

Seven questions I ask before posting to social media

I begin with, Is it worth it?

by [Bruce Reyes-Chow](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



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In 2008, I was elected to the office of moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), at that point a denomination of just over a million members. The role required me to moderate our annual meeting of about 1,000 people and then travel the country and the world on behalf of the denomination. For our church, this was a big deal. I was the youngest person ever to be elected as moderator.

While the pride of my family, home church, and mentors overflowed, no one outside the true church-nerd Presbyterian types really cared about my election. My children once described to their friends why I traveled so much: “My dad is very important to a very small group of people.”

Still, my time as moderator corresponded to a resurgence of interest in our denomination by folks under 40. One of their own had been elected to this office! I was viewed by both younger and older folks as a tech-savvy leader who would usher in a new generation of ideas. I had the opportunity to model a different way of being.

I have many stories from my time as moderator (and the years since) about being attacked online. I've received threats of violence, shaming of all kinds, racist remarks, and even a hate tweet from Roseanne Barr. But beyond the people out there who find joy in tearing down other people, beyond the bots and other technological disruptors, the vast majority of my online life has been positive and healthy. I know that this is not everyone's experience: those who occupy more marginalized lands have it much worse than I do.

Online life works best when everyone has the opportunity and obligation to try to create the kind of space that is supportive, generative, and community-building. To help create this space for myself, here are seven questions I ask myself as I think about my own use of social media.

1. Is this worth it? Here I am not asking about the respectability politics of tone policing but merely about whether this is the right thing to post at this moment or on this topic. I am all about freedom of speech, but freedom of speech does not come with freedom from consequences. I've learned that often the blowback is just not worth the time and energy.

This also is a good question to ask when someone posts an opinion with which I simply disagree. I might disdain your getting all worked up about the return of pumpkin-spiced anything, or I may judge your utter lack of appreciation for a certain musical about a certain Founding Father, but I do not have to post about it. No matter how misguided some opinions may be, I do not have to be the purveyor and filterer of all truth in the world. Sometimes my interior voice needs to stay right where it is: inside.

2. Whose voice is being amplified? One of the best parts about social media is the ability to amplify one another's views and voices, especially the voices of those on the margins of the political, cultural, or social landscape. Social media is inherently about the self; I ask this question to make sure that my social media life is not entirely about me. I try to use my platform to bring some of the brilliance and beauty out there into the worldview of others, not as a discovery (which would make it about me again) but simply as a nod to the fact that I do not need to be, nor am I, good at all things.

3. Am I 'splaining? A White person once tried to correct my understanding of what it meant to be Asian American. It was a classic example of *'splaining*—when one

person attempts to correct or inform another person about something, assuming that the other knows absolutely nothing about the subject. When I engage with others on social media, I try not to answer questions that, first, no one raised and, second, I was never asked to answer. Answering when I haven't been asked reveals some underlying assumptions: that I know about everything, and that I know more than anyone else.

4. Am I one-dimensionalizing? It is so easy for me to jump on the caricature train and strip away any sense of complexity or human dignity that a person may have. There are plenty of reasons to critique certain people, but even in critiquing we should remember that every person is a complex, created human being. Yes, we must hold people accountable for their actions and words. But true accountability focuses on a person's actions and words; it doesn't question the very nature of who they are as a human being.

5. Am I letting myself be reduced to one dimension? I refuse to let people think that I am "only" some left-leaning Christian who strives to be part of movements for justice, equity, and love. I'm more complex than that. So I also use social media to share pictures and stories of my awesome puppies, to be obnoxious about my fandom of the Oakland Athletics, to make fun of myself for my love of bougie café dining, and to convey a deep love and commitment to my family. Also, I'm always up for a good GIF battle.

6. Am I consistent? It's the worst when someone I have only known through Twitter as insightful and kind turns out to be a grade A, first-class jerk in real life. Likewise, I find it off-putting and jarring when someone whom I know to be kind in real life turns into an angry troll when they hop online. When I meet someone and am startled by the difference in tone, content, or general perspective, I am left wondering which one is their real self.

At the end of the day, be you. When we are consistent, there are fewer narratives we have to maintain. If we all act more consistently, we can develop genuinely meaningful relationships that are enhanced by both our online and our in-person interactions.

7. Am I as funny as I think? I'm a big believer in the power that satire can have in social movements. Cartoonists, comedians, and writers have been poking and prodding at the powerful for generations. This is a needed part of any movement.

But few of us are as witty and wise as we like to think we are. When it comes to the sass that gets bandied about on social media, our satire is often hypocritical or lazy.

There can be only so many cartoons, memes, and GIFs making fun of politicians, celebrities, and other public figures. To catch my attention, the artist has to have some cutting insight or powerful imagery. Most of my friends are not that talented in this area. I know I'm not.

When I use social media to express every opinion or thought that comes into my head, I find that I'm more likely to be trolled, to have people try to find and exploit my Achilles' heel, and to receive unsolicited feedback about every choice I make. Applying these seven filter questions has helped my online ecosystem stay rooted in a spirit of authenticity, fueled by genuine relationships. Our online lives are so interconnected that a healthy posture of being can only be built, nurtured, and embodied when we see one another through the lens of kindness—and when we act accordingly.

This article is adapted from the book In Defense of Kindness: Why It Matters, How It Changes Our Lives, and How It Can Save the World, published by Chalice Press. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Being kind online."