



SOCIAL MEDIA

HANDBOOK

A USER GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATORS

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

UNITED STATE DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



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A USER GUIDE FOR NOAA COMMUNICATORS

What this handbook is – and isn't

NOAA considers social media an information platform, similar to Web, e-mail, press conferences, television broadcasts, and other distribution methods where the content, messages and audience are what matter. Regardless of the platform, we apply existing communications and outreach policies and guidelines NOAA personnel should already be familiar with:

- [DAO 219-1 Public Communications](#)
- [NOAA guidance for implementing DAO 219-1](#)
- Line office-specific guidelines/policies

Also, the Commerce Department issued general guidelines for use of social media and Web technologies, including the DOC Social Media Guidebook (Jan. 2013), which you can find and download at http://www.osec.doc.gov/webresources/doc_web_policies_best_practices.htm.

This handbook is not a list of regulations. Consider it a:

- Roadmap to locating and understanding existing policies;
- Reference for basic best practices and helpful tips for communicating better with our public audiences; and
- Guide to help you and other NOAA communicators avoid online pitfalls.

Please note: Nothing in this guide is intended to abridge any rights provided by the National Labor Relations Act or any other bargaining unit agreements currently in effect. 🗉

SECTION I

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE GUIDELINES REGARDING EMPLOYEES' UNOFFICIAL OR PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA/WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

Excerpts from the DOC Social Media (SM) and Web 2.0 (W2.0) Policy

(You can find this Department of Commerce content at:

http://ocio.os.doc.gov/ITPolicyandPrograms/Policy_Standards/PROD01_009476#P112_17378).

“The safe and legally appropriate use of SM/W2.0 services and technologies involves behavioral issues, as well as technology issues. It is essential that employees adhere to the following requirement. Employees should be aware that their operating unit CIO may not allow access to certain SM/W2.0 services. Please note that these guidelines for unofficial or personal use do not apply to Department contract employees, except to the extent that they are using Department resources to provide information to the public.

- Pursuant to the Department’s [Public Communication Policy](#) (DAO 219-1), Department employees on Government or non-Government Web sites, who wish to post or upload material using SM/W2.0 technologies that relates to the programs or operations of their operating unit and that is related to their official duties, must submit their communication for review to their supervisor or a public affairs officer at their operating unit. If a posting concerns a fundamental research communication as defined by the policy, employees should clearly state that they are providing their own personal opinion and not that of the operating unit, the Department, or the Government.
- Employees should be mindful of blurring their personal and professional life when using SM/W2.0 technologies. Employees should not establish relationships with working groups or affiliations that may reveal sensitive information about their job responsibilities.
- Although Department employees are encouraged to learn about and experiment with these tools in an unofficial capacity, they should be mindful that any information posted on the Web, even when on-site privacy controls are used on SM/W2.0 sites, could become public.

- Do not use your Federal job title when you are using social media in a personal, unofficial capacity to avoid any confusion about whether you are communicating in an official capacity. You may use your title when it is self-evident that you are not posting in an official capacity, such as posting a resume or listing your employment history on a social network profile.
- Do not disclose any information obtained on the job that is not already publicly available. This includes national security (classified) information, personally identifiable information, proprietary or business confidential information, pre-decisional information, or similar sensitive information. Avoid establishing relationships or affiliations with groups that are not appropriate or that may result in the inadvertent sharing of non-public sensitive information.
- The [Hatch Act](#) prohibits Federal employees from soliciting, accepting, or receiving campaign contributions, including through the use of SM/W2.0 technologies. This prohibition includes hosting or posting to a Web site that includes a link for making contributions to a political party or a candidate in a partisan election, that is, a campaign in which candidates are identified by political party. Additional information is available from the OGC [Ethics Law and Programs Division](#) Web site, by phone at 202-482-5384, or via e-mail at ethicsdivision@doc.gov.
- The Commerce [Internet Use Policy](#) allows employees to use their Government computer and SM/W2.0 for their personal use, provided that access is allowed by the operating unit CIO and use of equipment is minimal. Additionally, use of SM/W2.0 must not interfere with office operations or involve commercial activities (profit-making or business), partisan political activities, or sexually explicit communications.
- Remember that information posted on SM/W2.0 sites is available to a wide audience of users. How you present yourself on these Web sites will reflect on Commerce and the Federal Government. 🗉

SECTION II

NOAA EMPLOYEE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A PERSONAL CAPACITY

NOAA guidance on the use of social media technologies includes, but is not limited to, photo and video sharing (e.g., Instagram, Tumblr), blogs, podcasts, Web feeds, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), and other Web-based forums.

The use of social media technologies in an official capacity is covered by existing DOC and NOAA regulations and policies on external communications ([DAO-219-1](#)).

Personal use of Social Media

Things to remember

As a NOAA employee/contractor, you are accountable for responsible, safe, and judicious use of Web and social media technologies, whether in an official or personal capacity.

Please note: When you are using social media technologies in a personal capacity to discuss NOAA and its activities, you must clearly identify that you are issuing personal communications and personal opinion (versus Agency) and post a disclaimer such as:

“The statements and opinions posted here are my own, and they do not represent NOAA’s positions, strategies or opinions.”

Do not use your official NOAA e-mail address or official NOAA logo — or line office/program identifiers (logos, banners, etc.) — in connection with any personal communications or non-official representation.

NOAA personnel may post some of their NOAA work on their social media accounts, including blogs and websites, AFTER this work has been published or otherwise made public by NOAA. This work must be clearly identified as being NOAA content.

Two rules of thumb

- Do NOT use your personal accounts for work-related purposes; you will avoid any unforeseen complications or conflicts of interest.
- If you administer a NOAA headquarters, line or program office social media site, do not retweet, repost or promote any content from personal accounts, with the exception of online Q&As in which we answer individuals’ questions. Why? Doing so can confuse the public about what is or isn’t “official” NOAA news and information and who has the authority and knowledge background to disseminate it in an official capacity from an official NOAA source. 🗉

SECTION III

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN AN OFFICIAL NOAA CAPACITY

General guidelines

- All NOAA social media accounts must be applied for and approved through the Commerce Department system before they are created: <https://socmed.my.commerce.gov>. This includes NOAA accounts for employees cleared to communicate externally to a broad public audience (i.e., NOAA leadership, scientists, public affairs officers, etc.).
 - Please note: *Any changes to established accounts* – for instance, a requested name or URL change – must first be vetted/discussed by an internal team of relevant line office/program office and headquarters-level communicators and public affairs officers, including a member of the NOAA Communications Digital Media Branch (David Miller, Genevieve Contey.) This is only to ensure there are no inadvertent conflicts of interests or sensitivities, external or internal, concerning a name/URL change.
- Know and follow Commerce/NOAA regulations** as cited in the beginning of this document, as well any line-office specific guidelines.
- Act responsibly: Think before posting.** Even if a post is removed from a site, it can be preserved by others and reposted. Use plain language, check spelling and grammar, and test links before you go public.
- Stick to vetted information from your subject matter experts/authorities.** Use plain language, and retweet with helpful context (links that drive traffic back to official government webpage source, clarifying info, etc.)
- Unless you are officially representing NOAA as a spokesperson (in an official capacity), do not represent yourself as speaking for NOAA.** Moreover, please do not use the word “I” when tweeting or posting in official capacity for a NOAA account not representing a singular person.
- Do not use a public social media channel for a NOAA-related activity or discussion that is not meant for total public access.** If it’s posted on a website or social media channel, it’s public.
- Stay in your lane.** Do not retweet or comment on tweets by non-partner groups or on issues that don’t directly relate to NOAA’s mission. When in doubt, ask a higher-level NOAA public affairs or communications manager.

- **Remember: Please do not follow, link to or promote content hosted by political blogs; political campaigns; partisan websites or questionable “news” sources; websites selling products/services; personal accounts.**
- Be honest and transparent.** Truth and sarcasm look the same on paper. The best way to make sure that you convey a truthful message is to be truthful.
- Be professional and respectful at all times.** Do not reply to contentious comments with an argumentative or defensive tone; it can start an argument that will play itself out on your social media page or blog comments area.

Best practices

- Provide alternative access to information published on social media.** The Commerce Department advises the following: “Agencies should also provide individuals with alternatives to third-party websites and applications. People should be able to obtain comparable information and services through an agency’s official website or other official means. For example, members of the public should be able to learn about the agency’s activities and to communicate with the agency without having to join a third-party social media website. In addition, if an agency uses a third-party service to solicit feedback, the agency should provide an alternative government e-mail address where users can also send feedback.”
- Contribute, engage, and get involved.** The unique value of social media is to interact with others by commenting, replying, giving feedback and letting your voice be heard. Without it, you’re just broadcasting. Thank your followers for their feedback and interest in your content. Answer as many questions you can in a timely manner, without sacrificing accuracy. We are a science agency, after all.
 - That said, any response we make to a Web or social media user — especially direct messages on Twitter and emails — can go public and find their way onto blogs and websites anywhere in the world, and sometimes in an adulterated form. These might feel like private communications between NOAA and our followers when you are responding, but they are far from it. Think before you reply: Be respectful, be transparent, be accurate and do not engage users in an argument.
- Be as clear as possible in your tweets and posts.** First, answer the basics of *Who?, What?, Where?, When?, Why?* and *How?* in plain language. Use dates and time zone info whenever possible. Don’t use abbreviations only your line or program office will recognize. Keep your tweets short as possible and well within 140 characters to facilitate retweeting.

- **Speak with one voice whenever possible:** For example, NWS, NHC, HPC, SPC, OR&R, OAR, AOC, CSC, etc., are all NOAA. Moreover, the public and the media think of us as just NOAA. Make it easy for people — let them know we all work for the same organization toward the same overall mission.
- **Patrol, maintain and update your originating website and blog content regularly** to ensure accurate and timely information for social media distribution. Science, news and circumstances can change quickly. Social media is a means to reach an audience with a teaser, let them know what you have on your websites as well as a great opportunity to engage with your audience.
- **Correct and acknowledge mistakes as quickly as possible, and announce your correction to your followers.** You might know that something you stated was not quite right. But do others? Make sure you issue a correction swiftly and clearly in tweets and posts — and be sure to tell people WHAT the mistake WAS and post the correction prominently.

Using social media during major news events, and disasters

- **Use a short, easy-to-follow hashtag for your tweets** (Twitter): #Sandy (for Hurricane/post-tropical cyclone Sandy); #Irene, #StateofClimate, #TsunamiChat, #HurriChat (hurricane tweet chat), #DidYouNOAA, #NOAA etc.
- **Provide your followers with active, OFFICIAL NOAA social media accounts for your line and program office** that they need to keep on hand or bookmark. Create lists of your line office's accounts in your Twitter profile and distribute a shortened link to their location. To earn an "official government account" designation, new NOAA accounts should apply for Twitter verification ( white on blue checkmark) by sending a request to gov@twitter.com.
- **Publicize your event-critical mobile/smartphone-friendly websites on your social media channels.** For example, during a severe weather event or natural disaster, people might not have electricity to use their computers but are checking their mobile phones for breaking news.
- **Stay in your NOAA lane:** Do not retweet rumors or unconfirmed reports by non-NOAA sources, especially in the heat of the moment. Often, these reports are found to be unsubstantiated or are altogether false, and you don't want to perpetuate a falsehood.
- **As in advertising, repetition is key.** Don't assume everyone saw that tweet you sent 2 hours ago. For critical and late-breaking information and instructions, RESEND, and then resend again.
- **Beware of "Facebook fatigue":** Try to switch up your graphics to sustain interest and prevent "graphic apathy."

- **Show compassion:** Remember that our social media followers may also be victims of disaster or other news we are posting about. Be sure to let your followers know you are thinking of them during this difficult time.
- **Don't take a victory lap too soon – or at all.** If your organization did an outstanding job and you want to thank people for a job well done, wait at least 1 week after a natural disaster, rescue, oil spill, etc., to toot any horns. And if you have any doubts, wait another week or more.
- **No gratuitous tweets or posts.** Don't clog up the feeds with unnecessary or frivolous content especially during the height of a severe weather, natural disaster or breaking news event.

Photos, images, video

- **PHOTOS, IMAGES, CAPTIONS & CREDITS:** Please make sure every image you post answers the question: "What am I looking at?"
 - Use NOAA and/or other public domain images, which don't carry copyright restrictions (e.g., federal agency photos, etc.).
 - Be sure to provide full caption/labeling and credit information, as well as any links to more information about the photo or the topic it is referring to.
 - If the photo is not NOAA-owned or in public domain, please secure written permission from the copyright holder before using it, and keep it on file. Be sure to include information about the terms of the credit in every post. For example, "Courtesy of XXXX" means you were given the photo by the owner to use – not that you swiped it from their website without asking.
 - Photos taken by NOAA employees on work time, as part of their NOAA position or responsibilities, can receive a credit if that credit can be confirmed. Use this style: "Photo: Jane Doe/NOAA." If you can't confirm the NOAA photographer, then simply use Photo: NOAA.
- **INSTAGRAM:** Only NOAA-owned and credited photos are suitable to be posted on Instagram and other similar photo-sharing sites. To remain truthful to the documentary nature of NOAA's photos, do NOT put photos through one of the typically offered filters. This alters the "reality" of the photo content. If, however, there is a part of photo that is best explained by using a filter of some kind (to add contrast for better viewing), you must note the fact that did so in the photo's caption.

- VIDEO COMPLIANCE: General [Commerce Dept. guidance](#) (see page 20 and first bullet under “Best Practices” section) is that any video posted separately on YouTube or other social media applications should also reside on a **.gov** webpage. DOC Policy allows the use of YouTube to embed videos on our webpages assuming they meet [Federal 508 compliance/ accessibility regulations](#).
 - Please remember: Videos distributed to the public that include dialogue (other than media b-roll) must be close-captioned to be 508 compliant. Whenever possible, also provide or post a text file of the transcript.

Handling comments

- **Every social media page that allows commenting (e.g., Facebook) requires “Comments Guidelines” that users can readily access and that explain what type of comments are and are not allowed to appear.** This can be posted under the “About” section. Consider reminding users about your guidelines a few times a year, and not when you receive a spate of negative comments. If you update your commenting guidelines, you should let your followers know and provide them a direct link to them.
 - Do not individually reprimand any users who violate your comments guidelines. Instead, hide or delete their comments, or block the user as a final resort if he/she meets the criteria.
- **Whenever possible, patrol your social media comments feeds** to make sure people are not spreading rumors or posting misinformation. Also be watchful for posts directing readers to off-topic private sites. Try to answer the big questions as quickly as possible, and clear up misinformation in the comments feed.
 - Remember: Every post is a new opportunity to reiterate essential links to critical information and resources.
- **Disabling comments that violate your Comment Guidelines**
 - Hiding or blocking comments on your social media platform page is a decision that depends on the situation, nature of the comments and frequency of the violation. In general, be sure your Comments Guidelines include a clear explanation about the possibility of comments being deleted or blocked from your page if the guidelines supporting on-topic, civil discussion are flouted.

For NOAA scientists using social media in an official NOAA capacity

- Scientists or any other NOAA employee using social media for work purposes need to apply for and receive approval/listing in the DOC social media tracking system.
- Be yourself: Use the first person and speak for yourself and your work, not for NOAA as an agency.
- Identify yourself: State your name and role when you discuss your work.
- Write, tweet what you know: Stick to sharing the facts and perspectives about your areas of expertise. You are personally responsible for the content you publish on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, wikis or any other form of user-generated media.

Media inquiries and news distribution

If you receive any inquiries from reporters or media outlets through your social media channels, politely refer them to your NOAA Communications public affairs officer. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov/media.html> to see a list of NOAA Communications public affairs contacts and their line office assignments.

- **Do not use social media to release NOAA “news” without first consulting your NOAA public affairs officer.** News can be defined as *“any previously unreleased information with the potential to generate significant media or public interest or inquiry.”*
- Generally, most if not all official NOAA news releases, as well as major breaking news items, are first tweeted out from @NOAAComms and/or @NOAA Twitter feeds before any similar line office announcements.
- Only official spokespeople are authorized to speak for NOAA regarding NOAA policy and budget issues. When in doubt, consult your NOAA public affairs contact. (See: <http://www.noaa.gov/media.html>)

Above all else, please remember:

- You are not authorized to post or tweet any message regarding NOAA budget or policy matters, nor any decisions or matters that the agency has not already made public. Remember: Stay in your lane.
- Information such as NOAA’s or a contractor’s intellectual property, trade secrets, International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU) and customer data are strictly forbidden from any online discourse except by authorized personnel in accordance with the specific NOAA external communications process.

- **Do not** provide any type of endorsement of a product or company for reasons of liability and appearances of favoritism by a government agency. Refer questions regarding communications of this type to the Ethics Law and Programs Division of the Office of the Assistant General Counsel for Administration (DOC).
- **Do not** blog/tweet/distribute proprietary or privileged information online. For example, don't assume you can "tweet" or blog the meeting you just attended. Ask the meeting leader first.
- **Do not** cite or reference clients, partners or suppliers without their approval. When you do make a reference, link back to the source where possible.
- **Don't forget your day job!** Be sure that your personal online activities do not interfere with your NOAA job commitments. Your manager has the right to limit the use of social media at work.
- **Know before you post:** Violation of official DOC/NOAA policies and administrative orders could result in disciplinary action.
- **FINALLY:** Social media is a powerful knowledge-sharing and engagement tool that the public and media rely on. This handbook is designed to help you be successful in promoting your office and, in the process, the larger NOAA mission. **Post smart and have fun!** 📧

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

DOC/NOAA DAO 219-1 on Public Communications <http://www.noaa.gov/mediaguidance.htm>

DOC Social Media Application Site <https://socmed.my.commerce.gov>

DOC Terms of Service Agreements for Social Media (approved tools) http://www.osec.doc.gov/webresources/socialmedia/Approved_Social_Media_Account_Agreements.html

DOC Office of Digital Engagement Weekly Reading List for Social Media & Web To be included on this weekly e-mail, contact mkruger@doc.gov.

HowTo.gov	http://www.howto.gov/social-media http://www.howto.gov/social-media/using-social-media-in-government/improving-accessibility
Mashable	http://mashable.com/category/social-media
Neiman Journalism Lab (Harvard)	http://www.niemanlab.org/tag/social-media
NOAA Headquarters official social media accounts	http://twitter.com/NOAA http://twitter.com/NOAAComms http://twitter.com/NOAALive http://www.facebook.com/NOAA http://www.instagram.com/noaa http://www.youtube.com/noaa http://www.storify.com/noaa
NOAA Social Media page (main line office accounts listing, only)	http://www.noaa.gov/socialmedia
NOAA Web Committee Toolbox	https://sites.google.com/a/noaa.gov/noaa-web-committee/toolbox
Poynter Institute - Social Media	http://www.poynter.org/category/latest-news/media-lab/social-media
Social Media Today	http://socialmediatoday.com
White House Digital Government Strategy	http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/egov/digital-government/digital-government.html

Have questions about this handbook? Please contact [David Miller](#) or [Genevieve Contey](#) in NOAA Communications & External Affairs for more information or clarification. For questions about the [DOC Social Media Policy](#), please contact [Mike Kruger](#), director of the Office of Digital Strategy, Commerce Department.

