

Grading Government Transparency

Scientists' Freedom to Speak (and Tweet) at Federal Agencies

Model Social Media Policy

The text below serves as a template for a social media policy that federal agencies could adopt to ensure free and open communication between scientists, the media, policy makers, and the public. This language is adopted from the Union of Concerned Scientists Model Media Policy and draws partially from social media policies adopted at the National Institutes of Health and the Department of the Interior. Below, “[agency]” would be replaced by the official name of the agency and/or department if it were to adopt this policy language.

Model Social Media Policy (Last updated March 2013)

Section 1: Purpose

.01 This Order establishes the [agency] policy governing social media communications including tools and technologies that allow a person to share information, inclusive of, but not limited to blogs, social networks, forums, micro blogs (i.e. Twitter), and automated data feeds (e.g., image/video sharing sites, social bookmarking services).

This Order defines appropriate use of these tools by [agency] employees for communications with the public, while protecting privacy and minimizing risk to [agency] systems and data, whenever Web-based technologies are used.

.02 President Obama’s memorandum on Open and Transparent Government encourages Federal agencies to use technology to communicate and engage with the public. Social media services and tools (often referred to collectively as "Web 2.0") are powerful and effective means to communicate quickly and broadly, share information, and interact with colleagues and the public. Such tools offer important opportunities for promoting the goals of transparency, public participation and collaboration. With respect to personally identifiable information, the presumption shall be in favor of openness (to the extent permitted by law and subject to valid privacy, confidentiality, security, or other restrictions).

.03 However, it is critical that social media tools be accessed and used in a responsible manner. [Agency] employees that establish accounts for both official purposes and for their own personal/private use must be cognizant of the important distinctions that exist between the use of their official and their personal accounts. Individuals may share information about themselves without always realizing the potential consequences. Be certain that your post would be considered protected speech for First Amendment purposes.

Section 2: Rights

.01 Scientists and other employees have the fundamental right to express their personal views on social media outlets, provided they specify that they are not speaking on behalf of, or as a representative of, the agency but rather in their private capacity. So long as this disclaimer is made, the employee is permitted to mention his or her institutional affiliation and position if this has helped inform his or her views on the matter.

.02 Employees have the right to the correction of errors in technical information that significantly relies on their research, identifies them as an author or contributor, or purports to represent their scientific opinion, in the event that such errors were released by the [agency] on social media outlets.

Section 3: Responsibilities

.01 The officer in charge of social media is responsible for:

- a) providing draft text for social media release to agency scientists whose work is included, to assure the accuracy of scientific information being communicated on such outlets.
- b) Issuing correction statements for incorrect technical information released on social media outlets.

.02 Employees are responsible for

- a) the accuracy and integrity of their social media communications and should not represent the agency on issues of politics or policy without prior approval from the public affairs officer (PAO).
- b) adding a disclaimer to their social networking profile, personal blog, or other personal online presences that clearly states that the opinions or views expressed are theirs alone and do not represent the views of the [agency], if they choose to disclose their affiliation with [agency] on social media outlets.