

Reporting from the Internet and Using Social Media

Reporting from the internet We are committed to aggressive journalism in all its forms, including in the field of computer-assisted reporting, but we draw the line at illegal behavior. Internet reporting is nothing more than applying the principles of sound journalism to the sometimes unusual situations thrown up in the virtual world. The same standards of sourcing, identification and verification apply. Apply the same precautions online that you would use in other forms of newsgathering and do not use anything from the Internet that is not sourced in such a way that you can verify where it came from.

No falsehoods

Reporters must never misrepresent themselves, including in chat rooms and other online discussion forums. They do not “pick locks” in pursuit of information, nor do they otherwise obtain information illegally. Discovering information publicly available on the web is fair game. Defeating passwords or other security methods is going too far.

Know your subject

Reporters should use aggressive Internet reporting techniques only when they are familiar with the way an organization releases news. Familiarity with an organization’s past disclosure procedures can insulate us from all-too-common Internet spoofs. Please capture, save and print a copy of a screenshot of the web page in question in order to defend us against charges of printing nonexistent information. If you do not know how to capture a screenshot, ask anyone with a technical bent to show you how. It is our best protection against vanishing web sites. Be wary of “unusual” news covered on a web site. Do not treat this as “normal news” until the company or organization confirms it or at least has a chance to respond to what you have found. Escalate such situations to your manager. Also keep in mind what we consider newsworthy. Personal information must be relevant to a legitimate story for Reuters to publish it. Copyright laws, and libel laws, apply to the Internet too.

Attribution

Headlines should be very clear when we have obtained information in unorthodox settings. In stories, we also must make it clear high up how we gathered the information. Retain those facts high in the story as it plays out. The reader wants to know how we obtained the information.

Fairness

The act of seeking confirmation of the news before publishing it can lead the organization to front-run our story and announce the information before we have a chance to put our story out. This does not relieve us of the responsibility to give an organization a fair chance to comment. Please make it clear if the organization is unwilling to confirm the information.

Is It A Hoax?

Do a reality check. Does this information fit within the bounds of what was expected? Any wild divergences are a clue you may be viewing information in the wrong context.

Using Social Media

We want to encourage you to use social media approaches in your journalism but we also need to make sure that you are fully aware of the risks -- especially those that threaten our hard-earned reputation for independence and freedom from bias or our brand. The recommendations below offer general guidance with more detailed suggestions for managing your presence on the most popular social networks. This is a fast-changing world and you will need to exercise judgment in many areas. In framing this advice we've borne in mind the following principles and encourage you to think about them whenever using social media.

Social Media: Basic Principles

Social networks have been a great boon for the practice of journalism, on stories large and small, and Reuters journalism has been the better for them. Not only have they served as a conduit for primary- and crowd-sourced information, they have also given us new ways to report and find stories and tipsters on Twitter, using LinkedIn to locate sources, mining Facebook groups for angles and insights, and so on.

Social networks also raise important questions for us, especially when we are using them to transmit rather than receive. The issues around what we can and cannot say there are a subject of constant conversation among us, so as this is not our first word on the subject, it will not be the last. The online world is as full of pitfalls as it was when the Handbook was issued, but the issues are more familiar now, so it makes sense to simplify the guidelines.

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.

When writing as Reuters journalists, whether for the file or online, we are guided 24 hours a day by the ethics of our organization as embodied in the Code of Conduct and the Trust Principles, which require us to be responsible, fair and impartial. On the one hand, these standards can be compromised whenever we "like" a post or adopt a "badge" or "join" a cause, particularly when the subject is relevant or even tangential to our beat. On the other hand, it might be necessary to "like," "join" or adopt a "badge" to get the news. It should go without saying that no one may compel or pressure anyone to friend them on Facebook, follow them on Twitter or engage in similar conduct on other social media. One of the distinguishing features of Reuters is the trust invested in the judgment of its journalists – and we will continue to look to our journalists to use their common sense in dealing with these new challenges.

We expect our journalists to reach conclusions through reporting, but they must also demonstrate the intellectual discipline to keep their conclusions susceptible to further reporting, which requires a posture of open-mindedness and enlightened skepticism. This is difficult to demonstrate in the social networks' short forms and under the pressure of thinking-writing-posting in real time. But maintaining this posture is critical to our credibility and reputation as

journalists. When in doubt about a post, tweet or other action on social networks, we must enlist a second pair of eyes, even at the cost of some delay.

On matters dealing with Thomson Reuters, we must observe our existing obligations of confidentiality and the obvious boundaries of discretion—for example, refraining from the disclosure of inside information, confidential personnel matters, sensitive information from internal meetings (all of which are to be considered “off the record”). But nothing in this paragraph or in this policy should be interpreted as inhibiting the exchange of ideas about matters that deal with our common welfare. Nor is there any prohibition on using social media for speech protected by the National Labor Relations Act, such as candidly discussing wages, hours and working conditions.

The tension is clear: Social networks encourage fast, constant, brief communications; journalism calls for communication preceded by fact-finding and thoughtful consideration. Journalism has many “unsend” buttons, including editors. Social networks have none. Everything we say online can be used against us in a court of law, in the minds of subjects and sources and by people who for reasons of their own may want to cast us in a negative light. While, obviously, we cannot control what others may post on our accounts, we must maintain constant awareness when posting to Facebook, Twitter and other online fora that we are flying without a net, and that an indiscretion lasts forever. At all costs, we must avoid flame wars, incendiary rhetoric and loose talk. We should also remember that by friending or following someone, we may be giving out the identity of a source. Everything depends on our keeping trust.

In other words, be careful. By all means, explore ways in which social media can help you do your job. But before you tweet or post, consider how what you’re doing will reflect on your professionalism and our collective reputation. When in doubt, talk to colleagues, your editor or your supervisor.

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