

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR AP EMPLOYEES

REVISED JULY 2012

AP's Social Media Guidelines are based on our Statement of News Values and Principles. The guidelines below apply these long-tested principles to the social media space. The Social Media Guidelines are designed to advance the AP's brand and staffers' personal brands on social networks. They encourage staffers to be active participants in social networks while upholding our fundamental value that staffers should not express personal opinions on controversial issues of the day.

Any exceptions to the policies below must be approved by a senior AP manager.

ACCOUNTS

All AP journalists are encouraged to have accounts on social networks. They have become an essential tool for AP reporters to gather news and share links to our published work. We recommend having one account per network that you use both personally and professionally.

Many AP journalists have had great success with this strategy.

Employees must identify themselves as being from AP if they are using their accounts for work in any way. You don't have to include AP in your Twitter or other usernames, and you should use a personal image (not an AP logo) for the profile photo. But you should identify yourself in your profile as an AP staffer.

Posting AP proprietary or confidential material is prohibited.

Employees may not include political affiliations in their profiles and should not make any postings that express political views.

OPINION

AP staffers must be aware that opinions they express may damage the AP's reputation as an unbiased source of news. AP employees must refrain from declaring their views on contentious public issues in any public forum and must not take part in organized action in support of causes or movements.

Sometimes AP staffers ask if they're free to comment in social media on matters like sports and entertainment. The answer is yes, but there are some important things to keep in mind:

First, trash-talking about anyone (including a team, company or celebrity) reflects badly on staffers and the AP. Assume your tweet will be seen by the target of your comment. The person or organization you're deriding may be one that an AP colleague is trying to develop as a source.

Second, if you or your department covers a subject -- or you supervise people who do -- you have a special obligation to be even-handed in your tweets. Whenever possible, link to AP copy, where we have the space to represent all points of view.

Posts and tweets aimed at gathering opinions for a story must make clear that we are looking for voices on all sides of an issue.

PRIVACY

Employees should be mindful that any opinions or personal information they disclose about themselves or colleagues may be linked to the AP's name. That's true even if staffers restrict their pages to viewing only by friends.

We recommend customizing your privacy settings on Facebook to determine what you share and with whom.

However, as multitudes of people have learned all too well, virtually nothing is truly private on the Internet. It's all too easy for someone to copy material out of restricted pages and redirect it elsewhere for wider viewing.

RETWEETING

Retweets, like tweets, should not be written in a way that looks like you're expressing a personal opinion on the issues of the day. A retweet with no comment of your own can easily be seen as a sign of approval of what you're relaying.

Examples of retweets that can cause problems:

1. RT *@jonescampaign*: smith's policies would destroy our schools
2. RT *@dailyeuropean*: at last, a euro plan that works

These kinds of unadorned retweets must be avoided.

However, we can judiciously retweet opinionated material if we make clear we're simply reporting it, much as we would quote it in a story. Introductory words, colons and quote marks help make the distinction:

Examples:

1. Jones campaign now denouncing Smith on education. RT *@jonescampaign*: smith's policies would destroy our schools
2. Big European paper praises euro plan. RT *@dailyeuropean*: at last, a euro plan that works

These cautions apply even if you say on your Twitter profile that retweets do not constitute endorsements. Many people who see your tweets and retweets will never look at your Twitter bio.

FRIENDING/FOLLOWING

It is acceptable to extend and accept Facebook friend requests from sources, politicians and newsmakers if necessary for reporting purposes, and to follow them on Twitter.

However, friending and “liking” political candidates or causes may create a perception among people unfamiliar with the protocol of social networks that AP staffers are advocates. Therefore, staffers should try to make this kind of contact with figures on both sides of controversial issues.

We should avoid interacting with newsmakers on their public pages – for instance, commenting on their posts.

AP managers should not issue friend requests to subordinates. It’s fine if employees want to initiate the friend process with their bosses or other managers.

PUBLISHING

AP staff are encouraged to link to AP content in all formats. They can also link to content from other media organizations, except if the material spreads rumors or is otherwise inappropriate. Be mindful of competitive and corporate issues as you post links; we compete vigorously with other news organizations, but you should think twice before you tweet or post anything that disparages them, as this may affect perceptions of your objectivity.

Staffers should link to content that has been published online, rather than directly uploading or copying and pasting the material.

AP journalists have live-tweeted news events on several occasions with great success. Here are some guidelines on live-tweeting:

- News events (press conferences, sports events, etc.) that are being broadcast live: AP staffers are welcome to live-tweet these events. However, when major news breaks, a staffer’s first obligation is to provide full details to the appropriate news desk for use in AP services if the desk isn’t tuned in already. After providing this information and handling any other immediate AP work, the staffer is then free to tweet or post information about the news development.
- Exclusive material: AP news services must have the opportunity to publish exclusive text, photo and video material before it appears on social networks. Once that material has been published, staffers are welcome to tweet and post a link to it on AP or subscriber platforms.
- Incremental reporting threads: AP staffers should never share on social networks incremental information that, if closely held, could lead to important, exclusive content.

- Other content: Other material you have gathered may be shared on social networks. This includes material we commonly refer to as “cutting room floor” content -- material that is not needed for a specific AP product.

A note about the safety of AP staff: Staffers must not post on social networks any information that could jeopardize the safety of AP staff — for example, the exact location of staffers reporting from a place where journalists may be kidnapped or attacked. This also applies to reports of the arrest or disappearance of staffers. In some cases, publicity may in fact help a staffer, but this determination must be made by AP managers handling the situation.

SOURCING

It can be difficult to verify the identity of sources found on social networks. Sources discovered there should be vetted in the same way as those found by any other means. If a source you encounter on a social network claims to be an official from a company, organization or government agency, call the place of business to confirm the identity, just as you would if a source called on the phone.

You must never simply lift quotes, photos or video from social networking sites and attribute them to the name on the profile or feed where you found the material. Most social media sites offer a way to send a message to a user; use this to establish direct contact, over email or by phone, so you can get more detailed information about the source.

Use particular caution if you find a social networking page or feed that appears to belong to a person who is central to a story, especially if you can't get confirmation from that person. Fake accounts are rampant in the social media world and can appear online within minutes of a new name appearing in the news. Examine the details to determine whether the page could have just as easily been created by somebody else.

Many athletes, celebrities and politicians have verified Twitter accounts, identified by a white-on-blue check mark on the profile page, which means Twitter has determined that the account really does belong to that person. However, Twitter's verification process has been fooled, meaning we should still do our own checking with the newsmaker.

The same goes for verified Google Plus pages, which have a white-on-gray check mark — we need to verify the page through our own reporting. Also, before you quote from newsmaker's tweets or posts, confirm who is managing the account. Is it the famous person? His or her handlers? A combination? Knowing the source of the information will help you determine just how newsworthy the tweet or post is and how to characterize it.

To include photos, videos or other multimedia content from social networks in our news report, we must determine who controls the copyright to the material and get permission from that person or organization to use it. Any exceptions must be discussed with the Nerve Center and Legal.

INTERACTING WITH USERS

AP is strongly in favor of engaging with those who consume our content. Most feedback we receive is constructive, and any substantive criticism of our content should be taken seriously, however it may be phrased.

AP's News Values and Principles say, "Staffers must notify supervisory editors as soon as possible of errors or potential errors, whether in their work or that of a colleague." Beyond that, responses to our audience can largely be guided by the nature of the comments that come in.

A thoughtful note from a reader or viewer that leads to a correction by us deserves an email or tweet of thanks (try to avoid repeating the original error). If someone offers a businesslike criticism of a story or image but has their facts wrong, it's good to reply, time permitting, to clarify the facts.

However, it's best to avoid protracted back-and-forth exchanges with angry people that become less constructive with each new round. Abusive, bigoted, obscene and/or racist comments should be flagged to the Nerve Center immediately and, if appropriate, to AP Global Security (contact dspriggs@ap.org).

OTHER THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

I. Any response we make to a reader or viewer could go public. Email and direct Facebook and Twitter messages may feel like private communications, but may easily find their way to blogs and political pressure groups, attorneys and others. In the case of a story or image that stirs significant controversy, the editor is likely the best person to reply, rather than the person who created the content. The Standards Center can also reply.

II. Any incoming message that raises the possibility of legal action should be reviewed by an AP attorney before a response is made

INTERACTING WITH AP ACCOUNTS

Staff are welcome to retweet and share material posted by official AP-branded accounts on social networking sites (e.g. @AP). We ask that AP staff refrain from liking or commenting on official AP-branded Facebook or Google Plus posts and chats. These accounts are official, public-facing channels of communication, and we want to reserve the comments and the interactions for the public, not for journalists to talk among themselves in a public-facing spot. It can be off-putting for an average Facebook user to click on a post and see conversations between colleagues or virtual insider pats on the back.

DELETING TWEETS

Twitter.com allows us to delete tweets we've sent. Deletion, however, removes the tweet only from Twitter.com and perhaps some other Twitter clients. Tweets of ours that have been retweeted or reposted elsewhere will still remain publicly visible. If you believe a tweet should be deleted, contact a Nerve Center manager to discuss the situation.

CORRECTIONS

Erroneous tweets or other social media posts need to be corrected as quickly and transparently as errors in any other AP service. This applies to AP-related tweets or posts on personal accounts as well.

The thing to do is to tweet or post that we made a mistake and explain exactly what was wrong.

Example:

Correction: U.S. Embassy in Nigeria says bombings could happen this week at luxury hotels in Abuja (previously we incorrectly said Lagos): apne.ws/uxr9ph

Serious errors need to be brought to the attention of a Nerve Center manager and the appropriate regional or vertical desk.