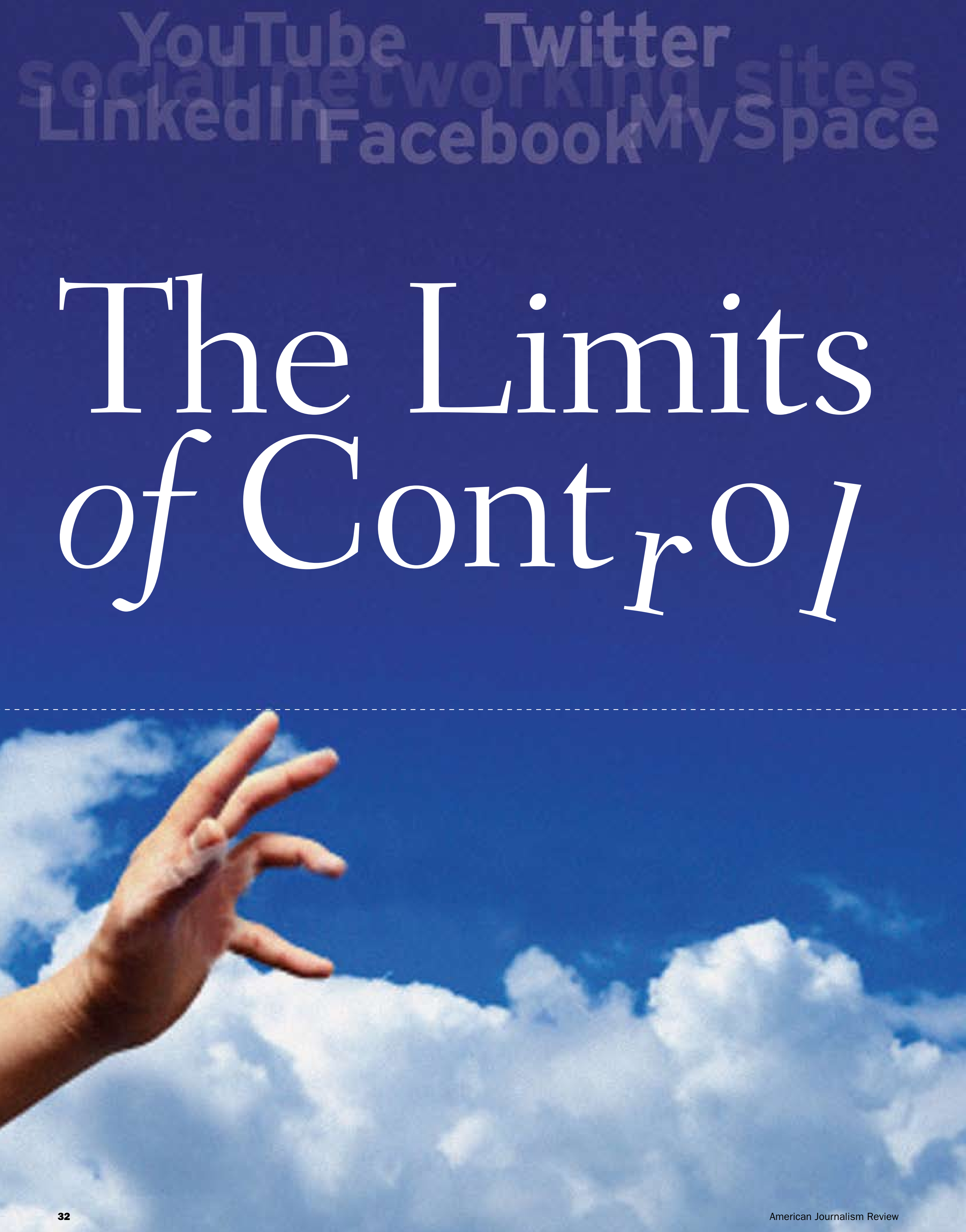
The Limits of Control


YouTube
Twitter
social networking sites
LinkedIn
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With journalists and their employers increasingly active on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, news organizations are struggling to respond to a host of new ethics challenges.

BY PAMELA J. PODGER

As a journalist, is it okay to describe your politics as “kind of a Commie” on Facebook?

Do you stop friends from posting pictures of you on their MySpace pages?

How about that video of you at the tailgate party going up on YouTube?

For journalists today, social networking sites are increasingly blurring the line between the personal and professional, creating a host of ethics and etiquette questions for news outlets.

In the past, Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn were mined mainly for research and background, but these days more and more journalists are players in these cyber sandboxes. Age is no limit, with journalists in their 20s to their 90s exploring social networking tools.

News organizations—dealing with a flood of unedited, unfiltered remarks appearing digitally—are busily crafting ethics guidelines for the growing number of staffers using social networks. These documents aim to be malleable and adapt to changes in the new technology—be it using Twitter material from Iran with all the advantages and disadvantages of eyewitness tweets to hunting on Facebook for relatives and friends of a skier lost in the mountains.

Traditional newspapers are eager to harness the power of social networks to find and distribute information, but they also want to do it in a way that fosters responsible use. The goals are to identify the tripwires of social networks, avoid any appearance of impropriety and ensure the information can’t be used to impugn the integrity of their reporters, photographers and editors.

In recent months, the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Associated Press, Roanoke Times and others have hammered out ethics guidelines for social networking. These range from restrictive uses to common sense approaches. Other papers, including the Seattle Times, Sacramento Bee, Baltimore Sun, San Francisco Chronicle and Spokane's Spokesman-Review, are in the process of doing so.

Mary Hartney, director of audience engagement at the Baltimore Sun, says reporters, editors, managers and others will help shape the new guidelines. "The technology is changing, so I hope the ethics policy is a living document," says Hartney, who estimates about half the Sun's newsroom actively uses social networks. "All of this stuff is changing very rapidly. So, anything you write down in an ethics policy or as a best practice is liable to change next week."

On social networks, you should identify yourself as a journalist, tell recipients if you're using social networks in a professional capacity and remain mindful that people will regard you as a representative of your newsroom, says Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute.

"For journalists, transparency is one of the most important values," she says. "That doesn't mean you don't act as an individual, but there should be a caution gate if there's anything that might embarrass your newsroom."

Already, news managers have faced some unexpected behavior in connection with social networking, such as young staffers at the New York Times tweeting tidbits from an internal meeting where Executive Editor Bill Keller spoke of generating new revenue from the Web. "The older generation understood that these were internal meetings, but to the younger generation, who enjoy being wired in with the outside world, this was news and they wanted to share," says Times Standards Editor Craig Whitney, who estimates about 30 percent of the Times staff uses social networks. "No one was reprimanded. They didn't intend anything malicious nor did they tip off the competition, but it was behavior we hadn't expected."

Whitney says the paper responded by asking staffers to turn off their cell phones in meetings and managers now remind people when information is proprietary. "At Bill's next meeting," he says, staffers should "bear in mind this is a meeting for us."

As journalism evolves, some old-school conventions remain intact: Don't march in protests, don't contribute to a political campaign, don't stick a political placard in your front lawn. But what are the online equivalents as journalists participate in discussions in the virtual public square?

Ken Chavez, assistant managing editor for interactive media at the Sacramento Bee, says his paper has nearly completed its guidelines for online ethics. "Our new rules will reinforce the idea that these are public spaces and what they are saying is not private and their cyber footprint can be seen," he says. "They need to act professionally and realize what they can and cannot do in terms of exposing a political bias or creating a perception of favoritism."

Social Networking Etiquette

Here are some policies for journalists who use social networks to keep in mind, according to experts, reporters and editors.

- Identify yourself as a journalist and tell people if you're using social networks in a professional capacity.
- Act on social networks as you would on a first date.
- Be transparent. For example, instead of deleting posts, acknowledge your mistake and correct the information in another post.
- "Friend" your bosses on social networks to help govern what you reveal on those sites. If you "fan" or join groups on one side of an issue, join them all so there isn't a perception of bias or favoritism.
- Be human and allow your personality to be apparent on social networks. Cleverness, casualness, humility, humor and openness are key.
- Avoid posting about politics, religion and subjects that could damage your credibility as a journalist.
- Be mindful that your actions could reflect on how you and/or your news organization are perceived by the public.
- Follow your Mom's advice and be polite, grateful and receptive.

—P.P.

Kathy Best, managing editor of digital news and innovation at the Seattle Times, says the growing number of questions in the newsroom is encouraging the paper to come up with guidelines by the fall. When do reporters "friend" sources? (See Drop Cap, October/November 2008.) Do they risk revealing them? What if a source wants to friend a reporter?

While the Times follows the conventions against deleting posts or putting up compromising photos, Best says she can give advice but doesn't have all the answers. "There are many ways you can get into an uncomfortable place," she says. "I completely understand the idea of transparency, and that's what we preach here. But at what point does transparency begin to erode journalistic credibility? You could argue, 'If I lean a particular way, it is valuable for people to know.' But if you're good at your job, you don't want anybody to read your story and discern what your political leanings are."

Best estimated 70 to 80 percent of the Times staffers—young and old—use social networks, and that the determining factor isn't age but privacy. "Some people are very private and don't want anything to do with this stuff," she says. "Others are very gregarious, embrace it and are comfortable. I don't want

> "If you're sharing opinions with friends, it seems like Facebook is the electronic equivalent of sitting around drinking in a bar with friends."

to be in a position where I force someone to reveal themselves on the World Wide Web with a Facebook page."

Despite the progress that many newsrooms are making in addressing social networking ethics and etiquette, questions still abound. While experts say friending your boss will keep you honest, how does one delicately unfriend a boss? Is it okay to celebrate President Obama's victory or make other political statements in a status update on your Facebook profile?

Matt Chittum, data delivery editor and a reporter at the Roanoke Times, says he's excited about social networks but practices restraint.

"All those quippy remarks that formerly would only be heard by the guy sitting next to you in the newsroom, well, suddenly you're now saying this to 400 friends—so you don't want to post something regrettable," Chittum says. "These places become your virtual front yard. But all of a sudden, your neighborhood is a lot bigger and is visible from a lot more places."

He advises journalists to educate themselves about privacy settings on the sites, but he still takes the precaution of self-policing his utterances before he hits the send key on Facebook. "I worry there are a lot of side doors that you're not really aware of, and people can see things you're doing who are 'friends of friends,' " Chittum says. "If you've decided to keep your pages as personal, then you're not getting the benefit of putting your personality out there. It can be humanizing, but if you're not careful, inevitably it can backfire. I guess I'm still old school and think all of this should be done with a good deal of thought."

Some journalists say their activities on social networks are akin to gathering with coworkers at a corner pub. They say they freely express their views to their online community of friends, relatives and colleagues.

Michael Cabanatuan, who covered transportation at the San Francisco Chronicle for nearly a decade, holds this view. He says he joined Facebook about two years ago and initially used it to track down friends and relatives of a lost skier. He says he now uses Facebook personally more than professionally, but that he didn't think twice about his Election Day remarks on the site.

While nothing he posted was outrageous, he started his status updates for the evening by saying he was "hoping we've overcome." He also said he voted "the Right Way," and when a friend asked if he meant to the left, he wrote, "You're Right."

At 6:53 p.m., he was "anxiously awaiting election results." Later, he remarked, "I'm ticked about Prop. 8," which eliminated the rights of gay couples in California to marry, and finally, at 2:49 a.m. on November 5, he wrote he was "ready to go to bed and wake up to a brighter world."

Months later, he says he doesn't have any regrets about his comments.

"At that time, I didn't have any friends who were sources, managers or bosses. I don't think anything went over the line because I wasn't covering those races. The remarks were innocuous and no one could tell how I voted," he says. "The whole nature of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, is people are asking to be your friend. It is not saying, 'Can I connect with you to see what your biases are?' If you're sharing opinions with friends, it seems like Facebook is the electronic equivalent of sitting around drinking in a bar with friends."

With his recent shift to general assignment, Cabanatuan says he will be more cautious given the wider range of issues he will cover.

"Social media is about building community and not isolating groups from each other," he says. "I find myself joining in discussions of friends of friends, and that's part of the appeal. If I want to be more opinionated, I'll defriend some of my sources or figure out some way to wall them off."

Monica Guzman, 26, a news gatherer at seattlepi.com, says her tweets are open, reflect her personality and link to her stories. Once, on her way to cover a fashion show, she asked her Twitter followers what she should wear and posted photos of three possible outfits. She also notifies her Twitter followers about weekly face-to-face conversations in different Seattle neighborhoods.

She says she enjoys the "stream," or real-time aspect, of Twitter that captures the thoughts, influences and information surrounding an event, especially in a wired city like Seattle. "Journalism is about listening," Guzman says, "so if you're not listening to people who are talking, then you're not doing your job."

She "never, ever, ever" unpublishes or deletes tweets without explaining why she is doing so, and often will retweet with the correct information. "Social media makes us confront that we're not superhuman and we don't have all the answers," she says.

But she always identifies herself as a journalist, is careful about how she expresses herself and is "kind of a stickler" about allowing her friends to post photos of her. "You should never assume you can control anything you put online," Guzman says.

But other reporters prefer to have separate personal and professional pages on social networks. One is for friends, family and classmates, while the other is for sources, bosses and coworkers.

Cheryl Rossi, 38, an arts and community news reporter at the Vancouver Courier in British Columbia, says she segregates her work and personal lives on two Facebook accounts. Now she doesn't have to think twice about who is receiving her "warnings of my PMS days on my status updates."

She has a more casual picture of herself dancing at a friend's wedding on her personal site and a head shot on her professional page.

"It might be me being technologically superstitious, but it just seems wrong for all of my friends and professional links to be in one place," Rossi says.

Matt Stannard, 39, who covers the San Francisco Bay Area delegation in Congress for the San Francisco Chronicle, says he has two Twitter accounts.

He first used Twitter about six months ago, sending tweets during an immigration protest and alerting drivers to blocked roads. The updates were interesting to those affected or involved in the protest, but they wouldn't warrant a complete rewrite of a story for the newspaper's Web site, he says.

Stannard said he now uses Twitter as a news aggregator for his followers and bookmarks information he's reading about the congressional delegation.

He has a separate personal Twitter account and would prefer that his followers recognize the distinction.

"My hope is people who're interested in what the Bay Area congressional delegation is up to will come to see me as a useful aggregator of that news," he says. "But I'm sufficiently old school that I like the idea that people can rely on a journalist to see what's going on and not have to wade through my opinions or what I think about something."

Hal Straus, assistant managing editor for interactivity and communities at the Washington Post, says his paper requires its reporters who use social networks to include their proper identity and clearly state what jobs they hold at the paper. "We want people to identify themselves online, period," he says. "Everything is provisional and platforms change, but we would be concerned by people having two pages—a public and a private page. Who are you on one page and who on another? Remember, we're in the most political place in America, and we try to report what all sides say and cannot be highly partisan. The Post is real clear about reporters not engaging in political speech."

As the digital dynamic unfolds—rapidly, chaotically and in directions difficult to predict—some journalists say the mainstream media's traditionally authoritative voice is a thing of the past. News consumers want more insight into how news organizations and individual journalists operate; they want a glimpse of the human news gatherer, with all his foibles. In short, the public—once reliant on major news organizations to decide what's news—is demanding a seat at the newsmaking table.

Today's Internet readers have a 24/7 appetite for news, information and gossip—regardless of who produces it—and social networks can provide those heightened connections with their communities. For example, says Poynter's McBride, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof does a fine job integrating his Facebook presence with personal and professional tidbits, asking people questions and adding small amounts of analysis.

Amy Gahran, a consultant for the Knight Digital Media Center, says the best practices for journalists in social media include being personal, clever, edgy, receptive, grateful. Their goal is engaging the community, forging connections and creating a sense of belonging by asking questions, posting links, cultivating real-time debate and providing a place for instant, impressionistic feedback.

She adds, "Social media is one of the best ways to get traction with the mobile market. Far more people have crappy cell phones than computers. This allows journalists to reach lower and even middle-income communities and minorities that news organizations have been overlooking. Why are you a journalist in the first place?—hopefully it's more than writing articles and seeing your byline. It's to reach communities where they are, and they're on the phone."

Giving journalists the breathing room to connect candidly with people in their communities and show they participate in life is an upside of social networks, says Yoko Kuramoto-Eidsmoe, a copy editor and page designer at the Seattle Times. She says she's very open about her personal views, describing her politics as "kind of a Commie" on Facebook.

"Maybe it's making people more comfortable with the idea

> "Assume that your professional life and your personal life merge online regardless of your care in separating them. Don't write or post anything that would embarrass the LAT or compromise your ability to do your job."

that a journalist is a complete person, that you don't exempt yourself from other facets of life," she says. "The mid-20th century concept of what a journalist is and the whole objectivity doctrine kind of assumes that you don't live and participate in the world. I hope social media is changing this."

So how do traditional news organizations write guidelines that allow a relaxed, casual interaction with readers while maintaining standards such as accuracy, fairness, context and verification? Each news outlet's culture seems to define its approach.

Staffers are always representing the Los Angeles Times in online activities, according to the paper's guidelines on social media. "Assume that your professional life and your personal life merge online regardless of your care in separating them. Don't write or post anything that would embarrass the LAT or compromise your ability to do your job."

At the Wall Street Journal, staffers are advised not to mix "business and pleasure" in their postings. They are told not to "recruit friends or family to promote or defend your work." And "sharing your personal opinions, as well as expressing partisan political views, whether on Dow Jones sites or on the larger Web, could open us up to criticism that we have biases and could make a reporter ineligible to cover topics in the future for Dow Jones."

The AP guidelines say the wire service has a "robust corps of employees" with accounts on various social networks. The organization says comments on staffers' Facebook pages should meet AP guidelines. "It's a good idea to monitor your profile page to make sure material posted by others doesn't violate AP standards; any such material should be deleted."

Regarding Twitter, "We're still the AP. Don't report things or break news that we haven't published, no matter the format, and that includes retweeting unconfirmed things not fit for AP's wires."

Tony Winton, an AP reporter and the president of the News Media Guild representing about 1,100 AP editorial staffers across the country, says the union is reviewing the policy with legal counsel and has concerns it is "overly broad." "These guidelines have a chilling effect on proper, ordinary conversation that people have with their coworkers," Winton says. "Facebook is an explosive social networking tool of today and tomorrow. We believe you have a right to interact with your coworkers about things in the news industry. It is a protected area of speech."

Amy Webb, principal consultant at Webbmedia Group in Baltimore, says news organizations are late with "their edicts, ethics and codes" about social networks. Instead, they should be pondering the privacy and safety issues of a new crop of tools, including location-aware services.

"When a New York Times reporter logs on to Facebook from his mobile phone, he's sharing a lot more information than his status updates. He's sharing the content he wrote and his location," Webb says. "There are safety and privacy issues around this."

As journalists' use of social media evolves, there are likely to be continued ripples in the workplace. "Transparency, accuracy and minimizing harm carry over to social media, and there will be a continuing conversation on how best to do this," Seattlepi.com's Guzman says. "The technology will always be changing, and we need to be mindful that there will be new ways to screw up."

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