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Your business

Social media best practices for writers

In this excerpt from the upcoming Science Writers' Handbook, Emily Gertz advises journalists how to use social media in their work without hitting any career-damaging tripwires. Also, Sarah Webb reflects on how blogging became a central part of her writing business. The Science Writers' Handbook was funded by an [NASW Idea Grant](#), and this excerpt is viewable by NASW members only. You can pre-order the NASW-funded Handbook from the [NASW Bookstore](#). Congratulations to all of the SciLance authors on their forthcoming book and labor of love!

Chapter 24:

Social networks and the reputation economy

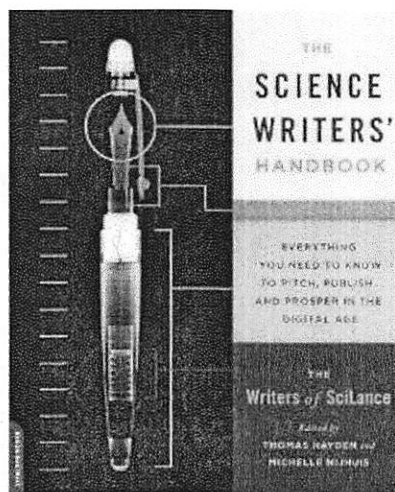
By Emily Gertz

Are digital social networks a means to advance our careers, or pathways to professional suicide? Valuable information resources, or bottomless time sinks? In a word: yes. Social networks can greatly enhance a science-writing career. They can build your visibility, promote your work, facilitate your reporting, and more. It's equally possible to use social networks in ways that can damage your credibility, or make it harder to get work. There's an economy on social networks, and its currency is reputation. And our reputation depends on our behavior, the quality of the information we share, and the media we use — words, photos, video, and links being the most common.

What follows are some basic guidelines to working in the digital reputation economy, both getting-started tips for beginners and tune-up suggestions for intermediate users. You can adapt how you use them to fit your own professional needs.

Given the current churn in the social network industry — after all, “would you follow me” today might be as irrelevant as MySpace tomorrow — I'll look at overall best practices for using social networks, rather than techniques specific to particular services.

Journalistic norms and social networks



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Social networks may be relatively new. But whether you're a journalist, public relations officer, or educator, the underlying professional norms of traditional science writing should also apply to social media. These include:

- Reporting or writing facts accurately, with verifiable sources to back up those facts
- Forming conclusions based on analysis of the facts, rather than on personal hopes, biases, or opinions
- Attributing quotes, or information reported by others, to the correct sources
- Being an observer rather than a participant in a story (or, in some instances, being transparent about your participation)

Unfortunately, communication on social media routinely violates these norms. Bull-headed opinionizing, ad hominem attacks, and wholesale invention of information have been features of online community discourse since the days of dial-in bulletin boards. Science writers who want to take advantage of social media's benefits without undercutting themselves, particularly at the outset of their careers, will need to learn to participate in social media without adopting the worst habits of its participants.

How can social networks help science writers?

Two decades into the era of the mainstream Internet, there's still no proof that using online social and sharing networks is crucial to the success of a writing career. Some SciLance members are definitely not true believers. "No one and nothing has convinced me yet that it's worth my time to use social media in my journalism," says Kendall Powell. "I cannot see how it would be anything but a time suck for me."

Others are sold. Hillary Rosner finds social networks "completely invaluable." "It's a way to connect to sources, other journalists, and editors. It's an extra, and really important, tool for circulating your work and your name," Hillary says. "I think it's especially powerful for young writers starting out, because it's a way to get your work in front of editors. It makes the journalism ecosystem a bit more of a meritocracy."

Social networks can connect you with people who are reading, thinking, and doing interesting and important things, and as such they can help you find ideas, meet colleagues and sources, and keep up with fast-breaking news. "I use LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and even Skype to search for information or people in much the same way that I use Google," says Hannah Hoag. "I have, in several cases, found sources through those media that I was unable to track down in other ways."

Other reasons to use social networks: practicing new reporting skills; "following" the information shared at events, such as conferences, that you cannot attend in person; or simply breaking the isolation that freelance writers often experience while working from home or solo offices. (Read more about loneliness, and how social media can and can't help, in Chapter 12.)

You are your own words: Creating an online persona

In traditional, so-called meatspace office politics, how you look and sound can mean as much as what you do and say (or how you say it). But on social networks there is little if any physical nuance — tone of voice, body language, or facial expression — to what you communicate. On social networks more than anywhere else, you are your own words.* Others will evaluate you based largely on the words and images you share, and how you share them.

Social networks are also characterized by the fast pace, frequency, and brevity of the messages they carry. There's no guarantee that any given person reading your blog entry or status update knows anything about you beyond the words on the screen at that moment. Although the same can be said of your words on the printed page, in that context there are likely to be more of your words in one place, all enhanced by the work of fact-checkers, editors, and graphic designers before they reach anyone's eyeballs.

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When readers, editors, and colleagues go looking for more information about you on social networks, you want them to learn things about you that will enhance your credibility. You can prepare for this ahead of time by developing a digital “persona”: a public personality similar but not identical to who you really are.

Consciously building a social media persona might strike some as disingenuous. But we do something very similar when engaging in the in-person networking that SciLancer Cameron Walker described in Chapter 20. When schmoozing at conferences, public readings, editorial meetings, and happy hours with colleagues, we emphasize the upbeat developments in our work and downplay the problems. Most of us avoid sensitive subjects, such as religion, politics, or our bank accounts, and instead “curate” the facts about ourselves that we share in public, even among close colleagues, to put our best selves forward. We try to be thoughtful about the boundary between professional and personal in what we say and how we behave.

*Credit and my appreciation to the online community The WELL and its longtime copyright policy, “You own your own words,” which I ripped off to make this point. Professionally oriented commentary, sharing, and reciprocity are all part of the online reputation economy. Some suggestions for professional messaging on social networks:

- Link to your own latest stories or other works.
- Congratulate colleagues on professional accomplishments.
- Link to news related to your beat, such as the potential impact of a new medical study or environmental regulation, that you find informative, well-written, or otherwise worthwhile to the people who follow you online. Pointing out what you found interesting is a good “value-add” that subtly emphasizes your expertise.
- Support your markets. I make a point of “following” publications I write for, and reposting links to their articles and features. This kind of mutual support is intrinsic to community building on social networks.
- Create live “coverage” of events related to your beat. Since I cover a lot of environmental stories, I like “live-tweeting” related events now and then, such as congressional hearings, even if I’m not on assignment.

A careful blend of personal and professional

You can choose to keep your social-media activity strictly professional, and some of us do. Blending personal updates with professional messaging is a bit riskier, but it can also build the depth of the connections you make on social networks.

Think about how you would do this in a face-to-face setting — at the aforementioned happy hour, for example — and use that experience as a guide. People have varied levels of interest and comfort with different subjects. You’re probably not going to offend anyone by sharing anecdotes about your adorable kid’s latest exploit, the tasty taco you just ate, or the latest win by your favorite sports team. But by the same token, people who read your social network postings because you’re a great science journalist may not be interested in your opinions about sports, food, or your saintly offspring. They may even find them irritating.

Achieving your optimum personal-professional balance on social networks may take some trial and error. If you’re really feeling at a loss for how to get started or continue, try picking out a few people on your networks you find the most fun, readable, or informative, and consciously observe their behavior and use of the media. Why do you like their updates? How would you describe their digital personas: Upbeat? Sardonic? Low-key? Excited? How often do they post, and how much do they talk about their own work in comparison to external events or the work of others?

You may divide your professional and personal personas by platform: Some journalists use Twitter for professional purposes, for instance, and reserve Facebook for sharing more personal information. Others organize their lists of social-media contacts so that only certain people can see their more personal updates. But keep in mind that these measures aren’t foolproof. Any information posted online, even to a restricted circle, can become public with a stray click or two.

So whether your post is personal or professional, be sure it's something you could live with if it roamed far from its intended audience.

What not to share

No matter how you shape your online persona, there are certain professional and personal matters that you should never share on social networks:

- Negative opinions about editors, colleagues, or anyone you've worked for. Those opinions will become part of your permanent reputation and possibly close doors to future work.
- Anything about personal finances.
- Gripes about your family.
- Details about assignments in progress, including travel updates.

If you feel you must post on a political issue, one tactic is to comment only on the policies or behavior involved, not on the particular people or political parties. Just remember that not everyone reading your message will detect this nuanced approach. "I'm much more cautious about linking to anything that's partisan or political," says SciLancer Bryn Nelson. "Even on Facebook, I limit my very occasional politically oriented posts to friends-only instead of to acquaintances." It's good advice: remember that not everyone in your network shares your assumptions or sense of humor, any more than everyone in your extended family does. If in doubt, leave it out.

Time management and social networking

Writers are great at finding ways to put off working. (See Chapter 11 on procrastination.) But now, with the Internet just a click away, the opportunities to kill time really do seem infinite. Along with all the online videos, recipe collections, and celebrity news, it's easy to spend hours on social networks, catching up on news posted by friends, family, or colleagues, following updates from live events, or sharing jokes. The key word here is "spend." Unless you happen to have a gig that pays you to be on social media all day (and I can personally attest that these do exist), there's a fine line between making a reasonable time investment in your digital network — and squandering your most productive hours.

I can't really define where that line is for you. Nor can I provide you with the willpower you'll sometimes need to tune out, turn off, and get back to work. But here are some ideas for managing your time and attention:

Make appointments. If you are the sort of person who can get online and then off again at an appointed time, you already know who you are. One way to use this talent with social networks, where the online audience and topics can shift quickly, is to schedule two or three brief sessions each day.

Sort your stream. For most of us, social networking is most satisfying and efficient when we break down the mass of people and entities we're following into different categories. Different networking platforms conceptualize sorting in different ways: lists, circles, and groups are some of the current modes. Use these tools to help you focus on one type or source of information at a time — say, personal friends or energy news.

Use integration and scheduling tools. Many social networks make their application programming interfaces, or APIs, available to outside programmers, who create tools that enhance use of the network. These tools are typically web browser add-ons, stand-alone computer applications/programs, or smart-phone/tablet apps. They range from improved visual interfaces, to applications that manage multiple networks at once, to programs that analyze activity. Some are free, while others charge a license or subscription fee. Useful time savers include tools that schedule updates ahead of time, and automatically forward messages that you post on one network to others.

Be selective. You don't need to be on every social network, or even half of them. Instead, think about what you want to accomplish, and decide which network is best suited to the task. "I use LinkedIn to see who's looking at me, like editors," says SciLance member Anne Sasso. "I also use it to monitor activity at clients. If someone starts to increase activity and build up their network, they're often worried about losing their job or about to jump to another job. That's often an opportunity for me to expand my client base."

Finding networks that fit your goals may take some research and experimentation. Pick a few networks to focus on, and downplay or close your other accounts. You can use the time you save to socialize the old-fashioned way.

Blogging: My digital calling card

By Sarah Webb

As a former scientist, I viewed blogging as an experiment. Would writing for free be a useful career move? I gave it a year. I launched a simple Wordpress blog and named it Webb of Science. I write about anything, as long as it had some connection to science.

Blogging quickly became a way to share the bits of stories that didn't fit into my finished articles. I posted extra anecdotes and reflected on my personal connection to stories, my experiences as a working scientist, and the challenges women face in male-dominated fields. Blogging helped keep my writing muscles limber and gave me a venue to develop kernels of ideas into something more substantial.

Over time, the traffic to my blog outpaced the page views on my professional website, and Webb of Science became an important part of my online presence. I merged my writing portfolio, bio, and other website information with the blog, making it a one-stop shop for people interested in me and my work. Traffic quickly grew, and though it remains a relatively small blog, I occasionally meet people who say, "Oh, you're Webb of Science."

Oh, that single year I envisioned? I've been blogging since 2009.

I find it incredibly gratifying to be recognized for work that doesn't involve an editor or a large corporate media operation. I built the blog, and I write the blog. I make no money directly from it, but Webb of Science is both my creative outlet and my digital calling card, and it has become part of the digital engine that powers my business.

SciLance says . . .

- On social networks, people evaluate you based on the information you share, and how you share it.
- Apply the same ethics and self-editing on social media that you do in your other work.
- Social media are great for promoting your own work, but you'll build your community by linking to work by others.
- Don't share details about assignments-in-progress, not even travel updates.
- Manage your social media time: Find tools and strategies that help you get the most out of digital networks without losing hours from your work day.

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RE: Social media best practices for writers



Written by [Jennifer B. Freeman](#) on Apr 11, 2013 [Blog](#) [+](#) [Follow](#)

Thanks for these well-written observations! I agree with the concept of social media as digital calling card. I also support Emily's point about creating online personas. For me, the ticket is choosing narrow topics as a focus, which allows me to get some depth into brief posts. So my twitter feed is @Greengotham, featuring environmental news having to do with New York City, and on Pinterest I post as <http://pinterest.com/climatehealth/>, featuring content on health-climate connections.

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