



ENJOYED YOUR HOLIDAYS? DON'T READ THIS UNTIL YOU'RE GOOD AND READY

I hope you had a good old-fashioned cucumber season and took time to distance yourself from the gasp-inducing news on social media. With autumn upon us, I have three tips on how to better organize your Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn feeds now that you've returned from your holidays.

I hope you were able to get away from the small screens that can provoke big emotions. The Tuscan cypress trees deserved your full attention. I don't want to bash social media. Yes, the opinions shared daily on social media are compelling—the fact that social media can provide a direct line to the brain of a Nobel laureate remains irresistible to me—but they are also intrusive and exhausting. The negative aspects of social media have been the subject of much discussion in recent years. There are ways, however, to improve your experience by tailoring your social media feeds based on psychological insights into their influence.

NO. 1: DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM NEGATIVITY

Emotions are contagious. Facebook conducted a large-scale experiment over the period of 1 week without the knowledge of the study's nearly 700,000 participants.¹ In the experiment, participants' news feeds were manipulated to show more or less emotionally positive content, more or less emotionally negative content, or less emotional content overall. When positive content was suppressed, participants subconsciously posted more negative than positive content. When negative content was suppressed, the reverse happened, and when both positive and negative content were suppressed, participants posted less content.

Limit your exposure to emotionally charged content. Our emotions are subconsciously influenced by the emotional tone of the messages to which we are exposed. Why let yourself be carried away by the emotional turbulence expressed by someone you do not know? Keep your distance. Cast the pickpockets, trolls, and black eyes out of your social media feed.

NO. 2: EXERCISE CAUTION

Repetition creates truth. The more you see a post on social media, the more likely you are to think it's true. Hearing a message more than once increases your perception of its truthfulness. Newspaper titles, advertisements, fake news, trivia—if the same stories pop up in your timeline several times each week, you become subconsciously aware of them. It is difficult to guard against this. Common sense and/or insider knowledge offer little protection.

Use caution. Be careful with the information you allow on your screen. People who spew nonsense, spread conspiracy theories,

or share slanted news stories are a danger to your intellect. Don't be overconfident. Repetition poisons your judgment.

NO. 3: BREAK OUT OF YOUR ECHO CHAMBER

Social media can be an echo chamber. We tend to follow people on social media who think the same way we do, express the same opinions, and know the same people we do. To some extent, this is good for our mental health—it creates a sense of coherence and identity. It doesn't, however, make us particularly creative or smart.

Follow unique people. Research shows that people think more creatively when they follow a few people on social media whom no one else in their network follows.^{2,3}

Following people on social media with whom no one in your network has connections gives you access to unique knowledge and information. In science, this phenomenon is known as the *strength of weak ties*.⁴

The advice is simple. On social media, deliberately seek out interesting people who are not followed by anyone else in your network. I try to follow a few journalists, comedians, and artists from other continents. If you really want to break the echo chamber, take it one step further by following people who have opinions you know differ from your own. Seeing how the other camp thinks—without arguing with them—can give you new insights and break down your social media echo chamber.

CONCLUSION

Social media has more influence on our thinking than we realize. We must therefore all become conscious curators of our own information environment. Above all, I hope you waited to read this editorial until you were home from your vacation overlooking a valley from a mountaintop or from carrying a surfboard under your arm on an exotic beach where social media was the last of your thoughts. ■

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