

Washington Post policy on ethics in social media

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The following social media guidelines were sent to Washington Post staff members in September. I have inserted numbers and italicized passages to identify points for groups to discuss. (Please note if you are assigned to points 1 or 3 that they include two separate passages.) If you agree with the policy on this point, discuss how you would enforce it, how would you penalize violations and how would you defend it to staff members who disagree. If you disagree, discuss why you disagree and what you think a better policy would be. In either case, don't limit your discussion to the specific wording of the policy here, but discuss the underlying issue broadly. For instance, on the question of "friending" sources on Facebook, you might not discuss just friends who might present conflicts, but whether you should be friends with sources at all and whether friending a confidential source might present a problem. If you finish with the point that was assigned to you, you can discuss a second point of your choosing.

Newsroom Guidelines for Use of Facebook, Twitter and Other Online Social Networks

Social networks are communications media, and a part of our everyday lives. They can be valuable tools in gathering and disseminating news and information. They also create some potential hazards we need to recognize. 1. *When using social networking tools for reporting or for our personal lives, we must remember that Washington Post journalists are always Washington Post journalists.* The following guidelines apply to all Post journalists, without limitation to the subject matter of their assignments.

Using Social Networking Tools for Reporting

2. *When using social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, My Space or Twitter for reporting, we must protect our professional integrity. Washington Post journalists should identify themselves as such. We must be accurate in our reporting and transparent about our intentions when participating. We must be concise yet clear when describing who we are and what information we seek.*

3. *When using these networks, nothing we do must call into question the impartiality of our news judgment. We never abandon the guidelines that govern the separation of news from opinion, the importance of fact and objectivity, the appropriate use of language and tone, and other hallmarks of our brand of journalism.*

Our online data trails reflect on our professional reputations and those of The Washington Post. Be sure that your pattern of use does not suggest, for example, that you are interested only in people with one particular view of a topic or issue.

Using Social Networking Tools for Personal Reasons

1. All Washington Post journalists relinquish some of the personal privileges of private citizens. Post journalists must recognize that any content associated with them in an online social network is, for practical purposes, the equivalent of what appears beneath their bylines in the newspaper or on our website.

What you do on social networks should be presumed to be publicly available to anyone, even if you have created a private account. It is possible to use privacy controls online to limit access to sensitive information. But such controls are only a deterrent, not an absolute insulator. Reality is simple: If you don't want something to be found online, don't put it there.

3. Post journalists must refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything—including photographs or video—that could be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism that could be used to tarnish our journalistic credibility. 4. This same caution should be used when joining, following or friending any person or organization online. Post journalists should not be involved in any social networks related to advocacy or a special interest regarding topics they cover, unless specifically permitted by a supervising editor for reporting and so long as other standards of transparency are maintained while doing any such reporting.

Post journalists should not accept or place tokens, badges or virtual gifts from political or partisan causes on pages or sites, and should monitor information posted on your own personal profile sites by those with whom you are associated online for appropriateness.

5. Personal pages online are no place for the discussion of internal newsroom issues such as sourcing, reporting of stories, decisions to publish or not to publish, personnel matters and untoward personal or professional matters involving our colleagues. The same is true for opinions or information regarding any business activities of The Washington Post Company. Such pages and sites also should not be used to criticize competitors or those who take issue with our journalism or our journalists.

If you have questions about any of these matters, please check with your supervisor or a senior editor.

On my blog, stevebuttry.wordpress.com, search for “Washington Post” for posts on my views and links to other discussions of this policy.