Professional powerlessness: reflections from a WhatsApp group

My schoolfriend, a junior doctor, added me to a WhatsApp group chat entitled ‘Shenanigans’. Initially, I thought this would be a forum to plan wild nights out as we did before adult life took over and to share hilarious anecdotes. Soon, the irony of the group name dawned on me as I realised why we were hand-picked. All of us, close since the age of 11, are now working in health — as medical consultants, GPs, lawyers, policymakers, civil servants, managers, advisors, and academics — all united by our firmly held belief in a publicly owned NHS.

Formed at the time of the junior doctor strikes, our group has become a forum for venting political frustration. I have picked up on a whole gamut of emotions conveyed by my old pals — anger, disillusionment, incredulosity, fear — all driven by an ever-increasing sense of professional powerlessness.

Our exchanges consist of sharing video and newspaper article links, the occasional Hunt-related expletive, and with Chomsky’s invectives forming a large part of my contributions. All underpinned by our individual Brexistential crises (in my case, Polish passport deportation angst) and PTSD (Post-Trump Stress Disorder), and a shared dismay at finding ourselves trapped within a neoliberalist, post-truth dystopia. And yes, we are keenly aware of our armchair activism, interspersed with occasional, to use Berry’s framework, high-resource, low-impact outsider group political strategies, namely [hashtag] strike selfies. As time goes on, my friends share petition links by the dozen.

As a social scientist, I reflect on our social media chats with a heavy heart. To me, they encapsulate a wider wave of professional disempowerment, a lack of tools to make a real difference, deeply seated in policymaking that has since the early 1980s sought to de-professionalise and undermine the autonomy of the medical doctor.”

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Maria Kordowicz, Post-doctoral Research Associate, King’s College London, London.
E-mail: maria.kordowicz@kcl.ac.uk
@mariaikordowicz
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