Thoughts on the use of social media by interpreters

Don't throw professional values out the window when you're having a good time online.

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More and more interpreters (community, conference, court, liaison, medical, military, sign language interpreters...) use social media to communicate and exchange opinions and resources. Social media are convenient and fun, but it’s important to remember that we, interpreters, are “bound by the strictest secrecy [...] towards all persons and with regard to all information disclosed in the course of the practice of the profession at any gathering not open to the public”[ii].

As a technology enthusiast, I’ve tried to find the right balance between online sociability and confidentiality. I’d like to share some of my thoughts in the hope that they’ll prove useful to those of you active on the social media or thinking of becoming so.

I am convinced that interpreters can use social media in a positive way to showcase our profession as well as to communicate, interact and share points of view, best practices, interesting articles, personal glossaries and so on. However, we run the risk of damaging our profession through inappropriate use of the same.

For starters

You should certainly feel free to make use of all available social media channels for private and/or professional purposes. When doing so, however, it is advisable to separate your private (friends, family) and professional lives (colleagues, clients). To this end, you may wish to create different profiles (e.g. by using different user names).

If you prefer to maintain a single page or user name, it is still be possible to separate private and professional activities. Many social media allow you to share content selectively: in Facebook there are groups; in Twitter, lists; in Google+, circles; etc.

What are the do’s?

Use social media to exchange experiences, foster reflection, or point out what’s happening in our profession. The most important thing is to be honest and trustworthy, respecting your audience and colleagues.

It is entirely advisable to protect your own privacy and that of others. To this end, don’t forget to read the terms of use and configure privacy settings (and recheck them periodically) to suit your
needs before embarking on the social media boat.

Now that you’re done with the basic settings, start sharing interesting content. This can be done without violating confidentiality. For instance, you can post about your work in general terms without mentioning specific circumstances.

You may like, circle, add people to your lists or groups and chat with them as you wish, using common sense and moderation. Remember, however, that the people, companies or brands you are linked to project a composite portrait of who you are.

Of course, there are many ways in which social media can be used to help you prepare for an assignment (for instance, you can ask your social community for help tracking down that glossary on fisheries). Take full advantage of the opportunities for learning and information exchange that the social media offer. Also, they help you to maintain contacts with colleagues and clients after an event and build a sense of community.

And the don’ts?

The Internet amplifies everything you say. A general rule of thumb would be to avoid posting online anything that you wouldn’t want to see printed in a newspaper. If you want to shelter your family, share personal details or family pictures only with friends and relatives.

Sharing negative professional experiences or views on a meeting or speakers, or even posting meeting documents or pictures of the event, can damage the public perception of the profession, which is based on the discretion and respect for confidentiality of all interpreters. Moreover, you shouldn’t mention client names without their express permission, and pictures taken at an event should only be shared with the prior consent of the client - and of your colleagues, where applicable.

Don’t share potentially embarrassing information about yourself or write that you dislike or “don’t know anything” about a specific topic (e.g. “accounting”); the image this transmits to others may well not be the one you intended. Remember - humor doesn’t always come across online, especially to people who don’t know you well.

Be wary of sharing your location publicly and make sure to turn off the location services of the social media channels you use. Out-of-home/holiday status updates or “working-abroad” posts are an invitation for thieves to pay you a visit, especially if your home address can be easily found on the Internet.

Be aware of the fact that music videos, movie segments, lyrics, drawings, texts etc. are protected by copyright laws. Buildings (including interiors) and artistic works such as paintings, sculptures, craft items, architectural works, clothing, etc. are also protected by copyright. Always respect intellectual property rights; obtain prior permission from the owner. If in doubt, it’s preferable to abstain from using such material.

While working?

Avoid using social media while on duty (in the booth, hospital, courtroom...). If you feel the need to catch up during the workday, do so during your lunch break or at the end of your shift.

Even brief status updates made while working or innocent comments like "wow, this meeting is extremely complex" or "still in the booth and I’m totally exhausted" could be detrimental to your professional reputation. It is, after all, your responsibility to focus on the meeting or conference from beginning to end. Your client may find out that you have been active on the social media during
working hours, and this may leave them with the impression that you have not fulfilled your contractual obligations.

So...

Don’t hesitate to take advantage of today’s online communication tools. With a bit of forethought and common sense, you can get the most out of them.

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[i] Social media are technology-based communication channels between groups or individuals, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Digg, Delicious, Foursquare, etc. But also more traditional platforms or channels like Wikipedia, e-mail, news groups or Internet fora can be regarded as social media.

[ii] AIIC Code of professional ethics, II, Article 2, 1.

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Further reading

COMM Collection N°21, Recommandations pour l'utilisation des médias sociaux, Guide pour les communicateurs fédéraux.

Heads of Interpreting Services (HINTS), Declaration on the use of Social Media.

Hofert, Svenja, Die Marke Ich im Internet: Wie bin ich privat und trotzdem professionell?

Interpreting.info, What are the DOs and DON'Ts on Facebook for a professional conference interpreter?

Interpreting.info, Is it right to tweet or do social media work from the booth while I'm not interpreting i.e. in the break?

Interpreting.info, Is it OK to take pictures of the conference rooms I'm working in?

Recommended citation format: