

Subject/Topic: Social Media Policy and Guidelines
Topic Category: Information Technology
Department Lead: Office of the County Manager
Last Revised: 07-30-09

Summary: These are the official social media guidelines for Arlington County employees. We expect all who participate in social media on behalf of Arlington to understand and follow these guidelines. These guidelines will continually evolve as new technologies and social networking tools emerge — so routinely check to make sure you're up to date.

Purpose: We encourage you to engage with the public through social media outlets. This document outlines the rules and guidelines you should follow when working in social media.

Scope: Applies to all County employees or contractors creating or contributing to blogs, wikis, social networks, virtual worlds, or any other kind of social media both on and off www.arlingtonva.us (and our related websites).

Policy Detail:

Social media examples include blogs, wikis, Facebook and Twitter accounts, etc.

Social media = interaction

New and emerging online platforms are fundamentally changing the way the world works, offering us new ways to collaborate and to engage with our constituents. These are new models for interaction that complement the “Arlington Way.” Ignoring social media platforms is not an option. As Arlington County employees – and part of the Arlington community – social media must be built into our business processes and responsibilities.

We are working toward an Arlington County website that offers readers multiple ways to receive County/agency updates via various avenues, e.g., YouTube, [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), RSS feeds, etc. We also are working toward County communications that work across platforms, that are interactive and that engage our publics. Here are just a few examples of social media use around the County:

- **Help achieve business goals:** [Arlington Police on MySpace](#) to discourage would-be predators; Twitter for Inauguration Day transportation updates; surveillance video on YouTube to help catch suspected criminals.
- **Monitor and respond to hot topics and emerging issues:** Post a comment on the Save Gulf Branch Facebook site linking to County fact sheet details. Add comments on a Smart Growth blog about the County's new documentary film. Post stories on the Fresh AIRE or CommuterPage blog.
- **Proactively share stories to address current issues, projects, & success stories:** Short video update on Arlington Blvd./Glebe Road overpass problem; video “Crane’s View;” last Metro bus leaves Ballston bus yard.
- **Reach new people and reach out in new ways:** Go to where the people are. Reach new audiences and new demographics.

It is essential that communications and community engagement be **part of the business planning** for every project, business unit, and department.

Why use social media?

Social media platforms offer many advantages – and help us open up government to encourage citizen participation, strengthen our democracy and support a civic culture.

- Increase transparency of government.
- Enable rapid response.
- Identify trends before they take off.
- Listen to residents, customers – enabling us improve County services, programs, practices.
- Reach out – go to the conversation, don't wait for it to come to us.
- Respond directly to the community without a filter.
- Expand communication tools with vast distribution system for content.
- Answer what folks want to know.
- Fill the vacuum being created by the death of newspapers.

Rules of engagement when using social media

- **Use official accounts for official business.** If you're conducting official County business, use one of our official accounts. We have active accounts with YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, and Facebook. Be sure to use your County email address (not personal email).
- **Write what you know.** Ensure you write and post about your area of expertise, as it relates to your position in the County. **Write in the first person.** If you publish outside the County, use a disclaimer like this: *"The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent Arlington County's positions, strategies or opinions."*
- **Be transparent.** Your honesty, or dishonesty, will be quickly noticed in social media environments. When blogging or commenting about your work at Arlington County, use your real name, identify that you work for the County, and be clear about your role.
- **Perception is reality.** In online social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred. Just by identifying yourself as an Arlington employee, you are creating perceptions about the County. Be sure all content associated with you is consistent with your work and with the County's values and professional standards.
- **Be judicious.** All statements must be true and not misleading and all claims must be substantiated and approved. What you publish will be around for a long time, so consider the content carefully. **Don't publish anything you wouldn't want your mom, coworker, clergy or supervisor to read!** [Also see the County's [Code of Ethics](#) on AC Source]

- **Your responsibility.** What you write is ultimately your responsibility. Participation in social computing on behalf of the County is not a right and it therefore needs to be taken seriously and with respect. When responding, be sure you're the correct person in your department. Know and follow the **County's Media Policy** (on AC Source; see the "[Document & Resource Library](#)" in the Communications Resources section).
- **It's a conversation.** Talk to your readers like you'd talk to real people in professional situations. Avoid bureaucratic or formal language. Don't be afraid to bring in your own personality. Consider open-ended content that invites response and comments. Stay professional – don't be combative.
- **Be open.** One of the great benefits of social media is the interaction between us (you) and our customers. Take in ideas. Share relevant feedback & input with relevant colleagues. When in doubt, talk to your communications liaison or department director.
- **Are you adding value?** There are millions of words out there. The best way to get yours read is to write stuff people will value. Communication should help our residents, employees, and others in the region. It should be thought-provoking and build a sense of community.
- **Did you screw up?** If you make a mistake, admit it. Be upfront and quick with your correction. If you're posting to a blog, you may choose to modify an earlier post — just make it clear that you have done so.
- **If it gives you pause, pause.** If you're about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, don't shrug it off and hit 'send.' Take a minute to review these guidelines and try to figure out what's bothering you, then fix it. If you're still unsure, check with your manager. Ultimately, the decision about what you publish is yours — as is the responsibility. So be sure.
- **Follow the rules.** Employees who fail to comply with these policies are subject to disciplinary action, including dismissal.

Topic taboos

Do not write any content or postings that involve or are related to the following:

- Items involved in litigation or could be in the future.
- Nonpublic information of any kind.
- Illegal or banned substances and narcotics.
- Pornography or other offensive illegal materials.
- Defamatory, libelous, offensive or demeaning material. Don't engage in a combative exchange.
- Private/personal matters of yourself or others.
- Disparaging/threatening comments about or related to anyone.
- **Personal, sensitive or confidential information of any kind.**

Getting started – creating a social media forum

All requests for new social media platforms must be coordinated through your department's communications liaison and the Office of Communications (in the County Manager's Office). Depending on the nature of the request, the Department of Technology Services, the Internet

Policy Group Working Group, and the Technology Leadership Committee may also need to be involved.

- First step – identify **what goal you are trying to achieve**. What are the best tools/vehicles for you to achieve your goal? In other words, don't set up a Facebook page just to do it ... make sure that is the best solution to help you achieve your business goal.
- To develop your communications plan – including the best communications vehicles for you to use – consult with your department's **communications manager**. For a listing, visit the [Document & Resource Library](#) on AC Source.
- In the resource library, you'll also find a listing of all available **communications vehicles** in Arlington County Government, including Arlington Public Schools.
- If your communications plan includes social media, **first consider using our existing platforms** ([Facebook](#), Twitter, etc.) before creating your own.
- Some County departments and groups have **well-established, successful social media presences** and you should take advantage of their knowledge and experiences.
- All County organizations should **check in with the CMO Office of Communications** on any major new initiatives.

Keep in mind

- Departments are ultimately responsible for establishing, publishing, and updating their pages on social media sites. When possible, content should always link back to the County website for more information.
- If possible, on social networking sites, departments should provide a link to the main County pages. This includes, but is not limited to, "friend" requests and video subscriptions. Also encourage other Arlington related platforms to cross-link back to us.
- The County may monitor content on social media sites to ensure adherence with the guidelines in this document – and ensure consistent countywide messages. The Communications Office retains the authority to remove pages or close sites if necessary.
- Identify your social media site as "an official Arlington County site," and include the County logo, according to the [Graphic Standards Manual](#).
- Sometimes we just have to be brave and try something new. Sometimes we should go with the "tin standard" and not wait for gold.

Related Information:

- [AC Source Communications Area](#) – main source of Arlington County communications resources
- www.socialmediatoday.com – network of communicators working in web 2.0
- www.ragan.com – a site for professional communicators
- www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/other_tech.shtml – federal government website
- Jeffrey Levy on Twitter (@levyj413) – Head of web communications for EPA and a longtime Arlington resident. Tweets exclusively about web 2.0 ideas and issues.

- www.govloop.com – A networking/info sharing group exclusively for government communicators. You must be authenticated as a government employee.
- www.webcontent.gov – best practices in government websites
- www.addthis.com and www.sharethis.com – tools and widgets to share content

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Approved: _____

Ron Carlee, County Manager

July 30, 2009

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