



U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary **Public Affairs**



USCGAUX National PA P&P 6-09

Subj: Social Media Guidelines

1. Background: Social media is evolving - and frequently contentious, the profile of which continues to grow. These guidelines cover the following topics:

- Introduction – what social media is
- Social media and a Code of Conduct
- Potential legal issues
- What to be aware of
- Other issues: Astroturfing; Ghosting; Off the record; Wikis; Rules of engagement; The future
- Further information: resources; Useful links

2. Introduction

“Social media” is the term commonly given to websites and online tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. As the name implies, social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement.

Blogs are perhaps the most well known example of social media, but the term encompasses other platforms. Examples include podcasts, ‘wikis’ (such as [Wikipedia](#)), message boards, social bookmarking websites (such as [del.icio.us](#)), social networking websites (such as [bebo](#), [MySpace](#)) and content sharing websites (such as [flickr](#), [YouTube](#)).

‘Social media’ can be referenced in a variety of ways, often depending on who is discussing it. Other terms which may be used in a similar context include ‘social software’, ‘social computing’ and ‘Web 2.0’. For convenience we use ‘social media’ throughout.

The growing popularity of social media has attracted the attention of companies who believe that these platforms open up new opportunities for communication. The opportunities are indeed there, as are the pitfalls. Organizations that apply the usual methods of dealing with the media can get into deep trouble, but that doesn’t mean that

the 'rule book' can be completely disregarded. There are areas – both legally and in terms of best practices – that are still applicable whether dealing online or offline.

Public Affairs people have a particular duty in this area - and indeed an opportunity to set standards. In general, members should disclose, even where there might not seem an overriding professional obligation to do so. For example, we recommend that any member running a personal blog, whether or not it deals with Auxiliary related issues, should state on it the nature of their membership. When posting a comment on another blog it may also be advisable to state that you are in public affairs. Obviously there can be circumstances where this is not appropriate. Equally, members should know that reputation is holistic – it is not possible to sustain one image created through conventional media alongside a completely different one created through social media. Old and new media interact and members should bear that interaction in mind. Reputation is one continuum. Social media presents many traps.

3. Social Media and Ethics

Integrity, Competence and Confidentiality should be adhered to when engaging in any public affairs activities.

Integrity: Integrity is key to the ethical treatment of social media, as indeed it is key to all elements of professionalism. It requires that members are honest and open in their use of social media.

Members should have regard for the public interest. They should be accurate when disseminating information. They should never use social media knowingly to mislead.

Competence: Members should be aware of the limitations of their competence, and should be willing to accept or delegate only that work for which they are suitably skilled and experienced.

Members' use of social media must be transparent, and they must make extra effort to disclose any potential conflicts of interest.

Confidentiality: Material posted using social media should not disclose privileged information. Confidences of present and former should be safeguarded. Care should be taken to avoid using information covered by exemptions to the Freedom of Information Act. OPSEC and other sensitive information should not be disclosed.

4. Definitions/Terms:

Public (pub-lic): of, relating to, or being in the service of the community or nation

Affairs (af-fairs)

- a. commercial, professional, public, or personal business
- b. a matter occasioning public anxiety, controversy, or scandal

Ethics (eth-ics)

- a. the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation
- b. a set of moral principles or values
- c. a theory or system of moral values
- d. the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group
- e. a guiding philosophy

Censorship is the restriction or suppression of material by an authority. Federal laws based on the First Amendment forbid government censorship...except in the public and/or private schools.

Defamation, Libel, and Slander

Libel is the publication of anything injurious to the good name or reputation of another.

Slander is the same kind of defamation in spoken form, including broadcast on the radio.

There are a number of legal defenses, including truth and fair reporting.

Plagiarism/Copyright

Materials from national PA offered for use of our members; not true of other materials.

If you will be using material developed by an outside source like a local paper, be careful not to take credit for material which was written by someone else.

Many news professionals will gladly provide their permission for you to do so. Just make sure you ask and save a copy of the response in case there is ever an issue.

Utilitarianism: an action is right if it results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people – leans towards relativism. Looks at what the likely outcomes of one course of action or another might be

Deontology: broad principles of right and wrong can be established; they are not dependent on the consequences of a particular action. Focus on duty/responsibilities: it's one's duty to do what is morally correct and avoid doing what's morally wrong regardless of the consequences

True sense of duty and responsibility are at the cornerstone of leadership.

A USCG training document states, "A working definition of ethics is: 'Obedience to the unenforceable.'"

Ethics definition: *"The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation."*

Core Values

These core values are more than just Coast Guard rules of behavior. They are deeply rooted in the heritage that has made our organization great. They demonstrate who we are and guide our performance, conduct, and decisions every minute of every day. Because we each represent the Coast Guard to the public, we must all embrace these values in our professional undertakings as well as in our personal lives.

Honor: Absolute integrity is our standard. A Coast Guardsman demonstrates honor in all things: never lying, cheating or stealing. We do the right thing because it is the right thing - all the time.

Respect: We value the dignity and worth of people: whether a stranded boater, an immigrant, or a fellow Coast Guardsman; we honor protect and assist.

Devotion to duty: A Coast Guardsman is dedicated to the accomplishment of our missions. We are loyal and accountable to the public trust. We welcome responsibility.

6. Potential Legal Issues

A growing number of organizations are incorporating social media into their communications. As a relatively new phenomenon, this is still, in legal terms, a developing area. While the medium may be different, however, many of the legal considerations associated with print and broadcast need to be borne in mind. In the absence of legislation relating specifically to social media, practice has tended to use established areas of the law as a starting point in cases to date.

There are several areas to consider:

- Intellectual property – including copyright and trade marks
- Disclosure / Confidentiality
- Defamation
- Invasion of Privacy

Intellectual property

Intellectual property (IP) describes ownership of an intellectual 'product' which may have commercial value. IP encompasses the following areas: copyright, trademarks, patents and design.

Trademarks include logos, slogans and words, and are 'signs' used to distinguish products or services of one company from another. A trademark owner has the right to prevent unauthorized use of that trademark.

Copyright covers material including literature, music, film, audio and art. If material is copyrighted, the copyright owner has certain economic and moral rights – for example, the right to be credited as the creator of the material and the right to be financially rewarded if the material is used by another party. In most cases, the copyright owner needs to give permission for the material to be used, although there are exceptions to this. The concept of fair use in copyright law allows for certain actions with regards to copyrighted material; for example, there is provision for quoting from publicly available material if the source is cited, its use can be justified and only the necessary amount is included.

Websites or blogs may specify a 'Creative Commons' license, which allows copyright owners the option of providing their material for use if specific conditions are met.

Some practical examples of circumstances where intellectual property law may be applied include:

Use of music, for example in a podcast:

Members should search for websites which provide music that has been submitted by artists for use under a Creative Commons license or for which the Coast Guard and/or the USCG Auxiliary has rights to use.

Use of images, for example on a blog:

Use of the Coast Guard and Auxiliary image libraries is encouraged.

Quoting from sources:

Check whether the quoted material is covered by Copyright or a license, which will set out terms for use. Short quotations are generally fine, providing these are referenced, but if in doubt seek permission.

(Deep) linking to information on another website:

Many websites state their policy on this within a Terms of Use / Copyright section; for example, larger companies often state that linking to the home page is acceptable but deep linking (i.e. linking to a page within the website) is not. Some websites also specify that all links to their pages must appear in a new window and not within the 'frame' of the site linking to them.

Disclosure / Confidentiality

Public Affairs staff should bear in mind issues around disclosure and confidentiality when posting information about the Auxiliary. Information can be disseminated very quickly via social media and is virtually impossible to retract once it has been published: even if it has been online for only a short time, it may well have been picked up and cached by computers around the world.

Some practical examples of circumstances where disclosure / confidentiality laws could be applied include:

- Announcing a new mission area before all details have been finalized
- Revealing information that is not in the public domain

Defamation

Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or company that is considered to harm reputation, for example by lowering others' estimation of the person or company, or by causing them to lose their rank or professional standing. If the defamatory statement is written down (in print or online) it is known as libel. If it is spoken, it is known as slander. There are exceptions to this - posting a defamatory statement online or recording it on a podcast would both be examples of libel.

Points to note:

The Coast Guard may be held responsible for something an Auxiliarist has written or said if it is on behalf of the Coast Guard/Auxiliary or on an Auxiliary-sanctioned space.

Action can also be taken against the government for repeating libelous information from another source, so you must check carefully before quoting statements from other blogs or websites. This can also apply to linking to defamatory information. You should consider whether a statement can be proved before writing or using it. The onus is on the person making the statement to establish its truth

Invasion of privacy

Some practical examples of situations where privacy may be an issue include:

Disclosing information about members on a personal blog

Collecting information about visitors to your blog/website and then using it

7. What to be Aware

There have been several well-publicized cases where employers have taken action or dismissed employees based on their use of social media. A new term has even been coined following one such case: to be 'dooxed' is to lose your job because of something you wrote in your blog.

There is much debate over the boundaries companies should set for their employees' use of social media, and there is, as yet, no definitive answer. Organizations will always want to protect their brand against misuse or misrepresentation and also bear a certain amount of legal responsibility for employees' actions. Being aware of the potential issues as member means that steps can be taken to ensure these issues do not materialize.

For examples of the policies some organizations have put in place, please see the useful links at the end of these guidelines.

If you have an organizational blog, you should bear in mind that posting the opinions of others can mean you assume a certain amount of legal responsibility for the content. You should therefore include a policy on your own blog that outlines how you will treat comments (for example, these may be moderated before publication).

People have been dismissed because of their online activities. While such cases may be rare, it is important as to be aware that posting information about the USCG/Auxiliary cannot be isolated from your Auxiliary membership. Any information published online can be accessed around the world within seconds and will be publicly available for all to see.

As a Member, you should take the following into consideration when using social media:

- Ensure that you are aware of any USCG/Auxiliary policy or guidelines for using social media, whether this is personally or as a part of your role
- Familiarize yourself with the legal issues before writing about colleagues or sharing information about the USCG/Auxiliary
- Err on the side of disclosure so that readers know of who you are and what you do. They can have no complaint that you are acting in an 'underhand' way. You should normally state that you work in the public affairs.
- Use common sense - for example, it should come as no surprise that writing or talking about sensitive issues will have its own set of problems.

8. Other Emerging Issues

'Astroturfing'

'Astroturfing' is the practice of falsely creating the impression of independent, popular support by means of an orchestrated and disguised public affairs exercise. The underlying idea of faking grassroots support gives rise to the term, which was coined from the word AstroTurf (artificial grass). Astroturfing is not a new concept in principle, but social media has provided a host of methods for conducting this type of campaign. For example, in the context of social media, Astroturfing techniques could include the creation of a dedicated blog, posting comments on others' blogs or on message boards, submitting supposedly amateur videos to YouTube – all of which would be designed to give the impression of spontaneous support for an idea/product/company/service. The principle of Integrity suggests that Members should act transparently, honestly and with accuracy, and never knowingly mislead. 'Astroturfing' campaigns are self-evidently likely to contradict basic ethics principals.

'Pitching'

With the proliferation of social media, a growing number of organizations are actively engaging with selected websites and incorporating them into their communications strategies. Pitching to bloggers has become much more common – to the extent that many now view unsolicited emails from PR practitioners as pure spam. This doesn't mean bloggers aren't open to hearing from the USCG/Auxiliary, but it is important to consider areas of best practice before pitching.

Researching blogs that you intend to pitch to is essential, both in terms of judging the blogger's attitude to receiving information from Public Affairs people and also in ensuring that the material you send is relevant to the blog. You should take the time to start reading the blog regularly to familiarize yourself with the blogger's interests and scope; the added benefit of this is that the blogger may also reveal how open he is to receiving pitches and how they prefer to receive these.

As when dealing with mainstream media, you should make sure pitches are for newsworthy items and are targeted carefully. Unlike mainstream media, the risk is not simply that they will be ignored – they may instead be held up as an example of poor public relations practice. Tailoring the pitch to the blog means it stands a better chance of being received positively, instead of being viewed as a form of PR spam.

It is also important to be honest about your role and the nature of the pitch. Failing to disclose this could mean your pitch results in criticism and negative posts about your organization.

'Ghost writing'

The drafting of material by PA people has a role to play in many areas of professional endeavor. But where a blog is run entirely, or almost entirely, without detailed oversight by the 'face' of the blog, then serious questions of integrity arise. Where such ghosting happens, this should be made clear on the blog, along with other relevant information (such as potential conflicts of interest), as detailed elsewhere.

'Off the record'

The concept of 'off the record' does not apply when dealing with social media such as blogs. You should understand that your conversations or emails with a blogger may be considered to be in the public domain and therefore be posted online without specifically eliciting your permission. Familiarizing yourself with the blogs you are dealing with will give a good indication of the blogger's stance. If in doubt, you should assume that any information you share could be made available publicly. On the other side of the coin, you should think carefully about posting content from private emails without permission to do so. Apart from ethical considerations, there may also be legal restrictions on reproducing a person's email correspondence: the writer of an email may be seen as the copyright owner and many organizations now include a disclaimer at the foot of their emails citing how these are intended to be used. When blogging you should also avoid treating your private emails as 'blogs'.

Contributing to Wikis

A wiki is a website that is updated and edited by visitors to the site, who collaborate to create and maintain the information contained there. Probably the most well-known wiki is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. When contributing to a wiki on behalf of the USCG/Auxiliary, the main issue to be aware of is the policy on such contributions. There has been some controversy about the involvement of public affairs people in the creation of wikis which some in social media would prefer to preserve solely for individual contributions. The majority of wikis will provide some form of guidelines for those wishing to contribute - Wikipedia for example has a series of policies on submitting or editing contributions. The site emphasizes that entries must be neutral in tone, factual and verifiable. In addition, there are guidelines on adding links which state that adding a link to your own website will be considered spamming. Read the guidelines carefully before submitting or editing an article.

9. Summary

Rules of engagement

There are few hard and fast rules for using social media, and the landscape is evolving constantly. However, openness and transparency are key elements. Organizations and individuals who do not respect this can find themselves criticized publicly for attempting to utilize social media networks without disclosing full commercial intent – and this involvement can backfire spectacularly. You should abide by the rules and etiquette of the community in question. There will generally be an area explaining how to use the website which will include policies and guidelines to help you judge how to engage with other visitors to the site. If you can't find this information, make contact to find out what is and isn't acceptable - either via a named contact or a discussion forum.

The future

This is an evolving area, with regular new developments and innovations. The landscape changes constantly and so issues that seem most pressing today will most likely be replaced by new ones in the near future. There will be new challenges for Auxiliary Public Affairs.

Links:

SOCIAL MEDIA - THE WAY AHEAD:

<http://www.uscg.mil/ANNOUNCEMENTS/alcoast/ALCOAST45708.txt>

SOCIAL MEDIA - UNOFFICIAL INTERNET POSTS

<http://www.uscg.mil/announcements/alcoast/alcoast548.08.txt>

Coast Guard Uses 'Social Media' to Tell Its Story

<http://coastguardnews.com/coast-guard-uses-social-media-to-tell-its-story/2008/09/23/>

Social Media and the Coast Guard

<http://revver.com/video/1195421/social-media-and-the-coast-guard/>