

THE SACRAMENTO BEE sacbee.com

'Unfriendly' posts, tweets on Election Day rile social media users

efletcher@sacbee.com

Published Sunday, Nov. 11, 2012

As Election Day neared, seemingly everyone with a Facebook or Twitter account was weighing in – some more bluntly than others – on the presidential race.

But for many, those partisan status updates, tweets, rants, cartoons, pictures, retweets and videos come at a cost: online "friends."

Sacramento student Nick Hardin said the bashing of Republican nominee Mitt Romney's personal values drove him to "unfriend" several backers of President Barack Obama.

Jane Gassner, a local blogger, did the same thing to some "very vocal Romneyites."

Sacramento retail salesman Jon Tooker said a Facebook friend instructed people to defriend him if they voted for the "other" candidate. Tooker obliged.

An informal survey found that many social media users drew their own lines in the sand. For some, it was an attack on Obama they viewed as racist. Others said their tolerance ended at hurtful words or personal attacks.

"Social media friendships – like any other friendship – are tested when there are differences of opinion," said April Masini, who writes the nationally syndicated advice column Ask April. She suggests moderation.

"If you express an extreme opinion, like, for instance, 'all Democrats should be stripped of the right to vote,' or 'all Republicans are evil,' then you should expect to lose some friends because extreme opinions have a tendency to scare others away," Masini said.

But the likelihood, said Michael Heaney, an assistant professor of organizational studies and political science at University of Michigan, is that most people unfriending or defriending others weren't very close to those people anyway.

"Defriending is not the same as stopping a real ... friendship," Heaney said.

Paul Levinson, a professor of communications at Fordham University, said the stronger the offline connection the more likely people will find reason to preserve the online relationship.

"When it is totally digital it's much more flammable," said Levinson, also author of the book "New New Media."

As Heaney notes, social media have allowed people to dramatically expand their network of people to include old classmates, friends and acquaintances. Before social media, those relationships were lost as people moved, changed jobs or drifted apart.

Many of these online friendships are superficial and more easily shed.

Roseville food and beverage retailer Dominic Sirianni said he reconnected with an old high school football teammate through Facebook but came close to unfriending him during the heated political season.

"Some people go on and throw out these purposely antagonistic statements," Sirianni said. "I don't think it's the ideal tool for arguing politics."

Social scientists disagree on whether social media have significantly changed how people promote their political beliefs or the volume at which they do it.

Heaney suggests it just increases the number of people exposed to commentary from someone who otherwise might have limited such discussions to the corner bar or office water cooler.

Levinson disagrees. He believes the new medium fundamentally alters how people communicate. Levinson said people's collective ability to alter the media conversation made this the most "people-spontaneous election in history."

He said he closely monitored the conversation though his nearly 5,000 Facebook friends. He, too, found himself hitting the unfriend button.

But Heaney expressed concern that people doing that are squelching voices with which they disagree.

"As my social network gets filtered ... I'm not seeing other points of view," Heaney said.

With the election in the rear view, many will consider re-engaging with deleted friends. Masini recommends reaching out and talking the issue through with the "former" friend.

"Just sending a new friend request is ignoring someone's actions – and feelings," Masini said. "If you do this, chances are you'll be ignored."

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

 Order Reprint

Share

Facebook

Twitter

Share

StumbleUpon

Email

Call The Bee's Ed Fletcher, (916) 321-1269. Follow him on Twitter @NewsFletch.

- Read more articles by Ed Fletcher