
Anonymity, the Internet and Social Media

(Reprinted excerpts from MG-18, AA Guidelines-Internet)

GUARDING ANONYMITY ONLINE

Modern communication in A.A. is flowing from one alcoholic to other in ways that are high-tech, relatively open-ended and evolving quickly. Protecting anonymity is a major concern for members who are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers. When we use digital media, we are responsible for our own anonymity and that of others. When we post, text, or blog, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

ANONYMITY AND EMAIL

Electronic mail is a widely used and accepted method of communication. It is now used regularly as a service tool in A.A., but as with any service, we need to ensure the Fellowship's Traditions are maintained while still receiving the most benefit from this form of communication. When using email it is necessary to consider the anonymity of the recipients of messages. Sending messages to multiple recipients that disclose the email address of everyone on the addressee list is a potential break of someone else's anonymity. Therefore, it is a good idea to obtain a recipient's explicit permission before outing his or her email address for A.A. correspondence, especially if it is a workplace email address. When sending A.A. mail to multiple recipients who wish to remain anonymous, use can be made of the BCC (Blind Courtesy Copy) option available on most computers.

GENERAL SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES

Facebook and other social networking websites are public in nature. Though users create accounts and utilize usernames and passwords, once on the site, it is a public medium where A.A. members and nonA.As mingle. As long as individuals do not identify themselves as A.A. members, there is no conflict of interest. However, someone using their full name and/or a likeness, such as a full-face photograph, would be contrary to the spirit of the Eleventh Tradition, which states in the Long Form that, "... our (last) names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed or publicly printed." Experience suggests that it is in keeping with the Eleventh Tradition not to disclose A.A. membership on social networking sites as well as on any other website, blog, electronic bulletin board, etc., that is not composed solely of A.A. members and not password protected, or is accessible to the public. Websites social networking offer individuals the chance to post a great deal of personal information about themselves (and others). Our experience suggests that some A.A. members do not post anything that is "A.A. jargon?" on their personal profiles and in "status updates," while others feel it is all right to do so as long as A.A. or Alcoholics Anonymous specifically is not mentioned. These websites often allow users to create social

networking “groups” and the ability to invite others to “events” for like-minded individuals. Some A.A.s have chosen to create A.A.-related groups. Since this is a relatively new medium, A.A. members are frequently “learning as they go,” and technology and applications change practically on a daily basis.

Our experience has shown that the evolving nature of social networking platforms makes it difficult to provide specific guidelines for using such resources for A.A. purposes. Any A.A. group or member that is thinking about entering this public arena should closely consider the privacy policies of such sites, in light of A.A.’s tradition of anonymity. For example, social networking sites often provide full names and pictures of group members, contrary to A.A.’s practice of avoiding such disclosures in public media. Even “closed” or “private” groups might still reveal an individual’s identity. Being well-informed prior to joining or starting such a group is the key to protecting your own anonymity and that of others. G.S.O. has received numerous complaints from concerned A.A. members regarding anonymity breaks online, inappropriate use of the A.A. name, and copyrighted materials and protected trademarks being improperly used on Facebook and other social networking websites. No local online A.A. or non-A.A. entity should purport itself to be a spokesperson for A.A. or act as if they represent the General Service Office, A.A.W.S., or the General Service Board. Each A.A. entity is autonomous and encouraged to make decisions by informed group conscience decision in light of the guidance provided in our Twelve Traditions. A.A. members sometimes contact G.S.O. for suggestions on how to remain within the Traditions on Facebook and other social networking websites. Keep in mind that G.S.O. staff members are not “special workers” of the “technological wizards” variety, but they can act as a resource regarding A.A.’s Twelve Traditions and the shared experience of the Fellowship in the U.S. and Canada. How A.A.’s spiritual principles play out in new technologies needs to be carefully discussed by each A.A. individual or entity creating an online presence.

This information has been distributed by the Public Information Committee of the Worcester Area Intergroup to help AA’s understand anonymity issues regarding the use of social media. Questions or concerns may be addressed to the Worcester Area Intergroup office by emailing: pichair@aaworcester.org.