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| **The Diversity, Media and Technology (DMT) Project** Social Media Ethics |

**What about retweeting, reblogging and reposting?**

In situation where a journalist is asked to refrain from expressing opinions, can she retweet, reblog, reshare or otherwise repost the opinions of others? The best practice is to append some material on such posts to put them into context, so the re-posts aren’t seen as an endorsement of the original opinion.

Some news organizations find it acceptable to do a straight retweet or resharing of something opinionated, as long as one’s social profile notes that retweets and other similar posts don’t constitute endorsements; other note that these profile details are rarely read by others, and that such a disclaimer becomes meaningless when a journalist repeatedly reshares the same sorts of opinions.

**Using social networks to share news developments**

How certain do you do need to be about a news development to share it on a social network, whether from an institutional account or one belonging to an individual journalist? An ethical approach to social journalism demands some standards, though the exact approach can reasonably vary. Here are some considerations for various types of shareable information:

Rumor/hearsay: Many journalists believe they should report news only from legitimate sources, avoiding rumors- whether they’re found on a social network, overheard in a public place or discovered in some other way. An exception might be made if the existence of such rumors is itself a news worthy phenomenon (for example, if unfounded rumors prompt an elected official to hold a news conference to set the record straight).

An exception could also be justified for journalists who specialize in using social networks to verify rumors through crowdsourcing. In that case, material that is only rumor should be clearly identified as such. This is explored further by the [**Ethics Advice Line for Journalists**](http://ethicsadvicelineforjournalists.org/2014/06/11/handling-rumors-on-social-media/).

Reports by others: You’ll need to make a decision about whether (and under what circumstances) your news organization or journalists might tweet or post information reported by another news organization or journalist. Some news operations already have standards for when they might pick up information from another news organization; if so, this might also inform your policy on what you might retweet or otherwise reshare. Maybe you’d only do this if you’re familiar with the originating reporter. Or maybe only if the source is identified and is credible. Maybe you wouldn’t do it at all, or only if your news organization already picked up the information for a story. Have a plan before news breaks.

Information tweeted/posted by a primary source: What if, for example, a prominent public figure, government agency or business directly shares information over a social network? In most cases, this would be reasonable to reshare, with some caveats:

You need to be certain you know that the account is authentic. Some news organizations use the presence or absence of a “verified” badge as a guide, but others do their own verification, noting that such badges have been wrongly handed out before. The best approach is to ask an official representative whether the account is real (and to do so before (“before” in italics) big news breaks).

When you verify an account, find out what you can about how the account is run; you’ll be able to make better decisions if you know whether a celebrity or a staff member, for example, is doing the tweeting.
Keep an eye out for red flags indicating someone’s account may have been compromised, like uncharacteristic posts, surprising grammatical errors or sharply worded political opinions.

Observations and color from the scene: This is generally fair game, though see the separate note on safety below.

Independently verified information: This is fine to share on social networks from an ethical perspective — though you’ll need to factor in your news organization’s business considerations when deciding whether to break news on social or wait until it’s distributed to customers some other way. Consider whether the limitations of a social network allow you to report information in context. Use multiple tweets if needed to provide context or answer questions that arise.

Safety and security: Regardless of what sort of news organization you represent, you need to consider any safety issues that might arise from your decisions about what to tweet or post. Sources, members of the public, story subjects and fellow journalists could be put in danger by a careless tweet or post, such as one that identifies someone’s location in a war zone or that identifies a source who put his life at risk by sharing information with you. If someone in the public is posting to social media from the scene of a crime or disaster, encourage them to be careful of their safety. When in doubt, skip the tweet or posts.

**Friending and following**

Is it OK for a journalist to friend or otherwise follow a source? Generally, yes; it’s a reasonable way to keep up with what they’re posting, which is central to your job. However, if you work for an impartial news organization, make sure you follow and at least attempt to friend people on both sides of any contentious issue to avoid perceptions of bias. And think carefully before friending or following a source who’s giving you information anonymously. This action might reveal a source’s identity. Ask the source if it’s OK, and when in doubt, steer clear.

## **Social Media and User-Generated Content**

In today’s digital environment, rumour and speculation circulate freely and knowing what is real and how to verify news and information is essential. Reporters must be alert to the danger of falling for bad information from online sources whether it is user-generated content or social media. Digital-age sourcing is a major challenge, particularly in emergency coverage where rumor and falsehood can quickly add to the tension and uncertainty surrounding traumatic events.

Some questions a reporter might ask, in the case of social media, include:

* Have I corroborated the origin including location, date and time of images and content that I am using from social media?
* Have I confirmed that this material is the original piece of content?
* Have I verified the social media profiles of accounts I am using to avoid use of fake information?
* Is the account holder known to me and has it been a reliable source in the past?
* Have I asked direct questions of the content provider to verify the provenance of the information?
* Are any websites linked from the content?
* Have we looked for and found the same or similar posts/content elsewhere online?
* Have I obtained permission from the author or originator to use the material whether pictures, videos or audio content?
* Have I collaborated with others to verify and confirm the authenticity of content?

### In the case of user-generated content:

* What do I know about the actual origin of this content? Can I verify the source?
* Are there copyright or legal issues around using the content?
* Have I ensured that all the information can be used and that the conditions for use are clear, for instance through Creative Commons License?
* Am I confident that there have been no reality offering alterations (e.g. Photoshop) used?

### In the case of sourcing breaking news:

* Before I report or retweet a development reported elsewhere, how confident am I in its accuracy?
* Would I potentially cause harm if I reported something before it is established at 100% certainty? Is there potential harm in not reporting it?
* Have I been careful to question first-hand accounts that can be inaccurate and manipulative, emotional or shaped by faulty memory and limited perspective?
* Have I triangulated the information with other credible sources?
* Have I acknowledged that the material I am using can be copied, distributed, and displayed, including derivative works based on it, and have I given credit to the original author and source?