

Rules of the Road

Best practices and ideas to be a force for good on social media

1 Know and understand the source and format of the information you are consuming. Is it recognized and legitimate? Remember that there are hundreds of thousands of fake and extremist accounts that will post on social media. Be watchful and informed.

- Who is posting the content? Is it a mainstream media outlet, a political action group, or a group with questionable legitimacy? Even if you disagree ideologically with some mainstream outlets, the information they publish must meet certain standards, and their organization is subject to oversight. If the poster clearly establishes itself as an advocacy group, you need to consider that when evaluating the accuracy and truthfulness of the information that is posted. On Facebook, a known, defined entity will have a lower case **i** in a circle somewhere on the post; click on it and learn about the outlet.

- There are different forms of media content, even within the same network. Different programs, websites or publications feature varied formats, so it is important to discern whether what you are seeing and hearing is fact or opinion. Is the outlet reporting news or analyzing it? Is this network considered left-leaning or right-leaning? Many formats have a legitimate place in the spectrum of media and communications if exercised responsibly. The critical element is the consumers' awareness and discernment – knowing what you are watching or reading is key to understanding it properly.

2 How do bad actors promote fake news and disinformation through social media? As media consumers, we are accustomed to believing what we see. But in today's media environment, there is almost no limit to the ways that disinformation can be perpetrated on an unsuspecting public. Here are but a few to watch out for:

- Fabricated information made to look like legitimate news reports – The most effective ones are those that have tidbits of truth or make claims that play upon fears or doubts that we may already have, though without any substantiation. Any legitimate news article does not just make claims, it provides supporting detail.

- Computer-generated or manipulated photos or videos – The potential for misleading the media consumer through doctored images is immeasurable. Replacing a person pictured in a legitimate photo with a disreputable person, or changing what a person is doing in a photo (holding up a fake sign, for instance.) Trust your instincts; if it doesn't seem to make sense, it warrants verification.

- Celebrity statements or advocacy – You may come



across a surprising quote from your favorite film actor, musician or sports figure. Just because the person's photo and name are used does not mean he/she said it. Very often, the source of the post is a good hint to its legitimacy.

- Incendiary comments on posts that fuel arguments or share web links to extremist content – These are often generated by "trolls" or persons connected to fake accounts, not good faith actors

3 Whether you suspect fake accounts or fabricated content, or you have been harassed by trolls who post offensive or aggressive messages, there are positive steps you can take:

- When in doubt, check it out – There are many fact-checking sources that will tell you if an article is true or a photo or video are authentic. Here are a few:

- **Politifact.com** – focuses on statements made by politicians and news people and rates their quotes on a truth scale.

- **Reuters.com** – a UK-based website that, along with reporting news and commentary, dedicates a section of its website to fact-checking articles, political speeches and new reports.

- **Factcheck.org** – provides a more in-depth analysis and explanation. The site includes video discussions and full articles on the validity of speeches, quotes and news reports.

- **NewsLit.org** – Along with fact-checking and commentary, the News Literacy Project provides resources for spotting fake news and how to combat it.

- **Social media sites have reporting mechanisms for abuse or questionable content** – On Facebook: Click the three dots on the upper righthand corner of the post and click "find support or report post." Select a choice from the menu why it should be reported. On Twitter: Click the down arrow on the upper righthand corner of the post and click

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“report tweet.” The option redirects to a screen to explain the reason for reporting. Choose from the selection and add personal comments as well.

Sites differ as to their standards and the action they are willing to take. Even if the social media site does not take action, it is of value to get your complaint on the record.

- **Social sleuthing** – Click on the name of the suspected troll or fake account and see what you can learn. If it takes you to a nearly empty profile, there is a good chance that this was an automated (bot) account. This can be reported to the social media site, and you should block this source from your newsfeed.

- **Call it out** – You can call out inauthentic or inappropriate content when you see it. Challenge what may appear to be falsehoods, but do so armed with information, not vitriol. If you suspect that something was posted by a fake account, state your findings among your community of friends. Fake accounts often do not respond because they are often geared toward a “hit and run” attack, and have moved on. When a friend on social media posts something that does not check out, respectfully let him or her know and share the link to your fact check.

- **Disclaimers and mistakes** – If you want to post or share something that you believe to be true but are not able to verify, begin your post with a disclaimer. For example: “I haven’t been able to verify this, but I found it worthwhile to read.” Also, be realistic with your expectations. There are many influences at play to get you to share falsified information. It is entirely possible that you will make a mistake and share disinformation inadvertently. If that should happen, remove the post, and then inform your social media friends that you learned that your post was inaccurate. Offer an apology, a rare thing on social media.

- **The meme stops here** – You may come across something that is so outrageous that you want to show friends in your circle and post a blistering criticism of it. But don’t be an unwitting collaborator in spreading the problematic content. People will more likely remember images and graphics, not the message you wrote. The best thing is to make sure that this content spreads no further due to your actions. Hide it from your newsfeed; report it if there is an infraction of the rules, and you may even consider unfriending the poster if this has happened in the past.

4 We are called to transform social media; not to let it transform us. Here are some best practices to help you reflect Gospel values while on social media:

- Ask yourself if your post is constructive, informative and has the potential to heal and strengthen, rather than piling on or exacerbating.
- Say nothing to someone online that you wouldn’t say

to their face.

- Express your thinking but respect the rights of others to speak their mind in a reasonable way, even if you find their position untenable.

- Do not allow anyone on your posts to spread disinformation or to harass others who are commenting. It may be necessary to block someone who does not respond appropriately.

- Remember that sharing false information in order to damage someone’s reputation is not only unethical, it is sinful. (In some places, defamation of character is also a civil offense.) Our faith teaches us to avoid the sin of calumny, which is an offense “against the virtues of justice and charity,” thus breaking the eighth commandment, as taught in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2479).

5 Always act responsibly on social media. Do not participate in sharing content that violates the security, privacy and intellectual property rights of others. Here are things to keep in mind:

- Never share personal information on social media about anyone other than yourself. Be particularly careful about not revealing the names and locations of minors, or any other details that would allow bad actors to gain access to them. In today’s hate-prone culture, people’s privacy must be protected as a matter of safety.

- When posting photos on social media, make sure that all who are pictured have given their permission to be included in that post. (Sometimes people take part in photos to be shared with friends or family, not the social media community.) Take extra care to avoid including passers-by or people in the surrounding area when taking photos for social media.

- There is a great deal of content available online that can be shared legitimately. Take care that you are not using content that is protected by copyright and therefore someone’s intellectual property. As a best practice, when sharing content from another social media user, give that person credit for posting it.

Pope Francis has consistently called upon us to unmask falsehoods, and to avoid “unwittingly contributing to the spread of disinformation.” With these tips and ideas, each of us can truly be a voice for truth in an environment where it is sorely needed.

