

Professional Identity and Digital Diligence

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The transition to online teaching has dramatically increased educator visibility. Unfortunately, in some cases, that increased attention brings a disproportionate level of negative scrutiny. While adapting to significant changes in teaching modalities, educators must also consider the need to protect their privacy through the separation of their personal and professional identities. The ever-widening gap in socio-political opinion coupled with a worldwide pandemic has set the stage for hyper-scrutiny within personal and digital spaces. As an unexpected benefit of being abruptly forced online for daily communication, the public witnessed a dramatic improvement in collective technical skills. Upgrades to internet services and computer equipment served to further supplement that growth. However, this increase in online life also opened windows for broader exposure to subjects and personalities that some found at odds with their personal beliefs. The education system is one of many that has faced intense re-examination in this environment. Given the increase in exposure and the unpredictability of public response, educators should consider actively separating their personal identities from their professional identities while proactively assessing privacy risks. The terms *educator*, *teacher*, and *instructor* will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter. Though there are some notable differences between the K-12 environment and higher education, the focus of this chapter covers both arenas.

Preserving a positive professional identity is critical to a successful career as an educator. This manifests through what has been called a “persona.” Major (2015) stated that a persona “represents a compromise between the role that a given individual is willing to play and the role that society expects” (p. 164). Maintaining that balance is tenuous at best. Unfortunately, these carefully crafted personas can be easily ruined. Be it maliciously or accidentally, a damaged reputation for an educator often negates the years of pre-career training and years of success inside the classroom. From the start of the American public education system, educators have been subjected to intense scrutiny by the public while simultaneously being held to higher moral standards. Through the early years of the twentieth century, teachers could be punished or dismissed altogether for getting married, having a child, or participating in any community-defined infractions, among other reasons (Pawlewicz, 2020). With increased internet usage during the lockdown period of the pandemic, educators began experiencing heightened attention to and judgment of their teaching methods and practices, including the expectation of unlimited availability (Weale, 2022). They are critiqued in a variety of public forums for what happens inside the classroom, such as their approach to course content, as well as those things that happen off school property outside of school hours, such as community activities and activism. The transition to online teaching during the pandemic continues to erode educators’ expectations of privacy and agency to separate work life from personal on their terms.

Effects of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic instantly changed the way people worked and lived. The surrounding uncertainty regarding exposure to infection and unprecedented death pushed most aspects of everyday life online, including doctor’s visits and funeral services (Kaffer, 2020). As the internet became the world’s dominant means of communication, computer equipment sales skyrocketed as households sought to improve online connections and experiences. Sales of personal computers saw their most significant growth in a decade, with largely Chromebooks filling the almost-immediate demands of online learning (Armental, 2020). Quick pivots to working almost exclusively online drove laptop and desktop sales to exceed \$302 million in 2020 (Pressman, 2021). The additions or upgrades to web cameras, camera lighting, microphones, speakers, and high-resolution monitors, coupled with a tremendous increase in technology dependency,

led to a quick uptick in user skillset and confidence. Being online was no longer a preference but a necessity. Even users ages 50 years and older contributed to these marked increases by 8-15% in their own adoption of key technologies, such as smartphone ownership and social media use, compared to a decade ago (Faverio, 2022). This increase in users, particularly on social media, added to the number of voices expressing opinions and in turn, gave everyone a voice on issues from mask requirements to vaccinations to in-person vs. online learning (Associated Press, 2020).

Improved technical knowledge, increased time online, and the cultivation of new online personas quickly expanded the potential audience of educators outside the confines of the classroom roster and educational institutions. The audience now included the court of public opinion and excessive media coverage – where the rules seem to follow the old “shoot first, ask questions later” approach. For the first time and on a grand scale, the online classroom provided a viewing window for those not enrolled as students. Family and guardians were able to observe, attend and comment on learning happening in a digital arena rife with privacy concerns and access issues. This change emboldened some parents to “zoom bomb” active online sessions by breaking in to ask questions or to refute the teacher (Jargon, 2020). Inevitably, this new access point of instant feedback and concern led to conflicts such as online classroom management disagreements with parents, online bullying over the return to in-person learning, and full-scale targeting that could lead to professional burnout/demotion/job loss.

Challenges of the Online Classroom

The online classroom introduced a host of unforeseen privacy challenges for educators. Unlike a traditional face-to-face classroom, the online platform makes it impossible to reliably detect if someone not included in the class roster is lurking in the background. Lurking increased opportunities for misunderstanding and misinterpretation of class management, instructional modes, and even the content itself. Online learning sessions can be recorded and distributed without instructor knowledge even though subsequent edits might take the situation out of context. These possibilities almost demand that educators regularly inspect their recording environment before beginning each online session and consider what could be visually misconstrued in the background. What will students and parents be able to see in the background? Items include books, artwork, photos, flags, and anything else that observers could characterize as offensive or objectionable. Unfortunately, this can also include apparel like shirts, scarves, and hats that imply affiliation or support for various groups or movements. The potential of parents to misconstrue or incorrectly contextualize objects means there is value in depersonalizing everything when teaching online. For example, a high school teacher in Los Angeles was forced to flee her home due to death threats received after wearing a BLM t-shirt while teaching an online English session (Agrawal, 2020). Though perhaps extreme, it suggests that attention might be warranted for potentially offensive background audio as well. The expectations and standards in online learning are decidedly less rigid in higher education environments based on the assumption that these students are “adults.” However, there were still instances of student disruption in lectures and online events where virtual audiences were subjected to deprecating outbursts and racial tirades (Brockington, 2022; Parkey, 2022).

Cellphone recordings of incidents at middle and high schools have been reported for years; however, few people expect or prepare for what they do in the face-to-face classroom or the online classroom to be brought to the forum of public opinion. While there are no surefire ways to eliminate all risk in a climate fraught with widespread feelings of offense, curating easily identifiable information about self and immediate family can help manage targetable points of impact for situations that suddenly trigger the spotlight of public scrutiny and opinion.

Communication Challenges in the Digital Environment

The pandemic forced most daily communication into an exclusively digital mode, and that social routine seems slow to revert. Conversations that were once in-person continue to take place in a digital realm out of convenience, but also where they can be stored and recalled ad nauseum. Once viewed by a select but relevant few, instructions, written examples, and educator syllabi are stored and shared indiscriminately across the web. Now that digitized documents are the norm rather than the exception, they are more susceptible to mass distribution. Despite differing opinions, personal growth and the evolution of views on political and social issues through conversation became stifled as digital communities formed echo chambers and introduced the fear of online harassment. The ease of taking screenshots and forwarding them only served to exacerbate miscommunication and strife. According to De Zwart et al. (2010), “(t)he very purpose of social networking sites, which is to lower the barriers to social communications, creates risks associated with uninhibited communications.” Educators learned to operate on the assumption that their lectures and conversations were being recorded and possibly shared on social channels, which led to guarded speech and suppressed opinions (Redden, 2021). Teachers were also unable to make quick visual assessments of student understanding because either student cameras were off, or students were distracted by background activity.

Another challenge of online learning was that decisions regarding technology platforms and access were made at the administrative level, bypassing the input of the teachers who would be using them. Administrators often selected platforms based on user-friendliness and affordability rather than factoring in ease of use for room management or digital protection for students learning. Because online heckling was a completely new phenomenon for educators, administrators also failed to consider instructors teaching with an unintended audience. In addition to learning to use each unfamiliar platform, educators were simultaneously troubleshooting connectivity issues with students, trying to teach the curriculum in the least disruptive manner, and combating online aggression, leading teachers to unexpectedly lose classroom privacy and autonomy.

Community Engagement Expectations

Educators face unique complications when trying to minimize their level of personal exposure given that their job roles often include an expectation of community involvement. These mandatory but secondary responsibilities vary depending on the institution but can include coaching, club advising, and representing the school at various events. This exposure broadens at the college level with the additional expectations of grant-writing to fund research, scholarly publication, and presentation of the resulting research. In many cases, this is not optional because it is an evaluation requirement. This magnifies exposure beyond classroom walls and translates into broader recognition among those not directly tied to the instructor's primary responsibilities, which can include parents, students, boosters, alumni, and general community members at large. Many US schools have one or more social media accounts used for marketing and promotion of the organization. Administrators often use social media posts to share events, awards, and school news with the local community. To protect the identities of minors in those posts, school employees are often pictured and fully identified while leaving the students pictured unnamed. Teachers and staff receive neither compensation nor the same privacy protection as students when their images and reputations are used for marketing to increase school attendance and funding. These social media posts, however, expose identifying information about educators and increase their levels of visibility to the public.

Areas of Vulnerability

Understanding specific areas of vulnerability is the first step to regaining control of an educator's personal and professional identity. No two people will be juggling the same issues and scrutiny; therefore, carefully assessing their personal threat level is essential. Because outside influences inform some of these susceptibilities, they need to be revisited regularly and reflected on based on the current situation and the expectations of the educator's community. Engaging in thoughtful conversations with trusted colleagues can also be helpful. These conversations will allow opportunities to provide feedback on potential risks and to rethink threats to personal online identities. The pendulum of concern and scrutiny is ever-changing. Making informed and thoughtful decisions about how to actively engage in both personal and professional life provides the best protection to educators at any level or in any teaching environment.

Personal Identifiable Information

The authors define vulnerabilities as areas that leak Personal Identifiable Information (PII) about the educator. This information provides easy access for those looking to target or bully someone when there is disagreement or a difference of opinion. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (2022), PII is "information which can be used to distinguish or trace the identity of an individual alone or when combined with other personal or identifying information which is linked or linkable to a specific individual." Single bits of information can be aggregated to create a complex digital biography of an individual. As Solove (2004) explains "digital biographies greatly increase our vulnerability to a variety of dangers" (p. 146). PII includes name, address, date and/or place of birth, email address, telephone number, driver's license number, social security number, banking information, place of employment, names of family members, and any other information that can be used to identify and trace back to a specific educator.

Primary vulnerability is information that one unknowingly hemorrhages in various spheres of life, particularly where there is overlap. Educators should consider what goes online about their personal interests/passions and professional work/identity. It is easier than ever to connect those seemingly unconnected dots and merge those worlds without consent – often by people unknown to the target. With over 500 unique data brokers selling public record information online to anyone who pays, millions of records can now be searched with the click of a mouse button (Solove, 2020). For example, simple information such as name, birth date, and county of residence can be used to easily gain access to a person's home address on the voter registration website of most states. Unfortunately, this information is quite often disclosed voluntarily within social media posts and responses. Even if educators intentionally avoid disclosing personal data, friends and family may also inadvertently add to PII leakage by tagging and posting on the educator's social media accounts. The vulnerability intensifies when personal connections blend with friendly professional connections, so it is important that one reflects on how much risk they are willing to accept.

Information Institutions Must Share When Requested

Educators in public institutions are subject to both the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) as well as the Open Records Act of the state in which they reside. These acts grant members of the public access to government documents upon request with a few well-defined restrictions, such as materials that involve law enforcement or national security. This includes requests for documentation or records involved in the daily work of state and federal employees. Most, if not all, of what an educator produces or uses at work is subject to disclosure to any member of the public who inquires. This includes emails, saved computer files, all hiring documents, employment evaluations, and more. Educators would be wise to take some time to locate and familiarize themselves with FOIA regulations found in their employee

and institutional handbooks. Particular attention should be paid to social media use and electronic communication guidelines. Also, First Amendment law should be reviewed as it pertains to individual educators. These laws differ by state, district, and employer, so instructors should educate themselves within their own jurisdictions when outlining a privacy plan.

Information Voluntarily Disclosed

Educators should make time to identify how the deliverables in their work-life lead directly back to personal identifiable information about them or their families. Where can educators make autonomous decisions about their digital work identity and work product? They should make an appointment with someone from their human resources (HR) and/or information technology (IT) departments to discuss privacy options. Depending on the situation, it may be helpful if they can select the name used to identify them in work settings such as email, department directories, and so on. Also, educators should ask if it is possible to opt in or out of specific communication channels (e.g., Slack, LinkedIn Edu). Thought should be given to what information is shared about the educator in professional spheres, including conference proceedings, membership directories, committee minutes, and recordings. Items like these are often stored “in the cloud” and accessible to anyone motivated enough to search. Consider removing extraneous personal information from the professional biographies submitted for conference introductions and published works. Personal information such as names of immediate family, city of residence, or affiliations with specific community groups or organizations could be used to build a public attack or target the educator.

The information that is shared within an educator’s personal activity groups and social media should be reviewed. Many personal and social connections triangulate with social media identities to create a treasure trove of critical personal identifiable information. This accidental hemorrhage of contact information, close acquaintances, and organizational affiliations can spill into one’s professional life. When evaluating susceptibility between personal and professional personas, consider potential areas of unforeseen impact, such as membership directories for places of worship, homeowner associations, community clubs, groups, political organizations, and classroom directories. Think about what information is necessary versus information that may be considered oversharing. Use work emails and contact information exclusively for professional communication and rely on a separate personal email for family and non-work communication. Blending the two for convenience could lead to a massive headache later if the educator finds themselves too reachable or needs to control damage and access to their online communication channels.

Ounce of Prevention

Given the already hectic schedule of the educator, taking steps to eliminate privacy vulnerabilities can be easily pushed to the back burner. Some educators may think, “there’s no rush because it’s unlikely to happen to me; my classes don’t contain objectionable or controversial content,” or “the time and effort to do all that seems exhausting.” Privacy strategies and tools take some time but less time than it takes to deal with ransomware, identity theft, or doxing (A. Macrina, Library Freedom Project, personal communication, April 5, 2022). Being proactive will limit damage and prevent the need to scramble for new credentials and contact pathways.

There is no perfect plan to guarantee educator privacy and safety. There are, however, steps one can take to remove or mask personal identifiable information that is exposed and accessible to the public. As educators, the opportunities to accidentally hemorrhage basic personal information are numerous. Protecting family and professional identity requires a tremendous amount of diligence. To mitigate the damage caused by a doxing attempt, educators should consider the following:

- **masked phone numbers:** Use services that allow existing phone numbers to appear as masked numbers to non-family members. The masked number rings directly to the established number while avoiding potential abuse because masked numbers can be changed year over year or as needed with no impact on the established number.
- **email addresses:** When communicating with students or parents outside of a work email address, consider creating a separate email and using email forwarding services and/or secure email services rather than a personal email account. This gives more control over what is received and reduces the chances the personal address will need to be closed out because of abuse or hacking.
- **commercial mail receiving agencies (CRMA):** Use a CMRA (such as a UPS store) to receive mail off-site rather than a home address. This ensures that the address, displayed as a street address instead of a post office box number, will now be listed with data brokers rather than the geographical address of a physical home.
- **social media:** Create separate social media accounts for professional use. Review all personal social media accounts, remove unnecessary PII and lock down security and privacy settings.
- **information removal services:** Expedite the removal of personal information online by using an information removal service like DeleteMe to clean PII from social media accounts and/or data brokers.

Worst Case Scenarios

The authors would be remiss in failing to address the elevated dangers that exist in academia. Though these cases are less common than the bullying reported at the K-12 level, the professional impact can be devastating. With political polarization surging, there has been a sudden push to target college educators, their research, and course content. These attacks can get so personal that even physical appearance and racial slurs are fair game (Ferber, 2018). Unfortunately, the result is often the utter destruction of the accused's employment possibilities, academic credibility, and perceived moral character. Instructors are witnessing damage to reputations that they have built through the years "class by class and publication by publication" (Professor Washington-Hicks, personal communication, April 15, 2022).

Most of these harassment cases are instigated by groups that proactively search for targets connected to issues that conflict with their own worldviews, such as Critical Race Theory or Trans rights. A common misconception is that targeted harassment can be attributed entirely to overly zealous conservative groups. Political affiliation does not determine individual affect towards targeted harassment. Searches for victims often manifest in the formation of organizations devoted to identifying and targeting instructors whose teaching philosophies do not align with the groups' socio-political ideology. Three examples of such organizations are:

- **Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club:** In the text of their webpage, this left-wing group describes itself as an "anti-fascist, anti-racist, pro-worker community defense organization."
- **Professor Watchlist:** On their website, this organization boasts that their mission is "exposing and documenting college professors who discriminate against conservative students" by aggregating "instances of radical behavior among college professors."
- **Campus Reform:** The mission statement on this organization's website describes itself as "a conservative watchdog to the nation's higher education system."

When focused organizations target educators with opposing viewpoints, they trigger unnecessary fervor in individuals who can take retaliation to frightening extremes. This behavior can be found in both higher education and K-12 settings. Between 2016 and 2018, over 200 university professors were targeted as victims of online harassment based on their research topics, teaching, or things they posted on social media (Kamenetz, 2018). For instance, Professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor of Princeton University faced retaliation after a news story profiled a commencement speech that she delivered at Hampshire College in 2017. Professor Taylor, who still has a profile on Professor Watchlist, was forced to cancel multiple public speaking appearances due to numerous death threats she received following an opinion piece

broadcast by Fox News (Flaherty, 2017). After being harassed over a perceived link to Critical Race Theory, newly hired Cecelia Lewis declined an initial job offer for a DEI administrative role in favor of a position with another nearby county. The same group of rural North Georgia community members tracked her to the new position and continued their intimidation which led to a second resignation and an out-of-state relocation (Carr, 2022). Similarly, but on the other end of the political spectrum, fourth-grade teacher Kristine Hostetter was suspended for over a year after a video was posted of her in attendance at the January 6th Capitol protests (Rosenberg, 2021). Although the common consensus was that she was an excellent teacher, her neighbors and students tracked her family's social media accounts and signed multiple petitions to have her removed from her teaching position because they disagreed with her political views.

Facing a New Reality

Harassment of educators has become disturbingly common since the start of the pandemic. According to the American Psychological Association (2022), 50% of the teachers responding to a survey on educator harassment expressed a plan or desire to quit the profession due to violence and threats received during the pandemic. Regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum, teachers endure most of the blame for an education system they did not create and never controlled. The teaching profession is a historically low-paying position of service held to both internal (institutional) account and external (the public) account. Trying to balance and appease these two groups while simultaneously adhering to the ideals of the profession can be demanding even in the best of environments. Accepting the risks required of and the vulnerabilities inflicted upon educators who choose to remain in the field to support students is rewarded with threats, bullying, and reputational damage. Because the wave of public opinion is quick to change course, educators can no longer predict what will attract unwanted and unwarranted scrutiny. Educators at all levels should complete a diligent review of their existing PII and the overlap between their personal and professional identities and follow up with regular re-checks to protect themselves from the worst-case scenarios of being targeted online.

Recommended Reading

Unfortunately, there is no single, definitive privacy source that fits the needs of everyone. The authors offer a non-exhaustive recommended reading list as sources to begin learning more about digital privacy. We further suggest that the reader follow up with their own research and determine the privacy model that fits their individual needs.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

The United States Department of Justice publishes this website about the FOIA. It walks the user through the process of filing a FOIA request and has an extensive frequently asked questions section. <https://www.foia.gov/>

Library Freedom Project

This organization teaches librarians about surveillance threats, privacy rights, and digital tools to thwart surveillance. The resources section provides posters, bookmarks, presentations, and more to help anyone interested in teaching and promoting privacy. <https://libraryfreedom.org/>

Firewalls Don't Stop Dragons (Corey Parker)

The latest (2020) version of this book is an excellent reference for anyone who needs to protect their digital identity. The author covers everything from passwords to mobile phone security in everyday language. The author also has a great blog by the same name that he keeps current with weekly posts. Book ISBN: 978-1484261880 BLOG: <https://firewallsdontstopdragons.com/>

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)

This non-profit organization defends civil liberties in the digital world by championing user privacy, free expression, and innovation. <https://www.eff.org/>

Corporate Surveillance in Everyday Life

This site is published by Cracked Labs, a non-profit organization that investigates the socio-cultural impacts of information technology. The site does a thorough job of defining data brokers and explaining the impact of digital surveillance on the average consumer. The infographics alone are worth the effort of viewing the site. <https://crackedlabs.org/en/corporate-surveillance/#4>

Surveillance Self-Defense (EFF)

An expert guide, published by EFF, detailing how to protect family and friends from online spying. <https://ssd.eff.org/>

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