

# Keep The Political Context

One of the hardest things about having a child with a disability is not letting that disability define everything about them. They also offer perspective. It's hard to know if a particular challenge is related to their issue or not. Will Felix be able to ski? Are bedtime struggles related to the hemiplegia or him just being stubborn? How much longer will it take him to learn to swim? With two siblings to push him, not long at all! I'm a better parent because of Felix, but I'm a better parent to Felix because of them. So many listeners have echoed Sarah's experience. Finding people who are navigating a disease or condition can open up a world of information, connections to experts, and shared joy and hardships. These groups provide the shared context of a shared challenge. The unique difficulties of navigating the world with a disability or chronic disease can be incredibly isolating. It's not only shared struggles that can provide valuable context inside social media. The people in these groups don't all share one identity or struggle. They share a commitment to a certain set of principles. The values of the group provide the context. It's also clear that the people in the Buy Nothing groups don't interact only on social media within the Buy Nothing groups. However, sometimes it's enough to see the power and flourishing of online groups with context to recognize those without context and extricate yourself from them. Look, we're political podcasters. We both have more than sufficient experience with terrible political exchanges on social media. It would seem as if politics provides context for these exchanges. After all, to some extent, we're all invested in politics. And yet, on social media, that context isn't quite enough. In part, the other important component of online interactions is how we define the stakes at hand. The higher the stakes, the more important the context. If we're talking about abortion or capital punishment, we're talking about life and death. If we're talking about race and gender, we're talking about fundamental issues of identity that can also translate to life and death. If we're talking about taxes, we're talking about the literal money in someone's bank account. When stakes are high, emotions are high, and shared context is even more important. Now that is not to say we should talk online only with those who agree with us because we share context. Sometimes shared context can open up space to see disagreement differently. If some random friend of a friend comments with an incendiary hot take on one of our political posts, then that opinion becomes the only context through which we can see them. Even with people we know well, if the stakes are high enough, our outside context for them shrinks. We know it's tricky to ignore political posts. That's not always the right answer, but often scroll on by and address this in person if it's someone you care about is the best way to roll. True political debate, the kind that can enhance relationships or open hearts and minds, usually requires additional context. This doesn't have to diminish our online experiences. Sometimes, whatever the context, the value in social media lies less in engagement and more in simple expression. It's because the exchanges are less frequent and shorter. A tweet, whether it's about parenting, pop culture, or politics, can often just be. Maybe it's read, maybe not. Maybe someone responds, maybe they don't. Occasionally, we just have a thing to say and feel better for having said it. Think back to your most heated political exchanges online. Do you talk to any of the people with whom you were commenting regularly in real life? What were the results? We're not trying to increase the pressure on anyone participating in social media. It's also steadily influenced by extreme social pressures that are hard to recognize. Social media is

also fertile ground for sharing bad information. Again, we will leave the disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories to the experts. Let's talk here about information that is true and incomplete. It's so hard to talk about this because he is at it again and is truly the worst. The bill is probably outrageous, and the representative does need to go. The event was so sad and should never happen. We're having fair reactions. Our hearts are usually in the right place. And still, this behavior in the aggregate is doing merciless damage to all of us. We're staying simultaneously fired up and distracted and activated without a meaningful call to action. Social media presents us with a constant stream of stimuli along with a chorus of voices telling us what the singular appropriate response must be. Most of political Twitter is less about the story and more about how the story is told. The thing that happened gets lost. A story might materially change in the hours after it first lands online. This phenomenon is unlikely to change because it has some value. The takes have taught many of us a great deal about perspectives we've previously not seen. Social media allows us to curate feeds filled with voices of people from communities and parts of the world that we don't know. Also social media provided invaluable perspective. When Texas endured extreme winter weather and power and water failures, social media helped us really understand the impacts. For us, these observations have counseled in favor of curating our feeds based on current events instead of commentators. We're big fans of making lists relevant to events or just deciding we're sticking with these three local reporters right now. We also no longer allow social media to tell us what to pay attention to. We don't want our work to be driven by stories that are alarming but isolated and highly unlikely to materialize. Establishing some guiding principles for ourselves online along with increasingly limiting our time on social media is helping us feel more grounded and clearheaded.