

UNHCR Guidelines on the Personal Use of Social Media

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Introduction

UNHCR recognizes the high value of social media as a communications and collaborative tool that enables the organization and its personnel to inform, educate, inspire, persuade, advocate, fundraise, shape public discourse, build trust and influence policy.

While working with UNHCR, you can embrace and be a part of this effort. By sharing the important stories of what you see and experience every day, in your own voice, you can help to humanize refugees – and our work. We encourage colleagues to post on their personal social media accounts – although you may choose not to mention your work at all.

Many personal accounts reflect a mixture of personal and professional lives. This guidance is designed to help navigate social media ethically and strategically, while minimizing potential risks to yourself, people of concern and the organization.

The private activities of UNHCR personnel, on social media platforms as in real life, remain within the limits of the organization's core values, as reflected in [Staff Regulation 1.2](#) (see pages 9-12) and [UN Staff Rule 1.2](#) (see pages 13-16). This includes an obligation to act with impartiality, to exercise discretion and to refrain from making public statements on controversial matters. Any violation may be considered as misconduct, lead to a formal investigation and, depending on the outcome, disciplinary sanctions. Affiliate workforce are subject to corresponding rules in their conditions of service.

The Guidelines

The following ten principles will guide you in deciding what to post or share on your personal social media accounts.

(1) Use common sense

What is common sense in real life is common sense in social media. Think before you hit 'publish'. If you hesitate, there's probably a good reason. If in doubt, don't post it. Your personal posts could carry implications for UNHCR or the people we serve. Avoid posting about news stories which relate to issues under UNHCR's mandate that UNHCR has not yet confirmed or commented on, as your post could be viewed as UNHCR confirming the story when it has not. Similarly, sharing a news article or other third-party content may be seen as an endorsement of the facts and opinions it presents. Don't

post anything online that you wouldn't be comfortable seeing quoted in a news website or justifying to your supervisor. You are responsible for your online reputation, which may impact on UNHCR's image. Be aware of your digital footprint and act as responsibly online as you would in any other public context.

(2) Be impartial, neutral and independent

Abide by the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. When you work for UNHCR you are an international civil servant. Taking sides on issues UNHCR is engaged with could undermine UNHCR's reputation for neutrality, or compromise its relationships with governments, partners and other stakeholders.

Even when posting about an issue which is not related to UNHCR's work, try to reflect a balanced selection of viewpoints. Unless you are retweeting or sharing a UN or UNHCR statement, avoid criticizing or singling out any government, country or politician, or expressing a personal view regarding a political process or election.

Refrain from making political statements, expressing partisan opinions or endorsing political candidates. You should be particularly careful if you are expressing opinions about situations concerning your own country, when there can be heightened risk of being biased by your own political or other beliefs.

(3) Protection first

Do not share information that is not meant for external audiences or could compromise diplomacy, operations or protection. Do not identify or use the names or positions of colleagues without their permission. Leave sensitive issues to personnel who are specifically authorized to speak on them. When in doubt, consult your supervisor. Information you post, especially regarding locations or personal details, could put you or others at risk. This is especially important during serious security incidents, for example a hostage-taking or an attack on UNHCR personnel or premises.

(4) Data protection

Photos of refugees help generate compassion for their benefit. However, it's imperative that you do not publish on social media images of refugees or people of concern (photos or videos) that may contain their personal information or data, as this may put that individual at risk. Any imagery that may contain personal details such as phone numbers, addresses, or other details must not be used under any circumstances. Examples of these types of details can be found in refugees holding up ID cards, birth certificates, or other key identification documents. If in doubt about whether a photo can or should be used on social media, contact a member of the Social Media Unit or the Division of International Protection.

(5) Understand the limits of privacy and security settings

You may think your activity on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, Vkontakte, Snapchat, QZone, TripAdvisor, Reddit or any other platforms or forums is private and separate from

your role at UNHCR, but everything we post or “like” online, even in a private group, is public to some degree, and can easily be shared into the public domain.

Keeping your information private isn’t just about your own security settings – it’s about your friends’ choices, too. It’s impossible to have 100% control of your privacy and posts on social media. Likewise, it’s always possible that your old social media posts, even from years ago, can be dug up and used against you, so it pays to be conscious of your digital footprint.

(6) Engage smartly and respectfully

Social media is a two-way conversation, and platforms are designed to encourage people to engage with each other’s posts. The vast majority of users are genuine and well-meaning. However, you might encounter an internet ‘troll’ – the colloquial term for a user who aims to provoke or annoy, often with hateful, discriminatory or inappropriate comments, or a ‘bot’ – short for ‘robot’, a software programme that controls a social media account and can automatically generate social media posts which advocate certain ideas or support campaigns.

The best response is to starve a troll of attention by ignoring it. For persistent problems, you can block or mute users. If you feel threatened or experience abusive or challenging behaviour on social media, inform your supervisor immediately. Do bear in mind that a user whose opinions vary from your own is not necessarily a troll; be open to constructive criticism and questions about your posts. If you choose to respond, be thoughtful in your replies. Be respectful: if you wouldn’t say it to someone in person, don’t say it online.

(7) Be transparent

Be clear and honest about your professional identity. It helps build trust and prevents misperceptions. Use a good profile photo – which can show you at work – and fill out the bio section on your account. Your personal social media account is your property, and if you leave the organization, you will take it with you. You can refer to UNHCR and your job title or area of work in your bio, but do not include UNHCR in your username, to make it clear that your account is not owned by the institution, but by you. Do not use a pseudonym or post anonymous comments about UNHCR, the UN, persons of concern or the humanitarian sector.

(8) Avoid disclaimers

We do not recommend the use of disclaimers such as “*tweets are my own / these are my personal views / retweets are not endorsements*” as they are meaningless and can lull a user into a false sense of security. Even with such a disclaimer, your online behaviour is still covered by the Staff Rules and Staff Regulations. If you tweeted something inappropriate or a mistake, and delete your post, best practice is to quickly acknowledge the deletion in a subsequent tweet.

(9) Be visual – and always seek consent

Social media posts featuring visual content spark higher engagement than those without, so add a photo or video (your own, or one from UNHCR's [Refugees Media](#) photo library) or a URL to your post. Make sure you ask any person of concern, or in the case of children, their guardian or responsible adult, for their verbal permission to photograph and publish their picture on social media. Do not identify or use the names or positions of persons of concern without their informed permission.

(10) Be accurate

Outdated figures and erroneous information can spread rapidly online. When you publish on social media, whether an original post or a share of someone else's post, you are placing that information in the public domain, so always consider the possible ramifications, including the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Always double-check your facts before posting to social media. Never mislead or invite misinterpretation – UNHCR's credibility may be at stake. Credit sources and avoid negativity. Be honest and open and show integrity.

(11) Be authentic

Writing from a personal perspective enriches your social media posts. You should feel confident in using your own words in your posts, to share and amplify UNHCR content, adding comments about your work and experience to personalize, add context and make it relevant to your online networks and communities. UNHCR institutional accounts often retweet or share posts from the personal accounts of its workforce in order to put a human face on a 70-year-old institution, our work and messages.

Further Resources

If you have any questions or are unsure about what to post when, a good starting point is to discuss with your supervisor or peers. You can also contact the Social Media Unit, who sit within the Global Communications Service, via socialmedia@unhcr.org.

The Social Media Unit offer a wide and frequently updated array of social media guidance and training materials on specific issues, from dealing with trolls to gathering content, and you can find these resources on the [Communications section of the Intranet](#).

These guidelines replace the [AI/2014/02 on the Use of Social Media](#).

They accompany the [UNHCR Guidelines on Engagement with the Media](#) and the forthcoming [UNHCR Guidelines on the Institutional Use of Social Media](#) (due October 2019).