

MODULE SIX:

# Digital Safety

**Module Objective:** Improve digital safety skills and practices to mitigate the risk of violence in online communities

**Module Dilemma:** I want to keep myself and my members safe



# Why is Digital Safety Important for Online Communities?

## **COMMUNITIES – INCLUDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES – SEEK SAFETY.**

The various communities we belong to, including our family, friend groups, workplace, etc., need a sense of safety. We find it difficult to belong to and exist in communities that do not feel safe. Safety is not conditional. It is a right. Therefore, it must be available and accessible for all individuals regardless of whether the community is hosted on an online or offline platform. It is also worth noting that Facebook defines ‘community’ as follows: A collection of people in which they receive a sense of belonging, connection, and a feeling of safety.

## **ONLINE COMMUNITIES ARE AN ALTERNATIVE TO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS THAT CANNOT HOST OFFLINE COMMUNITIES.**

While social media groups are often created due to the benefit of proximity and convenience, many community-based groups host themselves online as it is a safer alternative when compared to offline communities.

This preference is often influenced by local legislation. For example, in countries where abortions are banned, or homosexuality is criminalized, individuals might feel safer in a digital community than in a physical one. As these communities, and the individuals who belong in these communities, are already vulnerable and at risk, it is crucial that these online communities are safe and well protected.

## **ONLINE COMMUNITIES ARE EASIER TO ATTACK THAN OFFLINE COMMUNITIES.**

Community-based online communities, especially ones such as the above, which discuss issues that attract scrutiny and judgement, can be at the risk of attacks and smear campaigns. This could be through an individual or even another group that opposes the views, beliefs, and perspectives of the group.

While physical attacks might be rare and require coordination and effort, cyber-attacks are, unfortunately easier to facilitate. Groups on social media platforms, including on Facebook, are vulnerable to such attacks – especially when necessary digital safety mechanisms

are not in place. This is why it is important for online communities to be aware of and follow the necessary digital safety mechanisms.

It is important to note that these attacks and retaliation can sometimes even be arbitrary and state-led violence. A good example of this is when three social media admins, including a journalist, were wrongfully arrested in Sri Lanka in May 2022 during the police protests and outrage.

## **ONLINE COMMUNITIES VALUE PRIVACY AND ANONYMITY.**

There are certain online communities, such as ones on Discord, that operate entirely anonymously. There are other online communities, such as ones on Facebook, that remain private. These decisions regarding privacy and anonymity are often made to safeguard the members as well as the overall interest of the online community.

If the privacy of the members is violated – or even threatened - it can greatly affect their trust in the group and might even influence them to leave the group. This is why online communities must prioritise digital safety mechanisms that ensure the privacy and anonymity of the group members.

## **ONLINE COMMUNITIES HELP INDIVIDUALS BUILD RESILIENCE AND CONFIDENCE.**

When individuals become part of a safe space and trust the members within, they begin to develop a sense of belonging and emotional security. Rather than completely shielding individuals from the adverse effects of society, safe spaces can help individuals build the strength and confidence needed to confront discrimination and isolation in a supportive environment and allow them the opportunity to engage as their authentic selves.



# What are the digital safety risks and challenges faced by online ?

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It is important to note that researchers have also studied how certain safety factors can undermine incentives or discourage people from participating in online groups. In many cases, the risk of harm or loss of privacy disincentivizes participation. The following are key risks and challenges you need to know about.

## POLARISATION

Michela Del Vicario et al. (2016) studied how Facebook users formed echo chambers or groups isolated from the outside environment which enforce members' existing behaviours and beliefs. The authors found that highly active users in those groups exhibited more negative emotions and that higher activity in these communities correlated with greater polarisation. Likewise, a study of political discussions on Twitter found that tweets that contained moral and emotional language spread more widely than those that did not, but that this diffusion was largely contained within each ideological group, which the authors argue "may partly explain increasing polarisation between liberals and conservatives (Brady et al. 2017)."

## EMOTIONAL HARM

The risk of emotional harm affects both a person's decision to join an online group and their behaviour as a member. Some have studied how the emotional distress that some experience within online groups, for instance, due to cyberbullying or online harassment, can negatively impact their experience or even drive them off of social media altogether. Jon-Chao Hong et al. (2015) studied users' motivations to participate in Facebook communities and found that people with higher levels of general anxiety and social anxiety were less likely to continue participating in communities on the platform.

## SECURITY

An individual has to weigh the potential benefit of engaging with their online community against the risk that other community members, or the platform itself, may breach their expectation of privacy. This tradeoff intersects with social traits, such as gender (Fogel and Nehmad 2014). For instance, studies of social media use by young women in urban India have found that while participating in online communities that cross social boundaries can be empowering (Kumar 2014), many women have also experienced breaches of privacy both online (e.g. unsolicited messages from other users) and offline (e.g. stalking and sexual harassment) as a result of using social media (Karusala et al. 2019).



## LURKERS

Nu Sun et. al (2014) examined a variety of these factors in their study of lurkers or those who are members of online groups but do not actively participate. The authors pointed to a number of reasons for this behaviour, including environmental reasons (i.e. the social environment does not make posting easy), personal reasons (e.g. introversion), relationship reasons (e.g. a lack of intimacy in the group), and also reasons related to security and privacy.

## TERMINATION

While leaders have a great deal of control over their group's activities, it is social media that ultimately decides what is allowed to happen on its platform, including whether groups can exist at all. A fear that the platform could unilaterally remove their community is common among many group leaders. Some common concerns shared by admins of social media groups around the world include "They can just literally wake up and say, 'OK, this isn't going to happen anymore'", "Two years of work and contacts would be lost" and 'Alright, you can't have a group anymore, or you have to start paying'".

## PRIVACY

Information collection and sharing may now be so pervasive that privacy concerns are diminishing as a deterrent to participating in online spaces (Al-Ameen et al. 2020). Nusrat Jahan Mim and Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed (2020) studied the conflicts between the image-sharing culture of online social networks and the privacy that is expected within the home in urban Bangladesh. Rather than change their image-sharing practices, many participants actually modified the functions of rooms within homes to accommodate picture-taking, much to the dismay of family members who felt their privacy was being violated (Mim and Ahmed 2020). Another possible explanation is that it is difficult for individuals to make informed decisions about what to share when they are not aware of who is privy to the information they share, as is often the case on social media (Acquisti and Gross 2006).

# Responding to Digital Security Risks and Challenges faced by Online Communities

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PRIVACY SETTING

Choosing the right privacy setting for your group can depend on the type of group you have and the sensitivity of what's discussed in your group.



On Facebook, when it comes to visibility and accessibility, there are three key settings for the group:

- Make your group public if you want it to be easily found and if you want posts in the group to be visible to non-members.
- Choose the private but visible in the search setting if you want people to be able to search for and easily discover your group but keep posts visible to members only.
- Make your group private and hidden in search if you want to have the most restrictions over group visibility and want membership to be by invitation only. You may consider this if the group covers a sensitive subject.

### A FEW KEY THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- Private groups with 5,000 or more members can't change their privacy to a public group.
- Groups are limited to one privacy setting change every 28 days.
- Admins who change their group's privacy will have a 24-hour grace period to change it back.
- All members of your group will get a notification that you have changed the group's privacy.
- Invited members are members of a group who can see the group in preview mode.
- When a Page joins a Group, there could be several admins on that Page. All of them can see and interact with posts and members of the group.
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- If an admin of the group has added a third-party app, the app has access to posts and comments in the group.
- Third-party apps can't access who wrote posts and comments unless the app has been given permission by the author.

It is highly recommended to notify members of a privacy change in a post or group announcement several weeks beforehand to make sure members feel comfortable with the new privacy setting. If the privacy level of a group changes, all members of the group receive a notification of the change.

## USING POST APPROVALS

All posts from group members appear in your group by default unless you turn on the post-approval option. With post approvals, admins can review all pending posts within a group and must approve them before they appear. Experienced admins tell us there are different reasons to use post approvals:

- You're on holiday, and you can't moderate posts effectively.
- An inflammatory topic is taking the group away from its intended purpose.
- People post about the same thing over and over again.

Admins agree that whether or not you use post approvals can depend on the nature of the group. A supportive group, where members need to talk immediately and freely, might not want to use post approvals. A small family or friend's group may not want to limit member participation in any way. A group that is about one specific topic may use post approvals as a way to prevent members from posting about something off-topic and unrelated.

On the rare occasions when group conflict occurs, admins recommend temporarily turning on post approvals until tensions have eased as a way to manage member conflict.

If you are going to use post approvals, be sure to review pending posts quickly to let members feel heard.

## CREATING MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS

When first setting up your group, you might invite close friends or people who share the same interests. As the group grows, the number of people asking to join increases. Experienced admins tell us that prioritising and managing new member requests is an important part of making sure that new members are a good fit for the group.

Membership questions help you learn more about people who want to join your group by asking them up to three free-form questions. Only admins and moderators see the answers, which can be reviewed within the member request queue. Since membership in private groups is limited to people who were personally invited to join, membership questions are only available to groups in a public or private setting.

Membership questions can be as simple as “what do you hope to get out of the group?” to more detailed questions about how they feel they might contribute to the group as a member. Experienced admins recommend mentioning the group's rules in one of the questions, asking potential members to agree to read and abide by them once they join the group.

Once your group has grown, and you're receiving numerous membership requests, you may find using membership request filters helpful. With membership request filtering, you can select and sort predefined filters to apply to pending requests. These can be accepted or declined individually or in bulk. The list of pre-set filters includes location or gender, whether a person was invited by a current member, whether they are in other groups you manage, and more. This information is made available based on what that person shares on their public profile. Member request filtering is one of the time-saving screening techniques recommended by admins.