

The Internet presents us with a set of ethical and intellectual decisions that prior generations have not had to consider. Each and every day we have to decipher what information is valid and true, how it can be used as an aid for social change, and how we can use it respectfully and responsibly. The Rotary “Four-Way Test” is a valuable tool to use as we navigate an increasingly more virtual world.

The first, and perhaps most important question is, “Is it the truth?” We live in a fast-paced era with constant access to information at our fingertips. Although the Internet is a powerful resource, it presents certain challenges. There are many tactics that are used to persuade or deceive internet users. Anyone or any group that intends to misguide users all do so for similar reasons. This is primarily for financial and personal gain but sometimes even for purely malicious intent. They do this through lying, exploitation, blackmail, coercion, and pressure, all while often remaining entirely anonymous. The average user takes the Internet’s validity and truthfulness for granted, often not asking whether something is fact or fiction. Yet, the virtual world forces us to make judgments quickly, each day of our lives. The question, “Is it the truth?” is something we should ask ourselves more frequently and immediately when encountering information online.

The second question is, “Is it fair to all concerned?” Many people are quick to assume that the Internet does not produce real-world consequences. However, the virtual world is even more tightly knit into our society than we may realize—in both positive and negative ways. On one hand, the Internet makes it easier to spark hatefulness and deceit that quickly spreads, sometimes even having a global impact. On the other hand, it also has the potential to foster social movements, spread true and useful information that could aid activism, provide powerful critique of leadership, and give voice to people who may not otherwise have a platform without

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it. In many ways, the internet is a great equalizer, allowing people to have a more active role in social change, including taking a greater part in the democratic process. The question “Is it fair to all concerned?” is quite important because it brings up the ethics of the Internet and makes us more likely to use the tool in positive ways.

The third question is, “Will it build goodwill and better friendships?” On one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the power and potential of the Internet in creating and fostering stronger relationships. In a world that would have otherwise shut down and forced people to become incredibly secluded, the virtual space provided opportunity for people to continue daily tasks but also to form communities over shared interests and needs. Unfortunately, the Internet has also made it possible for people to bully others online. Because of the anonymity of the Internet which gives the bully a sense of security, cyberbullying has become the most pervasive and harmful form of bullying. The question, “Will it build goodwill and better friendships?” is important to ask when posting online to ensure that our words are kind, true, and conscientious.

The fourth and final question is, “Will it be beneficial to all concerned?” Once again, the recent pandemic revealed another benefit of the Internet: the ability to learn virtually. Although most of the world was confined to their homes, students were able to continue their education, and adults could continue their jobs through various online platforms. This benefit extended past the pandemic by making it possible to attend school and work even during snow days or when sick. However, the virtual space will truly never replace the real world and this slow shift to a more isolated life could pose potential problems. My generation especially is faced with the dilemma of having to strike a balance between virtual and real-world activity. The question, “Will it be beneficial to all concerned?” is something we need to ask about both the content and amount of our time online.

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In conclusion, the Rotary "Four-Way Test" provides us with guidance and inspiration in a variety of situations. It can also be a crucial tool for both intellectual and ethical decision-making that affects everyone on the Internet, regardless of who they are. If everyone committed to using the "Four-Way Test," we could build an online community based on greater knowledge, kindness, and truth.