



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... YOUR SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networking is not just about being social. Technologies that enable citizens to connect with one another, to engage in lively debate, and to organize hold great promise for democracy. Around the world, the power to communicate on a massive scale—once held only by governments and those with access to print or broadcast media outlets—is now in the hands of anyone who can afford or has access to a cell phone. During the impeachment trial of Philippine president Joseph Estrada in 2001, activists were able to organize millions for demonstrations in a matter of hours via forwarded text messages.¹ A decade later, social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook played an integral role in organizing massive protests in Moldova (2009) and Iran (2009–2010), and full-on revolutions in Tunisia (2010–2011) and Egypt (2011). Here in the United States, social networking sites have fostered civic engagement, providing platforms for organizing massive grassroots movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street and enabling citizens to lobby their leaders at every level and to help to set political agendas on everything from local stop signs to same-sex marriage. Imagine the impact that social networking might have had on the American founding!

But that political upside of social networking has a downside as well. Free to speak our minds on every issue, we can find ourselves in virtual fistfights with friends and acquaintances whose political feelings differ from our own. And of course, the unfettered freedom to post and repost stories can be harmful. It's always been hard to put a stop to the circulation of an unfounded rumor, but before information moved at Internet speed, you had a fighting chance. In the era of instant, mass communication, anyone with a computer or smartphone can pass on a piece of information or misinformation—and not just to one friend, but to thousands—with the touch of a button. Much like the spread of a real infectious disease, once a story “goes viral” via electronic channels, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to contain.

What to Watch Out For

- **Don't create your own echo chamber.** With social networking sites (like Facebook and Twitter), social news sites (like Digg and Reddit), and tools like RSS feeds and Google Alerts, it's easy to create your own custom news channel, ensuring that you only have to read stories from the sources

you like, about subjects that interest you. But your information is only as good as the sources it comes from—be sure to cast a wide net to ensure you're getting all sides of the story, not just the one that you want to hear.

- **Beware the re-tweet.** On the Web, gossip and lies spread much more quickly than verified facts. Case in point: in 2012 a blogger posted a false claim that South Carolina governor Nikki Haley was about to be indicted. The lie went viral, tweeted to a national audience within two minutes, and made its way to several national news organizations, including the *Washington Post* and CBS News, within twenty.² So, when something comes up in your Facebook or Twitter feed, think twice before passing it along yourself. Is the information good? Is there a link to a reputable source? Does the original source appear to have verified the story?
- **Verify forwarded email.** When you open up an email and read a story that seems unbelievable, chances are you shouldn't believe it. Email chain letters are the urban legends of the Internet age, and like the legends of yore, they refuse to die. When one shows up in your inbox, take a moment to see if the claims made in it are legit. A number of fact-checking sites, including Snopes.com and TruthOrFiction.com, are dedicated to investigating and evaluating Internet rumors.
- **All your friends and followers may not be on the same page as you are.** You may be surprised to learn that your friends' political stands on issues are not your own. Although a majority of social network users usually just ignore posts with which they disagree, others say they've “defriended” individuals because of their political posts.³ If you choose to engage in a political debate on your Facebook page, be prepared for the consequences.
- **Remember, nothing's really private on the Web.** No privacy protections are perfect; once you post something, you no longer control it. Other people can repost your comments, and even your deleted posts might live on in cyberspace. Anything you share—from a status update to a comment on a news article—may find its way to future employers, partners, in-laws, or even your as-yet unborn children. Think twice before airing controversial views, and don't post pictures you aren't willing to have the whole world gaze upon!