

How to handle ethical issues in the case of professional social media accounts

Based on professional charters and handbooks for journalists

Main Issue: The professional integrity of the journalist are put in a new context in the digital age, indeed when it comes to the professional uses of social media and its consequences for the identity and practices of the individual journalist. Professional charters may need updating in order to cope with these new deontological stakes. The tipsheet refers to issue no. 2 in the IJE State of the Art analysis: "More attention should be paid to new journalistic principles in the light of technological change: for instance, what can be the consequences of producing news or images with a smart phone?" and no. 3: "Teaching staff and media professionals encourage students to use new tools, which often question the fundamental ethical issues in profession of journalism."

Keywords: social media, ethics, professional identity, professional integrity

Short description: One of the main issues of professional ethics in the digital age is the professional uses of social media and its consequences on the professional identity and integrity of the journalist.

The journalist's posts, being the posts of each person on every social media, are moderated according to the rules of the given social media (sometimes not very clear and not corresponding to local laws).

But the journalist, because he/she has to respond to the expectation of the profession and maybe to an employer, has some other principles to follow. Here are some recommendations for the teaching of journalism, based on charters and guides on the ethical uses of social media. These recommendations could indicate some mistakes to avoid, but may also protect journalists and journalism students from conflicts of interest and/or pressure.

To do	Topic	Teaching method
<p>Social media are present in the journalistic work as evidence and in a lot of cases teachers encourage students to experiment with social media from the early years of their scholarship. But before creating a professional account, the reasons and the goals have to be precise in order to avoid ethically problematic situations.</p>	<p>Goals and aims of an account</p>	<p>Two examples in J work simulation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media as a platform for news content (a Facebook group); • Social media as one of the newsroom’s services (community management). <p>Three points to discuss and decide with the students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the editorial needs? Decide what you are looking for: debate, new ideas, investigation, clicks? The way you will use your channel defines the contract with the audience and some ethical issues. • When to publish? The temptation to publish a news story quickly is even bigger on social media. Take time to check sources. • Who to follow? To have a few credible contacts is worth more than a thousand of unverified contacts. Don’t forget: who you follow determines how your readers and followers perceive you.
<p>Norms of journalistic objectivity and neutrality are changing from one country to another, but some decisive questions rise for a lot of journalists and future journalists: in the name of who is the journalist writing when publishing on his/her account? Does he/she still belong to the news-room? Can he/she share his/her own opinions?</p>	<p>Partiality or impartiality of journalistic discourse on SM</p>	<p>During the J work simulation teachers could introduce special exercises on partiality/impartiality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show students how the different contexts modify the limits between partiality and impartiality. For example: can we, and in which contexts, share our points of view on social questions, such as abortion (http://cargocollective.com/hancush/What-to-do-when-you-want-to-share-something-on-Twitter-but-you-re), or in main issues such as the recent Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures (http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/en/contents/to-publish-or-not-to-publish-charlie-hebdo-that-is-the-question-the-answer-is-in-the-code-of-ethics). • Let them think about how to retweet. Retweeting a message can look like supporting that message or make you responsible for that content. Think about how to quote or comment. Unconfirmed news has to be handled carefully. (See more on this topic in the tipsheets on UGC, user generated content). • To like or not to like. “Liking” something or someone on Facebook, seems like publicly giving a vote or a donation and it is in contrast with some professional principles. Let your students think how they are “liking”. • Let the students work on a disclaimer to add to their account.

Recommended resources

Topic/Learning outcome

Using social media even when the journalist is not at work guarantees a certain public presence for him/her. But what he/she is doing as a private person can be confused with his/her role at work and in some cases question the credibility of the journalist or the corporation.

Professional or private uses

- Let the students think about a disclaimer (It is necessary or not? What to write? Is the declaration of a personal engagement enough?), taking illustrative examples from the J practice (see for example the guide of Reuters, of AFP or of the Swedish Radio).
- Simulate concrete situations could be good practice to exercise. See for example Michael Grunwald's controversial post about Julian Assange (<http://blog.wan-iffra.org/2013/08/21/why-tweeters-mix-of-personal-and-professional-can-be-an-uncomfortable-blend-for-news-out/>) or use your students' personal accounts for examples, and see if they are still "in the context" (<http://onlinejournalismblog.com/2013/10/18/welcome-to-journalism-now-delete-your-history/>).

Using pictures, sound, videos, or text from social media and the web require authenticity verification (see more on this topic in the tipsheet on UGC). But you also have to make sure that you have the copyright owner's permission to publish it.

Authorship and copyright

Of course, the country's legislation has to be known by the students.
Then the following questions could be integrated in exercises on news production or news monitoring:
Is the video/picture/sound/text published with the owner's permission?
In case of uncertainty, is there any journalistic reason to embed the content (i.e. is freedom of expression more important than copyright issue)?
Is the author named or remaining anonymous?
How should you control the legality of content uploaded by users on your social media page?

Bonus material:

Some quotes from recommended resources:

“Some of those following you will want to know what your personal position is. “What’s your thinking on this?”, “What do you really think?”. After all, social media are very much about expressing one’s opinions. They’re typically described as being opinion-driven, and that can sometimes make things tricky for a public service journalist”.

Swedish Radio’s Social Media Handbook for Journalists, p. 55.

“Our wish is for people to benefit safely from social networks, not to muzzle anyone. Journalists are people too, with all the rights of citizens. If we want to tweet or post about a school play, a film or a favorite recipe, we are free to do so. When dealing with matters of public importance and actual or potential subjects of coverage, however, Reuters journalists should be mindful of the impact their publicly expressed opinions can have on their work and on Reuters. In our Twitter and Facebook profiles, for example, we should identify ourselves as Reuters journalists and declare that we speak for ourselves, not for Thomson Reuters.” Reuter’s Handbook of Journalism, http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Reporting_From_the_Internet_And_Using_Social_Media

“Professional journalists share cyberspace with citizen bloggers, most of whom produce plenty of opinions but little or no original reporting. When professional journalists are assigned to write blogs, they are typically urged to adopt a “voice” that is more relaxed than what you’ll find in traditional news reporting. From there, it’s just a short leap to trying to match the opining of their amateur brethren.

“ Gene Foreman, Journalism Ethics in the Digital Age

<http://journalism.uark.edu/wp/?p=2723>