

Yes, No, Maybe So



You're an ethical social media user, right?

Social media is powerful. We've seen it grab national headlines and spawn monthslong debate, analysis and no end of political pontification. But social media tools also streamline communication, information dissemination and advertising. For many legislators, they're invaluable for connecting with constituents and colleagues, developing policies and staying informed when away from the capitol.

The benefits of Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have made them inseparable from our daily lives. With powerful tools come big responsibilities for everyone—but for legislators and their staffs, using social media ethically is imperative. From knee-jerk tweets and fiery debates to full-fledged meltdowns, lapses in judgment when using this unforgiving technology are carved into stone—documented and, for better or worse, saved for posterity.

The same rules of decorum and professionalism observed in capitols, committee rooms and district offices should apply to social media. With awareness comes deliberation, and with deliberation comes caution, which, in turn, can be your guide to ensuring that posts, likes, tweets and retweets are viewed in context and not misunderstood.

Use the following tips to avoid those regrettable, hastily concocted and way-too-late-to-delete social media proclamations.

Avoid the appearance of impropriety.

Always do the smell test. On first sniff, does it seem like a good idea? What about on second sniff? If that little voice inside you questions your decision, you might want to listen to it. It is best to err on the side of caution. In many cases, inaction may be better than action. A failure to post or tweet, after all, can never be archived for all eternity.

Think, think again, then act (or react).

First, and rather obviously, ask yourself whether your post, comment, like or tweet is proper. Can it be taken out of context? Is it in poor humor? But don't stop there. Think again. That's right, think again. Then, only after reflection, act. By avoiding knee-jerk reactions and giving yourself time to cool off, you're less likely to fire off misguided or poorly worded tweets or posts that do nothing but make headlines the following day.

Don't be mean. This may sound silly, but smart, ethical social media use depends on it. Treat others with respect. It's too easy to feel safe or obscured behind the veil social media provide. But if you wouldn't say something in an everyday professional conversation, don't say it on social media. It's the Golden Rule, folks. It's as simple as that.

Now, go ahead and post or tweet. Social media certainly can be used to your benefit. And you're practically guaranteed to find more friends and followers than you ever knew you had.

Are You Social Savvy?

Here's a quick quiz. With social media, every day is a test, and you're always being graded.

Are any posts or tweets truly "private"?

An exchange might feel private, but consider that all tweets are archived in the Library of Congress. They aren't going away. It's always possible that a tweety chicken could come home to roost. And all posts—even email to someone you trust—can be made public, with or without your knowledge or consent.

What's more important, speed or accuracy?

Both are important, of course. But because so many people post and tweet without thinking, it's up to elected officials to set an example. If you cannot be sure of the accuracy of information you see on social media, it's best not to share or retweet it.

Is it OK for elected officials to debate constituents online?

Elected officials and their staff must respond quickly to their constituents' needs, but be wary of overcommunicating or being drawn into a heated exchange. It could come back to haunt you. It might make sense to invite a constituent to an offline conversation.

When staff members post on social media, are they representing themselves or their agencies?

Staffers have a right to their opinions, but they are also state employees. Having a social media policy is vital. Some policies, for example, allow staff to associate themselves with their employer when posting, but require that they indicate their posts are their own.

Sources: NPR; Santa Clara University Markkula Center for Applied Ethics

Ethan Wilson is a policy specialist in the Center for Ethics in Government at NCSL. Have you dealt with an ethical dilemma recently? Perhaps on social media? We'd love to hear about that or other questions or comments on ethics. Email Ethan at ethan.wilson@ncsl.org.