

JANE AUSTEN'S GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

We don't need romantic advice from 18th-century spinsters. What we really need is some guidance for avoiding Facebook foibles and Twitter gaffes. **By Shannon Rupp**

In honour of the 200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice* this year, the Jane Austen industry has been working at full capacity delivering tomes of Austenian advice on every conceivable subject but the obvious one: *Jane Austen's Guide to Social Media*.

Naturally, most authors are trying to cash in on the passion of the Jan-cites. Not to mention their wishful thinking in the romantic department. In *The Jane Austen Guide to Happily Ever After*, Elizabeth Kantor counsels young women to see the world through the eyes of Austen's serious heroines, like Fanny in *Mansfield Park*. Apparently this will teach the gullible not to fall for charmingly immoral men. I would be inclined to counsel that this is an important experience on the road to growing up.

And I have my doubts about just how useful the views of a witty spinster circa 1800 might be to modern romantics. It's ironic that some see her as an authority on husband-hunting given that the great love of her young life eluded her. His prudent parents prevented the ambitious lawyer from marrying the poor clergyman's daughter. Still, many a scribe has decided to treat Austen's astute social satires as Cinderella stories, despite the fact that her novels endure precisely because they are so unromantic.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Austen's books is that they reveal a truth that should be universally acknowledged: Technology changes; people don't. Much of her writing shows an uncanny understanding of Facebook follies and Twitter gaffes.

"Business, you know, may bring you money but friendship hardly ever does," says one of her witty characters in *Emma*, arguing that no letter from a friend is urgent enough to risk a rainy walk to the post office.

It made me wish that more of my Facebook acquaintances were clear on that tasteful 18th-century distinction between pals and profit. One has come precariously close to unfriending as she clutters my news stream with her "excitement" over the pasta sauce she sells through some home-party marketing scheme for comestibles of questionable origin.

Then there are the book authors who no longer have publishers, let alone bookstores, to do their marketing. One slapped a link to his (dodgy-looking) self-published book on my Facebook wall begging everyone to buy it because, in his not-so-humble opinion, it was *a really good read*.

He's like Anne Eliot's narcissistic father in *Persuasion*—vain, self-centred and utterly certain everyone will admire him. Would he be praising his own work in public if he'd laughed at Sir Walter Eliot flattering himself? I think not.

Then again, the jokes he inspired reminded me of *P&P*'s Mr. Bennet: "For what do we live but to make sport for our neighbours and laugh at them in our turn."



That insight is practically the recipe for social media.

In Twitter, I'm often reminded of Emma's pathetic neighbour Miss Bates (the yammering spinster who never says anything interesting). She's a dead-ringer for a publicist I followed who regularly reported the banal details of her lunch and her location. And then she announced she was starting a colon cleanse. I unfollowed her before the details of that adventure hit cyberspace.

Every Facebooker prone to putting the emphasis on status when he posts his status updates, might consider Austen's view on such fakery. She advised her niece, Fanny, a budding novelist, on how to construct interesting characters: "Pictures of perfection, as you know, make me sick and wicked." Well, don't those fakebook constructions of perfect lives make us all a little wicked?

Then there are people who brag relentlessly about their golf dates, their posh restaurant meals and whatever they bought this week. Would they do any of this if they'd read Austen's comic romp, *Northanger Abbey*, about teenage Catherine Morland, a gullible girl who has read one gothic romance too many? But even this sweet naïf is put off by boastful

John Thorpe, who is forever bragging about his coach and horses.

I know Thorpe in real life. He keeps posting about his new car, his new reno, his new barbecue, his new smartphone.... Oh dear. Now he's mobile.

I'm not suggesting you shouldn't post meaningful personal news—what my uncle used to call the hatching, matching and dispatching. If there's a new babe in our midst, by all means update us, although it would be best if you spared us the delivery-room shots, no matter how much you want to show off your new digital camera. Which, apparently, does video too.... Oh, isn't the new technology wonderful?!

Whatever you do, at all costs avoid the Mr. Collins-approved humble-brag. You know what I mean: the false humility that really disguises a boast. The hilariously repulsive Mr. Collins in *P&P* is a master of the form, apologizing endlessly in order to position himself as a superior person of great sensibility. His tales of his humility in the presence of his "great patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh" were really just a way of letting everyone know he was employed by an aristocrat. Mr. Collins is a raging egomaniac, which is part of what makes him so funny. Remember that the next time you have the urge to announce how overburdened you are with all those party invitations.

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While there's no difficulty in learning which buttons to click in social media, Austen's novels get at the much trickier problem of what to say, how to say it and when to shut up. What it comes down to is an old-fashioned sense of manners that includes both self-awareness and an eye to how you treat others.

Good manners of that sort fell out of favour in the 20th century because most of us live in relatively big, anonymous cities. You could be rude to strangers or make a fool of yourself publicly with little consequence. With that in mind, social rules changed radically in the 1960s. Those perpetual adolescents, the baby boomers, arrived and argued for authenticity over the artifice they thought courteous manners implied. Half a century later, people are so dazzled by the bells and whistles of social media that they've missed what these platforms are really doing—returning us to the village. A really big village, granted, but one in which there's a permanent record of everything everyone says.


So for those looking to perfect their skills in defensive posting, Austen's characters offer the full range of potential faux pas. Self-promoters, shills, braggarts, cheats, liars, manipulators, narcissists, social climbers, psychopaths, dimwits, and fools—especially malicious fools—all come in for a drubbing.

Which is why I wish some enterprising publisher would skip the romantic advice and sum up all Austen's insights into a pithy guide for social-media novices. Then again, the best advice might be to just read the novels and then pause before you post anything and ask yourself: "What would Jane say about that?"

Searching for the Virtual Nod

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to Instagram it, does it still make a sound? Yeah, sure it does, but what a shame to have missed out on all of the "likes" the photo op could have generated!

It's difficult to understand our newfound need to document our every move on social media but apparently nothing is sacred anymore. The trials of colonoscopy preparation? Fair game. Heck, for a price, you can sign up for a service that will keep your Facebook and Twitter feeds alive even after you aren't. But what are we searching for when we post our thoughts, feelings and photographic evidence of our (often-mundane) lives for everyone to see?

Some observers believe it comes down to social media's biggest flaw: the virtual . Whether someone is trying to entertain, fishing for attention or searching for approval, posting on their forum of choice is likely to elicit the desired response in the form of the "like" button.

"Social media is a very low-ask technology," says Anders Svensson, a writer at Uppercut, a Calgary-based creative agency. "You can receive the exact same response for completing your PhD in biochemistry as you can for eating a hamburger. And that's okay online. The crazy part is, in these realms, the like button is preferred to having an actual conversation."

When you stop to think about it, it is kind of crazy. In the real world, no one would dream of walking into a room and shouting, "Hey, does anyone like this plate of tacos?" So why are we doing it online? Interestingly, just like in real life, the more someone strives for approval online, the less likely they are to get it. If your news feed is a constant stream of whining rants, motivational quotes or cries for attention, you better believe people are "hiding" you.

But while it's easy to poke fun at that person on your feed who is always taking pictures of her dog or her lunch, at least they're expressing what they're passionate about. The less someone considers their online posting choices, the less they are actually saying about themselves. "If someone is just randomly documenting everything, it's just another kind of overshare—they're just making noise," Svensson says. "They become *The Da Vinci Code* of live updates."

There's also something to be said about the fact that constantly looking at things through our device's lens is certainly shifting our priorities away from enjoying the experience as it happens and towards documenting it for all our "friends" to see. "It's a shame people can't put their phones and cameras down and enjoy the moment more, especially in cases like concerts where the photos are going to be less than stellar," says Kat Tancock, a Toronto-based digital-content consultant.

The bottom line is, like it or not, our social-media feeds are an extension of our identity. Our accounts are there for the world to see (locked-down privacy settings or not). This can be a very good thing when used correctly—or at least wisely—or it can be a very effective way of alienating yourself without even realizing it. "In real life, when you say something, it's difficult to take it back," Svensson warns, "but once you've said it on the Internet, well, you're never getting that back. Even if you delete it, someone out there saw it."

Taking a second to think, "Should I post this?" is now a necessary life skill. We may not gather as many "likes," but we also won't find ourselves wishing nearly as often that there had been an "Are you sure?" button.

HIGH ANXIETY

You've heard of social anxiety, but what about social media-induced anxiety? **Fear of Missing Out or FoMO** is a form of anxiety caused by a feeling of exclusion, one that's increasingly studied by mental-health researchers. Most prevalent in people ages 18 to 33, it's that unpleasant feeling you get when your feeds flood with tweets and photos of an event you weren't invited to.

While the smartphone is a brilliant communication and entertainment tool, if you find yourself incessantly checking for messages when no notification has sounded, experiencing feelings of resentment towards things posted on social media, and unable to function without your phone by your side, you need to start asking yourself if there might be a problem.

"Like any other form of anxiety, it becomes a problem when it is causing problems in other areas of your life," says Sharla Zalmanowitz, a registered provisional psychologist with the Calgary Counseling Centre. "Setting healthy limits around how much engagement with an anxiety-causing platform, like Facebook, a person has each day would likely be a recommendation for working through this condition. Determining what a healthy amount of time is, though, is going to vary from case to case."

It's also important to recognize that life can look a lot more enviable online since people are usually just posting the highlights of a social event. Friday night spent solely with Ben & Jerry isn't generally what golden status updates are made of, but grabbing a few real, live friends and going out for some Chunky Monkey might be.