

**Guidelines for
optimal Social Media etiquette**
(Navigating social platforms with decorum)

Media Law Forum

Guidelines for optimal Social Media etiquette

(Navigating social platforms with decorum)

Printed by :

R & C Graphics
180/A, Kirigampamunuwa,
Mattegoda.
011 2172324

Published By :

Media Law Forum
No. 170, First Floor,
Hulftsdorp Street,
Colombo 12

Hotline : 074 3070888
info@medialawforum.org

April 2024

Foreword

In contemporary times, social media has emerged as the predominant mode of communication for individuals. As of January 2024, the global count of social media users is projected to surpass 5 billion, with Sri Lanka alone accounting for 7.5 million users. Forecasts indicate a substantial rise in Sri Lanka's social media user base to 21.66 million by 2029.

It's evident that social media has emerged as a powerful tool for championing, safeguarding, and advocating for people's rights, particularly in expanding the realm of expression. Consequently, it plays a pivotal role in educating individuals about their rights, serving as a platform for their voices, uncovering violators of human and political rights, initiating campaigns to advance human rights, and acting as a defender of these fundamental rights.

While the expansion of freedom of expression via social media is a positive development, it also brings about negative repercussions on society. Some individuals misuse this right, leading to violations of others' rights. To address or mitigate these issues, societies with a sophisticated media culture are implementing various measures. One such initiative is the introduction of guidelines, such as a Code of Practice, for social media usage.

Therefore, the Media Law Forum, after considering factors such as the current legal framework, societal norms, and professional ethics, presents this set of guidelines for the use of social media. These guidelines serve as a reference for appropriate conduct within the social media industry, outlining both recommended practices and practices to avoid.

Furthermore, these guidelines encompass a spectrum of recommended behaviours and actions for navigating the digital realm. It's important to note that these recommendations may evolve over time and are influenced by social context. They cater to both individuals and businesses engaging with social media, acknowledging the diverse purposes and implications of online interactions.

A set of guidelines for optimal social media use

Awareness prior to use

It's imperative to acknowledge that your copyright and freedom of expression aren't boundless rights. While freedom of expression is fundamental, legal and ethical boundaries exist. Familiarize yourself with the rules and ethical standards governing these limitations, and ensure your understanding is current.

It's crucial for both social media activists and ordinary citizens to possess a fundamental grasp of the legal framework governing their actions. As a social media activist, understanding the relevant legal regulations is essential to avoid crossing legal boundaries and to discern the fairness of laws, prompting informed action when necessary.

Whether you're engaging as a user or an activist on social media, your conduct could potentially result in defamation suits, intellectual property disputes, allegations of sexual or psychological harassment, and even accusations of obscenity or hate speech, constituting human rights violations. It's imperative to bear this in mind. In the event of such circumstances, remember that claiming ignorance of the law is not a viable defence.

Understanding the legal regulations, as well as the media and international ethical guidelines pertinent to social media usage, will enable you to optimize your engagement. Most social media platforms have implemented guidelines to uphold user safety and maintain high standards. Familiarizing yourself with these guidelines is essential for responsible usage.

Adhere to the law and uphold ethics

Understanding the law and ethics isn't merely about awareness; it's about embodying these principles. Compliance with the law should stem from a recognition of and commitment to the values it safeguards. If you perceive any law as unjust or unsuitable, you have the freedom to voice your dissent, advocating not only against it but also for its amendment. Your responsibility extends beyond being just a social media user; it encompasses your role as a member of society.

Ethics should guide your actions with the same gravity as legal obligations. While laws mandate adherence, ethics are a personal choice. It's up to you to decide whether to abide by them. Thus, comprehending the conceptual underpinnings and societal significance of ethics is crucial. Ethical conduct is not merely a practice but a way of life.

Be yourself

The prevalence of individuals adopting false identities on social media poses a significant issue. As a social media activist, there may be temptation to obscure your true identity for safety reasons, given the sensitive nature of the content you share.

Indeed, concealing one's true identity to disseminate unfounded, unverified, or fabricated information, especially with the intention to unjustly attack or infringe upon someone's rights, goes against the principles of responsible social media engagement. Such actions are incompatible with the values upheld by the social media community.

Absolutely, if you're a truth revealer (whistle blower) striving for social progress, safeguarding your safety by not disclosing your true identity can be warranted. However, impersonating someone else, especially a public figure with societal influence, for any purpose is unacceptable. Account impersonation is a prevalent form of misuse in the realm of social media.

Maintaining fake social media accounts is not only misleading to society but also detrimental to the reputation and privacy of the individual whose identity is being impersonated. It undermines trust and can cause significant harm to both the person's reputation and their right to privacy.

Your social life and your presence on social media are two different things

Your social life and your presence on social media are separate entities. Keep personal matters private and avoid treating social media as a public diary. Nonetheless, recognize that your online activity, including what you post, share, like, and your overall behaviour, reflects your character, attitudes, professionalism, and standards to the social media community.

To uncover what is known, one must first explore what is unknown

It's crucial to refrain from posting or sharing anything on social media that hasn't been verified to be accurate and true, whether on a personal or commercial level. Avoid reposting or sharing information that you're unsure about, as it can perpetuate false or misleading narratives. Consistently sharing inaccurate information can undermine trust, even when presenting genuine and correct content, as recipients may become hesitant to believe it.

Credibility is indeed a fundamental trait for journalists, and it holds equal importance in the realm of social media. Truthfulness is a moral principle that garners respect from others. When you maintain honesty and truthfulness, it fosters trust within the community. Ultimately, this trust has a positive ripple effect on society as a whole.

News is sacred, and opinions are open.

As a commercial user of social media, it's crucial to maintain this separation by refraining from blending news with personal opinions. Moreover, always cite your sources when sharing news stories to enhance credibility. If a source requests confidentiality, honour that request to demonstrate responsible social media conduct.

Not all the information you receive may be suitable for reporting or sharing

Even if a piece of information is accurate and true, it may not be appropriate to post or share it. Consider the consequences before sharing any information or opinion. Before disseminating an idea or piece of information, reflect on its potential impact on society. Only share ideas or information that contribute positively to society.

Unlike traditional media, social media lacks a centralised authority to approve and edit news content. Users have the autonomy to report, approve, or edit news themselves.

Mistakes are inevitable, but the failure to rectify them is the greatest error

Regardless of expertise, errors can occur. Upon confirmation of misinformation or inappropriate content shared on social media, promptly acknowledge the mistake. Take decisive action to correct it and, if necessary, compensate the aggrieved parties. Allow space for the voice of those affected on your social media platform.

While acknowledging and rectifying mistakes demonstrates commitment to quality, it's important to avoid doing so excessively. Frequent mistakes can call into question the professionalism of your practice.

Always prioritize doing what is right, regardless of others' actions. Refrain from justifying your mistakes by comparing them to those of others. Even if the majority holds a certain opinion, a mistake remains unjustifiable. Take proactive steps to uphold what is morally correct and advocate for the minority viewpoint, particularly when it concerns the welfare of children.

Avoid engaging in intellectual property theft under the guise of freedom of expression

Sharing others' ideas, creations, or knowledge without their consent and presenting them as your own is prevalent on social media. This unauthorized use of intellectual property constitutes theft and can lead to legal consequences.

Moreover, it is morally reprehensible and highlights incompetence and ignorance. If you intend to use someone else's intellectual property, obtain the necessary permission from the owner. Even if permission isn't mandatory, always credit the original creator in your submission.

Even when sharing personal photos, such as those with family or close friends, it's courteous and respectful to seek their approval before posting them on social media.

Ensure that commenting privileges are not misused to fuel anti-social behaviour

Refrain from endorsing or promoting extremist ideologies such as racism or religious intolerance, which can undermine social cohesion. Exercise caution when reporting or sharing events related to disruptive actions like violence, drug-related crimes, or abuse. If necessary, do so with sensitivity and without glorifying such behaviour. Avoid using social media as a platform for spreading hate, and steer clear of hate speech pages. While debates are welcome, remain focused on the topic and maintain rationality.

Avoid making derogatory remarks

It is vital to avoid making derogatory remarks or expressing prejudice towards individuals based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical and mental abilities. Only mention a person's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities if they are directly pertinent to the story.

Be humble

Practice humility when engaging on social media, as it is a shared public space. Treat others with politeness and humility, showing respect for their perspectives. Allow others the opportunity to express their opinions, even if you disagree. Prioritize listening before responding.

Instead of trying to prove a point aggressively, respectfully express your disagreement. Maintain transparency in your interactions.

Don't mislead the community

Avoid disseminating false or exaggerated information on social media, as it can mislead the community. Refrain from promoting myths or scams. If you are sharing information for commercial purposes, clearly disclose it. Act ethically and avoid conflicts of interest by disclosing them when necessary.

Respect and protect privacy and reputation

Respecting the privacy of individuals, regardless of their status, is paramount. Similarly, honour individual reputations by refraining from intentional harm. Avoid derogatory remarks. While speaking the truth should not cause offence, sharing information about someone's personal life should only occur if it serves the public interest.

Maintain societal standards and avoid their degradation

Avoid publishing anything that could harm public interest, morals, or degrade one's status. Unless it serves the public interest, refrain from reporting obscene matters. Prosecution should steer clear of actions that promote sensuality, promiscuity, or decadence. Your posts or shares reflect your attitudes, lifestyle, and outlook on life to the community.

Be mindful that what may not violate social media guidelines could still be deemed obscene or inappropriate within our social context. Pay attention to such matters and exercise caution accordingly.

Do not commodify death

Ideally, either report incidents of suicide responsibly or refrain from doing so entirely. If reporting or sharing, ensure it doesn't promote suicide, and avoid mentioning specific details of the act.

Do not sensationalize the method of suicide or publish graphic content like photos or videos of the deceased. Similarly, avoid displaying the bodies of murder victims or those deceased due to natural disasters.

Recognize and honour the rights of specific demographic groups within society

Children, women, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities are deserving of particular consideration and respect. When discussing these groups on social media, it's crucial to present information without disregarding their social circumstances or causing undue harm. For instance, when reporting cases of child abuse or rape, avoid mentioning identifying details such as names, photos, or personal connections that could lead to the victim's recognition or disclosure.

The names of minors accused of a crime should not be mentioned. Photos should not be posted in an identifiable manner. In the event that a minor is accused or convicted of a crime, or an adult is accused or convicted of a crime, or in the naming of his relatives, the relationship between his relatives and friends should be disclosed only if it is in the public interest.

When covering marriage and divorce cases, it's essential to report them sensitively, avoiding any language or details that could harm the individuals involved or infringe upon their privacy rights.

In both society at large and the realm of social media, women often face a disproportionate amount of sexual violence and various forms of oppression and aggression. Rather than perpetuating these injustices, social media should serve as a platform for raising awareness and combatting the oppression faced by women, striving to minimize and ultimately eliminate these harmful behaviours from society.

Be vigilant and proactive about your safety

While social media has empowered individuals to express their opinions and drive social change, it also harbours a dark side. Despite its role in spreading information and raising awareness, social media has also facilitated various forms of exploitation, including human trafficking. Deception, fraud, and manipulation are prevalent in society and can manifest on social media platforms. Therefore, it's crucial to exercise caution and awareness while engaging with online communities.

As a social media user, it's important to remain vigilant and avoid falling victim to scams, fraud, deception, and misdirection. Be cautious when engaging with unfamiliar individuals or offers online, and always verify the authenticity of information before taking any action.

For that,

1. Refrain from sharing highly personal information with anyone on social media.
2. Avoid disclosing your financial information, such as bank account numbers, credit card numbers, or ID numbers, to untrusted sources.
3. Never share your bank card or credit card secret numbers with anyone outside of trusted financial institutions.
4. Exercise caution when participating in online or social media contests promising incredible prizes. Be skeptical of claims that such gifts are offered by well-known companies. Prioritize verifying legitimacy to avoid falling victim to scams or harm.

5. If you've been deceived through social media, promptly inform the police and relevant agencies if you've suffered harm. Investigations into online or social media-based trafficking can lead to actions against these illegal and anti-social activities, with numerous legal provisions available for recourse.

However, many victims may refrain from disclosing or pursuing legal action due to shame or other factors. By speaking out about the harm you've experienced, you not only seek justice for yourself but also prevent others from falling victim to similar schemes.

Notes...