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Social Media Users' Guide

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(Editor's note: Susan Currie Sivek, associate professor of mass communication, teaches journalism and media studies. She shares some tips and advice for using social media.)

Privacy: Who sees what?

Not everything you post has to be visible to the world. Spend a little time learning about privacy settings on different social media sites.

- On Facebook, you can make any or all posts visible only to a list of select friends. In fact, Facebook creates some lists, like "Close Friends" and "Acquaintances," that you can edit. You can also exclude specific people from your posts; a friend even planned a successful surprise party this way!
- On Twitter and Instagram, you can approve your followers in advance with private accounts.

- Ultimately, though, the people who see your posts determine their security. A "friend" could make a screenshot or show your posts to others. Decide how much you trust your friends before posting anything you want to keep truly private.

New social media: Should I try _____?

As a social media instructor, I have social accounts all over the place, many abandoned. I enjoy experimenting with every site that might be the next big thing! But you can focus your energy on services that truly improve your life.

- Read about the new social medium you're considering. How could it enrich your life? Specialized information and

discussions of a hobby? Better contact with your favorite people? A personalized news feed?

- Consider whether you know other people on the site. For photo sharing or chatting, you'll want to know at least a few other users online, if not IRL ("in real life"). For discussions of a hobby or interest, your shared curiosity can fuel interactions and connections.
- If you're still not sure, give the new social service a brief trial, then decide if it's a useful part of your digital life. Watch how others make the most of it. Many people check out Twitter for a few minutes and then quit – but Twitter's value isn't always obvious so quickly. After a fair test, if you decide a social medium really isn't for you, delete the app or close your account.

Attention management: How do I keep social media from taking over my life?

Do you have "text neck?" It's supposedly a new diagnosis for pain caused by staring downward too long at our digital gadgets. Social media contribute to our digital immersion, but you're in control and can set limits.

- Your social media accounts will pester you with emails and alerts for every interaction – if you let them. Get to know these settings. You can change almost everything, restricting how often and why social media sites email or send notifications to your devices. Your social media can wait until you're ready to check them.
- Minimize distractions within your browser. On Facebook, close chat and the constant "ticker" of friends' activity. Shut down browser tabs that display the number of notifications on a site. Even those tiny numbers interfere with work and relaxation.
- To get perspective on your device use, try a time-tracking app like Moment (iOS) or QualityTime (Android). These apps reveal how long you actually stare at your phone or tablet. Be forewarned: The results may be shocking.

The Sivek File

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B.A., English, Trinity University
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Freelance writer, copy editor for magazines and websites, magazine industry correspondent for MediaShift

Academic Interests

Journalism and technology, magazine journalism, media sociology, political communication

Making life easier: Can social media also save time?

Social media can be a huge waste of time, if not carefully managed. But you can use them proactively to save time.

- Setting up a Facebook event is a free, quick and easy way to invite any number of people to an activity and to collect RSVPs. You can include a map, event details and a list of attendees, plus updates if anything comes up. Afterward, attendees can share photos and comments.
- A Facebook group or a group chat on a service like WhatsApp can keep people with shared experiences or interests in touch over time. I belong to alumni groups for high school and college, groups related to my hobbies and several local groups. Pretty soon, my high school class will use our Facebook group to plan another reunion.
- Some services you might use for work collaboration are handy at home, too. Google Calendar and Google Documents make household planning much easier. Share calendars, budgets and travel plans with a couple of clicks. Services like Trello and Asana can coordinate bigger projects, like an anniversary party or remodeling plans, through shared tasks, links and checklists.

– Susan Currie Sivek

