Information Matters: Protecting Ourselves and Others Online

Securing your digital footprint

Protecting ourselves and others in the age of the internet begins with recognizing that every action we take online contributes to our digital footprint. This "footprint" is made up of the trail of data we create while using the internet and is often permanent, accessible to others, and much more revealing than we realise.

Because the internet is such a public space, and because once something is shared, it can be difficult to remove entirely, the first and most important step in protecting ourselves lies in securing our privacy to the extent that we can. This can be accomplished in a few different ways.

First, every social media platform and email service, as well as many apps and other platforms offer privacy and/or security settings that allow you to control who can see your information, what data is shared, and how your activities are tracked. Regularly reviewing and updating these settings (including using strong passwords and changing them regularly) enables you to maintain some degree of control over your personal information, reducing the risk of unwanted exposure.

Second, before posting anything to an online space, it is important to ask yourself whether the information you are about to share is something you would be comfortable with anyone in your life, now or in the future, knowing about you. Consider: employers increasingly review candidates' online presence as part of the hiring process and potential romantic partners may also turn to internet searches for fuller information about you.

Lastly, particularly when posting to social media, always be sure that you are protecting not only your own privacy rights but also the privacy rights of others. For example, don't share photos or stories about other people without express permission from those involved.

Protecting ourselves and others against disinformation

As we have seen from previous installments of this series, protecting ourselves online goes well beyond the need to secure our privacy and includes the ability to secure access to reliable information. Progress toward the latter goal can be made by incorporating the following practices into our daily media habits.

1. Assess sources – Never get your news from your social media feeds (including platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram) or from anyone that might be described as a "media influencer". Instead, even if a story comes to your attention on social media, always make a point of going to a well-established and credentialed news outlet to learn more. When you take this added step, you do two things. First, you make it harder for the social media algorithm to trap you in a filter bubble. Second, you ensure that your news is being delivered to you by people who are subject to professional ethics and the standards these impose.

Professional news sites are far from perfect these days, but they do have the decided advantage that, unlike people on social media, they are subject to a professional code of ethics. This means that they have a vested interest in reporting accurately and are professionally bound to acknowledge and correct mistakes when these happen. None of this is true of media influencers, most of whom are actually incentivized to exaggerate and sensationalize their accounts, thanks to the way that social media algorithms and payment structures work.

2. Question credibility – Cross check media accounts using multiple sources. Particularly if the story is political in nature, always try to read accounts from both sides of the political spectrum and/or from both domestic and international news outlets. If only one platform is reporting a story, or if it is only being reported in "right-leaning" or "left-leaning" media, this may be because it is made up. Reading multiple takes on the same story is time consuming, but doing this will help to ensure that what you're reading really did happen and it will afford you a more nuanced and balanced sense of what really took place.

As you engage with various sources, listen for unacknowledged inconsistencies, language that indicates the presence of bias, and other signs that suggest that the person tasked with delivering the news is actually delivering their personal opinion. For example, always pay attention to the tone in which the story is discussed. Does it sound contemptuous? (Hint: if the person is a real journalist, it shouldn't.) Also, pay attention to his/her credibility and history with respect to misinformation. Does the person have a reputation for spreading false information? If so, treat what they say with skepticism and, if possible, always trace the information back to its original context and source.

3. Beware of strong emotions – Those looking to spread disinformation often seek to accomplish their goal by targeting strong emotions like fear, anger, righteousness, or excitement. Always be careful with headlines that seem designed to elicit one or more of these feelings in a particularly strong way. When we're made to feel strongly, this can shut down our critical thinking and thereby lead us to do things that, in a calmer state of mind, we would never consider.

Similarly, beware of any story that seems designed to produce a sense of urgency in you. In particular, be suspicious of anything that's recently gone viral. Just because something is widely shared, doesn't mean it's true. In fact, because there often isn't time to fact-check them or vet their details, such stories frequently turn out to be half-truths at best.

In general, be wary of stories that aim to stoke your sense of righteousness and which seem almost too "good" to be true. Instead, try to remain open to information that challenges your views and beliefs.

Finally, regardless of the kind of media you're dealing with, never let the headline be the whole story. Always read/watch further, aiming to engage the substance of the news story calmly and with a critical mindset.

Engaging with media this way may seem distasteful and frustrating but it serves a few important functions. For example, studies suggest that the recent proliferation of stories aimed at provoking outrage has contributed to dramatic and wide-spread increases in anxiety, exhaustion, and depression across the population. Viewing the matter this way, by refusing to engage with

clickbait, not only are we resisting the radicalizing forces of social media algorithms, but we are also protecting our mental health and reserving our energy for those political contests that most matter to us. Further, looking at things at over the longer term, by being more conscious about our news and how we consume it, it may be that we can contribute to the creation of new incentives for media companies to produce better, more balanced accounts.

4. Verify before sharing – Never hit send before doing your best to ensure that the information you are sharing is accurate. If, after checking, you remain unsure whether the story is true, consider not sharing it. Either way, don't just read the headline, engage with the stories attached to the headlines and then, where possible, trace stories to their sources to make sure these are reputable and not compromised by any sort of problematic political agenda.

Aim not to share sensational stories or stories/images that you know have been altered or manufactured to produce an emotional response. Use fact-checking websites like Snopes, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact to validate suspicious claims and reverse image searches to help verify the origin of videos and images that might have been altered. Educate yourself on how to spot AI-generated images (our excellent library staff can help you with this) and, if you can't resist the urge to share doctored stories and/or images, make sure you clearly label them as such.

5. Shift the culture - Call out misinformation and disinformation when you encounter them. This can be done respectfully by including a link to evidence that will enable people to assess your claims for themselves. In your public posts, encourage others to educate themselves about how information is curated online and about how they can protect themselves against disinformation through enhanced media and digital literacy.

Studies suggest that people are often more vulnerable to disinformation when they feel isolated or marginalized. So, in addition to advocating for greater digital literacy, where possible, aim to build inclusive online communities where everyone can feel welcomed and valued.

Finally, when it comes to your attention that you've mistakenly shared something that isn't true, be upfront about it. Admit your mistake and quickly correct the record. In the internet age, every one of us has a role to play in

stopping the spread of false information. Make sure you do your part to help create a more informed and less polarized public discourse!