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A lesson that always needs to be taught

Regardless of our political orientation, we most likely can agree that the period leading up to this year's election has been remarkable in many ways.

For one, social media has reduced the so-called 24-hour news cycle that once kept candidates on their toes to a cycle that can crest and fall in a matter of minutes or even seconds.

The instantaneous nature of information sharing in the digital age certainly has brought with it many benefits to democratic processes — “liking” a post about an important issue can immediately and quite viscerally link a citizen to hundreds of thousands or even millions of like-minded individuals with a click or a tap, for instance.

The flip side is that misinformation travels equally fast, bringing with it the potential over time for civic knowledge to erode to dangerously low levels.

Can a governor or president unilaterally repeal or enact a piece of controversial legislation upon taking office, for instance?

We as lawyers and students of state and federal constitutions know that the answer is most unequivocally no. Yet an appreciable amount of social media discourse appears to labor under that and similar misapprehensions at the local, state and federal level.

Over time, a citizenry voting for candidates under such false beliefs — and never seeing the changes it believes to be possible — runs the risk of becoming ungovernable.

What is the answer? Education, for one.

Retired Supreme Court justice

BY MARGARET O'MARA FROSSARD AND JOSEPH A. KEARNEY

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Sandra Day O'Connor wisely noted, “The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned anew by each generation of citizens.” After her retirement from the bench in 2005, O'Connor has made it a priority to make civics education more accessible.

Her iCivics website, for instance, allows students of varying ages to learn through playing civics-related games such as “We the Jury,” “Do I Have a Right?” and “Branches of Power.” More than 70,000 teachers nationwide implement the website during classroom instruction.

O'Connor's important work certainly bodes well for the future generation, but what about now?

A critical piece to the way citizens view our form of government is the work that attorneys do. Jayne Rizzo Reardon, executive director at the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, and her team continuously publish meaningful content online about how, for in-

stance, attorneys must be always aware of how they appear in the public eye, as the public views attorneys as inexorably part of the justice system and courts.

Taking it a step further, specialized training positions attorneys uniquely to serve as patient and professional “correctors of the public record.”

What do we mean by that? If in our day-to-day lives we run across, for instance, a discussion about an action that would constitute overreach of executive power, we may wish to consider responding in a polite and measured fashion to explain some of the legal underpinnings that would prevent such an action.

The goal is certainly not to come off as a know-it-all — particularly because these issues are complicated and no attorney can possibly stay up on all angles of an issue — but to aspire to function as an extension of our form of government.

Some attorneys may feel more comfortable posting such corrections on social media, while others may prefer to do so during cocktail parties with their friends or at professional events when such topics arise.

Others may wish to “correct the record” through the submission of op-ed pieces to traditional media such as newspapers or magazines. However, it is difficult to justify a tack of staying completely silent in the face of civics misinformation that sometimes appears to grow each day.

An informed citizenry is critical to the health of our democracy, and lawyers should heed the call to protect and strengthen this, our nation's most important asset.