



By Joe Byerly

I've been thinking a lot lately about social media and the way it forms my perception of others based on the image they project through their social media platforms. I've also been thinking about how others must perceive me based off of the content I share. As I reflect on this notion heading into a new year, I've started to term this phenomenon the "Iceberg Bias." We often judge others' success in life based on the gleaming white, smooth surface directly in front of us in these online snapshots. We fail to take into account the reality of those peoples' lives that lies just below the surface. We form judgements based off one tenth of what is visible, missing the true contours that are never shared online.

Judging people based on their shared content is problematic because social media feeds the creation of an image based on your inputs, it doesn't care if the image you're creating represents reality. It provides a manicured glimpse of whatever people choose to share with the world. For some people, their visible icebergs are picture-perfect family photos. Yet, below the water line lies the hurt, the arguments, and a struggling marriage. I've watched husband and wives post nothing but loving date night selfies on Facebook, only to find out months later they are divorced. Until I received that bit of information, I kept comparing my own life to theirs, wondering why I was falling short.

I've made the same mistakes in judgement in my professional life, as well. On Twitter, there is an endless stream of military leaders doling out leadership advice. People who read their tweets may be quick to think these people are great leaders. However, as U.S. Army Captain Victoria Kositz recently cautioned her own followers, "Semi occasional reminder that being good at Twitter isn't indicative of anything other than mastery of concise communication...Most of us don't know each other and for all you know this account is run by a bored 62 yr old dude that served 3 years back in 1982." Yet, we seem to ignore the fact that unless we know a leader personally, we are unable to verify the authenticity of their content. I watch people applaud others for their leadership based on a handful of tweets. But tweets, articles, and social media posts are not solely indicative of great leadership. A leader's actions define their success, not just their words. Again, when we base our opinions of a leader on their shared content, we are guilty of the iceberg bias.

I'm going to get a little personal here. As I look across my own social media accounts, I also only share bits of the iceberg. I share family workout photos on Instagram, what I'm reading on Twitter, and the occasional article I've written or date night pic on Facebook. I only share a deliberate projection of who I am. We often justify this behavior by calling it branding. But what I haven't shared is how I struggled after returning from a recent deployment or those moments I've wrestled with a serious case of self-doubt. I write a lot of articles about leadership and self-development, but that doesn't mean it's easy for me or that I'm great at it. It only means I think a lot about leadership and I'm passionate about it. That's all.

Take this article for example, every word I typed in the preceding paragraph was carefully chosen.

As we head into a new year, I'm writing this to remind all of us that before we form positive or negative opinions of others, we should get to know them first. We should also avoid using social media as a mirror for our lives. We do an injustice to ourselves when we compare our own icebergs to the sheer veneer of gleaming, snow-covered ice other people choose to show. Finally, I charge you to think about your brand and the reality you're willing to lay bare. Do you include any of the sharp, treacherous edges that lie just below the surface?

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