

'I don't think anybody should be subjected to personalised abuse for doing their job'

Mayo Senator Lisa Chambers speaks on her own experience of online abuse and its effect on political discourse

ANTON MCNULTY



If you want to make your way in the world of politics, it is nearly mandatory of any prospective public representative to have a social media presence but, in particular, a Twitter account.

It is Donald Trump's favourite form of communication and it is often the first port of call for public officials to make an announcement.

However, it has a nasty side where many, including public representatives, come under attack from 'trolls', 'bots' and, often, anonymous account holders who think nothing of hurling online abuse at their latest victim.

Mayo Senator Lisa Chambers is one of those politicians who has, for whatever reason, become a favourite of those who hurl online abuse and expects it whenever she puts a post online.

"Honestly if I put up a picture of puppies there would be someone with something negative to say about it," she says frankly of what she has to endure.

She laughs when asked if she enjoys social media replying, 'God no, not at all' but it is a necessary tool in her line of work.

"There are pros and cons. In one way it is fantastic in that you get your own message out and it is a great way to connect with people. I get messages from people looking for help but obviously there is the whole nasty side to it.

"I find Facebook is less prone to that online abuse because people tend to have their names and pictures attached to their account and they are not anonymous. It is a nicer space to work in but Twitter is a horrible and nasty place with so many anonymous accounts. People have multiple accounts with the sole purpose just to abuse people and be really nasty."

She admits the online abuse can be draining personally but is more worried about the effect it is having on political discourse in Ireland.

"I definitely think it [online abuse] is a way of controlling the debate and silencing people. It is an issue and in my own view it is impacting on

political discourse. I know from talking to colleagues and young journalists, they do find that certain posts and stories you cover will get you a lot of hate and abuse. It does put people off speaking.

"You know that by speaking out on something you are going to get a massive amount of online abuse. You will probably think twice about doing it and from speaking to colleagues, they think very carefully before they post something because they just don't want the hassle and prefer to keep the head down. I still speak my mind and say what I think but there are still certain posts where I know I will take hassle on this but I think it is important to be said."

STRIKING THE BALANCE

CHAMBERS is not a prolific user of Twitter, explaining that she only uses it for her work as she would be too afraid to contemplate putting anything personal on it. She only joined Twitter in 2012, a year after she first ran for the Dáil and believes that it played a massive role in the General

Election last February. It was an election where Chambers came in for an inordinate amount of targeted online abuse and she lost her Dáil seat before winning a seat in the Seanad.

Despite the online abuse she says she did not think of walking away as she would not discourage others to not get involved.

"While there are difficult parts to the job it is still one of the most rewarding things you can do to represent your community, county and country and I would always encourage people to get involved and speak up for what is right."

Her Fianna Fáil colleague James Lawless introduced a Social Media Transparency Bill in the last Dáil to safeguard against what is said and printed on social media platforms and is currently working on a similar bill. While welcoming it, Senator Chambers believes that for social media companies to be more accountable the legislation will have to come from a European level for it to be effective.

She admits she does not have the silver bullet to prevent online abuse but believes that leadership is needed to ensure it is not accepted as part and parcel of politics.

"I wouldn't advise people to get a thick skin and deal with it because that is the wrong message. There is an element of people accepting that this is the world we live in now and part of politics. I don't agree with that. We have to push back against it. I don't think anybody should be subjected to personalised abuse or attacked online for doing their job. I don't have a difficulty with someone challenging my views or work I've done or party policy, that is proper debate and political discourse but where it gets personalised, that shouldn't be part of the job," she said.



▲ QUESTIONS Lisa Chambers

Time, young people and social media

Controlling how much time you spend on social media and your phone is key

EDWIN MCGREAL



Between them, Niall Dunne and Peadar Gardiner deal with thousands of young people in the county on an annual basis.

Dunne is Manager of the Mayo Mental Health Association and Gardiner is Project Manager of Mindspace Mayo.

Both groups work closely with young people in the county on areas relating to mental health. They deliver presentations to 10,500 secondary school children and their organisations deal with mental health issues affecting young people in the county.

What both men agree on is that time spent on social media is often the crucial determinant in it moving from being beneficial to detrimental.

Gardiner references the My World Survey 2, a comprehensive study of young Irish people's mental health and wellbeing, as instructive.

"Findings from the My World Survey 2 suggest that many adolescents and young adults may be using social media to build on and extend their social connections in real life, and there may be some benefits to spending time online," he told *The Mayo News*.

"However, there was a significant relationship between time spent online (more than three hours) and higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of body esteem.

"There are only so many hours in the day and if time spent online is taking away from things that offer balance and a healthy mind frame, that's where we run into problems," added Gardiner.

He said equipping young people with the right skills to use and understand social media is key.

"We know mental health is complex and there are many factors that contribute to a young person's wellbeing, but it's clear from the research that social media is something young people have strong opinions about and it's something that appears to be creating more pressure day to day.

"A young person's real-world persona and online persona are so intertwined these days so, for example, if they're being vulnerable online or sharing something personal and not getting the reaction they were hoping for, it can be really upsetting. There's also exposure to things like cyberbullying and this ability to draw comparisons between your own life and that of your peers, perhaps making young people feel like what they're doing isn't stacking up.

"We need to raise awareness about the impacts of social media overuse, and support young people to develop the skills they need to handle these new and evolving challenges," he said.

Time online is key, argues Niall Dunne, who adds that parents often don't show the lead.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with social media and various devices. Everything is to do with the time. That's my experience," Dunne told *The Mayo News*.

"Teenagers might go to the bedroom at 10.30pm. The parents think they are gone to bed by 11pm. All the research will tell you they're not gone to bed until midnight. What happens is they get lazy, they get tired and they throw that stinger comment in that will really tip someone over and that's where all the trouble will come from," he said.



NEXT WEEK

We hear the thoughts of five young people from Mayo in the pros and cons of social media plus the latest edition of our Social Challenge.

“We would always talk to parents about the ‘bad hour’ between 11pm and midnight. We’ve done research with students about parents’ usage and parents are often as bad.

“If everyone in Mayo could decide that in that one hour before everyone goes to bed that there is no more social media, you would have so much less hassle.

“If you went off your social media at

9pm, I guarantee you you would be in bed earlier than if you had it in your hands. I guarantee you that is a positive thing.”

With that in mind, we’ve started our Social Challenge in this series with the guiding rule for the participants in the week-long challenge being the phone is off from 9pm at night and not on again until 9am the next morning.

Baby steps in social habits

The Social Challenge

GER FLANAGAN



THE RULES

Participants must turn off their phone and stay off all social networks from 9pm to 9am every day. Participants should turn off notifications on apps; make more phone calls instead of just messaging someone; commit to more exercise with less reliance on music, podcasts etc; more reading of books.

FIRST things first, this was never going to be plain sailing and the idea of going ‘cold turkey’ on social media had doubts it my head before it ever really began.

I’d consider myself a regular social media user, with my time divided between Twitter and Instagram, as well as Facebook. However, if this week showed me anything, it was how reliant I am on instant messaging media, such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, as opposed to scrolling through news feeds.

That part I didn’t miss too much, but not being able to reply to WhatsApp or other messages was where I struggled most.

What if there was an emergency and I missed the message? Will the sender think I’m being ignorant by not replying? What if it’s a really important message to tell me I’ve won a load of money and I have to respond ‘Yes or No’ in the next ten minutes?

They were the anxious thoughts running through my head on the eve of the challenge.

So, in line with them concerns, there were a number of parameters I set myself in line with the 9pm curfew for the social media and screen black out. The main one being that I allowed myself a quick check of messages before going to bed – just in case. Plus, if I don’t reply to my mother she probably wouldn’t get a wink of sleep over thoughts along the lines of me being abducted.

Plus, I am a bit of a night owl when it comes to working on my Mac and getting a couple hours of work done on my Masters or, like last Sunday, match reports for a Mayo game.

So, excuses out of the way, this was how my week looked.

Last Monday morning week my daily average screen time for the previous week on my iPhone was – worryingly – just below seven hours, while in the week up to yesterday (Monday), it was averaging at just above five hours per day.

Before this week I averaged 25 hours a week spent on social media, but last week was less than 21 hours. WhatsApp

was my most used app, and I received just shy of 900 notifications pre-social media blackout and got that down to less than 600 last week.

One example of how subconsciously I use social media came last Thursday evening when at 9.30pm I opened Twitter, scrolled through it and shared a tweet I saw in a work WhatsApp group. It was only when I noticed the time was 9.30pm that it dawned on me that I broke the rules.

Generally, the week passed without any other major incidents.

Wednesday evening was difficult when watching the Man United and RB Leipzig Champions League match. Typically my phone would be buzzing back and forth in my Man United specific groups talking the best formation to play Bruno Fernandez, Paul Pogba and Danny Van de Beek, or the future of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, or whether to play three at the back with two wide men or stick with the conventional four.

The important stuff in life, you know?

From an exercise perspective, I would be diligent with five or six days per-week and music and podcasts is a huge part of that. Could I remove it, without sacrificing the quality of the session? I don’t think so. But it’s all baby steps.

Reflecting on the week, there’s so much food for thought. Mainly that I do use social media too much and that cutting down will help me.

To me, that’s a starting point for change and ultimately a success.

I NOMINATE

Mayo News Sports Editor Mike Finnerty is known for his attachment to his phone and for his new found influencer fame on Instagram.

It would be no harm for him to stop writing hashtags for a week or two!

96%

The percentage of Irish adolescents who reported having a social media profile or account.

96%

Of those who reported to have a social media account, 96 percent reported having Snapchat, 90 percent Instagram, 54 percent Facebook, 28 percent Twitter and 4 percent had a dating app.

The percentage of adolescents who reported spending more than three hours online per day. Twenty-nine percent reported spending two to three hours per day, 25 percent one to two hours and 12 percent less than one hour.

67%

The percentage of adolescents who have their social media profile set to private.

SOURCE

My World Survey 2 – The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland, a survey of 19,000 second and third level Irish students conducted in 2019.

34%