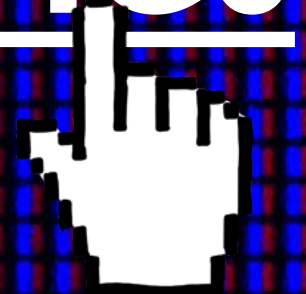


Social Crimes

Online faux pas are about as common as a Kylie J hair change, but did you know your digital misstep could have big consequences? Here's the DL...



the whole point of Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter is to freely express yourself online – that means you can't get in trouble for what you post, right? Sure, it's not the best idea to tweet about how lame your teacher is, and it's downright *Mean Girls* to leave nasty comments under someone's selfie, but it's not illegal... is it? Actually, sometimes it is.

"You can get into a lot of trouble when it comes to social media use if you don't understand the relevant laws," says Susan McLean, the director of Cyber Safety Solutions. "Any form of online abuse is a criminal offence in every state and territory in Australia and some crimes are actually punishable with a term of imprisonment."

But don't freak out! The key to avoiding sticky social media sitches is getting your head around what is and isn't OK to post. We've got all the deets for you...

CYBERBULLYING AND CYBERSTALKING

The Australian law views words as powerful weapons. Encouraging someone to hurt or kill themselves, making threats, and calling someone degrading names online are all illegal.

Earlier this year 25-year-old Sydneysider Zane Alchin was convicted and given a 12-month good behaviour bond for abusive comments he made against a woman on a public Facebook post.

"When cyberbullying is coupled with another offence, like creating insulting Photoshopped images, encouragement to commit suicide, or sexual harassment, it becomes a [criminal] offence," says Dr Debarati Halder, the managing director of the Centre For Cyber Victim Counselling.

She says cyberstalking is pretty serious too – but only if it's coupled with a threat. So secretly checking your crush's Instagram and Facebook 10 times a day is totally fine (legally, anyway) but tracking someone's movements online and sending them threatening or hurtful messages is definitely never OK.

Speaking of tracking bae's whereabouts, logging into their social media accounts to get some inside info (like if he's been messaging people behind your back) can land you in big trouble – besides being completely embarrassing when you're inevitably caught. You can actually get up to two years in jail for it.

"UGH MY BOSS/TEACHER/PRINCIPAL SUCKS"

Warning: Even if your social media accounts are set to private, you can still get fired or expelled for saying not-so-great things about where you work or go to school.

"If you say anything that may ruin the good reputation of your school or workplace, then that organisation can discipline you," Susan warns.

"There's no defence that your account was 'private'. There's no such thing as privacy online and everything you post, like, or share becomes public," she explains, adding that even if you're under 18 you can still be sued for your comments if they're found to be defamatory.

The best thing to do is to not say anything questionable about your school or workplace on your socials – assume you're saying it in front of the whole world (because you are). If you have a habit of posting your unfiltered thoughts without thinking things through, check your school or workplace's guidelines to see where they stand when it comes to social media.

This article discusses suicide and child pornography which some readers might find triggering.

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THE NAKED TRUTH

Sending a selfie of you posing in a super cute crop to bae may seem harmless, but it can actually get them in serious trouble with the law. That's right, even if you wanted to send it to them. If the authorities find out (like if their mum finds your photo on their phone and gets mad), they can be arrested for possession of child pornography.

The law isn't meant to stop you from flirting – it's there to work in your favour. If you have a bad break-up and your ex posts photos of you that were meant for their eyes only, you can sue them. And the same goes for any, um, intimate videos the two of you might have made (which we can all agree is never a good idea).

“The law punishes creation or circulation of sexually explicit materials which have been made to damage the reputation of the victim,” Dr Debarati says. But she also notes that revenge porn isn't considered a separate crime everywhere, and the laws haven't caught up with technology in every region in Australia. But in places where the law still sees revenge porn as a grey area, it's typically covered by other aspects of law that are clearly illegal, like not respecting someone's privacy. So if someone ever posts nude or compromising pictures or videos of you online, it's 100 per cent not OK and you have the right to take them to court.

FIGHT THE POWER (RESPONSIBLY!)

If you don't like something the Prime Minister is doing, or you want to voice your political opinion in a passionate Facebook post, you have the right to speak your mind. In fact, doing so can spark meaningful debates and conversations that can lead to social justice and political change. But anything that's threatening the police or government officials crosses the line.

“Not only do social media companies report these types of conversations to the police, many others see them and report them as well,” Susan says. So even if your account is set to private, you can still get busted.

The government takes Facebook posts and rants seriously. Earlier this year a 17-year-old from Sydney was arrested and charged with terrorism after posting on Facebook that he was going to kill police and that he was planning an attack similar to the tragic Orlando nightclub shooting that happened in America in June.

Remember, there's a huge difference between posting a political opinion and threatening to hurt someone. Even if you mean a comment as a joke, it might not come across that way.

It may seem like all these rules are taking the freedom out of something that seems harmless, but the truth is they exist to keep everyone happy. Posting a pic on Instagram is a lot more enjoyable when you know that if someone says malicious or threatening things to you, then you can take action against it.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU POST

Susan says you should consider these three points before going H.A.M. on your socials:

- **Respect.** Am I showing respect for myself and others?
- **Responsibility.** Is this the right thing to do?
- **Reputation.** How will this affect how others see me?