

Another Twitter frenzy

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I don't know whether Rep. Anthony Weiner sent a lewd photo of himself to a college student via Twitter. The evidence is mixed: on the one hand, Weiner's claim that someone else sent the photo as a prank is quite plausible given [security holes](#) (since fixed) in photo-sharing service yfrog. On the other, the unfortunately named Democratic congressman's [evasive behavior](#) in the last couple days doesn't exactly scream innocence.

I do, however, want to make two quick points about social media:

- Twitter is almost five years old, and people still routinely make judgments about it without understanding how it works. Rep. Weiner has some questions to answer, but "[why were you following the Twitter account of a young woman you don't know?](#)" isn't really one of them. A few possibilities based on my own experience: Maybe she sent him a form message asking him to follow her. Maybe she posted something interesting once. Maybe he briefly set an application to respond in kind to all new followers and then changed the setting without bothering to unfollow them. In any case, one important way Twitter differs from Facebook--both technically and in terms of user conventions--is that lots of people follow users they don't know, often for no particular reason.
- An incident like this might tempt you to criticize social media and pine for the good old days of pre-web journalism. But as is so often the case, most of the deep research and reporting on this story hasn't been done by print journalists and broadcasters. [It's been done by bloggers](#) and Twitter users.

As always, it's important to remember that social media (like a newspaper or a broadcasting license) is a tool that can be put to many uses, good and bad. This is simply a particularly colorful example of the latter--whether the culprit turns out to be Rep. Weiner himself or someone trying to smear him.

Elsewhere, Ruth Graham [compiles a list](#) of members of Congress for whom this would be a less scandalous incident.