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Healthy Immunity Against Viral Posts

Abstract

"I wonder about the future of a church, a country, a world, that shows such vulnerability to viral misinformation and damaging rhetoric."

Posting about using discernment in social media from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/healthy-immunity-against-viral-posts/>

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Healthy Immunity Against Viral Posts

Jeff Ploegstra

I always found the immune system to be incredibly amazing. The idea of little cells running around destroying pathogens lit up my imagination. At some point I realized an even more amazing part of our immune system; it shows discernment! Your immune system can tell the difference between good things (self) and things that don't belong (non-self). It develops this capacity in part by being trained through two separate processes called clonal selection and clonal deletion.

What I find equally amazing is how frequently I have seen a lack of discernment in what people choose to post on social media. Things that are good and things that don't belong seem to be propagated in equal measure. This lack of discernment leads to social disease in a process very similar to viral replication. People's social media accounts basically become a platform to spread misinformation and destructive rhetoric.

We can do better.

As Christians we often talk about the Imago Dei—the Image of God. I think all Christians would like to be healthy and effective witnesses, so here is my recommendation for how we can do better at loving the world in social media, and how we can be more discerning.

When you think about posting something, you should first “SMEL-IT.” This handy acronym points to several questions you should ask yourself before you “share.” The acronym stands for:

Source, Motivation, Expertise, Love,- Integration, Trust

Source: *Am I willing to fact check?* Fact checking doesn't just mean finding another source that agrees with the article or video under question. It means going back to the primary source and actually reading it to be sure that the information is being accurately and completely represented. You need to ensure that there is no "cherry-picking" or misrepresentation going on. Ideally, you would actually look for counter-arguments and claims and evaluate the post in light of those as well.

Motivation: *Why do I want to post this?* What is the perspective being promoted? It is all too human to accept ideas that we like and reject ideas that we don't, regardless of their actual fit with reality. Most people refer to this as confirmation bias. It is also all-too-human to want to position ourselves as "in-the-know" and others as "sheeple."

Expertise: *Do I have the expertise to evaluate the claims and arguments being made?* Recently, many videos and posts popped up regarding COVID-19. I am quite confident, based on how much support they garnered, that many people don't understand statistical concepts like representative sampling, immunological concepts like clonal selection and adaptive immunity, epidemiological concepts like the difference between case fatality rate and infection fatality rate, vaccine development processes, and the list goes on. If you lack the training to evaluate the quality of the information, you probably shouldn't post it. You should also be aware of the Dunning-Kruger effect—a cognitive bias in which the less you understand a topic, the more you overestimate your understanding of it.

Love: *Is this the best way to present these particular claims or arguments?* Too many posts utilize polarizing and demeaning rhetoric designed to undermine the credibility of other people rather than focusing on the claim or argument itself. These kinds of posts may make you feel good about yourself, but are extremely unlikely to lead to productive dialogue or to change anyone's mind.

Integration: *How does this post integrate with everything else that I know about the world?* Are there implications of the idea that just don't fit with the bigger picture, both in terms of ideas and people that you have relied upon? If the central claim runs counter to multiple commonly held understandings or requires you to essentially distrust all of humanity, you should be careful. It is possible that there is a global governmental conspiracy to which 99% of the population is blind, but realize that you may be in danger of falling in with flat-earthers.

Trust: *Is this post consistent with who I am as a Christian?* How is this post going to reflect on the larger body of Christ? Is this going to lead people to trust me and—by extension—other Christians?

I am strongly against censorship, and in some ways find it very disturbing on a gut level when I see videos and posts being removed, but I wonder about the future of a church, a country, a world, that shows such vulnerability to viral misinformation and damaging rhetoric. It is unfortunate that it takes time to debunk conspiracy theories and undo the damage of uncritical reposting. It is unfortunate that these diseases can spread through communities unchecked before someone with discernment takes the time to respond. Instead, maybe we can take a proactive approach to the problem by developing a healthy immunity against viral posts.

Please don't be part of the problem. We bear the name of Christ—let's do it well.