

by

Larry Magid, Ed.D  
and Kerry Gallagher, JD





Social media has become ubiquitous. As of January 2014, about three quarters of online American adults were using some form of social media, according to Pew Research. Among young adults and teens, the numbers are even higher. Without a doubt, the vast majority of your students – at least those in middle school or higher – have social media accounts.

Many educators are also on social media both for personal and professional use and, for the most part, that's great. From a professional standpoint it can enhance your network of contacts, engage you in important discussions, extend your own learning and even provide a platform for class projects. As for personal use, well, educators have lives, families, friends and interests just like everyone else so, naturally, many are drawn to social networking as a way to connect to the people they care about.

## **Appropriate use**

But educators also have responsibilities and concerns that could, perhaps, cause them to think twice about how they use social media. What is appropriate to post? Who should you interact with? Should you "friend," follow or make your posts accessible to your students? How about parents and colleagues? Are there certain types of posts to avoid? And how can you control who has access to what you post?

Social media services and apps can also be used as educational tools, but there are important issues to consider including privacy, appropriate content, security and your comfort level with the apps and services. Often, the best authorities on what is useful are your students themselves. Find out what tools they're using (new ones pop up all the time) and check them out. You might find them useful, or maybe not. But having an open mind about what your students are using and recommending not only opens you up to new horizons, but shows that you respect your students and care about what is important to them.

As is often the case, there are not always right or wrong answers to these and other important questions about social media use, but they are issues that you need to think about and, perhaps, discuss with parents, students and colleagues.

One thing we can say for sure is that social media is not something to be afraid of. We're not saying it's for everyone, but we are saying that – as with any powerful tools – there are some amazing and positive aspects to it as well as reasons to be careful.

This *Educator's Guide to Social Media* is designed to provide a framework for thinking about how to best use social media.

## **Protecting your privacy on social media**

There are ways you can limit who sees what you post but, if you are really worried about something getting into the wrong hands, the safest way to avoid that is to not post it on social media. For that matter, you might also avoid sending it via email or text since anything that's digital can be copied and pasted deliberately or by accident. But these are extreme cases, such as material that would be embarrassing or get you or others into trouble. For the most part, learning how to limit the audience of what you post can provide you with a reasonable amount of privacy.

So, the first thing you should do before using any social media service is to understand its privacy settings and norms. Almost all services have some controls over who can see what you post. Some services, including Facebook, allow you to control the audience for each post. Others, including Twitter, have universal settings that control all of your posts.

Twitter allows you to create a profile where you can pre-approve everyone who follows you, but the “norm” on Twitter is to not limit who can follow you, while on Facebook the norm is to limit posts to friends or friends of friends though there are some people who opt to post at least some updates to the public – knowing that anyone can see what they post. What’s important is that you consider the settings and think about how to use them before you post. Visit [ConnectSafely.org/eduguide](http://ConnectSafely.org/eduguide) for details about privacy settings for the major social media platforms.

## Interacting with students

There is no hard-and-fast rule about interacting with students on social media, but we do have some recommendations. First, you need to find out if your district has rules or policies and, if so, be sure to comply with them. It’s generally not a good idea to socialize with your students through social media but there are some teachers who use social media to discuss classroom projects, resources for students or examples of great student work. On Facebook, for example, teachers can set up [Pages](#) or [Groups](#) that their students



can access without their having to “friend” their students. It’s also possible to set up Groups of students and send class-related messages to the group without sharing your other posts.

Because the Twitter norm is public posting, it is possible that your students might see your tweets, unless you use Twitter’s privacy settings to pre-approve all your followers and are careful to not allow students to follow you. So, if you do have a public Twitter account, be careful not to tweet anything that you wouldn’t want students to see.

Just as some educators have personal Facebook profiles and professional pages, some have both personal and professional Twitter accounts. The professional account can be used to post links to assignments on Twitter or photos of excellent student work. This means that the professional accounts often have few privacy restrictions and any student or parent could easily find and follow it.

We’re not saying that educators must have separate personal and professional accounts. If you want to have only one Twitter account that is used mostly professionally, go for it. There is nothing wrong with posting an image of your family or a quote from a favorite movie now and then for your students and colleagues to see. Every educator has a different comfort level with personal sharing in the classroom and in faculty meeting rooms. Consider your comfort level when making social media decisions and do what makes sense to you. Remember, you are the same person online as you are in your classroom.

## Protecting student privacy

Regardless of whether your account is public or private, teachers must be careful about posting photos of students if parents have not signed the school's media release documents. For our youngest students, it might be best practice to keep the account private and tell parents they will need to request access and get approval before having the ability to view. For middle and high school students, parents who have signed the waivers are often thrilled to see the images of their students engaged in learning posted online.

These same guidelines hold true for Instagram. The service can be used in class to showcase students' work, document class activities or share educational content. The same could be true for Snapchat, Google Photos, Flickr and other services that allow you to post and share images. Again, be sure parents have given permission if students appear in the images. In addition to parental permission, make sure it's OK with the students as well. Some of them might be "having a bad hair day."



When deciding whether to friend or follow students, think about their space. It's not so much a privacy issue if they chose to post publicly or share with you but it's important to respect students' personal space. Just as you probably wouldn't hang out with them at a mall, you might not want to hang out with them online in their own spaces. Again, pages or spaces dedicated to education are an exception.

When discussing social media in class, talk with your students about their privacy settings and who will see their schoolwork posted. You might consider asking them how they protect their own privacy on social media – many kids are a lot more privacy conscious than adults give them credit for.

## Interacting with parents and colleagues

It's fairly common to use social media to interact with professional colleagues and parents. Be aware of your audience and only post what you think is appropriate, and use tools to limit your audience, as described above. LinkedIn is a great option for connecting with other educators and, in some cases, parents because it's designed for professional networking. You'll find links for privacy settings on major services at [ConnectSafely.org/eduguide](https://connectsafely.org/eduguide).

With parents remember that their primary concern is their child. When posting an image or idea they can see, keep that in mind. Parents react positively to encouragement and uplifting posts from the classroom.

Also, even though educators have a right to their personal lives and opinions, it's important to remember that you are something of a public figure, at least as far as parents are concerned. How you are perceived – even when you're not at work – can have an impact on your career and how people think about you. That doesn't mean that you should shy away from posting pictures or comments, but it does mean that people may judge you based on how you appear or what opinions you express. We're not saying that you can't ever express an opinion, but do consider how it might affect how people in your community perceive you.

While still maintaining professionalism, interactions with colleagues on social media might be more informal than with parents. With colleagues we could feel more willing to share a struggle and appear a bit vulnerable in order to ask for advice. Remember, though, that

what you share with colleagues could possibly be viewed by parents or students depending on your privacy settings. And even privacy settings are not the end-all-be-all, since private comments or posts can easily be copied or captured via a screenshot and circulated elsewhere.

## Teaching your students about social media safety, privacy, security and digital literacy

While the subject of “Internet safety” may seem daunting, it’s not really all that complicated or, for that matter, much different than what you learned about when you were a student. Much of what young people (and adults too) need to know about protecting themselves online can be summarized in four words: “Think before you post.” Add to that “be kind and respectful” and you’ve pretty much covered the basics of “digital citizenship” in social media. OK, it’s a little more than that, but you get our drift.



There are plenty of programs designed to teach digital citizenship and Internet safety in schools. While some schools have set aside dedicated time, and in some cases dedicated staff, for these subjects, we think that the concepts should be woven into the entire curriculum. You can call it “digital literacy” if you want, but in the 21st century, knowing how to safely use digital tools is just literacy. Your students don’t distinguish between their digital lives and the rest of their lives – looking things up online, texting and accessing apps is just part of what they do as they go about

their day. And while there may be some value in having an assembly or class on safe use of digital tools, there is a lot to be said for integrating it into everything you teach. Just as educators use “teachable moments” to talk about treating others well and social responsibility, educators should take advantage of digital teachable moments as well. Digital citizenship is still citizenship.

Students also need to understand the importance of critical thinking and how to evaluate sources. The Internet makes it very easy to find just about anything, but just because they find something on Twitter or Facebook or through search, doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s from a credible source. Students (and teachers too) must take responsibility for what they post on social media. It’s not uncommon to spread urban myths – “facts” or stories that are simply not true – in social media simply because some people never bother to verify if they are true (snopes.com and factcheck.org are among several sites that can help determine what is or isn’t true). But you don’t have to be teaching about “the Internet” to make this point. Critical thinking and knowing how to find reliable and accurate information are relevant to all subjects.

## Myths about social media

While it’s important for educators to teach the safe use of social media and use it safely themselves, it’s also important to not pass on inaccurate information about social media. For example, there have been media reports about the dangers of Internet predators and lots of stories about cyberbullying. But, even though these dangers are real, it’s important to put them into context. In an article in [The American Psychologist](#), experts from the Crimes Against Children Research Center, which is funded by the Department of Justice, recently wrote, “The publicity about online ‘predators’ who prey on naive children using

trickery and violence is largely inaccurate." And even though cyberbullying is a real problem, it's not an epidemic as some claim, [according to most scholars](#) who study the issue. There is also a lot of misinformation about "[Facebook depression](#)" and conflicting research about the [dangers of too much screen time](#).



This is not to say that all of these issues aren't concerns, but it's important to put them into context and use credible sources when discussing them. Critical thinking isn't just for students, we adults must practice it ourselves.

### **Protecting yourself against harassment**

Fortunately, it's very rare, but there are cases where teachers have been harassed or cyber-bullied by students or former students. First, you need to distinguish between harassment and a student's right to express an opinion. While you might not like what they're saying, there is little you can do to prevent students from sharing their opinions about you, though if you see something about yourself that you don't like, you can certainly start by speaking with the student, explaining why the comments are hurtful and asking if they will take them down. If the comments are abusive, harassing or factually inaccurate or if they are impersonating you, you may have some recourse through

the social media service itself, your school district or union or – in extreme cases – law enforcement. If the comments are posted on a social media site, take a look at that site's terms of service and, if you believe the content it is in violation, report it immediately to the site's operators ([here's a link](#) to reporting pages for major services). Sites generally do not permit impersonation, which protects you if someone is posting as if they are you. Facebook requires people to use their real names and therefore prohibits anonymous accounts or accounts with fake names. You may have other legal remedies, so consider speaking with an attorney.

### **Dealing with abusive or dangerous student online content**

While schools don't generally have control over their students' activities outside of school, there have been cases where schools disciplined students for online activities including cyberbullying, impersonation and harassment of other students or staff. As a general principle, if the activities interfere with a student's ability to learn – even if they occur away from school and outside of school time – schools may have the authority to intervene. These issues can be tricky and are not always black and white, but if you encounter anything online that you feel needs to be addressed by the school, definitely check with district or school officials to see if there is anything that can be done. Of course, if you see anything online that indicates that a student is in danger of hurting themselves or others, you should contact the site operator, local law enforcement and district administration immediately and consider reaching out to the student or the student's parents.

ConnectSafely's [Resources for Youth In Crisis](#) lists several helplines and hotlines that may be able to assist you.

### **Professional learning with social media**

"Connected educators," as they are sometimes called, regularly share, find resources, and interact with other education professionals by way of social media. There are many social media tools, and each has its own strengths. Some are media-rich and robustly show

images and videos. Others are focused on short bites of text or links to outside resources. Connected educators who are experienced and comfortable on social media tend to use many tools over the course of a single day because of these differences. If you are just starting out, you do not need to dive into all tools at once. Here's a quick run-down to help figure out which tool to try, and to get the most out of your social media interactions.

### **Finding and curating your professional learning network**

In a professional learning network (PLN), educators can share ideas and learn from the expertise of others beyond the walls of their school. There are a few tactics for finding people who would fit well in your PLN. Start by following your colleagues who are already connected educators. Then talk to them about who they follow. When they recommend a person or social media account, ask them to be specific about how they've interacted and what they've learned. Another tactic is to follow the authors and bloggers whose writing you have read and admire. You can also search for speakers or consultants you've worked with in previous professional development situations. Once you are ready to grow your PLN, start participating on the conversations you see on Twitter. This is often how you find new people to follow, and therefore new ideas and perspectives to be learned. It is likely the people you follow on Twitter already converse about topics and ideas that will also interest you.



When you first start building your PLN, it's tempting to follow or friend everyone you can think of but it might be better to move a bit slowly at first. Eventually, you might reach a point when you are following too many people for you to keep up with, or some people whose posts simply aren't all that interesting. It's OK to unfollow or unfriend someone if you no longer want to hear from them. Neither Twitter nor Facebook will notify someone that you've unfollowed them. Also, Facebook has ways to minimize how much you hear from people – you can, for example, designate a friend as “an acquaintance,” which means you'll hear about major life changes but not everything they post. Twitter has a [mute feature](#) that lets you remove an account's tweets from your timeline without unfollowing or blocking that account. Curating your PLN in this way does not violate social media norms, but if you unfollow or unfriend someone you know in person, be prepared to explain your actions.

### **Sharing and finding articles and resources**

If you have a great lesson experience to share or if you are looking for ideas to revamp your classroom practice, [Twitter](#) is the place to go. Start by finding users who have similar interests and click on the links to articles, resources, and lesson plans that they share. “[Favorite](#)” or retweet the ones you like. Be sure to share your successes and questions, too. Your tweets are [limited to 140 characters](#). This forces users to be succinct and thoughtful when posting, and also makes it easier for users to quickly read through their feed. The more you put out there, the more you will get back.

[Google+](#) is the place to find links to articles and resources, too. Those posts can be liked, shared, or you can add to a comment stream similar to Facebook. There is the added feature of Google+ Groups. You can join groups of educators from your region, or with your interests. These groups tend to focus their posts to topics related to the purpose of the membership, and might be an easier way to find what you need. The conversation on Google+ also doesn't tend to move as fast as on Twitter.

[LinkedIn](#) is growing as a location for publishing and finding articles. Although its primary purpose is still professional networking and posting a resume, more professionals are also blogging on the platform or posting links to their blogs. If you haven't visited LinkedIn for a while, it is worth a peek.

[Our website](#) has links to additional resources including popular education blogs and apps.

### **Sharing and finding media**

Sometimes educators are looking for infographics, photographs, artwork, or video clips to use in the classroom. [Pinterest](#) boards require each pin – the term for a post on that platform – to have an associated image. Users create and name pinboards full of images, which are linked to their sources. By clicking these images, elementary educators can find excellent classroom decoration ideas and organizational strategies. Teachers who focus on particular subject areas can also find graphic organizers, primary source images, and lessons. As you find multiple resources on a single topic, Pinterest can be a place where you categorize and save those resources to easily find later.

[Instagram](#) users can post images or 3-15 second videos. Then you can add a caption or description for the media you post. These are usually not lesson ideas, though. Instead, Instagram is a place for you to see other educators interacting at conferences or events that you might not be able to attend. Posting to Instagram is only possible on the mobile app, but Instagram is viewable on a computer browser. It's a great way to keep up with your new connections from Twitter, Google+, and elsewhere.

For rich video content, [YouTube](#) is the place to go. Users have to be good at search terms to find what they need, but once you get the hang of searching on YouTube it can be a gold mine. Varying content delivery by using short, engaging video clips is an effective teaching strategy. Once you find a YouTube channel that has content that fits your curriculum or philosophy, follow it so that you can get notifications whenever new videos are posted. Also, YouTube videos can be "embedded" into your own blogs, Facebook posts and tweets so it's easy to share them with colleagues or students.

Edu blogger has an [excellent article](#) on how to find and use media without violating copyright law.

### **Getting social**

Since social media is meant to be a social experience, consider how you want to interact with your fellow educators. If you are looking to have an experience like group messaging –short typed responses between many people – [Twitter chats](#) will meet your needs. Find the hashtag (#) that fits your interests and then meet others on Twitter at the designated time for a discussion based on pre-made prompts. Usually chats are an hour long, happen weekly and the prompts and moderators change. But sometimes they are shorter or longer and sometimes they happen daily or monthly. These are fast-paced and can be overwhelming for newbies, but also a great way to build relationships with other educators from around the world.

If you want to have a more personal conversation, consider [Voxer](#). It is a walkie-talkie type experience that allows you to either leave voice messages or have a live voice conversation. Text, images, and links can be added to the conversation as well. But since the primary form of interaction is via voice recording, most educators find it more engaging and personal than other social networks. In fact, most Voxer interaction are a continuation of Twitter chats when people want to have a more rich discussion.



If a voice conversation isn't enough and you want a video chat, Google+ has a feature called [Google Hangouts](#). Up to ten people from remote locations can participate in the same video chat at the same time. These are ideal for planning upcoming events or being part of a webinar.

There is also a way to combine Google Hangouts with the sharing power of YouTube. [Hangouts on Air](#) are video chats, using the Google+ platform, that are broadcast live publicly on YouTube. So, up to ten people can participate in the chat, but it can be broadcast to an unlimited audience online. These are becoming a popular way to share and post webinars. The video stays online after the broadcast is over so those who missed it can watch it any time.

Where does [Facebook](#) fit in all of this? It is a place to share links, short typed messages, images, video clips, and to have direct message conversations. And since many educators are already on Facebook to keep in touch with family and friends, some choose to post links to education resources in their feed right along with their personal posts. Others choose to keep them separate. Educators who are also speakers or writers can create separate public figure pages where they post links to a speaking event website or to articles they publish.

## **How to use social media in the classroom**

It is possible to include social media within lessons to promote collaboration among your students and with the outside world. There are some excellent examples of teachers leveraging social media to promote learning in their classes, but be careful not to require your students to be on social media in order to participate in the learning experience. Some may not have access to a computer or smartphone, and just as you have the prerogative to join social media, or not, and how much to share, so should your students. Students can work in mixed groups in which some members are comfortable with sharing. The students who are not comfortable should be able to contribute to the learning without being required to post. Also, students under 13 are not allowed to use most social media services. Of course, many do despite the rules, but be aware that the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) limits the ability of children under 13 to use services that collect personal information. For more on COPPA and other student privacy laws, see ConnectSafely's [A Parents' Guide to Student Data Privacy](#).

### **Connecting students with experts**

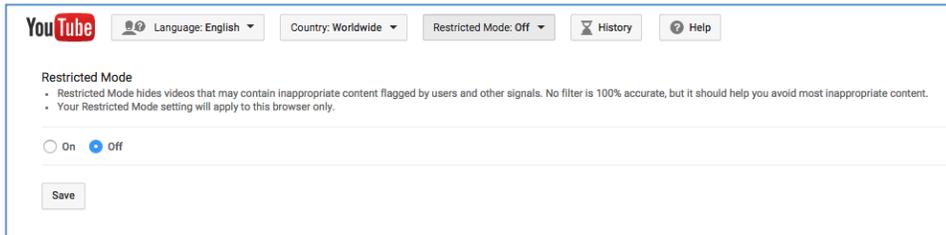
After students learn the basics about a topic, teachers can use their online connections to bring an expert to meet their students virtually. It is not uncommon for teachers to set up video conferences using tools like Google Hangouts or Skype, so that students can meet and talk with book authors, scientists, or people who lived through historical events like the Holocaust. It is free, as compared to expensive travel arrangements, and the students feel a deeper connection with the content when they can interact with a person who experienced or produced it.

### **Student-produced media**

As project-based learning has gained popularity, students are producing their own media to demonstrate their learning. Sometimes they might be especially proud of what they've created and want to share it. This is possible with YouTube, blogs, and other social media platforms. Talk with students about checking their work to make sure they have credited the sources of both information and images before they post. In addition, be sure to explain to them how to share their work using multiple social media services. For example, a student-produced documentary could be posted on YouTube and embedded in a blog post,

but a link could also be shared on Twitter and Facebook to gain more viewers if the student is especially proud.

A note about YouTube: Although it prohibits pornography and certain other types of material, there may be content on the service that you might consider to be inappropriate for your students. One way to mitigate this is to turn on restricted mode, which filters out content that has been flagged by users but, as YouTube explains on the site, "No filter is 100% accurate, but it should help you avoid most inappropriate content." Restricted mode applies only to the browser on whatever machines you've set it on and works independently of any other filters the school might have in place.



## Homework and extra credit

Teachers with Twitter and Instagram accounts dedicated to their classes often use them to send out reminders about upcoming assignments or extra credit opportunities. Students enjoy liking or commenting on a teacher's Instagram posts to show the teacher they are paying attention. They also like to retweet a teacher's tweet to share with their classmates as reminders. Remember, though, that not all students will be comfortable with using social media so those platforms cannot be the only place assignments are posted. An additional benefit to assignment reminders on social media is that they can reach parents as well as students, adding a new avenue for school and home communications.

## Class hashtags

Most social media services – Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Twitter, etc. – recognize hashtags as a way to label and search for posts that are focused on particular topics. Teachers can create a custom hashtag for their classes. Once the hashtag is shared with parents and students, it can serve as an alternative for those who do not want to follow or friend the teacher. Simply add the hashtag (ex: [#gallagherhistory](#)) to all posts that contain resources, reminders, excellent student work, or anything related to the class. Once you talk about appropriate use of the hashtag with students, you can welcome them to use it when they post about their learning or

## Dealing with content filters

The first thing you need to do is to determine that the social media services you want to use in class are accessible from machines connected to your school's network. A federal law called The Children's Internet Protection Act ([CIPA](#)) requires school districts that receive federal aid or discounts under the E-Rate program to certify that they have an Internet safety policy that includes technology protection measures that block access to images that are obscene; child pornography; or harmful to minors. The law does not require schools to block social media but it's quite common for these filters to block Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media sites. If this is the case at your school, it is likely either a school or district policy or possibly simply the default setting on the filtering software. So, if you or your students are blocked from resources you want to use, contact the administration to see if they can be lifted either for the entire school or at least your classroom. And by the way, school filters do nothing to block content from students' own devices if they are connected to a cellular network.

about their work from your class. Students can post pictures during a field trip to record their learning, links to videos or articles they happen across that relate to your curriculum, or questions they might want to pose to the teacher or classmates about an ongoing assignment. This practice can really break down the walls of your classroom and allow the learning to continue beyond the allotted class period or school day. It cannot be a required part of class, but it can be invigorating for students to know their teacher cares enough to continue the discussion on a platform they are already using.

### **Anonymous isn't synonymous with ominous**

Some of your students may use services like Yik Yak, Ask.fm and Whisper that allow users to post anonymously. There has been a lot of media attention paid to the downsides of these apps and, indeed, there have been instances of bullying and harassment, exacerbated by the ability to post without having to reveal your name or even a username associated with the person who is posting. Yet these apps have some [positive uses](#) as well, including the ability to explore subjects such as politics, health, sexual orientation or religion without having to reveal your identity. If you or your students are using any of these apps, you might want to take a look at ConnectSafely's [Tips for Safe and Civil Use of Anonymous Apps](#).

### **Ephemeral photos and live video**

One of the most popular messaging apps among teens is Snapchat. In its early days there was some misconception that messages and images sent via Snapchat could be viewed once and would disappear forever. While most teens now know this is not necessarily the case (there are ways to capture the screen), they still use it as their preferred messaging platform. One reason many young people like Snapchat is because it is "in the present." It's not about taking pictures to look at later in life but to experience them in the moment and then move on. It's as if photos are part of a conversation rather than as fodder for memories.

Among other things, Snapchat allows users to send both texts and edited or captioned images and videos in the same message stream. You can also piece a day's worth of snaps together into a "story" that's presented in chronological order. There are risks and benefits to this service and much more to learn in ConnectSafely's [A Parents' Guide to Snapchat](#).

### **Live video and parental permission**



Some of the newest social media apps allow users to live stream video to followers. Meerkat and Periscope (which is owned by Twitter) are the most popular. It is important to remember that when parents sign the school media releases they generally believe it covers photos of a child, but live streams are a brand-new arena. Many teachers have received positive feedback by sharing their discussion and teaching methods live from their classrooms. However,

both parents and students should be informed in advance about the purpose and audience of any broadcast. While streaming from their classrooms, teachers usually make sure student faces are not on the live stream and the smartphone is strategically filming from behind them as they share their learning. Others choose to live stream from their classrooms when no students are present. Videos can be saved from Meerkat and Periscope live streams and then uploaded to YouTube for future viewing.

## Closing thoughts for educators

Social media is part of the world we live in and, even if you don't use it, chances are that it affects you simply because many of the people around you – including students, colleagues and parents – are using it. That doesn't mean that you have to use it and you certainly don't have to use every service and app out there or spend a great deal of time on social media. You should, however, be aware of the services and apps your students are using.

How you approach it, who you friend or follow, how often (if ever) you post and how often you check in is completely up to you and, as with lots of good things in life, there may be times when you need a break from social media.

Keep in mind that, when used thoughtfully, social media can provide opportunities for professional growth, enhanced home-school communication, and conversations that allow learning to continue beyond allotted class times. If and when you choose to get started – or start over – with social media remember that general professional and personal rules of etiquette hold true online as they do in person.

### About the authors

[Kerry Gallagher](#) is a Technology Integration Specialist at St. John's Prep in Danvers, Massachusetts, a 1:1 iPad school serving grades 6-12. For 13 years she taught middle school and high-school history where her classes collaborated, created and published their ideas in a paperless environment. Kerry has a Juris Doctor from Massachusetts School of Law.

[Larry Magid](#) is CEO and co-founder of ConnectSafely.org and a technology journalist with CBS News, San Jose Mercury News and other outlets and for 19 years a syndicated columnist for the Los Angeles Times. He has a Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.