

Learning to discern: balancing news and social media while staying sane

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It can seem as if society is in a never-ending downward spiral and we are all at each other's throats. No trust. No tolerance. No grace.

It's hard not to want to speak out. To stand up for what you believe in — to want to make a difference. It's very easy to get sucked into a news or social media algorithm that feeds our political bias and then react in ways that are divisive or just plain mean.

How do we know what news resources are trustworthy? How do we express our opinion without getting into mean-spirited arguments?

One way is to completely avoid both the news and social media — and that may work for some. But most of us want to stay informed and engaged, so what do we do?

So much news, so many opinions

Like it or not, we live in a 24/7 news cycle where everything seems to be “breaking news.” It is all too easy to fall into the trap of listening to too much news and feeling depressed. This is especially true for media that are highly partisan.

If a TV or radio segment is entirely focused on tearing down (or building up) one political party/person, this should be a flag — especially if your mental health is negatively impacted. Just try turning it off. You might be amazed at how much better you feel!

Braver Angels encourages curiosity when trying to understand the other side. Some of our local East-Central Illinois Alliance members have found that switching between conservative and liberal leaning media is an enlightening exercise. Even when reporting on the same story, the angle can be very different.

Those who are really curious could try an activity launched several years ago by Braver Angels. “Walk a Mile in My News” was designed to break people out of their media silos by asking them to read articles from the “other side” of the political divide, and then get to know a person who appreciates what those articles are saying.

The red and blue leaning teams then get together for a discussion — following the guidelines of showing civility and respect for each other.

Navigating political talk on social media

If you use social media, it’s hard not to get sucked into a debate when a hot-button issue shows up on your feed. You may be innocently scrolling when suddenly a political post or meme pops up and you just can’t resist weighing in.

In these moments of temptation, it’s easy to wonder, “How can I engage in a non-polarizing way while still expressing my views?”

First and foremost, ask yourself if you would say in person what you are about to post on social media. If not, consider rephrasing or not sending. Anything that has negative emotion attached tends to come across as more hostile than if said in person.

Braver Angels offers online training for social media skills. Among their tips:

- If you believe others will strongly disagree with facts you are presenting, cite sources.
- Don’t use “red flag” terms to label a position of people you disagree with. Examples: racist, xenophobic, socialist, anti-police, etc.

— Don't assume you know the "real" motives of large groups on the other side of an issue. It's better to focus on the effects of a policy more than what you believe are the motives for it.

— If you have a personal story behind your view, consider sharing it.

— Before you post, check to see if it stereotypes, dismisses, ridicules or treats people or groups with contempt.

— Ask yourself: Would people of good will on the other side of this issue feel disrespected (as opposed to just disagreed with) by what I've written?

— Don't say or imply that the other person is ignorant or misinformed; just give what you believe to be the correct information.

— Don't disqualify someone's view because of their age, gender, occupation, political affiliation or any other characteristic.

You can think of the core skills to disagree in an agreeable manner as "ACAP": Acknowledge, Clarify, Agree, Perspective.

— **Acknowledge:** When people feel heard (even briefly and in written form), they tend to listen better to what comes next. They feel taken seriously instead of just contradicted.

— **Ask for clarification:** If you are not sure you understand what someone means by a brief post or a repost, ask them to clarify or expand before you disagree.

— **Find something to agree with before you disagree:** This might be a common value you share or a worry you both have.

— **Give your perspective:** Here's an additional skill for ending a perspective statement in which you have disagreed with someone: Openly invite a response.

Making educated, intentional choices about our media consumption takes work — as does interacting in a more positive way on social media. But the stakes are high and the effort is worth it — being better informed and having healthier political discussions will benefit us all.

About this series: This is the eighth installment of a [series of "Braver Conversations" columns](#), appearing every two weeks in Town Hall. Braver Angels is a national organization dedicated to bringing Americans together to bridge the partisan divide, with

a local presence in East Central Illinois. Readers are encouraged to join these Braver Conversations and submit questions or topics they want to see addressed by local members. Learn more and submit questions at il.braverangels.org. Email comments to eci@braverangels.org.

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