

Social Media Practices

A DART CENTER TIP SHEET FOR COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISORS/EDITORS AND STUDENT JOURNALISTS

In today's world, social media is one of the most popular ways through which the public stays informed, particularly in breaking news situations and following traumatic events. At the same time, information disseminated through social media can be problematic, as misinformation can spread at lightning speed.

As a student journalist or college newspaper advisor or editor, it's important to know basic practices for using social media for newsgathering and reporting on traumatic events. The following tips offer some important ways that social media can be used responsibly and ethically when covering a traumatic event.

PREPARATION

Curate source lists on Facebook and Twitter ahead of time. You should have local, state and regional sources in your digital toolbox that relate to natural disaster, crisis or traumatic events. Compiling these lists ahead of time will save you valuable time when a traumatic event occurs; they will allow you to quickly access sources and information when you need it most.

Don't forget mental health and wellness sources. Identify sources for mental health and wellness ahead of time that are local, state and regional in scope. When a traumatic event occurs, people may be looking for help and/or exhibiting forms of traumatic stress and/or PTSD and providing these kinds of sources can be helpful for the public.

[Twitter Alerts program.](#) Twitter has created a program that informs individuals when a crisis or disaster hits their area and sends informational tweets. [The program is free to join.](#) Several national and federal agencies have signed up to be part of the Twitter Alerts program. You may want to consider whether it makes sense for your college publication to enroll in the program.

NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING STAGE

Identify the major hashtags. When a traumatic event occurs, people will take to social media to inform their friends, colleagues and loved ones of what has happened. In these moments, hashtags will be formed, with usually two or three surfacing within the first half-hour. It's important to keep track of these conversations, and if you post, use the same hashtags as most people will come together around common hashtags.

The search function is your friend. When gathering information during a traumatic event, you will have several ways to find a source. Here are a few:

- **[Use the advanced search function on Twitter:](#)** this will allow you to find people in general or find people by location, by date and by hashtag.
- **[Use the open graph search on Facebook:](#)** this will allow you to search people, interests, locations and photos.
- **[Locate people through Foursquare:](#)** this geo-location service allows you to locate people by specific area. This can be helpful if you are trying to identify where people may or may not be congregating when a traumatic event has occurred. You can then go to that location/scene and find out if there is anyone there to interview.

Help people find each other. During traumatic events, people may be separated. You can be a resource to them by helping them locate one other. [Google Person Finder](#) provides a mechanism for people to report those who may be missing or need to connect with loved ones or friends.

Organize the conversation. Using tools such as Tweetdeck or Tweetbot will help you arrange and keep track of multiple hashtags or Twitter handles. They can help you organize conversations so you can focus on what is being discussed and how you want to proceed – whether to corroborate information, identify potential sources or provide information to the public.

Be professional. When using any social media platform, remember that the information you post is a reflection of you and your publication. Keep your personal opinions and feelings out of the social media sphere. Tell the story as it develops in a professional, ethical and humane manner.

Be safe and tell others the same. During particular crises or disasters, [Facebook has a “be safe” option](#) that allows individuals to mark their status as safe. If you are at the scene, this can be a helpful tool to use to inform your editor/advisor that you are safe. This can also be helpful for others if they are seeking ways to inform their friends, colleagues and loved ones that they are not in danger.

VERIFICATION PROCESS

Social media can provide a wealth of sources and information during a traumatic event, but you should be skeptical of what you come across just as you would with any typical source. Misinformation, rumors and lies disseminate quickly on social media platforms and can spread like wildfire. Here are some tips to help corroborate the information you find:

- **Reach out to the person behind the account.** Ask to contact them via phone for follow up. Don't just take their tweets and profile as fact. They could be a spambot or fake account.
- **Google the name of the person and/or Twitter handle** and evaluate the results.
- **Review the person's social media account** – look at their posts, see how often they tweet, look at what they tweet about, see how many followers they have and who they are being followed by – these are cues that will help you assess the legitimacy of the person behind the social media account.
- **Use tools like Pipl or Spokeo to verify identity.**
- **Corroborate image information.** Images can be made up, recreated from the past or manipulated, and then posted on social media during a traumatic event. Corroborate images with other sources to make sure they are legitimate. You can Google the image or use the following websites that help identify manipulations or fakes: [FotoForensics](#) or [Regex](#)

Don't post unless you are 100% sure and are willing to stand behind your post if you are called into your editor or advisor's office to provide evidence that the information is true.

Don't rush to be first! It's better to be right even if it takes more time. The public will quickly lose their trust in you if you post anything inaccurate on social media platforms, especially during a traumatic event. Make sure you have vetted your information before posting it. If it takes you 15 minutes or an hour longer than it takes the rest, that's okay. You can stand behind the post knowing that the information is accurate.

If you don't have the information, don't make assumptions. Only offer what you know. During breaking news or traumatic events, reporters can get caught up in assuming or predicting what happened or could happen. Avoid this at all costs.

Be thoughtful about what you post. Remember that during traumatic events, people have a heightened sense of emotion and feeling. They can be impacted by how they receive information of what has occurred. Think carefully about how you write your post, what images or video you include, as well as what you redirect to via hyperlink.

Don't create unnecessary chaos or agitation.

Situations can escalate quickly on social media and create an atmosphere of helplessness, grief, and chaos. Make sure that what you post on social media doesn't enter this realm as it doesn't help anyone, least of whom those impacted by a traumatic event. As a journalist, you are there to inform and provide resources to the public, not to create unnecessary panic.

Your posts on social media have an impact. Just as a full-length story or broadcast can impact a community during a traumatic event, 140 characters or a sentence or two on Facebook can also have an impact. Research has shown that those exposed to traumatic news coverage can experience traumatic stress or that it can trigger emotions or feelings tied to trauma. Information posted on social media may seem fleeting, but it does remain on the digital platform forever and can have a lasting impact on the community.

Be cautious and thoughtful about how you use the social media platform during traumatic events.

More resources:

- [Crisis Reporting in the Age of Social Media](#)
- [Social Media and Disaster Preparedness](#)
- [Using Social Media Before, During, and After a Natural Disaster](#)
- [Tweeting Breaking News Events](#)
- [Facebook Best Practices for Journalists](#)