

Social Media Strategies and Records Creation

A Guide for Managing Government Social Media Accounts



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Overview of Managing Government Social Media Accounts

The State Archives and Public Records Administration oversees records management functions for all State and municipal agencies. This includes records management advice, assistance, and consultation. Records management is a comprehensive task encompassing all records, regardless of format or media.

Social media provides an excellent communication tool for government agencies to interact with the public. All agency communication tools should be used in ways that maximize transparency, maintain the security of government systems, and are conducted with professionalism. Social media is no exception. This guide is intended to serve as a resource by providing guidelines for managing government social media accounts and developing a social media policy.

Things to Know

- Social media posts are considered public records and are used primarily by government agencies to disseminate information to the public in the form of press releases, correspondence, and visual media.
- A social media policy will help to identify who is responsible for managing the agency's account and provide transparency to the public regarding the agency's intentions and responsibilities both online and in-person.
- [Division of Information Technology Social Networking Policy](#)
- [Division of Information Technology Social Networking Site Authorization Form](#)

Developing a Social Media Policy

Digital Media Coordinator

State agencies should identify an individual who is responsible for the content and moderation of all social media records, approving and overseeing any staff posting, or managing social media accounts on behalf of the agency as part of their regular job duties. This individual should be able to communicate with agency leadership and legal representatives to address any potential legal implications of social media moderation.

Terms of Service

Government employees should be aware of the Terms of Service (TOS) of each social media site. Each social media platform has its own unique TOS that regulates how users interact on the platform, which are frequently updated. Any employee using a form of social media on behalf of a State agency should consult the most current TOS to avoid violations. If the TOS contradict agency policy, then the Agency Head should

be made aware, and a decision should be made about whether use of such media is appropriate.

Posts and Comments Are Public Records

Like e-mail, communication via agency-related social networking websites is a public record. This means that both the posts on the agency's account and any feedback (comments, direct/private messages, replies, etc.) by other employees or non-employees, including the public, will become part of the public record.

Because others might not be aware of the public records law, it is recommended to include clear language explaining the implications of interacting, such as the example below:

Representatives of Rhode Island State government communicate via this website. Consequently, any communication via this site (whether by a State employee or the public) may be subject to monitoring and disclosure to third parties.

Adapted from [Best Practices for State Agency Social Media Usage in North Carolina](#)

Public Comments and Developing Appropriate Use Policy

Social media sites provide the opportunity to encourage public participation. However, there is the potential for an agency to be held liable for inappropriate public comments posted to its site. To minimize the risks associated with public comments, governments should post an appropriate use policy for comments as well as a disclaimer stating that the government or agency is not liable for the content of comments posted to the site by outside individuals or entities. This policy should be posted publicly on the page and accessible to all viewers (e.g., "About" section of a Facebook page). This policy must be applied consistently and must not block speech that is critical, unpopular, or negative to the agency or is considered protected speech under the First Amendment.

Before developing an appropriate use policy for public comments, agencies should be aware that many social media websites have use policies that can be incorporated into the agency's policies and consult with their legal counsel for guidance on how to keep conversations civil without violating free speech. It is imperative that the agency actively enforce its stated policy, monitoring comments from the public daily, or more frequently, if necessary, and hide or report comments that violate the stated terms for appropriate use. Documentation of such comments should be kept as part of the records of social media posts and interactions.

The underlying tenets of an appropriate use policy for comments are like the principles that inform policies for the internal use of the internet (including social media sites) and email, and may include prohibitions against:

- Violent, obscene, profane, hateful, or racist comments
- Comments that threaten or defame any person or organization
- Solicitations, advertisements, or endorsements of any financial, commercial, or nongovernmental agency
- Comments that suggest or encourage illegal activity
- Multiple off-topic posts by a single user
- Repetitive posts copied and pasted by multiple users

Social media, by definition, invites interaction. Taking these steps will enable an agency to actively inform the public, manage records appropriately, and help protect the agency from risks and liability.

Private/Direct Messages

Occasionally, you will receive direct messages that may or may not pertain to the direct work of the government agency being messaged online. It is best practice to answer these direct messages in a timely manner, treating them like a constituent email question.

However, interacting with members of the public using direct messages raises preservation concerns, as it is difficult to download or export those conversations depending on the platform. In the spirit of transparency in state government, account administrators who receive messages through the private message service offered by the social media site should encourage users to contact them at a public e-mail address maintained by their agency. Documentation of communication exclusive to the social media site should be pursued, through services such as ArchiveSocial or other manual recording methods.

If individuals' public comments on or to a government social media account warrant a non-public response, the government social media account administrator(s) should publicly comment on the post and ask the individuals to email or direct message their specific questions to the official government account. If you're unsure about the legal implications of content or a comment/message received, be sure to contact your Digital Media Coordinator before responding.

Blocking Users

If social media is used by a public official to conduct government business, blocking members of the public from seeing the site or from posting comments may violate the First Amendment. There is a difference between legal hate speech and an individual expressing a belief or viewpoint. *For further information on what defines a hate crime, or hate speech, please visit the RI Attorney General's [website](#) for guidance.*

The Rhode Island State Archives employs ArchiveSocial, a third-party social media archiving service to document social media activities in-real-time for the Rhode Island Department of State and General Officers. This includes all interactions made by the Agency across social media platforms (posts, shares, likes, comments) as well as interactions made by the members of the public on an agency's platform. These interactions are part of the permanent record of the State agency. Contact the State Archives directly to learn more about this program.

Offensive/Off-Topic Comments and Messages

It is recommended that government agencies not delete social media comments, instead rely on a strong acceptable use policy developed within the bounds of the website's Terms of Service and review and approval of your agency's legal counsel. Comments critical of government or its officials should not be hidden and users should not be blocked because they are critical of government or its officials.

- Do not censor posts with which you personally disagree.
- Do not ban or block users.
- Alert the Digital Media Coordinator of any comment that you wish to hide.

Social media channels are considered limited public forums under the caselaw pertaining to the First Amendment. The law permits agencies to hide and/or delete comments that are not protected speech under the First Amendment and relevant caselaw. However, most social media content posted to public social media pages is protected as free speech and is considered protected from government limitation. When in doubt, consult the Terms of Service for the social media website and consult with your legal counsel regarding the implications of hiding comments.

Negative comments or "trolling" are not sufficient reasons to hide or delete comments. Members of the public who claim that their First Amendment rights are violated may sue the agency and social media moderators.

Note: Moderation cannot interfere with rights under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, Article I, § 21 of the Constitution of the State of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island State Labor Relations Act, or the various whistleblower acts. All information posted on social networking channels may be subject to the Access to Public Records Act litigation and records retention policies.



If a comment is in violation of the agency's social media policy, you may consider hiding the comment, but you should NOT delete any comments made to a government social media account.

Alert the agency's Digital Media Coordinator of any comments that are offensive, hateful, or harassing for assistance.

Addressing Misinformation and Disinformation

Government agencies do have a right to report or flag accounts actively engaging in coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns. As a representative of their agency, the Digital Media Coordinator is responsible for monitoring social media, as well as interacting with direct mentions and comments, to ensure correct information is being shared with members of the public.

Oftentimes, digital media coordinators have direct contacts at social media agencies to flag misinformation and disinformation appearing online. Work collaboratively with your senior staff, legal team, and well as representatives from the agency, to address false information being spread online.

Best Practices to Mitigate Security Risks

Security related to social media is fundamentally a behavioral issue, not typically a technology issue. In general, employees unwittingly providing information to third parties poses a risk to the State network. All employees need to be aware of current and emerging threats that they may face while using social media websites and how to avoid falling prey. If agencies participate in social networking, agencies should:

- Not use the same user IDs and passwords to access social networking sites.
- Never duplicate user IDs and passwords across multiple social networking sites.

- Train users about what information to share, with whom they can share it, and what not to share.
- Educate users about security awareness and risks when using social media.
- Help employees set appropriate privacy settings for social networking websites.
- Develop a social media policy that addresses security risks and mitigates them to the extent that the agency is comfortable using specific social media tools.

Records Retention

All Rhode Island records retention schedules are format neutral and are reliant on the content of the records themselves. Preservation can be accomplished through content export, as described below, or with assistance from specialty platforms such as ArchiveSocial.



The State Archives utilizes ArchiveSocial to preserve social media posts by elected officials. Please contact statearchives@sos.ri.gov if you have questions about this service.

Particular retention schedules of note are:

[GRS1 Executive, High-Level & Policy-Making Records](#)

[GRS5 Daily Operations Records](#)

Agencies should establish a workflow that includes the manual export of all social media data from each government account on a regular basis established by agency policy. It is recommended that backups be exported no less than semi-annually. Agencies should manually archive their social media content so that public records are not relying on social media service providers to store their content, as this removes control of these public records from the agency itself. Allowing a third party to make decisions about retention of public records impedes the agency's ability to live up to their responsibility to identify and enable retrieval of this content.

Agencies should maintain a local copy of the content from their social media sites and internal planning records which document social media post planning. Keeping a copy of this content on a local, networked, State-owned server ensures compliance with the public records law and allows the agency to provide the required level of public access to these materials, especially in the event of the platform retiring.

Internal documentation may include: spreadsheets or documents which include drafts of scheduled content, calendars to identify monthly or yearly themes, or other public relations records used to plan communications initiatives across platforms.

The below provides a sample spreadsheet used for drafting, scheduling, and planning social media posts in a format for preservation.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1										
2		January					Major themes			
3	Day	Date	Category	Platform	Draft 1	Notes	Link	Draft 2/More Notes	Image description	Link
4		1-Jan								
5		2-Jan								
6		3-Jan								
7		4-Jan								
8		5-Jan								
9		6-Jan								
10		7-Jan								
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34		31-Jan								

Helpful Resources

- For best models and sample policies for government agencies at all levels, see the site <https://digital.gov/>.
- The Center for Technology in Government has published Designing Social Media Policy for Government: Eight Essential Elements https://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/guides/social_media_policy
- The National Archives and Records Administration has published a whitepaper on Best Practices for Social Media Capture <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/resources/socialmediacapture.pdf>
- Facebook Government Terms of Service https://www.facebook.com/terms_pages_gov.php
- Instagram Amended Terms for Federal, State, and Local Governments in the United States <https://help.instagram.com/317709155098612>
- LinkedIn Government Terms of Service https://s3.amazonaws.com/digitalgov/legacy-img/2015/09/Amendment-to-LinkedIn-User-Agreement_Federal.pdf
- Twitter Terms of Service <https://twitter.com/en/tos>
- Federal-Compatible Terms of Service Agreements <https://digital.gov/resources/federal-compatible-terms-of-service-agreements/>
- Memorandum: Policies for Federal Agency Public Websites and Digital Services <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2017/m-17-06.pdf>
- Hate Crimes and Civil Rights Violations, Office of the Attorney General https://riag.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur496/files/documents/Hatecrimesandcivilrightsliaisonguidance12.8_AG_Redacted.pdf

Sample Internal Social Media Policy

PURPOSE

This document defines the social networking and social media policy for [Agency's Name], the “Agency.” To address the fast-changing landscape of the internet and the way residents communicate and obtain information online, agency departments may consider using social media tools to reach a broader audience. The Agency encourages the use of social media to further the goals of the Agency and the missions of its departments, where appropriate.

PERSONAL VS. PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES

Personal Use

Agency employees may have personal social media sites. These sites should remain personal in nature and share personal opinions. While Agency employees may have a First Amendment right to comment on some Agency issues that are of significant public concern, employees should know that posts about Agency issues that are closer to employment complaints or human resources concerns may not be protected.

Employees should be mindful of the distinction between sharing personal and Agency views.

Agency employees must never use their agency e-mail account or password in conjunction with a personal social media site. The following guidance is for Agency employees who decide to have a personal social media or who decide to comment on posts about official Agency business:

- Use a disclaimer in your profile such as: “The postings on this site are my own and don’t reflect or represent the opinions of the agency for which I work.”

If social media is used for official Agency business, the entire Agency site, regardless of any personal views, is subject to best practice guidelines and standards.

Professional Use

All official Agency-related communication through social media should remain professional in nature and should always be conducted in accordance with the Agency's communications policy, practices, and expectations. If possible, Agency accounts should be verified on social media platforms to ensure that members of the public can clearly identify trusted accounts. If verification is not possible, Agencies should include in their bio or about section language stating it is the official account for their Agency.

Employees must not use official agency social media for political purposes, to conduct private commercial transactions, or to engage in private business activities. Agency employees should be mindful that inappropriate use of official agency social media can be grounds for disciplinary action. Only individuals authorized by the Agency may publish content to the Agency's online platforms.

POSTING

Official social media sites need to be clear, precise and follow industry best practices for posting updates. All content posted to Agency social media should be:

- Relevant – Information that engages residents and pertains to their daily lives;
- Timely – Pertains to deadlines, upcoming events, or current news; and/or
- Actionable – Prompts residents to act.

Please refer to the Agency style guide for specific guidelines on content format.

What Not to Post:

Agency employees may not publish content on Agency social media sites that includes:

- Confidential information
- Copyrighted material without permission
- Profane, racist, sexist, threatening, or derogatory content or comments
- Political views
- Commercial endorsements or spam

Spam is any kind of unwanted, unsolicited digital communication that gets sent out in bulk. Often spam is sent via email, but it can also be distributed via text messages, phone calls, or social media.

RETENTION

Social media sites are subject to [R.I. Gen. Laws Title](#)

[38](#). Any content produced or maintained on an Agency

social media site, including communication posted by

the agency and communication received from the public, is a public record.

The department maintaining a site shall preserve records pursuant to the relevant records retention schedule in a format that preserves the integrity of the original record and is easily producible. Furthermore, retention of social media records shall fulfill the following requirements:

- Social media records are captured in a continuous, automated fashion throughout the day to minimize a potential loss of data due to deletion and/or changes on the social networking site.
- Social media records are maintained in an authentic format (i.e. ideally the native technical format provided by the social network, such as XML or JSON) along with complete metadata.
- Social media records are archived in a system that preserves the context of communications, including conversation threads and rich media, to ensure completeness and availability of relevant information when records are accessed.
- Social media records are indexed based on specific criteria such as date, content type, and keywords to ensure that records can be quickly located and produced in an appropriate format for distribution (e.g. PDF).

- Each employee who administers one or more social networking sites on behalf of the Agency has self-service, read-only access to search and produce relevant social media records to fulfill public information and legal discovery requests as needed.

REGISTERING A NEW PAGE

All [Agency] social media sites shall be:

- (1) approved by [contact];
- (2) published using approved social networking platform and tools; and
- (3) administered by the contact or their designee.

DEREGISTERING AN EXISTING PAGE

If a social media page is no longer of use:

- (1) notify [contact];
- (2) ensure records have been archived according to Agency guidelines and the State Archives; and
- (3) unpublish and delete page.

Sample External Social Media Policy

PURPOSE

To build communication and trust with our residents and visitors, and encourage participation through comments and feedback.

GOALS

[Agency Name] aims to effectively use social media accounts to:

- Provide information;
- Support community engagement and outreach;
- Support marketing and promotional campaigns;
- Assist with recruitment efforts.

Please be aware that when engaging with this agency through social media, you agree to the following:

MODERATION OF THIRD-PARTY CONTENT

The Agency does not necessarily endorse, support, sanction, encourage, verify, or agree with third party comments, messages, posts, opinions, advertisements, videos, promoted content, external hyperlinks, linked websites (or the information, products or services contained therein), statements, commercial products, processes, or services posted on any social media site.

This Agency social media site serves as a limited public forum and all content published is subject to preservation and disclosure in accordance with [State Public Record Law].

We do not allow information intended to compromise the safety or security of the Public or public systems. You participate at your own volition, taking personal responsibility for your comments, your username and any information provided.

RETENTION

Any communications sent to or received by the Agency and its employees via social media may be subject to retention and disclosure requirements. We are required to comply with [R.I. Gen. Laws Title 38](#) to ensure government is open and that the public has access to public records and information of which our Agency is the custodian. These retention requirements apply regardless of the form of the record (e.g., digital text, photos, audio, and video). To that end, we automatically collect and store all information posted on this Agency social media site. All information posted on this site may be subject to public disclosure under R. I. Gen. Law 38-2, Access to Public Records, even if it has been deleted. The Department utilizing a social media site shall preserve records pursuant to a relevant records retention schedule.