

Is self-censorship the answer?

Have you ever regretted saying something on social media? Or has something you posted on social media come back to haunt you “in real life?” Do you wish you could say what you really think but fear the consequences?

Social media seems to occupy a unique position of being virtual yet connecting real people in real relationships. We can broadcast our thoughts instantly, to thousands (or millions) of people around the world, while still having to be careful about the relationships we have in real life (IRL) with some of our connections.

Is everybody in your Facebook world your friend or family member? Chances are you have a fair number of other relationships on Facebook—co-workers, professional acquaintances, people you knew in high school/college, people you met on Twitter, and so on. Do you want to share everything with everybody or do you wish you could pick and choose? If you don’t want to share something with a certain person in your Facebook, why are you “friends” with him or her?

Sometimes, you see people in real life (at professional events, etc.) and feel forced to maintain a “Facebook friendship.” Unfriending on Facebook is a strange phenomenon, especially since most people use it to communicate that they no longer consider you to be in their social circle (although some people think of unfriending as simply reducing the number of people that they need to read feeds from).

Not a friend, just an acquaintance

But wait, Facebook has an answer! You can designate people as “acquaintances” and then when you post you can choose to share

with “friends, except acquaintances.” I just learned about this feature (and I am not sure how long it’s been around). Clearly, many people are trying to separate close friends from acquaintances while becoming “Facebook friends” with anybody that asks.

But what about friends/acquaintances who say annoying things?

Facebook has had a “hide” feature for years. Twitter recently created a way to maintain ties with people you don’t want to hear from. It’s the mute button. Now, you can simply mute people you don’t really care for while still following them.

So can I say what I think?

And then there is what we say or don’t say. Should we say what we really think or should we be more politic? There was a recent poll that found people are not expressing their opinions freely on social media any more. I can see why. We don’t want to offend and more importantly, we don’t want to be attacked. There are many “trolls,” that is people in social media who make it their business to be on the attack. They actively seek confrontation and are often very nasty. Or there are those people who are always arguing with you on Facebook or Twitter. If you say white, they will say black. Does every opinion need a counter-opinion?

Is self-censorship the answer to all these social media conundrums?

I think that at times you should follow the adage that if you have nothing good to say, don’t say it. For example, if someone posts a picture of his/her baby, and you don’t think the child is terribly cute, do you share your thoughts? Probably very wise to keep that opinion to yourself.

Social media seems to have made it difficult for people to understand that their words have real consequences. That you can insult and offend virtually. People routinely express

their negative opinions. They don't like the restaurant you recently went to (and raved about), so they share their thoughts saying that it was disgusting, the food was gross, they got sick (you get the picture). They disagree with an article you shared, they tell you how stupid the author is, how ridiculous anybody is for having that opinion. And on and on.

There is no one correct way to do social media. Some people will always be offended and some people won't care. To some, social media is a place to cultivate relationships and to some, it is just a place to promote their product or business.

I think it is always best to think about what you are going to say before you say it: Is it necessary? Does it add value to the conversation? Is it something you care about deeply? Will it make a difference? Will it hurt the other person? Does it really matter?

Perhaps it is not self-censorship we need as much as a **pause and think moment**. Too bad there isn't a built-in feature for that on Twitter and Facebook.