

A Scar is Born: What We Post Online Won't Fade Away

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Let's travel back...

The year is 2017. A total solar eclipse has crept across the United States. "Coronavirus" may as well have been a beer with a head cold. And New Jersey then-Governor Chris Christie, bedecked in Spandex hot pants, sat on a flimsy folding chair on a beach forbidden to the public by a government shutdown. The world went wild. Photos of the governor morphed into memes, flooding the 'netwaves and inspiring ridicule. People superimposed the holidaying politician onto shots of a kitty litter box, coasting on a Mardi Gras float, in bed beside John and Yoko. The flip-flopped laughing stock could be seen riding a gnarly wave, commanding the Starship Enterprise, or gracing Gilligan's Island with any given swipe or click. His transgression may have been a random gaffe, but the former leader of the Garden State has nonetheless become infamous, the perennial poster child with zinc on its nose, warning: Be careful what you do, as the internet is forever.

Why rehash this darkest of times for the disgraced delegate now?

Well, first, the memes are really funny. Seriously. Check them out.

But, second – and more important – it helps motivate us to maintain a watchful eye over what our loved ones with IDD know not to post (nor allow to be posted about them) on the world wide web.

The permanence of online content is both a blessing and a curse. While it means never again misplacing our favorite photos or factoids (hooray! Grandma's noodle kugel recipe forever accessible!), it also indicates that a single ill-advised upload can mark the difference between brief embarrassment and infinite indignity. Like a scar, anyone can find it just by looking.

So, how to educate our children, family, friends, and clients with IDD on the importance of internet discretion? It's as easy as P.P.P.P.P.P.P! (Not the strongest acronym, but I'll explain...)

Personal

Two of the most essential lessons for safety are the concepts of "public" and "private" - what is appropriate to show to the world and what is not. And when it comes to this internet rule, the P stands for personal information.

We should never, ever let anyone we meet on the internet know the town we live in, the street we live on, the number of our house, which window is our bedroom's. We should never post a picture of ourselves at an identifiable park, in front of our apartment building, in our team jersey, or while away at vacation (let's not advertise when our home is currently empty and unguarded!). If someone asks where we live, keep it general ("a suburb of Trenton!" "Near the beach!"), and if they press for specifics, change the subject or cut off the conversation. So, because we don't know who is looking for us online or why, we want to make sure that our location, our bank or credit card information, pin numbers and passwords, travel plans, and even our phone number be kept private (that indispensable word again!), neither written nor photographically captured. If anyone asks, we tell them our name is Mud. (Unless our name really is Mud, in which case tell them our name is something else!)

Don't know if a certain piece of information is personal? Err on the side of caution and tell too little rather than too much. We'll not only stay safe, we'll appear deliciously mysterious. A win-win!

Polite

When it comes to being a good citizen even on social media, a great acronym (not as great as ours, of course, but admittedly impressive) to remember is T.H.I.N.K. So, before you post anything, ask yourself:

Is it True? (No "fake news" here, folks)

Is it Helpful? (If it doesn't add value to people's lives, leave it in your diary!)

Is it Inspiring? (Make people feel good, not bring them down)

Is it Necessary? (Like, did we all really need to know this?)

Is it Kind? (If you don't have something nice to say, zip your lips!)

T.H.I.N.K.ing before posting can help us avoid offending others, getting in trouble, and winding up home alone with a Cherry Coke on prom night!

We also want to avoid harassing others when we are excited about pursuing a friendship with them.

To make sure you are not making someone else feel pressured to talk or spend time with you, follow the 3x3 rule: if the person has not responded to you after 3 attempts to contact them in one day by texting/calling/messaging, do not send another message that day. You may try again the following day but you may only do this for 3 days. (There is hard to get, and then there is impossible to reach!) After this, you may not attempt to contact the person again.

Pals

The internet is a great place for meeting new people, be it for a fledgling flirtation or a pickleball partner. Chat rooms, gaming, dating sites, and social media all provide the opportunity to connect with others we may never have otherwise met. But just because their profile pic is to. die. for., doesn't mean that's the face of the person with whom you are chatting. No matter how intensely or consistently we communicate, no one ever really knows who they are talking to online. Sitting alone at a keyboard, it is easy to pretend to be just about anyone else.

So, proceed with caution if your Snapchat comrade invites you over for a mocha-cappuccino-spresso-latte in the reading room of their penthouse pad. Because their entire persona could be a perfect pretense. (Excuse me while I replace the P key on my laptop...)

If you do want to meet an online acquaintance in person, though, there are ways to safely do so. Meet in public at a coffee shop or diner where there is sure to be plenty of other people around. Take separate transportation – never get in a car with them or let them know where you live – and rendezvous at the meeting location. It is also a good idea to bring someone else along; they can sit at the table with the both of you (and fill any awkward silences that may bubble up – bonus!) or take a nearby seat where they can keep an eye on you. And remember: keep personal information personal. Just because you split a pastry doesn't mean they are worthy of your trust. Give it time for people to show you who they are.

Papa

How can we tell if what we want to post is inappropriate? If our comments are too provocative? If our bikini in the picture is a little too... little? A good rule to follow is the Would-I-Show-it-to-Grandpa Rule. Before posting anything (and T.H.I.N.K. about it first, of course), consider if you would feel ok having your grandfather see it. If the answer is "no," don't post! Because, chances are, if your grandfather wouldn't approve, it's probably not meant for the general public, either.

To make extra-certain that no one ever posts a picture of us that would make our Grandpa (or anyone's grandpa, for that matter) blush, don't take racy pictures in the first place! Never capture, share, or allow someone else to capture or share photos of you in any state of undress or nudity, even if you really, really, really trust that person. If the pictures don't exist in the first place, it's a lot harder to post them! (And keeping your body hidden by your

clothes helps add to that mystery of which we are growing so fond...)

Persecution

Life might be like a box of chocolates, but can also be a whole lot like middle school, bullies and all. And the internet can be a breeding ground for nastiness and harassment (remember, that person sitting at their keyboard is great at hiding who they really are!). As long as you T.H.I.N.K. before you post, you can probably avoid becoming an accidental online bully. If you do happen to post something that upsets someone else (let's say an unflattering picture or a joke that's more unnerving than entertaining), take it down if the subject asks you to, and be sure to apologize! The difference between an honest mistake and bullying is INTENT (meaning to upset someone). If you aren't aiming to be mean and will do what it takes to make things right, you can never be a bully.

If you ever find yourself on the receiving end of the harassment - people are making cruel comments, using profanity, sending threats to one's safety, sharing nude or inappropriate photos, threatening to share nude or inappropriate photos, spreading rumors, impersonating someone else, or engaging in cruel or hurtful behavior in groups online - the person disseminating these attacks can be considered a cyberbully. What happens if we find ourselves the target of this kind of person?

1. If someone has posted something of us that we do not want online, ask them to take it down. If they did not have bad intent, they will apologize and remove the post immediately.
2. If they do not take it down, make sure to take screenshots of the post! Sometimes, people will suddenly remove what they have done if they figure out that they will get in trouble (and then deny ever posting anything bad in the first place). Taking photos and keeping a list of when and what they have done can be used as proof.
3. Always tell a trusted adult when we think we are being cyberbullied.
4. If someone posts something mean, embarrassing, or threatening about us, we should block them right away.
5. Report any cyberbullying to the site or platform.
6. In the case of threats to our health or safety, we should report it to the police. New Jersey has laws against cyberbullying!
7. There are also laws against harassment, intimidation, or bullying that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic such as a disability. If the mean or embarrassing posts are about our disability, race, or sexual orientation, we should report them to our

school district (if we are a student) or to the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division (<https://civilrights.justice.gov/#three>).

Predators

Let's now take another journey back through the years, this time to 1950 and a little film called "All About Eve." It features Bette Davis as stage legend Margo Channing and Anne Baxter's "meek" and "innocent" (note the quotes, folks – this woman isn't who she pretends to be) Eve Harrington, who insinuates herself into Margo's world and eventually takes over her life. You know, Hollywood. Well, the internet is not totally unlike this film. Not totally.

The truth is, there are people who will feign selflessness and affection and loyalty in order to prey on our trust. This is why we call them "cyber predators." Once we let our guard down and begin to share our problems, our secrets, and our (eh-hem) personal information, these people will take advantage, whether emotionally, financially, sexually, or in other sinister ways. And because we never know who it is we are really talking to online, sussing out the cyber predators can be very difficult.

The best way to avoid this situation is to revisit some of our previous P's:

Personal, Pals, and Papa. Keep private information private, never meet someone in person whom you initially met virtually (unless you are in public and have an ally with you!), don't tell secrets you wouldn't want anyone and everyone to know, and keep inappropriate photos and topics to yourself. Predators are great manipulators, and will make you feel like they are the most trustworthy people in the world. But, like Eve Harrington, sometimes there is more than meets the eye (or chat... or post... or font).

Privacy

Our final P is the most practical one (does that make "practical" the final P?). To stay Internet Safe, pay attention to privacy settings! (Those are ways to make sure that only the people we want to see our social media content can see our content!) Here is a quick tutorial:

Making Facebook private:

1. Open Facebook on your computer, laptop, tablet, or phone.
2. Open the Account Settings, then follow the path Settings > Privacy > Settings > Privacy.
3. Under Your Activity, find Who Can See Your Future Posts, and select Edit.
4. Set it to Friends or Only me.
5. Next select Profile and Tagging from the panel on the left side of your screen.

Here you can control who posts messages to your timeline, and who can see what you and other users post on your timeline.

6. Then move on to the Blocking section from the panel on the left. Here you can completely deny access to your profile for certain users by putting them into the Block users list. Alternatively, you can put them into the Restricted list and restrict their access and allow them to only see the public posts and public information on your profile.

7. When you're finished tweaking your privacy settings on Facebook, go back to the Profile and Tagging section. Scroll down and select View as to see what your profile looks like to other users who aren't on your Facebook friends list.

Making Instagram private:

1. Open Instagram and go to your profile page.
2. Select the three horizontal lines in the upper-right corner of the screen to open the Menu.
3. Select Settings.

4. From the Settings menu, select Privacy.
5. Under Account privacy, toggle the Private account switch on.

Making Snapchat private:

1. Open Snapchat and navigate to your profile page.
2. Select the icon in the upper-right corner of the screen to open your account settings.
3. Scroll down until you see the Manage Who Can section.
4. Select Manage Who Can Contact Me and set it to My Friends instead of Everyone.
5. Then go back, select Manage Who Can View My Story, and set it to Friends Only or Custom if you want to handpick who's allowed to see your Snapchat Stories.

Finally... enjoy! When you've taken all the necessary steps to stay safe in Cyberworld, you can explore the web without worry. And if you see Bernie Sanders and his viral knitted mittens, hell him I say "hi."