

Think before you tweet



By [Nerushka Deosaran](#)

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Last year one media personality threatened to sue another media personality claiming that her tweets were defamatory to their brand. The tweets included the adjectives "young hoe" and "drunk." The target's lawyers sent a letter requesting a halt on the tweets, an apology and damages in the amount of R85 000.

In Zimbabwe, a 17-year-old boy posted a photograph of a woman sitting in her office, with the caption "These are Chiredzi's prostitutes" in Shona. The woman discovered the photograph on Facebook and laid a charge against him with the police. He was convicted.

Unfortunately, these stories aren't unique or rare. The incidences of stories involving the law and social media are becoming more prevalent across the globe.

Instant communication, instant infamy

Social media, email and the internet enable the transfer of information instantly, constantly and virally throughout the globe. There are many forms of electronic communication available. Social platforms like Twitter and Facebook are designed for expressing opinions and giving updates. Twitter is a constant timeline of messages containing 140 characters spewed out by over a billion users across the world. Topics range from politics and sport to what-I-just-ate-for-lunch. Facebook is a global favourite, which is known, amongst other things, for its attention-seeking members constantly posting pictures of themselves (often looking into a mirror) and baring their innermost emotional thoughts for all to read or worse.

There is so much going on in life, work takes up most of the day, and there is little time left to dedicate to our social media personas. With the evaporation of complete words, and the loss of the romantic postage system which allowed more time to draft our correspondence, do we take the time to stop and think before we click "send," post a few photographs or update a status? Do we take any time to think about what we are saying; think about who our audience is; or whether what we are doing is right or wrong?

A killer communication

The implications of not doing so can be very serious. In Arkansas in the US, a prisoner convicted of murder and sentenced to death had his case overturned on the basis that a juror tweeted about the case from the jury box which violated the general rule of not discussing the case. The tweets were about waiting for the verdict and the bad coffee and did not even reflect the issues or the juror's opinions on the case.

We need to take responsibility for our actions online in the same way we take responsibility for our actions in everyday life. Social media is not a gateway through which you can have free reign to do as you please without consequences. The rules of defamation (injury of another's reputation through publication) and *crimen injuria* (unlawful impairment of another's privacy or dignity) apply equally in an online context.

Few people can go through a day without the influence of electronic media in some way, and social media platforms are changing the way people inter-relate, in many respects for the better. However, just because it happens online doesn't mean that anything goes. Remember, think before you tweet.

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