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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Even on social media, we should be open to others' opinions

Social media can be a wonderful thing. Every day I am bombarded with stories, experiences, pictures, quizzes to take and amazing “facts” - many of which need to be taken with a large pinch of salt. Thing is, as humans we like a good story and at times we're not too worried if we add something extra to that story in our re-telling. Some stories are simply based on people's opinions - such as the story that leaving a tooth in a glass of Coke overnight will make it dissolve. Others are based on observable fact. So although it might seem hard to accept, we can re-cycle the same amount of gold from 41 mobile phones as we can extract from 1 ton of ore.



But apart from the interesting, the trivial and the unbelievable, there is also much darker side to social media. The recent controversy over the video showing the beheading of James Foley showed at the same time the worst of the freedoms which social media such as Facebook and Twitter bring but also the best. There was an overwhelming stream of comments from thousands of users who refused to view the footage and asked for it to be removed from the web. There have been similar debates about how social media should cover the current Israel/Gaza conflict, where we seem to be inundated with horrific images of mutilated corpses, many of which are of children. I seem to recall similar debates about how the media should cover issues here when the bombing campaigns were at full tilt. We do need to know what is happening, but what constitutes an acceptable amount of evidence in the form of graphic images?

There is also an increasing tendency for people to think that social media somehow offers them free range to express their opinions without consequences, however prejudicial they might be.

We need to remember that opinions, no matter how strongly held, remain just that, opinions. We're entitled to have them, discuss them, share them, even argue using them. What we are not entitled to do, is present our opinions as the only and absolute truth, factually without error and allowing for no alternative narrative to co-exist. In this small place we call home, we have been brought up to hear and affirm our community

narratives, our faith histories and stories; and to receive them as fact rather than as interpretation or opinion. On many occasions we might catch ourselves agreeing uncritically with some-one's observation of "the other" which may be judgemental at best or prejudiced at worst. We are in danger of accepting opinion as fact.

If we really are committed to building a united community, we need to create space to hear the stories of others, to listen to their opinions and balance them against our own. We should be open to the possibility that sometimes those who disagree with us may have a point. Maybe, just maybe there are some bits of gold to be found there!



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog *"Here's the thing..."*

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