

Professor discusses what it takes to keep, communicate with Facebook friends

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Social media forums like Facebook fail to provide opportunity for users to express nuances of emotion, a feature which makes thoughtful and productive discussions about politics and other sensitive topics difficult, says a Purdue University communication expert.

"In face-to-face [communication](#) you don't blast a political message in someone's face; you have a conversation," says Glenn Sparks, a professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication. "Facebook is not a platform that fosters careful dialogue, nor is it a place to thoughtfully listen to other people. Text is an impoverished medium for expressing emotion, which is key for conversations. Lacking sensitive emotional expression on [social media](#) often contributes to a spiral of vitriolic communication."

Sparks, an expert in mass media effects who has studied how communication technologies affect interpersonal relationships, says many people have accumulated a lot of friends on Facebook without knowing them well. As a result, people are now learning they have distinctly different political beliefs and that is redefining and sometimes polarizing their virtual friendships. This polarization can lead to "defriending" which many experience as a severe emotional wound.

"If people can remember that this is social media, they can remind themselves that it is designed to connect people, not polarize people," Sparks says. "But, when people post, they often fail to take time to respond. Posts are often formed quickly and impulsively, which can breed instability and set off unintended emotional reactions."

Sparks is the co-author of "Refrigerator Rights: Our Crucial Need for

Close Connection" with Will Miller, who is a lecturer in the Brian Lamb School of Communication.

"Many users have decided to not engage or get involved in Facebook political discussions, and people need to do what is best for their well-being," Sparks says. "If Facebook political posts are often irritating, look instead for opportunities to engage and discuss with people face-to-face. Friendships and families can be strengthened as people look for ways to engage offline."

Provided by Purdue University

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