

NWCG Public Information Officer Social Media Reference and Guidance

Updated: March 2020

This document is intended to direct Public Information Officers and others to information and references for appropriate guidance on the use of social media. Although much of this information is agency-specific, many of the concepts and best practices referenced are broadly applicable across the wide range of incidents that public information officers support.

Laws, Policies, and Guidelines

Tasks	References	Best Practices
Familiarize yourself with current laws, policies/procedures in place for your own agency and the agencies you are supporting.	DOI Digital Media Policy	Work within the scope of the Delegation of Authority and any agency or unit communication plans.
	DOI Guidelines	Social media is one of several tactics for sharing information. Know your local audience and prioritize information tactics based upon the needs of the audience.
	USDA Social Media Guidelines	Use the social media platforms already in existence by the unit. Do not establish new channels without express permission from the entities represented under the Delegation of Authority (DoA).
	USDA New Media Roles, Responsibilities, and Authorities, USDA Departmental Regulation 1495-001	<p>Do not discuss any agency or bureau related information that is not considered public information.</p> <p>Assume that any content you post may be considered in the public domain, will be available for a long period of time, and can be published or discussed in the media.</p> <p>Understand agency policies regarding deleting posts.</p> <p>Consult the lead PIO before commenting, answering questions, or engaging with the public on social media.</p> <p>Monitor social media posts and respond appropriately and timely.</p> <p>All updates posted to social media sites should also be available via another publically available format such as InciWeb.</p>

		Designated social media PIOs may post information available on InciWeb and/or agency websites, all additional posts must be approved by the Lead PIO.
		<p>PIOs will follow unit comment policy identified on the social media platform. In general, do not engage in vulgar or abusive language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms targeting individuals or groups.</p> <p>All links should be to official sources of information and or partner agencies (Firewise, Smokey Bear, NIFC, US Fire Administration, FEMA, Red Cross, etc.).</p> <p>Links to media articles are discouraged to avoid the perception of endorsing one media outlet over another and to help maintain the incident website as the primary source for official information.</p> <p>Provide content that focuses on quality over quantity.</p> <p>Don't post internal operational documents or documents that may have privacy act protected information. Some information may not be shared because of privacy concerns or future litigation.</p>
	508 Compliance of Rehabilitation Act	Provide appropriate access to persons with limited English proficiency (E.O. 13166).
	Privacy Act	Don't post internal operational documents or documents that may have privacy act protected information. Some information may not be shared because of privacy concerns or future litigation.
	Paperwork Reduction Act	The Paperwork Reduction Act states that agencies may not post survey of any kind, including web polls and satisfaction surveys that pose identical, specific questions (including through pop-up windows). These surveys are treated the same as in-person, mail, or telephone surveys, are subject to the public notice and comment requirements of the PRA and must have OMB approval before use.
	OMB 2010 Guidance for Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act	You may post open-ended questions to your audience on social media, but may not use structured questions where the audience must choose from a selection of choices, i.e. using surveys tools.

	<p>The Plain Writing Act of 2010</p> <p>Guidelines for Writing in Plain Language</p> <p>Checklist for Plain Language on the Web</p>	<p>All federal agencies must write using plain language in accordance with <i>The Plain Writing Act of 2010</i>. This means all publicly distributed content should be written in a “clear, concise, well-organized” manner. Key best practices for writing in plain language include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose words that are common and easy to understand • Avoid run-on sentences. Use clear, short sentences and paragraphs. • Write in the active voice instead of the passive voice. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Passive Voice: Applications for the job were submitted by 100 people. ○ Active Voice: 100 people submitted applications for the job. • Use the correct message for the medium (writing for Facebook is different than writing for Twitter).
<p>Make sure social media use falls within the scope of the Delegation of Authority</p>	<p>Unit Social Media Strategies/Plans</p> <p>PIO Incident Organizer</p> <p>Sample Social Media Strategy</p>	<p>Create incident communication strategies for social media use based on Delegation of Authority and agency communication plans.</p> <p>Don’t create any pages, sites, or handles for the incident without first discussing an incident social media strategy with the public affairs officer(s) you are delegated to represent.</p> <p>Work with the local Public Affairs Officer to ensure consistent message and make a plan for release of social media messaging</p> <p>Document incident social media strategy if using social media as a communication tactic.</p>
<p>Follow team social media SOP</p>	<p>Incorporate social media into team guidance.</p>	<p>Work with Incident Commander to determine social media use, team platforms, and management strategy.</p> <p>Develop and communicate social media Crisis Communication/Incident within an Incident plan ahead of time, working with the Incident Commander (IC) and the Agency Administrator/ Public Affairs Officer</p>
<p>Be aware of agency policy and rules regarding photography on social media</p>	<p>USDA Photography Policy, Departmental Regulation 1480-001</p> <p>USDA New Media Roles, Responsibilities, and Authorities, USDA</p>	<p>Consider safety first when acquiring photos for content. Do not risk your safety or the safety of others to obtain social media content.</p> <p>Do not post pictures of convict crews. Children need to have parental consent and release forms.</p> <p>Incident Specific accounts should not be established without consulting with all agencies involved. If an incident-specific account is established, recommend</p>

	Departmental Regulation 1495-001	using the IMT Logo or the "Official Fire Information Logo to indicate "official Information" ("http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/social_media.html") Photos posted should be of high quality with professional standards in mind.
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Ethics

Tasks	References	Best Practices
Know Professional vs. Personal use of Social Media	Office of Gov. Ethics Standards of Conduct as Applied to Personal Social Media Use	<p>Social media can sometimes blur the line between professional and personal lives and interactions. Statements intended as personal opinion can be mistaken for official expressions of agency policy or position. Care by all wildland fire personnel, especially supervisors, must be taken to ensure personal use of social media does not create the appearance of official use of social media. This includes ensuring firefighters are not using their government title or position in a manner that would create an appearance that the Government sanctions or endorses one’s activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not engage in vulgar or abusive language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms targeting individuals or groups • Do not engage in criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, or other conduct prejudicial to the Government at any time. • Do not discuss information that is considered non-public. The discussion of internal, sensitive information is strictly prohibited. Failure to comply may result in fines and/or disciplinary action • Do not “scoop” the PIO or the agency by releasing information ahead of them
	Hatch Act Social Media Quick Guide	<p>Do not endorse non-Federal products, services, or entities.</p> <p>Do not solicit donations of any kind</p> <p>Do not engage in activity directed toward the success or failure of political parties, candidates, or groups.</p> <p>Do not advocate for a policy or Congressional bill.</p>

Tasks	References	Best Practices
Understand copyright laws and how to appropriately credit	Copyright Law & Property Rights	Consider intellectual property rights for contractors or partners before publishing information that is worked on collectively.
	Infographic: Can I use that picture? The terms, laws, ethics for using copyrighted images	Give consideration to public privacy before publishing photographs, videos, or information identifying private property.
	USDA Photography Policy, Departmental Regulation 1480-001	Consider potential ramifications and agency guidelines before posting pictures of fireline personnel that aren't wearing full PPE, identifiable structures (ie. visible address), photos of burned structures before property owners have been notified, inmate crews, faces of children, accident or investigation scenes, sensitive natural or cultural resources, or flip charts / whiteboards with internal passwords and contact information.
	Forest Service Firefighter Photography, Videography and use of Social Media	<p>Photographs and videos taken during government work hours are property of the agency you are working for regardless of whether or not you are using your personal property.</p> <p>No photographic work will be undertaken that is not essential for official use or necessary in furthering the official business of the unit. Photographs taken of work or subject matter by employees using private equipment on government time...are the property of unit/ agency. This means that during work hours, wildland firefighters can only take photos or videos that are needed for work purposes and those photos or videos are government property, even if wildland firefighters take them on their personal devices.</p>
	PSESII Dimensions Worksheet	<p>Incorporate subject matter experts and liaison officer if available into your discussions to ensure cultural sensitivities are taken into account.</p> <p>Address the social and cultural communication needs of the community.</p>
	Example Team 5 Social Media Guidelines \\wilmfcop3fp02vm\workgroups\$\pmo\Website\NWCG Drupal\02 Committees\Public Information Officer Subcommittee\Social_MediaGuidance_SOP_2017.pdf	All Incident Management Teams should have social media guidelines for all incident personnel.

Processes/Procedures

Tasks	References	Best Practices
Monitor content	News Alerts	Establish a Google Alert for the incident to monitor electronic media traffic. Consider setting alerts for fire name, Incident Commander's name, and other pertinent information. This is a great way to track media interest and collect newspaper articles for required documentation. "Rules" can be set in Google so that news alerts will be directed to a designated folder for later use.
	GeoMac Wildfire Application	Use GeoMac Mapping tool for situational awareness of other incidents nearby. Be consistent with use of hashtags, work with agency cooperator and incident personnel so use and monitoring are consistent.
Communicate social media best practices with fire personnel.		Use multiple avenues to communicate social media expectations with fire personnel, including contractors. Examples: morning briefings, 'code of ethics' at check-in, information posted on ICP boards and in IAPs.
Evaluate effectiveness of social media communication by quantifying and interpreting metrics of evaluation (frequency of use).	Social Media Analytics	Review platform analytics regularly to know and understand follower base and interactions to best communicate. Know the best times of day for high interaction for important messages. Also note the frequency of posts to make based on interactions and feedback. Manage post frequency and content based on analytics and audience feedback and engagement.
Post maps with consideration of operations and provide proper context.		Make sure posted maps are legible and understood on their own. Consider the differences between maps used on social media vs. trapline (e.g. level of detail)

Tasks	References	Best Practices
<p>Be aware of agency policy and rules regarding photography on social media</p> <p>Right-size during transitions</p>		<p>Consider these elements when taking photos in the field, and when choosing photos to post on social media platforms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling – Is there a feeling of movement within your image, or does it just sit there? Does it leave anything to the imagination, or is it just a statement of what is? If your image doesn't tell a story, there is no reason to give it a second glance. Great photos make you want to look again and again. • Intent – Could any viewer look at this photo and KNOW what you had in mind? • Emotional Impact with nature photos – Can this photo be described with words of emotion, like peace, calmness, anger, joy, or sadness? Does your nature photo make an emotional statement? • Center of interest – When composing your images do you successfully direct your viewer's attention to a specific point? Would the viewer know where your center of interest is? • Subject/background contrast – Shooting a portrait of someone with black hair against a black background is not a good idea. Does your subject stand out, or is it hidden in the shadows? • Composition – Do you consistently use the rule of thirds? Is there too much foreground or skyline in your photo? If you are too far away from the subject, move closer. If you can't move closer, edit/crop the photo to remove distracting features • Exposure – Does the sun drown out detail in faces? Can you move the subject or the camera to a better angle to eliminate problems created by glare? Can you see details in your shadows or are they just unneeded black spaces? <p>Ahead of/during transitions, make sure to right-size social media use to prevent undue public expectations.</p>