Despite all six participants suggesting that informality is a positive of social work podcasts compared to other forms of CPD, when described in comparison to non-social work podcasts that they listened to, social work podcasts were still described by all participants to be more taxing, and often requiring specific time set aside to focus. Mags described difficulty in listening to social work podcasts while her children were around, because they would interrupt her concentration. Lou described that he would frequently listen to podcasts during exercise, but never social work podcasts because “you’ve got to be in sort of a quiet place to listen properly”. Jack and Deb both also described that they would frequently listen to podcasts while resting, but that they would sometimes fall asleep while doing so, something they did not mind doing when listening to most podcasts, but with social work podcasts they felt they wanted to ensure they hear all the content. Therefore, both described avoiding social work podcasts during rest time.

This suggests that when dealing with social work content, in particular for the purposes of CPD, the flexibility afforded by podcasts that was strongly promoted by the podcaster participants, and is a frequent theme in research and literature in this area (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023; Belfiore *et al*., 2021), may have limits, and this could in turn limit the potential of social work podcasts to address the challenges around social workers wanting more flexibility in their CPD that were identified in chapter 2 (Doel *et al*., 2008; Beddoe and Duke, 2013; Gillies, 2015; Simpson *et al*., 2017; Gordon *et al*., 2019). This need for more focus and concentration is not unique to social work podcasts however, and the need for more focused concentration has also been found in research into educational podcasts (Evans, 2008; Gachago *et al*., 2016), and the true crime podcast Serial (Bouzis, 2017; Boling and Hull, 2018; Hancock and McMurty, 2018; Griffith and Sweet, 2023), as outlined in chapter 2.

Interestingly though, despite every interview involving an extended discussion about the positive potential of social work podcasts as CPD, and participants indicating that they needed to set aside specific time to listen to social work podcasts, none of the participants described listening to podcasts during paid work time. Considering most of the CPD already discussed in this chapter, in particular training sessions, but also online videos and reading, were discussed as taking place primarily during paid working hours, this suggests that podcasts were seen differently by the participants. For example, Mags even described regularly watching YouTube videos related to social work during working hours, but still stated that she only ever listened to podcasts during breaks or when commuting. This could therefore be indicative of a professional norm or common sense amongst social workers that podcasts, despite ostensibly being valued by the social workers in this study, were not something that social

workers perceived as appropriate during work time (Gramsci, 1971). The lack of employer support for engaging in podcasts could also be seen as a way of reducing their impact, in particular because they could represent a loss of control of employers over the CPD that participants engage with.

All participants were therefore asked why they did not listen to podcasts during work time, and it became apparent that for all participants it had been taken for granted that they should not do so, with none describing even thinking about the potential of listening to podcasts during paid working time prior to that question being posed. This further underlines that this was perceived as common sense that had not been subject to critical reflection by the participants (Gramsci, 1988), something particular identifiable in this quote from Jack:

> It's a good question really because I suppose podcasts are fun as well. That's kind of entertainment as well and they do not necessarily feel like CPD because I'm genuinely interested in that. And you know I think with social work you have to love what you do but I suppose yeah I guess it is one of the few mediums I suppose that we, you would do but I do not know. Now you've sent me thinking there. Why did I say that?

In a similar vein, Lou and Gav both agreed upon being asked that they think that social workers should be able to listen to podcasts during working hours as part of their CPD, although neither had ever considered doing so. Kim, Mags and Deb were less certain of this after discussing it, a notably direct division of participants along gender lines, suggesting that, similar to podcasts being more popular amongst men generally, they may also be more acceptable in these contexts to male social workers (Singer, 2019; Ofcom, 2022). The small sample size and lack of existing research in this area to corroborate suggests caution is needed before making this generalisation, however.

Returning to Jack, following the above discussion about whether he would listen to podcasts during his work time, I asked if in his learning and development role he would

be supportive of those he supports listening to podcasts during work time. The exchange went as followed:

> Researcher: What about that kind of in your supportive role. Would you support a social worker saying I'm going to take an hour and listen to a podcast for CPD during the day?
>
> Jack: No definitely not, definitely not. No it's a definite get away entirely and that's not just as mainly just to kind of refresh your brain. I think your brain needs to do something else.

Yet again it was clear that Jack was defaulting to listening to podcasts not during work time, and instead during break time, despite having just agreed that podcasts could be listened to during paid work time. I then asked him again about whether a social worker he supported could listen to a podcast during paid work time as part of their CPD, and in contrast he responded "Yeah definitely then yeah yeah yeah". Following this discussion Jack acknowledged that "you know you have kind of informed me there", despite my input in this portion of the interview being restricted to probing questions.

These discussions suggest a fragility to this perceived professional norm and common sense, as when participants were pressed on the point, after a very short discussion half had already changed their minds and accepted that podcasts can be listened to during paid work time as a valid form of CPD. It may, of course, have been easier to accept this within the context of the research interview than it would be in the context of a busy team where vacancies and workloads are high, time is short and any challenges to conventional common sense norms are unlikely to be successful (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b; UNISON, 2019, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a; BASW, 2023a).

Notably podcasts being free to access was not a significant theme when discussing their potential for social work CPD, similar to the discussions with podcaster participants outlined in the previous chapter. As was discussed in that chapter this may be related to the presumption that podcasts as a medium are free, and that social work CPD provided predominantly by employers is also usually free to social workers, meaning this point didn't even warrant mentioning. Furthermore, as outlined in the literature review, even fully funded CPD opportunities for social workers struggle with securing sufficient employer support, meaning that for participants in this study podcasts being free may seem insignificant next to workplace challenges that were very prominently discussed (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b; Stevenson, 2018; Baginsky *et al*., 2019; Cordis Bright, 2019; Interface Associates, 2019; Turner, 2019, 2020; Kantar, 2020; Smith and Moore, 2020; Skills for Care, 2021; Moriarty *et al*., 2021; Preston, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022).

When asked about the perceived limitations of podcasts as social work CPD all participants were able to come up with at least one limitation, but these were less prominent in the interviews than the benefits discussed, and as with the disagreements about the value of informality and humour on podcasts, there were often varying perspectives on whether something is a limitation or not. The most prominent limitation, as in the previous chapter, related to the potential that podcasts were lacking in quality or rigour. Deb specifically described "quality control" as a limitation, highlighting her concerns in particular if a social work podcaster is "pitching it as educational" without some sort of oversight. Notably though Deb also acknowledged that other forms of CPD can experience this limitation of quality control too, as discussed in the previous section. Lou, Gav, Jack and Kim all similarly detailed concerns about the information that is presented by some podcasts, including that

podcasts were often dealing with particular “perspectives” or “views” rather than verified information.

In some cases the concerns went beyond this. Jack pointed to a particular social work podcast he had listened to where he felt the podcaster was “tip-toeing along some lines”. He then suggested that this was a limitation of podcasts more generally: “anyone can do them and you can be popular without being necessarily ethical”. It is notable in these discussions that none of the participants made a distinction between independent podcasts and those that were developed by established social work organisations, with participants describing listening to examples of both kinds in preparation for their interviews. This suggests that this distinction was not particularly significant for these participants; although it also implies that being linked with an established organisation does not necessarily provide the quality assurance being sought by participants here.

When asked if they would continue to listen to podcasts after the interviews, all six said that they would. Reasons given for ongoing listening included that podcasts were enjoyable, informative, and kept the participant “up to date”. The majority followed through on this, and at the three-month follow-up four of the six participants described continuing to listen to social work podcasts at least monthly. Considering none of the participants described listening to social work podcasts regularly prior to their interviews, this suggests that exposure to social work podcasts may encourage future listening. In their response to the three-month follow-up Mags said as much, describing that she now listened to podcasts weekly and that engaging with this research had “revived her interest in them”.

For the two participants who described not listening to podcasts regularly since their interviews, Lou and Kim, both suggested that it was not from a lack of interest, but

because they were both too busy. In line with discussions around workplace challenges particularly impacting on frontline social workers discussed in other themes in this chapter (Johnson *et al*., 2022), both Lou and Kim were relatively inexperienced social workers compared to the sample as a whole. In contrast the participants who continued to listen to podcasts recounted that a major reason for continuing to listen was the individual control they could exercise over podcasts, and how this related to their approach to CPD more generally, something that was described above as potentially influenced by experience, with more experienced participants exercising more control, and internalising CPD as more in the control of individual social workers. The importance of the individual control being promoted through podcast listening was, however, highlighted by all participants to some extent, and the next theme examines this in more detail as it relates to individualism.

5.3.2 Individualism

The importance of variety and flexibility, both related to the potential to individualise podcast listening experiences, has been discussed in numerous places already in this chapter, the previous chapter, and in the literature review (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023; Belfiore *et al*., 2021), but this theme explores the idea of individualism as it was experienced by the listener participants more specifically. As a starting point, it is noteworthy that the importance of podcast flexibility providing choice around where and when to listen to podcasts was highlighted by all listener participants. This can be seen most prominently in the way that they described engaging with podcasts while undertaking a variety of activities, as already discussed. Mags also expressed that she appreciated the passive nature of podcasts meaning “you do not have to contribute”, something she contrasted with live CPD events, including those undertaken remotely.

More prominent than flexibility under the theme of individualism was variety, with all participants highlighting the value of being able to choose podcasts from the large number available. This included, as already discussed, being able to choose podcasts that meet their own preferred style and preferred level of informality. This is in line with research into podcasts generally, where one of the most commonly cited reasons why listeners engaged with podcasts is the choice that they are afforded (McCLung and Johnson, 2010; Berry, 2015). This choice is also a central part of the new media reality based on mass self-communication that has been highlighted throughout this thesis, whereby communication of the many to the many dominants networked communication over Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the network society, facilitating a wide range of variety and control for those engaging (Castells, 2007, 2015).

All participants described the variety of podcasts as being valuable in picking and choosing what podcasts to listen to. Both Lou and Jack used the term “self-selective” to describe podcasts and how they facilitated this choice. Four participants also described this variety as being important for avoiding certain podcasts and topics. Jack for example described that when he went searching for social work podcasts one of the podcasts he came across was created by someone who he was aware of through social media and he “didn’t agree with their general approach” so he avoided that podcast, stating, “I chose not to listen”. In another example, Deb described that one of the first podcasts that she found she “started and stopped very, very quickly” because she did not like the style, and felt that it was “kind of targeted to more newly qualified” professionals. Mags described engaging in “sort of browsing through” podcasts in a similar way and how she found the varied topics valuable as a newly qualified social worker still engaging in a lot of early career learning.

This variety and choice could therefore potentially reduce the influence of employers and their networks on social work CPD, offering alternative topics and perspectives that may be less palatable to a social workers employer. This could include podcasts that facilitate and promote networks of counterpower (Castells, 2015) or counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). This could also explain why podcasts have failed to gain traction as something listened to during work time, where CPD provided by employers is more likely to be in service of instilling the economy of performance and hegemonic control, as described in chapter 2 (Stronach *et al*., 2002). The potential to be able to sample different podcasts is something that could therefore promote dissenting social work, as people with dissenting proclivities may find a voice and perspective they may not otherwise have come across. Garrett (2021a) describes the importance of social workers engaging in critical perspectives and engaging with content and debate beyond a "set list" as part of his model of dissenting social work in this way (p.5). As noted in discussing the theme of employers above, some participants did feel beholden to a particular set list of content made available by their employers. Therefore, podcasts may be particularly effective in broadening the horizons of social work CPD, and as Llinares *et al*. (2018) describes, and as touched on in the previous chapter, podcasts exemplify the maxim that "the specific is universal", noting that "no matter how deep or obscure your interests are, there is a podcast for you" (p.2). This also seems to be very much reflecting the desire expressed by podcaster participants in the previous chapter for social workers to be able to "cherry pick" podcasts from a "smorgasbord" of podcasts.

While these discussions around choice largely related to the topic or the content, sometimes the length of the podcast was seen to be important as well. Five of the six listener participants made specific reference to their preference around podcast

length, with all suggesting that their biggest concerns were when podcasts got too long, but with different conceptions of what it meant for a podcast to be too long. Mags even described choosing the social work podcasts that she listened to based on the length of her commute to work, a difficult metric for any podcaster to aim for. This disparity reflects the differences in opinion in the existing research and literature about the ideal length of a podcast, further underscoring the importance of individual choice in podcast listening for listeners (Frydenberg, 2007; Evans, 2008; Paterson *et al*., 2015; Gachago *et al*, 2016; Drew, 2017; Loesing, 2020).

However, although this individual choice was a prominent theme, there were also indications that participants' choices were being influenced in various ways. As was noted in the literature review, algorithmic curation based on computer calculated perceived preferences is used by most podcast platforms in order to make suggestions of podcasts, and the more popular a podcast is the more likely it is to be suggested within this process (Vrikki and Malik, 2019). Five of the six participants described using Spotify in order to find the social work podcasts they listened to, the most popular platform for accessing podcasts in the UK, and one that engages in algorithmic curation (Ofcom, 2022). The only participant who did not state that they used Spotify described finding podcasts on Apple Music and through Twitter (now X) suggestions, both platforms that also use algorithmic curation to influence they content a user sees.

The influence of these algorithms can potentially be seen in some of the podcasts that the participants of this study listened to in preparation for this research. As a reminder, participants were asked to listen to between one to three social work podcast episodes, and were not restricted to independent podcasts or English podcasts. Therefore, as well as the ten podcasts that were identified in the methodology chapter as independent social work podcasts in England, there were dozens more that they

could have chosen from, and hundreds of available podcast episodes. It was clear that participants did expand their reach in this way, including participants describing listening to social work podcasts from Australia, the USA and several European countries. However, despite this there was a lot of overlap in the podcasts that were listened to. There was one particular podcast that was listened to by four participants, and three different participants described listening to another one. There were also several that were mentioned by two participants.

Perhaps most surprising was that three participants even described listening to the same podcast episode, and two participants described listening to another specific podcast episode. This was likely influenced by the importance that most algorithmic curation also places on recently released content, and considering all of the participants would have been searching for social work podcasts around the same general time period. However, it still potentially demonstrates the influence of algorithms on the perceived individual choice of participants, and the control that can be wielded by platforms over the listening habits of social workers engaging with podcasts. If social work podcasts are to become normalised as social work CPD, something that SWE already seems to be endorsing (SWE, 2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c), then the implications of allowing large for-profit platforms to influence the CPD that social workers listen to needs to be interrogated further. Notably though, the fact that multiple participants were engaging with the same podcasts in preparation for this interview also suggests that social work podcasts may be a more collectivist experience than the individualism that participants' responses have indicated so far, a theme that is now explored.

5.3.3 Collectivism

The previous theme ended by highlighting that multiple participants described listening to the same podcasts, and even the same episodes, in preparation for this research, potentially an indication of the importance of recency in podcast algorithmic curation. This finding, in combination with some podcaster participants in the previous chapter noting that their episodes regularly get hundreds or more downloads, suggests that there is a strong likelihood that hundreds of social workers throughout England and internationally are listening to the same podcast episode on any given week. This suggests that podcasts, while almost always an intimate and individual listening experience, could potentially have more of a collective influence, and one that could be harnessed by the profession, in line with the aspirational impact described by podcaster participants in the previous chapter.

The potential for this collectivism was apparent in all of the interviews with listener participants. For example, Gav, Kim and Jack all described that after listening to podcast episodes in preparation for their interviews they shared them with others in their workplaces. All three described that doing this had led to further discussions with colleagues about the podcasts and their content, with Jack specifically describing discussions during supervision sessions he ran with other social workers. Mags described having been on the other end of an interaction like this and as a newly qualified social worker having a podcast suggested to her by a colleague. Lou described the influence of colleagues in encouraging him to listen to podcasts previously also, in particular describing that some of his “younger social work colleagues are very strong advocates for podcasts” and directed him towards podcasts that they thought he would find interesting. This observation from Lou about younger social workers being more inclined towards podcasts is in line with research elsewhere

that has found younger people are more likely to listen to podcasts and have positive opinions of them (Newman *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, podcasts may be particularly beneficial for younger social workers. Miller and Grise-Owens (2021) in an American study of millennial social workers found that they were less likely to engage with the professional support provided by colleagues in the workplace. Podcasts could therefore provide them with an opportunity to engage with issues and supportive discussions outside of their workplace to fill this gap.

Gav described sharing the podcasts he listened to and his thoughts about them on social media platforms. He highlighted that this experience had led him into discussions not just with other social workers, but also the podcasters themselves. This could be seen as an example of the listener engagement that podcaster participants described trying to promote in the previous chapter becoming actualised. Gav described that his first positive interaction on Twitter (now X) with a podcaster had made him more confident and on occasion he now directly emails podcasters to ask follow-up questions about their podcasts, or for recommendations for further reading related to the topics discussed. He spoke positively about these experiences too:

> Most people who do the podcasts if I've ever had a query they've been really generous and come back and have gone, oh well I actually meant this or that's a good point I didn't mean it to sound like that, I meant it you know. So I think that's the kind of the good side of social media.

Deb described that listening to podcasts felt like a proxy for some of the discussions that she wished she was able to have in her workplace:

> It's conversations you won't necessarily get anywhere else and I think that's the useful thing is I do not think I would have those conversations in my work setting about hope.

As outlined in the previous chapter, many of the podcaster participants specifically described that they were trying to encourage conversations and discussions that social workers currently did not feel they were able to have in this way. While Deb did not describe going from listening to these conversations to having them herself, they do appear here to have made her feel to some degree as a participant in these discussions regardless.

This theme suggests that there is potential for more networking around podcasts, with the experiences that these listener participants had, either with colleagues, over social media or with the podcasters themselves, all being described positively. This could also point to the potential for podcasts to be engaged with in promoting networked counterpower (Castells, 2015), dissenting social work (Garrett, 2021a) or counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), all described requiring a collective approach that goes beyond individual action and activities. However, as outlined in the previous chapter, social work podcasting, including independent social work podcasting, remains largely dominated by those with existing platforms or involved with large established organisations. This could limit the potential for podcasts to promote these alternative perspectives and to engage in challenge. The next theme examines this in more detail, looking at the theme of social worker voice.

5.3.4. Social Worker Voice

The previous chapter noted that ten of the twelve podcaster participants expressed their desire for their podcasts to promote social work voices, mirroring the experiences of social work podcasters captured elsewhere (Fronek *et al*. 2016; Fox *et al*., 2023). This was seen to have the potential to challenge the high level of critical media and political scrutiny social workers tend to face in England (Reid and Misener, 2001; Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Rogowski, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2019; Edmondson and King,

2016; Warner, 2018; McCulloch, 2018; Hanley, 2021; Leedham, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). However, despite all the podcaster participants being social workers, this desire to promote social work voices on podcasts was not always seen as being fulfilled, and several of the participants made reference to the difficulties they had in getting frontline social workers to engage with them on podcasts. This was described by participants as potentially linked to the influence of “fear” on social workers, which has been shown elsewhere to impact on willingness to speak out and in particular to challenge (Ayre, 2001; Littlechild, 2008; Jones, 2014, 2019; Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Bay, 2019; O’Connor, 2020; Cane and Tedam, 2022; Murphy, 2023a). Throughout this thesis the potential for hegemonic control manufactured through acceptance and consent have also been highlighted as precluded the potential for social workers to speak out, including on podcasts (Gramsci, 1971).

However, it is notable that in the case of the listener participants in this study, this fear did not seem to be a prominent theme, and in fact all six participants stated that they would be comfortable speaking on a podcast. Participants described their enthusiasm for speaking on a podcasts to varying degrees, with Jack saying “I’d love to yeah absolutely”, in contrast to Kim who suggested “I possibly could”. Significantly though, even though none of the listener participants described having previously been involved in any social work podcasts at the time they were interviewed, all put themselves forward to be interviewed about podcasts, and therefore may be more likely to speak out generally, and may be particularly interested in podcasts. These factors could therefore potentially be mitigating the influence of any fear in speaking out in these cases. Furthermore, this finding could be influenced by the potential that my profile in social work created an echo-chamber or epistemic bubble that impacted on recruitment, as discussed in detail in chapter 3, leading to those who are more

inclined to speak out critically about issues facing social work to be participants in this research (Nguyen, 2020).

All participants did express at least one caveat in relation to being on podcasts, and for some it was clear that they would only do so under very specific circumstances. Even Jack who stated that he would “love to” be on a podcast, noted that “it feels like it’s quite a commitment” too, and that he would likely only do so if someone else did a lot of the work involved. In a similar vein Gav described his interest in being on a podcast, but that he would only do so “as long as I’ve got enough time to prepare for it and I know what it’s about or what I’m contributing to”. This suggests that there may be more reticence about speaking on a podcast than was initially expressed by these participants, and these comments suggest this may be directly linked with the lack of time social workers feel they have in general due to heavy workloads (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; UNISON, 2019; Ravalier *et al*., 2020, 2023; Johnson *et al*., 2022; Skills for Care, 2022; Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children’s Services, 2022; UNISON, 2022a; Murphy, 2023a; Department for Education, 2023a, BASW, 2023a). This also suggests that some of the barriers that were minimised by the podcaster participants as outlined in the previous chapter are potentially more significant for those who are looking to gain a foothold in social work podcasting.

One barrier not described in detail by podcaster participants was the potential influence of employers. This was, however, seen in the data collected from listener participants. As an example, Lou described that he would need to clear any engagement with a podcast with his employer, and specifically their “comms team”. This employer influence could also be seen implicitly from Deb who described that she would not want to discuss her everyday job, and Mags, who said she would worry

about confidentiality and therefore only talk about certain topics on a podcast. This suggests employer influence not only over the CPD that these participants engaged with, as already discussed (Brown and Keen, 2004; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Farrow, 2014; Gillies, 2015; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Pearce *et al*., 2015; Rees *et al*., 2018; Cordis Bright, 2019; Gordon *et al*., 2019), but also the CPD they felt they could be involved in creating. This may have been absent from discussions with podcaster participants because most were in relatively senior positions and already had a public platform, reducing the likelihood that their employer would take issue with their presence on this new medium. This further underscores the need for critical reflection and discussion about the potential for social work podcasts to engage more varied voices and break down barriers, including for those outside of English speaking countries in the Global South. If podcasts are to have an impact in promoting counterpower then it is vital to network with these more varied global voices, and ensure that they do not become switched-off as this new medium is increasingly influential (Castells, 2015).

Notably, Kim described that she worried that she would not have the confidence to speak on a podcast, although she described feeling “inspiration” from the podcasts that she listened to in preparation for her research interview, in particular highlighting a podcast she had listened to involving black and female social workers who were inspiring for her as an early career black female social worker. This last point from Kim is noteworthy, and as was discussed in the previous chapter, one of the main motivations from podcaster participants was the desire to present positive stories of social work, alongside seeking to model open discussions and dialogue. This suggests that there is the potential for podcasters to step beyond aspirational impact and engage in more varied voices, and that it could have a positive impact in promoting

voice and representation within the profession. One of the podcaster participants had spoken explicitly about their desire to promote the voices of social workers from minoritised ethnic groups through their podcast in order to generate exactly this type of inspiration. However, as the themes throughout this chapter and the previous chapter have highlighted, the current social work podcast landscape is still lacking in relation to examples like this.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored a number of themes related to each of the research question. The first half of the chapter provides important insights into the interplay of power and counterpower related to social work CPD as experienced by these participants, including how markets and networks shape CPD provision, an important perspective for research question 2 and 3. The next section looked at themes as they related to the social work podcasts, and specifically the themes of podcasts as CPD, individualism, collectivism and social worker voice. These findings specifically inform research question 2, looking at the potential for podcasts as social work CPD, but also research question 1, considering the landscape of independent social work podcasts in England. Notably though, as with the previous chapter, there were aspects of each theme relevant to each research question, and so it is important that despite this emphasis, the holistic understanding of this research and the findings is not lost.

As highlighted throughout this chapter, listener participants all described having found the process of listening to podcasts generally straightforward, and were overwhelmingly positive about the experience, and the potential for podcasts as social work CPD. Furthermore, when asked in the three-month follow-up, two thirds continued to listen to social work podcasts at least monthly, with the others pointing to lack of time as the main reason for not doing so, rather than a lack of interest. This

suggests a very positive picture about the potential for social work podcasts as CPD amongst these participants. However, it was noted that the current landscape of social work podcasts also has the potential to exclude certain voices, and promote hegemonic control through manufacturing acceptance and encouraging social workers to internalise their own subjugation and avoid engaging in dissent and challenge (Gramsci, 1971). The theme of collectivism, however, also highlighted the potential for podcasts to support collaboration amongst social workers, as well as the likelihood that algorithmic curation means that there are hundreds of social workers who listen to the same podcast episodes in any given week. The potential for promoting this collaborative engagement around podcasts is something that could therefore also be further explored. The next chapter examines these points further, and aims to synthesis the findings of this chapter and the previous chapter more cohesively in line with the qualitative meta-analysis approach (Timulak, 2009), highlighting the key contributions to knowledge made by this research, as well as drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter draws together the findings from both the podcaster participants and listener participants in line with the qualitative meta-analysis approach outlined in chapter 3 (Timulak, 2009). A major contribution to knowledge stemming from this research is that it has demonstrated that the hundreds, thousands, and maybe even hundreds of thousands of podcast episodes with relevance to social work, freely and flexibly available to anyone with a smartphone or computer, could contribute to the social work continuing professional development (CPD) landscape in England. However, any impact of these podcasts on the profession will be dependent on the opportunities afforded by them being effectively engaged with, while reducing the impact of the challenges also identified, in particular those related to voice and representation.

The positivity around podcasts expressed by all podcaster participants and all listener participants suggests they have a range of potential advantages for social work CPD, including accessibility and flexibility, variety and reach, promotion of dialogue, currency, and independence and choice. Podcasts were also noted to have the potential to overcome many of the challenges social workers face when trying to engage with CPD, around employer support, employer control, flexibility, exclusion and representation. Collectivist elements of podcasts, including those related to discussing and sharing content, activism and podcast networks, were also found in the data, and these were suggested to be a potential way for social workers to engage in dissent and counterpower, shifting the influence of social work podcasts from the individual to the broader social work profession, and society.

Challenges were noted, including around quality assurance, representation, the impact of algorithmic curation, and the potential for podcasts to be used by employers

and policy makers to abdicate their responsibilities around podcasts and promote hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971). However, some of these criticisms were also noted by participants to be challenges experienced by all social work CPD, in particular around quality assurance and representation. Therefore, in engaging with the findings of this research and drawing out recommendations, the goal was to look for ways to overcome these challenges, while also seeking ways to take advantage of the potential opportunities afforded by social work podcasts. In line with this, this chapter outlines recommendations for policy, practice and further research, alongside providing more details on the key contribution to knowledge made by this research, and addressing limitations of the research. However, first an overview of the research findings is presented, providing more details of how the key contributions to knowledge stemming from this research relate to each research question, and consolidating the findings outlined in the previous two chapters through the qualitative meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009). .

6.1 Overview of Research Findings

The overview of the research provided here is presented as it relates to the research questions that were developed through engagement with the existing literature in this outlined in chapter 2:

1. What is the landscape of social work podcasting in England?
2. What is the interplay of power and counterpower as this relates to both social work podcasts and CPD in England?
3. What potential do free, open access podcasts have for social workers within the new CPD context of social workers in England?

Each of these questions has been referenced throughout the findings presented in the previous two chapter, with a particular focus on highlighting which themes were relevant to answering which research questions. However, it was also stressed that in line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) that the data analysis was iterative and the themes and research questions overlapped in a number of ways. This was additionally led by an understanding of network ontology, as outlined in chapter 3, including a recognition of the persistently changing relationships within networks and allowing for the maintenance of multiplicity of understanding within frameworks of knowledge (Eriksson, 2005; Baecker, 2007).

Research question 1, looking at the independent social work podcast landscape in England, was answered primarily through the findings from the interviews with the independent podcaster participants, as outlined in chapter 4. A wide range of themes were analysed related to the potential for podcasts as CPD, podcaster independence, listener influence, social impact, and voice and representation. These findings were also supplemented by the experiences of the listener participants, who, like the podcaster participants, were overwhelmingly positive about social work podcasts and their potential for CPD. These themes suggest that independent social work podcasters are in many ways similar to independent podcasters generally (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Shamburg, 2020), including around their motivations stemming from interest in the content and personal enjoyment.

However, there were also some important distinctions, with podcaster participants in this research being more inclined towards a rejection of market incentives or what Sullivan (2018) describes as the “aspirational labour” of many podcasters seeking future monetisation (p.26). Instead, the social work podcasters in this research were

more likely to express wariness around engaging with advertisers and other forms of monetisation, and instead were more focused on the potential positive impact they could have through podcasting, or what I described as aspirational impact. The key contribution to knowledge from this research in relation to research question 1 is therefore that the independent social work podcast landscape in England is complicated, with varying levels of independence and collectivism involved for both participants and listeners. The podcaster participants were also noted to represent predominantly social workers in senior roles who already had public platforms. Therefore, the potential for the current approach to social work podcasting in England to perpetuate and engrain existing hegemonic control was also discussed throughout the previous two chapters as it related to the various themes (Gramsci, 1971).

Research question 2 related to power and counterpower across social work podcasts and social work CPD, and these themes were central to the theoretical framework of this research based primarily on Castells' (2010a) theory of the network society. Within that theory, Castells (2011) identifies four interrelated forms of power, and network power, the power resulting from the standards and rules within networks, and network-making power, the power to programme and connect networks, were both noted to be particularly relevant to this research and referenced throughout this thesis. Counterpower was also highlighted as important within the theoretical framework, described as the capacity of social actors to challenge and change the embedded power relations within networks (Castells, 2015).

This interplay between power and counterpower was discussed throughout the thesis as it relates to social work CPD and podcasts, for example, in relation to representation on social work podcasts. Therefore, the key contribution to knowledge stemming from this research related to research question 2 is that the interplay between power and

counterpower were important in shaping the experience of participants in relation to both social work CPD and social work podcasts. These issues, including how they relate to what voices, and whose values and interests, are represented on podcasts and reinforced through their influence, therefore need to be central to any discussions about the potential of social work podcasts as social work CPD going forward.

This sits alongside the themes of power and counterpower related to social work CPD, where listener participants in particular highlighted the performativity inherent in contemporary social work CPD, as well as noting the influence of employers, networks and markets. All listener participants were critical of the new regulator, Social Work England (SWE), and the requirement to record CPD evidence annually, although there was noted disagreement about whether that criticism relates to the requirements placing too much of a burden on social workers or not. Also significant was that participants all inherently framed discussions of their CPD through the lens of SWE's regulatory recording requirements, suggesting they have internalised this new approach as representative of common sense for social workers in contemporary workplaces engaging in CPD (Gramsci, 1971).

Within all of these discussions there were themes relevant to research question 3, looking at the potential of social work podcasts as CPD. Podcaster participants described the importance of accessibility and flexibility, variety and reach, dialogue, and currency, while listener participants highlighted the benefits of podcasts, including under the themes of individualism and collectivism. Challenges were also noted, including in relation to quality assurance, representation, the impact of algorithmic curation, and the potential for podcasts to be used by employers and policy makers to abdicate their responsibilities around social work CPD. Therefore, as noted earlier in this chapter, the key contribution to knowledge from this work as it relates to research

question 3 is that there is potential for social work podcasts to play an important role in social work CPD in England, but that there are also challenges that need to be accounted for, and in particular any consideration of podcasting needs to be engaged with in relation to their potential to reinforce and reaffirm hegemonic control and the status quo (Gramsci, 1971). The next section examines these contributions to knowledge in more detail, while also noting how they relate to the findings around CPD regulation, the independent social work podcaster landscape in England, and power and counterpower, as outlined in this section. This includes more detail on how this research sits alongside existing research and literature in this area, although this does not repeat the discussions presented in the previous two chapters or in the literature review.

6.2 Key Contribution to Knowledge

Chapter 1 of this thesis outlined the rapid growth of social work podcasts both before and during the course of this research, and the scale of podcast growth in the social work field shows no signs of slowing down. Several new independent social work podcasts that would have met the inclusion criteria for this study have started since the sampling was undertaken, including some with a decidedly critical approach (*for example* Do Do Social Work). Social work podcasts have also been getting increased media coverage (*for example,* BASW, 2023c), and there have even been recent examples of important policy revelations related to social work being made on podcasts (Lepper, 2021; Simpson, 2022). Since starting this research (but after the data collection was completed) I myself have been a guest on four different social work podcast episodes, including being invited to a live recording of the Let's Talk Social Work podcast to talk about this research (McClenaghan, 2023). This suggests that podcasts are of growing importance for the social work profession, including in social

work CPD, and that this research is particularly timely alongside this growing importance. This section considers in more detail the key contribution this research makes in light of this growing influence.

As outlined in detail in chapter 2, there have been a number of studies looking at the use of podcasts in social work, although these largely stem from outside of England and are focused on qualifying education (Feit *et al*., 2008; Tjorve *et al*., 2010; Stoltenkamp *et al*., 2011; Luna and Cullen, 2011; Cartney, 2014; Pillay *et al*., 2015; McGovern, 2017; Byrne *et al*., 2017; Bowers and Pack, 2017; Asakura *et al*., 2018; Lucas and Thomas, 2020; Ferrer *et al*., 2020; Hitchcock *et al*., 2021). The rare examples of social work research into podcasts as CPD all involved a focus on a single podcast, and with the podcasters also acting as researchers (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019). This research therefore provides a novel contribution to the knowledge in this area through its focus on social work podcasts as CPD in the context of England, and with a focus on the influence of podcasts generally, instead of focusing on the impact of a single podcast created by the researcher.

As outlined already in this chapter, podcaster and listener participants were both overwhelmingly positive about the potential for social work podcasts as CPD.. Themes identified by podcaster participants that point to the potential for social work podcasts as CPD included accessibility and flexibility, variety and reach, dialogue, and currency, and listener participants highlighted the value of social work podcasts for them both individually and in relation to their collective impact. The importance of individual choice was also prominent throughout all of the interviews. For podcaster participants this related to choices around advertisements, approach and curation. For listener participants this choice related primarily to what podcasts to listen to, including in relation to style, length and topic, as well as what podcasts to avoid. In all of this the

variety of podcasts available was prominent in facilitating this choice. This suggests that if the opportunities afforded by social work podcasts are to be engaged with effectively, it will be crucial that social workers and podcasters do not lose the ability to exercise this choice. However, algorithmic curation was also noted to have a role in influencing this choice, and therefore it will be important to understand the role this plays, and the control it provides to large commercial platforms like Spotify over social work CPD opportunities stemming from podcasts.

Another key contribution to knowledge from this research is that social workers may not engage with social work podcasts in the same way as other podcasts. Podcaster participants and listener participants all described that they tended to listen to podcasts while undertaking other tasks, including commuting, driving, exercising, doing housework, gardening, walking, walking a dog, sunbathing and eating. However, when it came to social work podcasts, listener participants expressed reticence about this, noting that listening to social work podcasts can be more mentally taxing than other podcasts, requiring specific time to be set aside to focus. This suggests there may be limits to the flexibility that participants described around podcasts and that has been widely identified in research into social work podcasts previously (Salloum and Smyth, 2013; Fronek *et al*., 2016; Singer, 2019; Blakemore and Agillas, 2019; Fox *et al*., 2023; Belfiore *et al*., 2021).

Despite this need to set aside specific time to focus, no listener participants described listening to social work podcasts during work time, and all initially questioned whether it would be appropriate for social workers to do so. Half of the listener participants agreed after some discussion that social workers should be allowed to take time to listen to podcasts out of their paid working day, in the same way that most other CPD is engaged with. This suggests that their initial belief around podcasts not being

suitable during work time could be perceived as common sense within the profession, promoting a professional norm which, as discussed in the previous two chapters, has the potential to reduce podcasts' ability to promote counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). However, the speed at which half of the participants changed their minds during the course of the interview on this point also suggests that this professional norm may be fragile and ripe for challenge. This also suggests that some guidance and support for both employers and social workers may help support podcasts to become more integrated into social work CPD experiences, and help to normalise them as a potential source for alternative voices and dissent, including during work time. This point returned to later in this chapter when looking at recommendations.

In relation to the challenges of using social work podcasts as CPD, the most prominent one posed explicitly by both podcaster and listener participants related to quality assurance. While some participants also noted this was a challenge related to all social work CPD, it was clear that there were some specific aspects of podcasting that participants felt made the medium particularly susceptible to being negatively impacted by a lack of quality assurance, including that there was no gatekeeping around who could make a social work podcast and who listened to it. As outlined in chapter 3, there have been attempts to develop quality indicators or frameworks for podcasts, but these remain inconsistent, limited and lacking in evidence of effectiveness (Carvalho *et al*., 2009; Fernandez *et al*., 2015; Paterson *et al*., 2015; Lin *et al*., 2015, 2023; Littlefield *et al*., 2015; Drew, 2017; Nwosu *et al*., 2017).

There were no consistent approaches to quality assurance that were discussed by podcaster participants in this research either. For example, metrics were described as unreliable and treated predominantly with apathy. Furthermore, any use of metrics as a measure of quality would need to account for the impact of algorithmic curation,

shown in this research to have likely impacted on the podcasts listened to even by the six listener participants here. Algorithmic curation is also highly susceptible to being manipulated by the platforms that host podcasts, and this has the potential to place a significant amount of control over social work CPD in the hands of private organisations that have been shown previously to manipulate algorithms to meet their commercial interests (O'Neill, 2017; Vrikki and Malik, 2019; Maicki, 2020; Ovenden, 2021).

As outlined in chapter 2, Heeremans (2018) have suggested that membership in podcast networks can provide a level of quality assurance for podcasts. However, in this research social work podcast networks were shown to be underdeveloped. Furthermore, any reliance on podcast networks for quality assurance would be impacted by the voice and representation afforded by the social work podcasts making up these networks, and it is therefore worth reiterating that independent podcasters identified for this research were likely to already have existing platforms, and themes around influential guests, social worker voices and service user voices all identified additional concerns related to representation. Along these lines, Castells (2010a) highlights that being part of networks brings advantages that replicate exponentially, but also that the disadvantages for those outside of these networks is felt far more acutely. Any reliance on network membership as a marker of quality would potentially exacerbate this exclusion.

This therefore leads onto another key contribution to knowledge stemming from this research, that independent social work podcasts in their current form struggle to effectively engage diverse voices and perspectives. Despite eleven out of twelve podcaster participants describing that they wanted to use their podcasts to promote positive social work stories, they also spoke about the challenges of getting social

workers to come on their podcasts. Similarly, although podcaster participants described wanting to engage service user voices, the guests that were invited on to podcasts were usually chosen either for their potential to generate interest, or through their existing network connections with the podcasters.

Podcaster participants themselves noted that they mostly had existing platforms, and described technological, financial and time commitments they had to make that could prevent other social workers from becoming podcasters. There were also aspects to podcasts like the prominent use of “banter” by male podcaster participants that could discourage some social workers from becoming podcasters, or engaging in social work podcast networks or communities (Whittle *et al*., 2019; Cameron, 2020; Buglass *et al*., 2021). This could also help to explain why despite assertions that podcasts have the potential to promote female voices more effectively than other mediums (Mottram, 2016; Llinares, 2018; Copeland, 2018; Miron-Spektor *et al*., 2022) the majority of podcasters continue to be male (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Barrios-O’Neill, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019; Shamburg, 2020; Newman *et al*., 2022).

The final key contribution to knowledge to be discussed here as stemming from this research relates to counterpower (Castells, 2015) and dissent (Garrett, 2021a) and the role that podcasts can play in both. The significance of power and counterpower related to both social work podcasts and social work CPD was analysed throughout this thesis, in particular in relation to the findings presented in the previous two chapters. It was shown that social work podcasts can have a collective impact related to networks, activism, engaging colleagues and social workers listening to the same podcasts. The potential for virtual communities of practice (vCoP) to develop around podcasts was also discussed, consisting of a community with a shared passion for

podcasting, or the issues and topics discussed on podcasts (Cook-Craig and Sabah, 2009; Adedoyin, 2016; Murtagh and Rushton, 2023).

There were some indications that vCoP or something similar have started to form in relation to podcasts, including in the way podcasters engaged with each other and with their listeners and the wider social work community, both nationally and internationally. This suggests that despite the potential role of social work podcasts in perpetuating dominant networks described in the previous two chapters, there is also a strong potential for social work podcasts to promote alternative perspectives, including around dissent and counterpower. Fanon (1959) describes in his writing around the use of the radio Algerian revolution that there was initial reluctance to engage with the radio from the colonised, seeing it as a tool of the colonisers. However, once the potential of the radio for spreading revolutionary messages and opposing the news of colonists was recognised and engaged with, it became a practical and symbolic tool for the revolution. The same trajectory could therefore conceivably be followed for social work podcasts in shifting the balance of podcasting more towards the prioritisation of unheard and marginalised voices, including those from the Global South.

This contribution to knowledge also suggests that social work podcasts could play a role in challenging the individualist and performative approach to CPD that participants described in relation to SWE's model of CPD. However, SWE have also accepted that podcasts are an appropriate source of CPD within their model, and they have even launched their own podcast (SWE, 2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c). Therefore, podcasts could also be utilised as a way to promote the individualised approach to CPD promoted by SWE, further instilling and reinforcing hegemonic control within the profession, by acting as an example of free, flexible CPD that allows employers and

policy makers to further abdicate their responsibilities around social work CPD. These points are returned to in making recommendations stemming from this research, after first looking at the limitations of this research.

6.3 Limitations

Before moving on to examine several specific limitations of this research, it is worth starting this section by reflecting on whether this research and the approach taken could be considered an example of the type of “techno-optimism” that the work of Castells has been previously critiqued for promoting (Slavina and Brym, 2020: 201). As noted in chapter 1, and expanded upon in chapter 3, I cannot get away from the fact that I was drawn to research around social work podcasts because of my existing interest in and enjoyment of podcasts, and this interest has been maintained throughout the course of this research. The work of Castells was also described above as constituting the historical conjunction of the information age, in line with what Gramsci (1971) refers to as the unique historical moment. Therefore, despite the rapid and accelerating growth of podcasts, both within social work and elsewhere, over the past two decades, they do remain a relatively new medium, and as with any new technology there is a strong potential to exaggerate or inaccurately predict the long-term impact, something Castells (2010a) does recognise in his analysis. Technology is also frequently suggested to be inherently positive in its impact, and O’Neill (2017) has stressed the importance of getting a grip on our “techno-utopia” or what she describes as “that unbounded and unwarranted hope in what algorithms and technology can accomplish” (p.207-208).

Therefore, as well as situating this research within the historical conjunction of the information age, it is also important that I reflect on my own position within that conjunction, and the ways that that this has shaped this research. Although this

research highlighted the potential challenges of podcasts throughout, including notably the strong potential in their current form to perpetuate hegemonic control and domination (Gramsci, 1971), the potential for podcasts to have a positive impact, and even an impact that promotes counterpower, dissent and counter-hegemony, was also stressed throughout. The most fundamental challenge to this potential was noted to be that podcasts, through the platforms that disseminate them, remain inherently tied to capitalist systems, and therefore their potential to influence change and promote dissent may be limited to the aforementioned “interpassivity”, whereby even challenges to capitalist systems are subsumed into those same systems (Fisher, 2009: 12). The platformisation of podcasts, in particular through platforms like Spotify, can therefore be seen as part of what Ovenden (2021) describes as the growing number of “private superpowers” engaging in “surveillance capitalism” predicated on the collection and monetisation of user data (p.199).

The history of technological innovation in social work further suggest this is likely to be the case. For example, in the study referenced above looking at the impact of call centres on social work practice, Coleman and Harris (2008) identify that despite promises to open up communication and access, the focus on market and business solutions, and the positioning of those in receipt of services as consumers, instead had the impact of promoting task-focused units of activity, undermining core elements of social work professionalism in the space of places. This can also be seen in the case of SWE’s CPD recording model, and it was noted that all listener participants already framed their CPD within the context of these new recording requirements, suggesting the substantial influence of these requirements in shaping continuing professional development discourse in less than two years. Even the newly qualified social worker who was interviewed, and has yet to go through the SWE recording

process, was already describing their continuing professional development within the context of these recording requirements.

Arguably, SWE have only been able to implement this model, so grounded in the economy of performance (Stronach *et al*., 2002), because of the technological affordances provided by ICTs. Engaging in a similar process manually, for example through employers as has been suggested by some social workers (YouGov, 2021), would be far more labour intensive for SWE to achieve, and therefore unrealistic based on their budget and scope. Notably SWE's current model also allows them to extend their influence into spheres they would otherwise not be able to, including placing requirements on social workers who are on maternity leave or extended sick leave to also record CPD, a requirement if implemented by employers would almost certainly be subject to legal challenge (SWE, 2020b). The use of ICTs to implement this new recording model of CPD is therefore in line with the views of Harris (2019) who highlights that the central influence of ICTs on contemporary social work practice has led to a situation where social workers are required to record almost every element of their practice.

However, as I have argued elsewhere (Hanley, 2022b), requiring social workers to engage in this performative recording task also provides a fertile ground for dissent. This growing dissent towards SWE, often targeted specifically at their CPD requirements, has also been identified elsewhere (BASW and Social Workers Union, 2022). Dissent can be seen in the findings of this study as well, including the negative views expressed about SWE and their recording requirements from listener participants. In the case of podcasts, both podcaster and listener participants highlighted the importance of the independence that the medium afforded, and were positive about this alongside the collectivist elements that it generated. This is in

contrast to the ways that they tended to describe CPD that was provided by their employers and other sources (including remotely), which was decidedly more mixed. It is possible then that the choice, rather than the technology, is central here, and with thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of podcast episodes that have some relevance to social work freely available to download at any time, podcasts may be able to afford this choice in a way that no other medium today can, and in a way that could be empowering for social workers.

Therefore, while it is important to recognise the potential for this research to be engaging in techno-optimism, and the potential for podcasts as a technology to reinforce, rather than challenge, hegemonic control, it is also vital not to discount the potential noted in this research for podcasts to be a source for counterpower and dissent (Castells, 2015). In this way, Garrett (2021a) highlights that one of the commitments of dissenting social work should be that it appreciates the gains that technology affords, while also alert to the threats that it poses. It is also noteworthy that when the theory of the network society has been applied to social work elsewhere, one of the major conclusions has usually been the need to recognise the benefits of technology while also ensuring that social workers develop practices that redress the negative impacts (O'Brien, 2004; Coleman and Harris, 2008; LeMendola, 2010; Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Smith, 2013, Baker *et al*., 2014, 2017, 2018; Sen, 2016; Frost, 2017; Ruiz-Roman *et al*., 2019). Therefore, when considering recommendations in the final section of this chapter, it will be important to similarly balance both the opportunities and challenges identified in this research.

Before moving on those discussions, there were some more specific limitations related to this research that need to be stated here, some of which lead on to recommendations related to further research. While an extensive search was carried

out to find social work podcasts and social work podcasters, this does not preclude the potential that some social worker podcasters were missed in the process, in particular if they do not identify themselves in the podcast title or description as social workers. As noted in the methodology chapter in relation to my positionality, the sampling may also have been impacted by my public profile, meaning that the sample may not have been truly representative. The small population size of the podcasters also prevented any detailed examination of demographic factors in case it revealed the identity of any particular participants. Being able to explore those areas in detail could have provided additional insights into the findings, in particular in relation to the themes around voice and representation.

Furthermore, while the sample of twelve podcaster participants represented 57% of that potential population of independent podcasters in England at the time, the listener participant sample of six could have come from any of the 100,000 registered social workers in England. This sample, recruited via social media, was potentially more likely to be impacted by my existing profile, based on the potential for social media to create an echo-chamber where you are predominantly exposed to those who reinforce or reaffirm your existing views (O'Neill, 2017; Cinelli *et al*., 2021). This means that, although the call for participants was seen over 35,000 times according to Twitter (now X) analytics, some potential social workers, and in particular those more likely to have views contrary to my own, may not have seen it. These findings therefore don't permit generalisation across this population, but instead offer an understanding and insights into how these participants' experienced podcasts and their own personal narratives generating new knowledge and insights as outlined in the previous chapter. The findings also provide insights about these social worker's experiences that could be

investigated further in scaled up research, including in future quantitative research, as discussed in the next section.

However, it is unavoidable that the target goal of recruiting about twelve listener participants, to mirror the twelve podcaster participants, was not achieved. Notably, this means that data saturation for this population may not have been reached. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) in their systematic literature review of research looking at qualitative data saturation suggested this generally requires a sample of approximately 9-17, although they also stressed the importance of each research study assessing sample numbers and data saturation based on the specific context. Nevertheless, there is the potential that the research could have been improved with a larger sample.

It is prudent as a result to posit what alternative approaches could have been engaged with, or could be engaged with in future, to achieve this larger sample size. For example, a quantitative approach emphasising engaging a larger sample with reduced focus narrative depth and understanding of participant experiences could have been utilised (Bryman, 2012). This type of approach could have involved an online survey or similar model of data collection that allows social workers to complete it within their own time, rather than having to commit to a specific interview time within their already busy schedules. The recruitment strategy for listeners, reliant on social media, also could have been potentially expanded. Although the desire to avoid recruiting social workers through employers was noted above to be a positive in precluding employers exercising control over the social workers who take part, an alternative approach could have been to engage social workers through a professional organisation, such as BASW. However, notably, I have in previous research used both BASW and employers to engage social workers, and still struggled to gain a large sample regardless (Hanley *et al*., 2023).

Therefore, further consideration has to be given to the potential that social workers, habitually overworked and under resourced, are unlikely to prioritise engaging with and supporting research external to their employer organisations, a point made in more detail in chapter 3 when discussing these challenges around sampling, as well as in previous publications I have produced (Hanley, 2020; Hanley *et al.,* 2023). It is also possible that, despite the rapid growth of social work podcasts described in chapters 1 and 2, this area may still not be a salient topic for most social workers, and therefore they didn't have particular interest in being a part of research in this area. The inability of this research to identify metrics related to listener numbers precludes further analysis of exactly how interested social workers in England are in podcasts. Returning to my positionality, there is also the potential that my own public profile precluded some social workers from engaging with the research, and therefore it cannot be discounted that a researcher without such a profile may have had more success in recruiting. Some of these areas are considered in more detail relation to recommendations for future research in the next section.

It is also important to acknowledge that all interviews for this research took place remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have outlined in the methodology the range of steps that were taken to mitigate the potential limitations related to this, as well as the steps taken to take advantage of the potential opportunities afforded by remote interviewing. Steps taken included the gradual building of rapport, setting plans for dealing with technological issues, providing choices for participants and reducing the burden on participants (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Archibald *et al*., 2019; Renosa *et al*., 2021; Campbell, 2021). However, as described by Lobe *et al*. (2020), the unprecedented change and disruption internationally that was experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic

undoubtedly shaped all data collection that took place at this time, and that includes in this research. For social workers this impact may have been more acutely felt, and research has shown that social work working conditions worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic (Gillen *et al*., 2022; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022; Unison, 2022a; Ravalier *et al*., 2023). This could therefore also help to further explain the lower than hoped engagement form social workers as listener participants.

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic could be seen in the way that all of the participants discussed the pandemic to some degree or another during the interviews. More fundamentally it was unavoidably also shaping their perceptions, experiences, outlooks and, as noted by podcaster participants, their podcasts, at the time I was speaking to them. The impact of this context on the research could not be avoided, but it has been acknowledged here, in the methodology, and in examining the findings in chapters 4 and 5. Notably this specific context therefore also provided important findings around the role of podcasts during the pandemic, and how the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic may shape the ongoing influence of social work podcasts as a result.

6.4 Recommendations

The first recommendations stemming from this research relate to the potential for further research to be carried out specifically related to social work podcasts. As discussed in detail in chapter 2, Berry (2018) has argued for an increasing focus on what he calls "podcast studies", based on the growing influence and influx of podcasts (p.30). This suggests that there should be a variety of studies into social work podcasts as well, with this research forming a part of a growing body of literature. As noted in the previous section, future research could include larger quantitative studies of social work podcasters or listeners, to explore whether the views and perspectives

expressed here are representative more broadly. There is scope for research into aspects and areas of podcasting that this research did not address, including social work podcasters who are not independent, podcasts that have ended, and podcasters from outside of England, in particular the Global South. Engaging with larger podcaster populations could also facilitate more analysis of podcaster demographics and characteristics that were largely avoided in the data collection for this research due to concerns about confidentiality. It would also open up perspectives beyond the group of podcasters and listeners included in this research, who, as noted throughout this research, were not necessarily representative of the social work population in England or internationally. These alternative voices and perspectives could also promote more engagement with some of the critical issues raised by these findings, including the gendered aspects of podcasts and the role of “banter”. There is furthermore potential for future research into the use of podcasts as CPD to focus on specific areas of social work practice, both within England, such as newly qualified social workers or those studying for advanced qualifications, like Best Interest Assessor or Approved Mental Health Practitioner qualifications, and social workers outside of England, including those working in specific countries and regions.

Another recommendations stemming from this research relates to how to harness any potential of social work podcasts. As described in the previous chapter the listener participants in this study were positive about podcasts, and while none of them were regular listeners to social work podcasts prior to the study, three months later two thirds were still listening to social work podcasts at least once per month. Those who did not continue to listen highlighted that they would have if they had the time, pointing towards the poor working conditions and high workloads commonly raised by social workers as a barrier to engaging with CPD generally (Local Government Association,

2019a, 2019b, 2023; Reddington *et al*., 2021; Reddington, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; UNISON, 2022a; BASW, 2023a). This positivity from participants, and the fact that most kept listening, suggests that finding a way to encourage social workers to try listening to social work podcasts may be a key step in promoting longer term and broader engagement with a medium that could have a positive impact on social work.

As one potential suggestion, this encouragement could come in the form of guidance for social workers around how to engage effectively with podcasts. This guidance could be in text, video or audio format, covering the technical aspects of accessing and listening to podcasts. However, as was shown in this research, the listener participants were all able to engage with podcasts without any technical support or input. Therefore, any guidance could move beyond just technical aspects of how to access podcasts, although notably this technical guidance could still be particularly important for some groups of social workers, including older social workers, who are not only less likely to engage with podcasts due to technological barriers (Ofcom, 2022), but also more likely to work overtime and not have the time to learn how to engage with new types of CPD like podcasts (Johnson *et al*., 2022).

To make any guidance relevant and valuable to all social workers in encouraging podcast engagement, it could also cover areas like explaining how social work podcasts can be treated like other CPD, with social workers afforded time during their working day to listen to them as part of their development. In addition, it would be important for any guidance to address some of the ethical concerns that were raised about social work podcasts in this research. For example, social workers could be encouraged to restrict their listening to only podcasts that have available transcripts or appropriate representation. In this way social workers could be encouraged to make decisions about what podcasts to listen to based not just on interest, length or context,

but also in relation to inclusivity. This could have the added impact of encouraging social work podcasters to provide transcripts and engage with more varied voices and perspectives. Furthermore, encouraging social workers to make informed, ethical decisions about the podcasts that they listen to could reduce the influence of podcast platforms like Spotify and the potentially negative impacts of the algorithmic curation they employ.

Any guidance could also include some specific information for employers, in particular around encouraging them to support social workers to take time to engage with podcasts during work time. This could be incentivised through highlighting the connections between the various social work professional standards and frameworks outlined in chapter 2 and social work podcasts, as well as noting SWE's (2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022) consistently positive endorsements of podcasts as CPD, areas that are more likely to speak to employer incentives. However, placing any responsibility around podcasts in the hands of employers could also limit the potential of podcasts to have an impact, and as noted in the literature review and the findings of this study, employers struggle to effectively support social worker continuing professional development generally despite exercising significant control over it (Brown and Keen, 2004; Doel *et al*., 2008; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Pearce *et al*., 2015; Rees *et al*., 2018; Gordon *et al*., 2019; Cordis Bright, 2019; Staniforth and Appleby, 2022). It stands to reason that they would be highly likely to similarly fail to effectively support social workers to engage with podcasts, something that the findings of this study suggest may already be the case.

The role of hegemony being perpetuated by the control that employer dictate over social work CPD has been discussed throughout this thesis, and any granting of control over the podcasts that social workers engage with to employers is likely to lead

to an extension and reinforcement of the subordination of social workers in relation to their CPD (Gramsci, 1971). This would also likely reduce or remove the potential for podcasts to act towards developing good sense discussions and counter-hegemonic perspectives and ideas. The fact that SWE (SWE, 2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c) consistently promote podcasts for CPD while also perpetuating and reinforcing the common sense norm within the profession that CPD is ultimately the responsibility of social workers, could also mean that, rather than having a dissenting or counter-hegemonic influence, podcasts could further engrain this status quo through facilitating both employers and SWE to further abdicate any responsibility for providing social workers with the time, resources and support to engage with CPD effectively.

Therefore, it may be more effective to encourage social workers to develop supportive networks to engage in podcasts themselves, with or without employer input. This could also help to broaden engagement around podcasts nationally, or internationally, encouraging wider discussions between professionals across the globe. The previous chapter identified that many social workers are likely listening to the same podcast each week based on recency and algorithmic curation. Significantly, Garrett (2021a) in outlining his model of dissenting social work, Castells (2015) in describing networked social movements of counterpower, and Gramsci (1988) in outlining counter-hegemony, all highlight the central importance of collective experiences in this way. Therefore, a more prescient focus of any guidance developed could be to consider ways to promote the collectivist elements of podcasts that were identified in this research, potentially encouraging the formation and extension of VCoPs around these (Cook-Craig and Sabah, 2009; Adedoyin, 2016; Murtagh and Rushton, 2023).

Building on this idea, if guidance is developed, it could be done through a VCoP or similar network approach, in a way that promotes inclusion through networked

connections. This would have the additional benefit of promoting inclusion of those who are geographically isolated, and in particular help to engage people internationally, including social workers and service users in the Global South. However, it would also be important not to replicate the exclusion so prominent in the network society in this process, or there is a strong risk of creating an echo-chamber and promoting only those voices already heard in relation to podcasts and social work CPD (Nguyen, 2020). In all of these engagements, in line with the approach taken by networked social movements, non-hierarchical networked coordination could be prioritised, without a specific leader identified (Castells, 2015).

However, this raises the important question of how a network of this nature could or should start, and that is not something that this research has an obvious answer to. One potential way is that, building on the example of networked social movements, a network could be sparked to develop through collective hope shared through networked interactions over ICTs, eventually leading to collective action (Castells, 2015). This research, as the first of its kind, could potentially act as a spark to promote this kind of engagement, in particular if I am able to share it nationally or internationally using my aforementioned public profile. However, it would also be important to recall the potential for an approach of this nature to only reach a small group within the echo-chamber of those who already engage with my work, in particular over social media (O'Neill, 2017; Cinelli *et al*., 2021). It may be, therefore, that a national, or international, organisation would need to be involved in organising or making the initial introductions that could lead to the development of a network like this, for example BASW or IFSW. This, however, inherently also brings potential for exclusion and a reaffirmation of the status quo, rather than promoting social work podcasts as a potential source for counterpower and dissent promoting alternative and unheard voices.

There are also important questions related to how any podcast guidance that a group like this develops could, or should, be evaluated. This is particularly challenging considering the already stated challenges around evaluating individual podcasts, with all existing approaches noted to be inadequate and open to manipulation. Therefore, the potential to find a consistent way to evaluate any podcast guidance that is developed is not something that this research has a clear answer to either. There may also be the potential that those developing any guidance may not want the it to be evaluated in the ways that social work policy and research currently prioritises. As was highlighted in chapter 3, the social work policy landscape is dominated by a focus on 'what works' approaches that emphasise the importance of assessing the impact of specified interventions based on pre-determined metrics of success (Krauss, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Webb, 2023). However, these evaluations often ignore key questions around who determines what counts as working, and whose interests are promoted and prioritised in that determination (Biesta, 2007, 2017). Furthermore, in line with the approach to networked counterpower presented by Castells (2015), "productivist" visions for social change that promote specific goals are noted to be not always useful in the network society, being that they render failure to meet those goals a de facto failure of any movement in a way that can then be used by dominant networks to discredit them (p.140). Therefore, it would be important not to restrict the value of any developed podcast guidance, whatever form it takes, to predetermined expectations of what it should be and the impact it should have.

These suggestions for encouraging engagement with podcasts, including through developing guidance in this area, all rest on the findings of this study that podcasts were found overwhelmingly positive by participants. It is important to reiterate that the findings also highlighted some important challenges in relation to social work podcasts

that would need to be addressed if podcasts are to be encouraged in this way. In particular, the findings raised important issues related to voice and representation on podcasts, whereby the voices of some social workers, service users and people from the Global South, are largely neglected. This is, therefore, another important recommendation from this research, and one that should be addressed before any encouragement of social work podcasts should be promoted: there is a need to harness the potential for service user involvement and alternative voices in podcasts.

Significantly, although the findings of this research have been interpreted at times to suggest the potential that podcasts have in promoting alternative voices, including service users, it is also true that the findings from this research could be read as social work podcasts being a new space that has been colonised by those with privilege to amplify their already prominent voices. Podcaster participants in this study described the technological, resource and time commitments they had to overcome to start their podcasts. In other examples, participants noted the potential for podcasts to exclude social workers who are hearing impaired or do not have the time to set aside to concentrate on podcasts. These findings are in line with the existing research on the network society in social work, where it was found that exclusion in the space of flows frequently replicates the exclusion faced in the space of places (Ballantyne *et al*., 2010; Sen, 2016; Baker, 2017, 2018; Ruiz-Roman *et al*., 2019). The normalisation and importance of “banter” described by many of the podcaster participants in this research could also lead to exclusion of particular groups, most notably women, who are underrepresented on podcasts already (Markman, 2012; Markman and Sawyer, 2014; Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

The findings of this research do not point to any conclusive way to engage alternative voices more effectively in podcasting and overcome these barriers. They do suggest,

however, that it is vitally important that these considerations are not sidelined or ignored. This thesis has identified the potential for a growing acceptance, or a professional norm or common sense, amongst the profession that podcasts are a positive for social work CPD (Gramsci, 1971), something identifiable in the positive perspectives of all participants in this study, as well as in the growing acceptance of podcasts by social work organisations, most notably SWE (2020a, 2021a, 2022b, 2022c). The findings also suggest that the focus on dialogue and authenticity on many social work podcasts may have the potential to inject good sense discussions, where these common sense issues are interrogated and reflected upon. In this way, podcasts may have the potential to create the critically reflective spaces where their own implications and limitations can be discussed. Significantly this is something that can already be seen happening on social work podcasts in England reflecting on their own role, and in particular their own representation (*for example,* McClenaghan, 2023).

It is important to end this thesis by reiterating the challenges in contemporary social work practice in England, including poor working conditions and high workloads, that mean that social workers struggle to engage effectively with any CPD (Local Government Association, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; Reddington *et al*., 2021; Reddington, 2022; Johnson *et al*., 2022; UNISON, 2022a, BASW, 2023a). It therefore remains likely that without fundamental improvements to the working conditions of social workers, these good sense discussions will likely remain sidelined within the profession, and any potential positive impact of social work podcasts to promote alternative perspectives, dissent, counterpower or counter-hegemony may be mitigated.

However, as Rogowski (2020) argues, it is within dissatisfaction that the seeds of resistance are sown, and social workers in England today could be perceived as

working in very dissatisfying circumstances in a very dissatisfying political and economic context. The point has also been made that the experiences of health and economic inequality that were not only exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, but made far more visible, have refocused many social workers towards the professions role around social justice and liberation of peoples (Sen *et al*., 2020, 2022; Warner, 2021; Pentaris *et al*., 2021). This could therefore signal a potential shift from the economy of performance discussed throughout this research towards ecologies of practice (Stronach *et al*., 2002).

Alongside these developments, the UK government over the past few years have been active in introducing new policy and legislation that curb the right to strike and protest in the space of places (Syal, 2022; Elgot, 2023). These types of activities make networked counterpower shared through mass self-communication, such as podcasts, all the more vital. Counterpower within these online spaces has been shown consistently to be more difficult to supress or co-opt. Castells (2015) gives several examples to demonstrate this, including the Egyptian revolution of 2011 when the government shut down all internet communications in the country. In response a movement developed, with substantial international involvement, to support Egyptians to stay online, using a variety of alternative avenues and back-channels. As such the shutdown was ineffective and reversed soon thereafter.

Therefore, Castells (2015) argues that the importance of maintaining online connectivity is vital when faced with oppressive contexts to build networks of counterpower through shared outrage and hope. He further stresses the importance of networks, both in the space of flows and the space of places, in engaging in dialogue to develop ideas for networked social movements. The importance of dialogue on podcasts as identified by participants in this study therefore suggests that they could

have an important role in counterpower under oppressive conditions. Fanon (1959) similarly describes the important role that radio played during the Algerian revolution when other avenues for sharing perspectives and stories that were contrary to colonial rule were curtailed. In a similar way to the response to the Egyptian internet shutdown, he outlines the various inventive ways that the revolutionary radio signals and connectivity were maintained at the time, including through sharing frequencies and the illegal sale of radios. This further underpins the importance of maintaining connectivity and the value of developing counterpower through audio mediums like podcasts, in particular when facing oppressive hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971).

These examples outlined by Castells (2015) and Fanon (1959), notably both stemming from the Global South, also highlight the inventive efforts that will be taken to maintain the potential for networked counterpower if it is suppressed. Independent social work podcasters looking to promote critical and challenging perspectives may therefore benefit from reflecting on these experiences, and considering how far they would be willing to go to maintain their podcast if faced with similar suppression. These experiences also further underpin the importance of linking any further promotion of podcasts with voices from the Global South, and it is notably that Castells (2015) frequently draws on examples from the Global South in making his arguments about the potential for counterpower to disrupt the power exercised by dominant networks in the network society. There are also specific examples of podcasts stemming from the Global South being used to challenge oppression, as noted in chapter 2 (Mare, 2013). With the range of new challenges facing social work growing every year, including the unprecedented impact of right wing populism (Garrett, 2021b), Covid-19 (Gillen *et al*., 2021), the cost of living (Koutsounia, 2022), artificial intelligence (Tambe and Rice, 2018) and climate change (Whelan, 2022), the promotion of dialogue, nationally and

internationally, may become all the more significant in supporting social workers struggling to come to terms with the implications of these challenges, something this research suggests podcasts may be particularly suited to facilitating.

However, I will refrain from ending this research with a specific concluding recommendation related to the ongoing promotion of counterpower in social work through podcasts, continuing professional development, or in general. Castells (2010a), Fanon (1959) and Garrett (2021a) all caution against the enforcement of a specific model of resistance imposed from above, instead highlighting the importance of collective action, shared experiences and ideas stemming from movements themselves. Castells (2015) describes that within the network society sharing hope and outrage openly online can be an effective way to overcome fear, leading to radical change in both the space of flows and the space of places. Podcasts, being a medium that has a history of promoting marginalised voices and dissent, could therefore possibly provide a spark for social work, reminding social workers everywhere of the profession's own history of promoting marginalised voices and dissent. I will end this thesis with that thought, and the hope that it can help lead to a future for social work more in line with that outlined by podcaster participant Tara, where:

> social workers would feel more like they are part of a social profession, and not just an individual practitioner doing their work, but there's a kind of whole collective community, and in particular a global community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide Podcasters

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Interview Topic Guide for Podcasters

Reiterate consent, and that they can stop at any time and request some, or all, of the discussion we have to be not used in the research. Also note that if there are technical issues that mean we have to stop then we can agree to just catch up after, maybe some follow-up questions or organise another time, depending on how far we get.

Before starting this podcast, what was your experience of podcasts (listening or being involved)?

How did you get into/start podcasting? What were your motivations?

Some practical questions about podcasting-

- Keeping track of metrics, listeners – do they know how many they have?
- Others involved in helping them? Support they received?
- How many hosts (if not clear)?
- Training they received?
- Technology issues?
- How many podcasts they are involved in?
- Cost to them? Time?
- If you have guests, how do you choose/approach these guests?
- What technology do you use?
- Advertising on the podcast –would you ever?
- Editing?

How do you plan/design your podcast?

How do you advertise/share your podcast?

What type of topics do you cover?

What topics do you avoid?

Do you ever have to be careful of what you say, edit your content in any way? Why? Any examples?

What do you see as the use/purpose of your podcast for social workers/non-social workers?

Do you think your podcast can be used for social work CPD? What are the barriers to social workers using your podcast for CPD?

What feedback have you received about your podcast, and from whom? How do you keep track of this? How do you engage with listeners?

Do you know, or engage with, other social work podcasters? How, why/why not? Ask about being interviewed on other podcasts, or bringing other podcasters on to yours?

Do you feel you have other mediums for getting out your views/thoughts out publically other than podcasts (don't need specifics)?

Impact of Covid-19?

What is a podcast?

Anything else you want to say what are the benefits/limitations of podcasts?

Appendix 2: Interview Guide Listeners

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development
Interview Topic Guide for Social Workers

Note: The topics on this interview guide may alter slightly based on key themes raised in interviews with podcasters that will occur first.

About you

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnicity?

Do you have a disability?

Do you have caring responsibilities?

Tell me about your background as a social worker?

Continuing Professional Development

What type of CPD do you usually engage in?

How do you decide what CPD to engage in?

What role does your employer have in your CPD?

What was your experience of the new Social Work England CPD process?

- How many pieces of evidence did you upload for the first year? How many pieces so far this year?
- What could have worked better?
- What worked well?
- Did this approach improve your engagement with CPD?

How did Covid-19 impact on your CPD? Did you have specific training related to working during Covid-19?

Does the CPD you engage in support you to challenge practice, either your own or your employers?

Are there aspects of social work that are not covered in available CPD? Explore why?

Podcasts

Did you have any experience of podcasts before these?

How did you find/decide on the podcasts to listen to?

Were there any you saw and decided not to listen to? Why?

How/when did you listen to the podcasts?

How many podcasts did you listen to? Do you finish them?

What did you think of the podcasts?

- What were the benefits?
- What were the limitations?
- If you listen to non-social work podcasts, how do the social work podcasts compare?

How do podcasts compare to other CPD?

Did you discuss podcasts with others, or in your workplace?

Would you be able to listen to podcasts during work time as CPD?

Do you think you will continue to listen to podcasts? Why/why not?

Would you ever make your own podcast?

Would you ever agree to be interviewed about your social work role on a podcast? Why/why not?

Remind them about the follow-up questionnaire.

Appendix 3: Email to Podcasters

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Invitation to Participate: Email to Podcasters

Dear (to be inserted),

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Brunel University London undertaking research entitled "Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development (CPD)". The aims of the project are to get a better understanding of social work podcasting in England and to explore the potential of social work podcasts as CPD. There is no existing research exploring this area, and it is hoped that the research will inform the use of podcasts as CPD for social workers within the context of England and the new CPD requirements introduced by Social Work England in 2020.

You are being contacted because you have been identified as a social work podcaster based in England producing an independent podcast that is not directly associated with a specific educational institution, professional organisation, service provider or media organisation. **Please advise if this description does not apply to you.**

Your participation would involve a single interview (if multiple hosts of the same podcasts are interested in being involved they can be interviewed either separately or together) and your participation is entirely voluntary. Any data collected will be anonymised and securely retained on Brunel University London password protected and encrypted servers.

More details are attached to this email in the Participant Information Sheet. If you are interested in taking part, please reply to this email: joseph.hanley@brunel.ac.uk to be sent a consent form and to arrange an interview.

In addition, if you have any questions please contact joseph.hanley@brunel.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you wish to discuss any concerns or ethical considerations, please contact the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair (cbass-ethics@brunel.ac.uk).

Thank you for your time

Joe Hanley

Appendix 4: Twitter Post for Listeners

'Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Invitation to Participate: Twitter

I am a doctoral student at @EducationBrunel undertaking research entitled "Podcasts as Social Work CPD". If you are a social worker in England then I am keen to hear your views on social work podcasts and CPD. For more info please email me on joseph.hanley@brunel.ac.uk

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet Podcasters

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The objective of this study is to explore the potential use of social work podcasts for social worker continuing professional development, and to get a better understanding of podcasting in England.

Why have I been invited to participate?

In order to gain an understanding of social work podcasting in England, and the potential that this could have for social work continuing professional development, you have been invited as a social work podcaster to share your experience.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary, and the decision to take part is yours. There is no obligation for you to participate.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to an online interview using Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams or another online platform of your choice. This interview will examine your role as a social work podcaster and aspects of your podcast.

If you agree to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. Voluntary participation is key and you can decide whether or not you want us to use any interview data that we have collected up to the point that the data is analysed.

Are there any lifestyle restrictions?

There are no lifestyle restrictions.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks associated with taking part in this study, except for the use of your time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no individual benefits for individuals taking part in the research but the findings will generate recommendations and future research that will have benefits for social workers and social work podcasters more broadly.

What if something goes wrong?

You can contact my supervisor, or the Chair of the CBASS Research Ethics Committee (see details at the end of this document).

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Pseudonyms will be used in the interviews and your name will not be attached to any of the data collected. Data that may identify an individual, including those around specific workplaces or podcasts, will be omitted.

Anonymised data will be retained confidentially on Brunel University servers. Once the interviews have been transcribed the recordings of interviews will be deleted, and all data will be deleted once the study is completed.

If during the course of the research evidence of harm or misconduct come to light it may be necessary to break confidentiality. We will tell you at the time if we think we need to do this, and let you know what will happen next.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

The interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analysed to produce the findings from the research. Once the interviews have been transcribed the recordings of interviews will be deleted, and all data will be deleted once the study is completed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of the project will be submitted as part of my assessment for the Doctorate in Education qualification from Brunel University London. Findings and recommendations may also be presented at conferences/seminars or through written publication. Resources may also be developed to support social workers to engage with podcasts as part of their continuing professional development.

Who is organising and funding the research?

There is no funding associated with this research. The research is being organised by Joe Hanley, Doctoral Student in the Department of Education, Brunel University London.

What are the indemnity arrangements?

Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research which has received ethical approval.

Who has reviewed the study?

The College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has reviewed this study to ensure that it complies with university guidelines in terms of anonymity, confidentiality, data protection, and potential harm to participants. All this is part of our standard procedure and ensures that research is conducted ethically.

Research Integrity

Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research

Contact for further information and complaints

If you have any further questions, thoughts or observations at any point during the research you can contact the researcher Joe Hanley (joseph.hanley@brunel.ac.uk). Alternatively, you may wish to discuss concerns with my doctoral supervisor Dr Anne

Chappell (anne.chappell@brunel.ac.uk), or College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair (david.gallear@brunel.ac.uk).

Thank you

Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet Listener

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Social Workers)

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research is being carried out as part fulfilment of my Doctorate in Education qualification from Brunel University London. The objective of this study is to explore the potential use of social work podcasts for social worker continuing professional development, and to gain an understanding of the podcasters working on these podcasts.

Why have I been invited to participate?

In order to gain an understanding of the experience of listening to podcasts and the potential that this could have for social worker continuing professional development, you, as a social worker, have been invited to listen to some podcasts and share your experience of this.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary, and the decision to take part is yours. There is no obligation for you to participate.

What will happen to me if I take part?

There will be three parts of this research that you will be asked to take part in:

1. You will be asked to listen to 1-3 social work podcasts of your choice over the course of a month. You will be asked to find these yourself, but if you require support with accessing these then this can be provided.
2. You will be invited to an online interview using Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams or another online platform of your choice. This interview will discuss your experience of engaging with the podcasts, as well as some themes around social work continuing professional development.
3. You will be sent a follow-up questionnaire three months after the interview that will ask some very brief questions about whether you have continued to listen to social work podcasts following this experience.

If you agree to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. Voluntary participation is key and you can decide whether or not you want us to use any interview data that we have collected up to the point that the data is analysed.

Are there any lifestyle restrictions?

There are no lifestyle restrictions.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks associated with taking part in this study, except for the use of your time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no individual benefits for individuals taking part in the research but the findings will generate recommendations and future research that will have benefits for social workers and social work podcasters more broadly.

What if something goes wrong?

You can contact my supervisor, or the Chair of the CBASS Research Ethics Committee (see details at the end of this document).

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Pseudonyms will be used in the interviews and your name will not be attached to any of the data collected. Data that may identify an individual, including those around specific workplaces or podcasts, will be omitted.

Anonymised data will be retained confidentially on Brunel University servers. Once the interviews have been transcribed the recordings of interviews will be deleted, and all data will be deleted once the study is completed.

If during the course of the research evidence of harm or misconduct come to light it may be necessary to break confidentiality. We will tell you at the time if we think we need to do this, and let you know what will happen next.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

The interviews recorded, transcribed and analysed to produce the findings from the research. Once the interviews have been transcribed the recordings of interviews will be deleted, and all data will be deleted once the study is completed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of the project will be submitted as part of my assessment for the Doctorate in Education qualification from Brunel University London. Findings and recommendations may also be presented at conferences/seminars or through written publication. Resources may also be developed to support social workers to engage with podcasts as part of their continuing professional development.

Who is organising and funding the research?

There is no funding associated with this research. The research is being organised by Joe Hanley, Doctoral Student in the Department of Education, Brunel University London.

What are the indemnity arrangements?

Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research which has received ethical approval.

Who has reviewed the study?

The College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has reviewed this study to ensure that it complies with university guidelines in terms of anonymity, confidentiality, data protection, and potential harm to participants. All this is part of our standard procedure and ensures that research is conducted ethically.

Research Integrity

Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research

Contact for further information and complaints

If you have any further questions, thoughts or observations at any point during the research you can contact the researcher Joe Hanley (joseph.hanley@brunel.ac.uk). Alternatively, you may wish to discuss concerns with my doctoral supervisor Dr Anne Chappell (anne.chappell@brunel.ac.uk), or College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair (david.gallear@brunel.ac.uk).

Thank you

Appendix 7: Consent form Podcasters

CONSENT FORM

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Joe Hanley

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 01/06/2021 AND 31/01/2023

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
• You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
• You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your rights.	☐	☐
• You can withdraw your data any time up to 31/07/2022	☐	☐
I agree to my interview being audio and video recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:

Appendix 8: Consent form Listeners

CONSENT FORM

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

(For Social Workers)

Joe Hanley

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 01/06/2021 AND 31/03/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
• You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
• You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your rights.	☐	☐
• You can withdraw your data any time up to 31/03/2022	☐	☐
I agree to listen to three podcasts for the purposes of taking part in this research study.	☐	☐
I agree to my interview being audio and video recorded.	☐	☐
I agree to be sent a follow-up questionnaire three months after the interview.	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐

I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:

Appendix 9: Follow-up Questionnaire for Listeners

Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Social Work Follow-up Questionnaire

Have you listened to any social work podcasts since you were interviewed?

- Yes
- No

If yes, how often?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than monthly

Please outline the reasons why you have/have not continued to listen to social work podcasts.

Thank you for taking the time to provide this information.

Appendix 10: Ethical Approval

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Brunel University London
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge
UB8 3PH
United Kingdom

www.brunel.ac.uk

30 April 2021

CONDITIONAL LETTER OF APPROVAL

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 30/04/2021 AND 31/03/2022

Applicant (s): MR Joe Hanley

Project Title: Podcasts as Social Work Continuing Professional Development

Reference: 30644-LR-Apr/2021- 32524-2

Dear MR Joe Hanley

The Research Ethics Committee has considered the above application recently submitted by you.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. Approval is given on the understanding that the conditions of approval set out below are followed:

- **On both Participant Information Sheets, for the Contact details at the end, please add the name of the Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair, David Gallear.**
- **On the Consent Form for the Social Workers, you have included the following line twice: "I agree to be sent a follow-up questionnaire three months after the interview. " Please remove one of them.**
- **Approval is given for remote (online/telephone) research activity only. Face-to-face activity and/or travel will require approval by way of an amendment.**
- **The agreed protocol must be followed. Any changes to the protocol will require prior approval from the Committee by way of an application for an amendment.**
- **In addition to the above, please ensure that you monitor and adhere to all up-to-date local and national Government health advice for the duration of your project.**

Please note that:

- Research Participant Information Sheets and (where relevant) flyers, posters, and consent forms should include a clear statement that research ethics approval has been obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- The Research Participant Information Sheets should include a clear statement that queries should be directed, in the first instance, to the Supervisor (where relevant), or the researcher. Complaints, on the other hand, should be directed, in the first instance, to the Chair of the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- Approval to proceed with the study is granted subject to receipt by the Committee of satisfactory responses to any conditions that may appear above, in addition to any subsequent changes to the protocol.
- The Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to sample and review documentation, including raw data, relevant to the study.
- You may not undertake any research activity if you are not a registered student of Brunel University or if you cease to become registered, including abeyance or temporary withdrawal. As a deregistered student you would not be insured to undertake research activity. Research activity includes the recruitment of participants, undertaking consent procedures and collection of data. Breach of this requirement constitutes research misconduct and is a disciplinary offence.

Professor David Gallear

Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee