Social Media Policy:

Developing Practices for Ethical Journalism

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Policy of Social Media Use

Preamble

Todd Vogts believes social media exists as a useful tool to foster personal connections, build

brand and reputation, and conduct high-quality journalism in an ethical fashion. Holding ethics

to be the bedrock of responsible journalism that aims to uphold democracy through the free

exchange of accurate and fair information, social media must likewise be used with integrity

honesty. Though Vogts believes responsible social media use can be boiled down to simply

exercising common sense, what follows can be utilized to ensure social media participation is

conducted in a manner consistent with moral and ethical stances currently held. This inherently

implies this is a living document, subject to review and revision as beliefs and stances evolve

with changes in the world affecting the ideals of Vogts and changing societal views.

Furthermore, as technologies change, this document must be updated to reflect the times and not

be relegated to antiquity.

Definitions

Social Media Platforms: Blogs, micro-blogs, wikis, social networks, social bookmarking

services, user rating services and any other online collaboration, sharing or publishing platform,

whether accessed through the web, a mobile device, text messaging, email or any other existing

or emerging communications platform.

Social Media Account: A personalized presence inside a social networking platform, created at

will by an individual. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Google+ and other

social networking channels allow users to sign-up for their own social media account, which they

can use to collaborate, interact and share content and status updates.

Social Media Postings: Blog posts, blog comments, status updates, posts via email, images, audio recordings, video recordings or any other information made available through a social media channel. This includes any public action of interacting with the posting of other users, such as "Likes" and "Shares" on Facebook, "Retweets" and "Favorites" on Twitter, "Likes" on Instagram, and "+1" or "Share" on Google+.

User Profile: Social Media Account holders customize their User Profile within a Social Media Channel with specific information about themselves, which can be made available others users.

Controversial Issues: Issues that form the basis of heated debate as they provoke a strong emotional response based upon tightly held opinions and ideals. Examples of such issues include political and religious beliefs.

Objectives

The purpose of this social media policy is to succinctly provide guiding principles for effectively using social media with integrity to uphold sound journalistic ethics, even in instances when journalism isn't the goal of the posting.

Guiding Principles

Be A Journalist

Even when not on duty, you are a journalist. It is in your blood and what ultimately drives you. Journalism is more than a career. It is a calling and passion. As such, all activities online should be conducted to uphold the ideals of journalism.

Seek and Report Truth Accurately — Journalists should be honest, fair and courages in their tireless pursuit of gathering and reporting information needed by society. On social media,

this same standard applies. Accuracy is key. Do not pass along information found online without

verifying it first. Confirm the identities of users on social media platforms before using them as a

source in reporting. Seek permission to utilize verified images, videos and other content in any

social media postings of your own. However, do not become lazy. Social media is a tool for

gathering information, but it is not the only, or even preferred, method. Face-to-face interviews

are still preferable. This is especially important as you consider the makeup of your social media

peers. Do not let the circle you run in blind you to what others of different demographics are

thinking and experiencing. Social media can be a tool to bring to together differing and opposing

viewpoints, and or it can be used to divide and segregate. Use it for good and to gain access to

voice you might not otherwise encounter.

Be Impartial and Independent — It's easy to get caught up in the fray of online

postings. Don't get caught in a trap of putting yourself in a compromising position. Don't appear

to be tied to any cause or entity you don't intend to be tied to. Don't take compensation for

promoting a certain viewpoint or providing specific coverage. Be your own person and think

independently. Don't be afraid to post something that doesn't agree with the masses, and pander

to anyone in order to increase "likes" or "retweets." Think and post for yourself. It is up to you to

decide what is the right tone to strike. Just keep in mind your credibility is always on the line

while online. Don't put yourself in a position where you can't do your job without people

questioning your motives. Be cautions about what online groups or communities you join and

what the larger impression your joining will give. Be cautious about "friending" and

"defriending" people online. The word "friend" implies a certain level of relationship that

"following" someone on a platform such as Twitter might not.

Be A Human

The point of social media is to be social. People want to see your human side. Don't be robotic in your postings. Be real and allow your personality to shine through. User want to know who you are behind the keyboard.

Be Open and Transparent — Use your real name and allow people to know who are you are. Don't hid behind a pseudonym. Be transparent about what, if any, organization you are representing by including such information in your bio on each social media platform. Never represent yourself to be anyone other than who you really are. Be consistent on all the profile pages of your social media accounts. Don't give the appearance of trying to hide who you are by even accidentally leaving out information about yourself on different social media accounts. It is a good idea to include language in these bios to indicate that links, "shares," "retweets," or any other form of postings in which other accounts are referenced do not equal endorsements. Furthermore, include the name of the user you are sharing whenever possible. If something is opinion, make sure it is clear. Also, don't be afraid to shed light on your personal life as you deem fit. If you want to share family updates or pictures of events you are attending, feel free to do so. It adds to the concept that you are a human who leads a life outside of the work you do. Just do so cautiously, keeping in mind the implications of what you are sharing about your personal life.

Be Respectful and Minimize Harm — Show respect in all aspects of social media use. Each platform has its own culture, so do not violate the cultural norms. Do not use sexists, bigoted, racist, or otherwise insensitive language. Be mindful of the beliefs of others, especially when the discussion concerns controversial issues. Do not use foul language. Do not take part in

harassment or bullying, and take appropriate steps to stop such threats and intimidations. Be

tolerant and patient. Treat others online as you would wish to be treated. Be respectful of every

individual's First Amendment right to express their opinions, whether those opinions are

complimentary or critical. Obtain informed consent from individuals from whom you wish to

cite information. This is especially important due to the informal nature of social media, and it

creates the risk of inadvertently interacting with minors or other vulnerable persons. Be mindful

of this as such persons may not realize what the implications of their postings might be.

Walk The Line

Being on social media means you are wearing two hats. You are a journalist, but you are

also a unique individual. You have to carefully navigate this dichotomy. You must balance your

professional and personal lives when displaying them online. With proper care and attention, it

can be done.

Be Creative and Flexible — Being creative and showing who you are is one thing. You

can also be creative in how you establish your online presence. You don't need to be deceptive,

but you can establish personal and professional accounts. This can help compartmentalize your

online postings and add clarity to the content you are producing or sharing. Be sure to be clear in

your bio what the aim and affiliation is for all accounts. Likewise, you can use privacy settings to

restrict access to private information, such as political leanings. You can also keep your "friends"

and followers, along with their comments, managed. Also, this will allow you to express interest

in or support of certain causes without arising a professional conflict of interest.

Interact Responsibly — Social media is built on interactions, so you need to be a good

listener. Hear what your acquaintances online are saying, and respond appropriately. If someone

leaves you a comment asking a question, answer it. If someone is asking a general question not aimed at you but you can help in finding an answer, chime in and help them find the solution. Foster relationships. Invite followers to share their own stories and expertise. Ask questions of your followers. If it won't suggest a bias, wish followers well when it comes to events such as anniversaries or birthdays, especially if it is in response to a post they shared about their own anniversary, birthday or other milestone event in their life. Be constructive. Don't reward harmful comments or other behaviors, and, instead, foster conversation around your postings. Most importantly, remember anything you post online is public and will exist online forever. Don't post content you will regret or could cause you embracement in the future.

Philosophy and Rationale

The social media policy described on the previous pages came about by looking at various policies professional media outlets currently used. Some were quite extensive, and others were more minimalist. In developing my own, I tried to find a balance. I didn't want to be too restrictive like the Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees (2013). As a huge fan of National Public Radio, I found the Ethics Handbook: Social Media (n.d.) guide to be enlightening. It helped me recognize some of the decisions I hear NPR make on a daily basis. I appreciated the succinctness of the polices from the Washington Post and the Guardian, which contained seven and eight guiding principles respectively (Digital Publishing Guidelines, 2011; Journalist blogging and commenting guidelines, 2010). That seemed like a fair number. It wasn't too much to digest, but it wasn't too sparse.

As I looked through them all, I tried to find similarities. Schwartzman (2012) helped me think through those distinctions, even though his list was incredibly extensive and aimed at corporate and governmental entities. I was then able to combine and condense the very specific policies used by journalism outlets to boil it all down to its common denominators, which all revolved around ethical journalism. Thinking of a social media in terms other than ethical journalism seems to overcomplicate matters unnecessarily. I grouped the commonalities by category, keeping in mind my role as a journalism educator and adviser. That's why one of the most influential policies I found came from the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. It had three guiding principles with descriptions and enumerated sub-points that seemed to encompass everything (Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists, n.d.). I liked the simplicity of that, so I modeled my own policy after that.

This worked because I decided the commonalities of all the policies surveyed equated to being a journalist, being a human, and walking that line between professional and personal.

As an educator, I am fully aware of the fact people are watching me, including my actions online. I might not be as scrutinized as a politician, but I am dealing with students. That brings with it attention to ensure I am interacting appropriately, providing the necessary education, being a good role model. This is why developed my social media policy in the fashion I did. I haven't had any particular experience in the past to influence this, other than hearing stories of teachers being fired for letting their guards down too much. High school students can read more into a comment or an action than was intended, which can lead to professional complications. Even when I'm not at school, though, I know my actions are still being viewed as representative of who I am as an educator. In the community I currently work, which is extremely conservative, having an alcoholic drink in public could cause problems. My contract is up for renewal each year, so I have to be aware of what I do. The same goes for what I post. When my wife and I travel to St. Louis each summer to take in a Cardinals baseball game, I have to make sure any pictures we take and intend to share via social media don't show me doing anything that would give anyone reason to not renew my contract. It's all about the optics. I vehemently disagree with this as my actions in my personal life away from my students shouldn't automatically interfere with my professional life unless I do something extreme, but this is my reality. I have come to accept it.

The policy I crafted is, in essence, my current practices put down on paper. I refuse to allow my students to "friend" me on Snapchat, and I decline their requests on a regular basis. The same goes for Facebook. I will "friend" them after they graduate if they still wish to

connect. Twitter and Instagram and a different matter. I am more active on those two platforms, but I am very conscious of what I post. Having students connect with me in this way has been helpful to create positive relationships with them, and the students have used these platforms to reach out with questions regarding homework and other issues. It has been positive. Going into this endeavor of creating a more concrete policy, I fully expected my practices to contradict what I was suggesting my policy should be. However, I am happy to report it did not turn out that way. This means it will be easier for me to stick to my policy. It will need reviewed periodically as new technologies become available, but the most pertinent time for review will be if I get a job at a different school. Even then, though, the policy should be easy to devise and implement. After all, a social media policy isn't something to lose sleep over. All one has to do is, to quote the Society of Professional Journalists' Social Media Guidelines. (n.d.), "Use common sense."

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