



DON'T FEED THE TROLLS

**AND OTHER ADVICE FOR GOVERNMENT
SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGERS**

by Melissa Holt



“With more voices in the discussion, facilitated by the internet, negative elements have become more visible/audible in civil discourse. This could be seen as the body politic releasing toxins – and as they are released, we can deal with them and hopefully mitigate their effect.”

- Jon Lebkowsky, CEO of Polycot Associates



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Sometimes People Care Really Loudly

It's a normal day at the office. You've said hello to your co-workers, taken a sip of coffee, and opened your organization's Facebook page, ready to serve your community by informing and engaging them. You post something seemingly benign, not expecting many reactions to it. Surprise! It's only 8:45 in the morning and the post has already been taken over by negativity, arguing, and a dash of pure craziness. Oh joy.

With 73% of Americans using social media and the majority of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat users visiting social media sites daily, social media has become a modern town square where people share ideas and information. Sometimes loudly. And with gusto. And often directed toward government entities. As the great Leslie Knope said, "What I hear when I'm being yelled at is people caring loudly." We want our residents to care and be engaged, but opening our content to commenters means opening it to trolls, too.

When negative comments take over a government social media page or when a troll is unrelenting, what should government communicators do? You're doing important work and your community needs you. But sometimes, the negativity can feel overwhelming and the urge to block users and delete their comments is hard to withstand. You want to do what's right. But what is that?

This booklet will explain why some people behave badly on the internet, how to prevent it, and First Amendment considerations for government social media accounts dealing with negative comments.

“Jack Dorsey said it best: ‘Abuse is not civil discourse.’ As more of our lives move online, people will naturally gravitate, as they do in the real world, to healthy, positive relationships. The success of online communities will hinge on the extent to which they are able to prevent the emergence of a hostile environment in the spaces under their stewardship. Algorithms will play an increasing role, but probably never fully replace the need for human curators in keeping our online communities civil.”

- Demian Perry, Mobile Director at NPR



People Behaving Badly



Toxic Online Disinhibition

Online discussions often crescendo into rudeness, fighting, and name-calling, among other things. Why is this? Put on your psychologist hat for just a minute.

Psychologist John Suler coined the term “the online disinhibition effect” (ODE) to describe how people behave online, which can contradict their behavior in the real world. Toxic online disinhibition is manifested through behaviors such as criticism, rudeness, and the use of threatening language.

Why do we need to know this? Understanding toxic ODE is important because government communicators often receive the brunt of people’s negativity and criticism through social media channels. By learning about what causes toxic ODE, we can prevent or mitigate it and instead encourage civil discourse via social media.

What Causes Toxic ODE?

Think about your cousin Fred who says rude things at the Thanksgiving table. When Fred thoughtlessly makes a comment, Aunt Mary gives him an angry look, Cousin Tom rolls his eyes, Uncle John turns red, and Grandma slams her fork down. All this non-verbal feedback alerts Fred to the fact that he has, once again, stuck his foot in his mouth. This is what’s missing on the internet.

Because the internet is a place without physical or social boundaries, social norms no longer regulate people’s behavior. Social norms are those unwritten rules of social

behavior that most of us follow. Combine this with lack of non-verbal cues, anonymity, a sense of invisibility, asynchronicity, and the minimization of status and authority and you have the perfect storm for disinhibited behavior.

Anonymity: I can be as anonymous as I want to be on the internet.

Invisibility: No one can see me behind this computer screen and I don't have to maintain eye contact, which gives me the courage to say things I wouldn't normally say in real life.

Asynchronicity: The fact that we're not all online at the exact same time gives me the feeling of being able to throw my feelings out into the open and then run away. It's much safer than in-person interactions.

Minimization of status and authority: No one is the boss of the internet. Because we're all equal, I'm more willing to misbehave or speak out in ways I wouldn't in the real world.

Two common forms of toxic online disinhibition are flaming and trolling. **Flaming** involves the use of aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, use of capital letters, and increased use of question marks and exclamation points. **Trolling** is posting offensive or unconstructive messages to create arguments or start debates, causing meaningless disruption and/or triggering conflict for their own amusement.

Is It All in My Head?

The Prominence of Toxic Online Disinhibition

As government social media managers, it can feel like we see the worst sides of people. But does toxic online disinhibition happen as often as we think? Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

The Pew Research Center reports that 66% of Americans have witnessed online harassing behavior directed toward others and 41% have been subjected to it themselves. One study of comments from the Arizona Daily Star found that more than one out of every five comments was uncivil. In addition, Microsoft's Digital Civility Index is currently at 70%, the highest reading of online incivility since the survey began in 2016.

What can be done to prevent toxic online disinhibition and instead promote civility?



“Online we express hate and disgust we would never express offline, face-to-face. It seems that social control is lacking online. We do not confront our neighbours/ children/friends with antisocial behaviour.

We will see the rise of the social robots, technological tools that can help us act as polite, decent social beings. But more than that we need to go back to teaching and experiencing morals in business and education: back to behaving socially.”

- Marcel Bullinga, Trendwatcher and Technology Futures Speaker

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Preventing Toxic Online Disinhibition by Promoting Civility

Now that we know what causes toxic online disinhibition and how much it's happening, what can we do to prevent it? Research indicates that promoting civility can prevent toxic online disinhibition. Sure, online arguments catch more attention, but civil discussion leads to better conversations and encourages participation. Instead of fighting bad online behavior, we should create pre-conditions that promote civil discussion.

We're Watching

Remind commenters that someone is watching by participating in the discussions occurring on your organization's page. If possible, the participating representative should be someone who has a recognizable position within your organization. This will cue a response to the person's power and status, removing the internet's effect of minimizing status and authority. Also, a recognizable organizational representative may be more trusted and viewed as an opinion leader, which is more effective at changing behaviors and group norms.

We're Engaged!

Engage with commenters by responding to legitimate questions and asking them related questions in response. Take time to share more information about a topic by sharing related links. Also, highlight and encourage comments that meet the criteria for good discussion. Focus on the positive!

Education as Prevention

In addition to making changes to how we manage our social media pages, studies show that creating educational programs that teach ethical media behaviors, empathy, and how to react to incivility can be helpful, especially among younger users.

There are a number of organizations that have created resources and toolkits to help educate communities on the importance of civil discourse both online and offline:

- National Association of Counties: <https://www.naco.org/resources/civility>
- Microsoft: www.microsoft.com/en-us/digital-skills/digital-civility
- The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: www.asha.org/About/Civility-Resources/
- The CyberSmile Foundation: www.cybersmiledigitalcivility.com
- The City of Boston: www.boston.gov/news/encouraging-online-civility

Share these resources with your community or create your own. Like the City of Boston, it may be helpful to create a dedicated page on your website for promoting civility in public discourse. Also, since younger users are the most affected by this type of education, work with local school systems to educate middle and high schoolers on the importance of being kind online.



You Can't Block Me

Public Forums & First Amendment Considerations

For those in the private sector, moderating social media accounts may mean deleting flaming or trolling posts and blocking followers who repeatedly post such content. As much as we'd like to hit the "delete" or "block" buttons, government communicators must instead consider public forum doctrine and First Amendment considerations, which include protection from government suppression of expression, speaking freely, and advocating ideas.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

- First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America

Public Forum Doctrine

A public forum is a place open to expression protected under the First Amendment. There are three types of public forums: a traditional public forum, which includes places like streets, parks, and sidewalks that have been devoted to debate and assembly; a designated public forum, which is when a public agency opens a nonpublic forum for public discourse, such as university meeting facilities, school board meetings, and municipal theaters; and a nonpublic forum, which is government-owned property opened for a purpose that does not involve speech, such as a

Remember, all negativity doesn't fall into the realm of trolling. Sometimes people have a genuine issue or they've just had a bad day. Also, even if people post something we don't like, they have a right to freedom of speech.

mailbox. Included in the designated public forum category is a subcategory called a limited public forum, which refers to a forum that has been opened by a public agency to certain groups or topics.

Why does it matter which type of public forum social media falls under?

Determining the type of public forum dictates the restrictions government can place on speech. Because government social media pages allow others to post material on their pages (such as comments, likes, and shares), then an argument can be made that the agency has created a designated public forum, falling under the limited public forum sub-category. In a designated public forum, the government may only institute content-neutral restrictions on speech that are based on the way the forum is structured.

Since an argument can be made that government social media accounts are public forums, it is best for government social media managers to proceed as though they already are. As such, the public's comments on government social media pages should not be deleted or their accounts blocked, as this would be a violation of their First Amendment right to free speech. The Supreme Court has ruled that "the availability of such forums in which individuals are ensured the meaningful right and opportunity to express themselves has been central to freedom of expression and to democratic self-government from time immemorial and as an attribute of national citizenship."



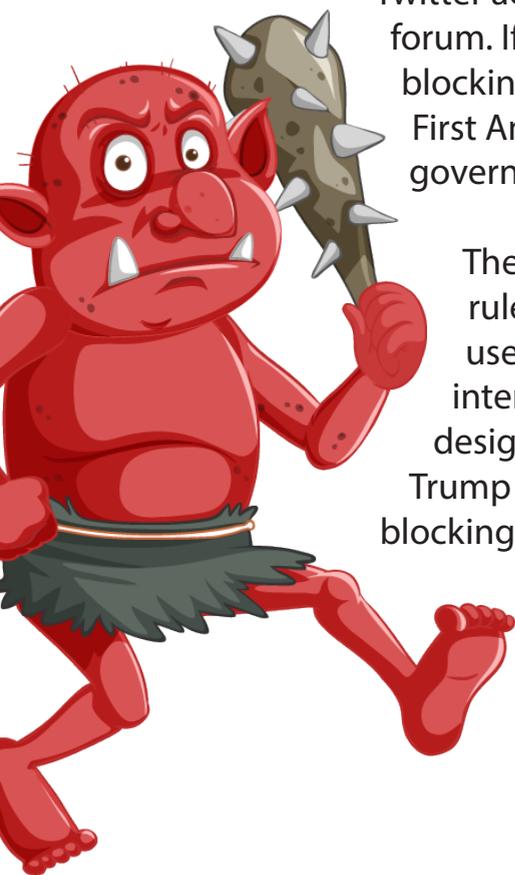
You Can't Block Me

What Happens if I Block Someone?

Let's take a look at the 2017 case of *Knight Institute v. Trump*, in which the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University sued President Donald Trump on behalf of seven Twitter users. They argued that because of the way President Trump uses his Twitter account @realDonaldTrump, he created a designated public forum. If @realDonaldTrump is a designated public forum, then blocking users due to the content of their speech violates their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and to petition the government for redress of grievances.

The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, holding that President Trump's use of @realDonaldTrump constitutes state action and the interactive spaces associated with his tweets comprise a designated public forum. As such, the Court ruled that President Trump engaged in impermissible viewpoint discrimination by blocking the seven plaintiffs.

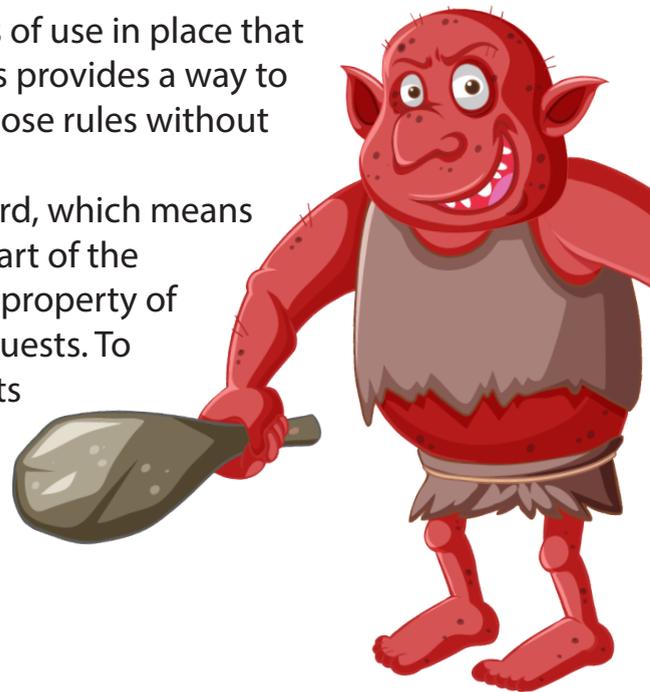
This is just one of many recent lawsuits regarding social media as a public forum.



How Do I Protect My Organization?

We obviously don't want to make our organizations targets for lawsuits and we don't want to violate anyone's First Amendment rights. What are some things we should do to protect our organizations?

- Don't block users.
- Don't delete users' comments.
- Have a social media policy or social media terms of use in place that state acceptable user behaviors and speech. This provides a way to preserve the intended use of the forum and impose rules without violating the First Amendment.
- Communication via social media is a public record, which means your organization's posts and citizen posts are part of the public record. Public records are considered the property of the people and are subject to public records requests. To preserve the public record, don't delete any posts or comments, including your organization's.



Now What?

Do I Have to Respond to Them?

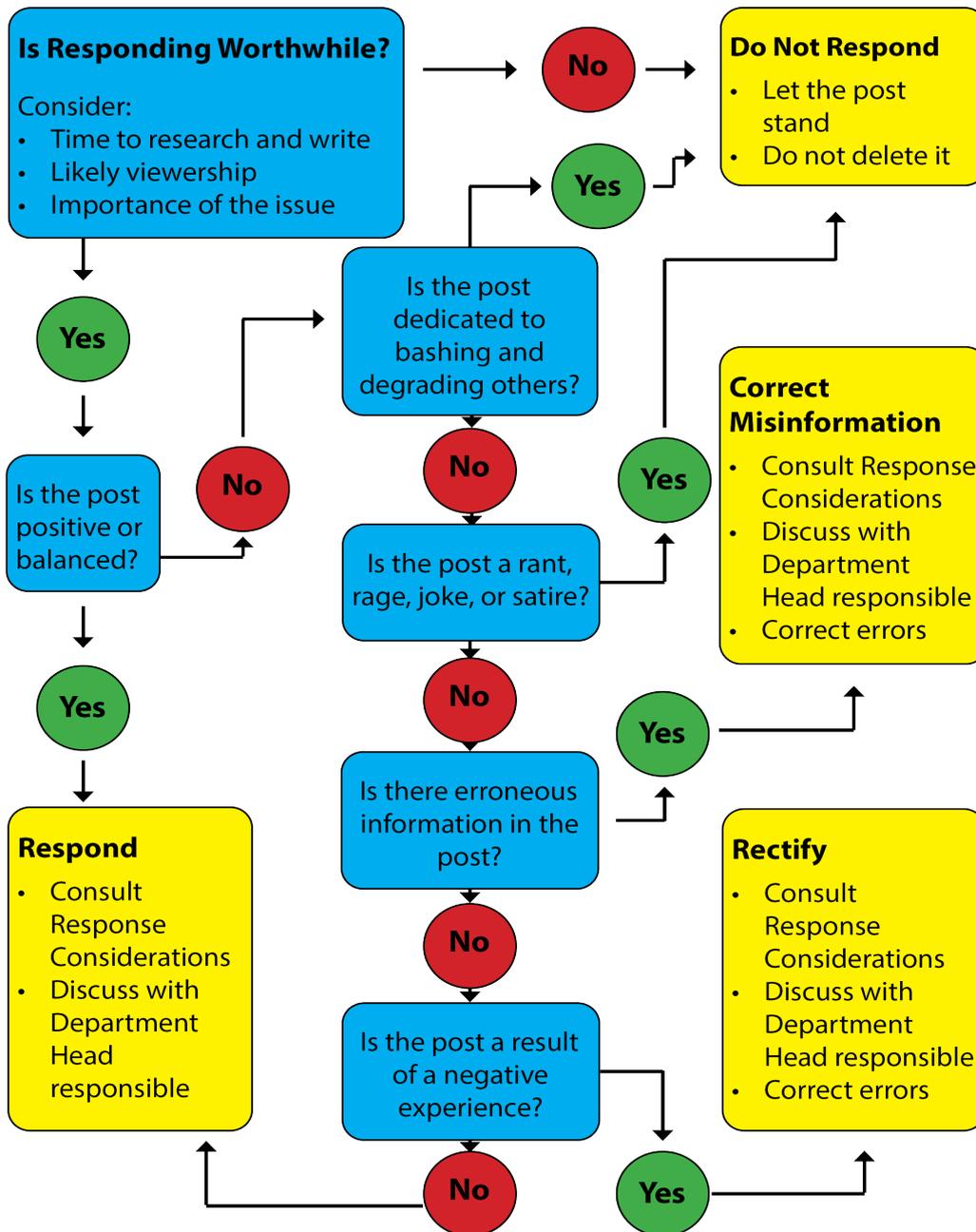
We've talked about what makes people behave badly on the internet, how to put pre-conditions in place to keep it from happening, and that we can't delete posts or block people (booo!). So do we need to respond to the negative comments?

According to the Department of the Interior, these are important things to consider before responding to a post:

- The time it takes to research and write
- Likely viewership
- Importance of the issue

Take a look at the next page for a handy matrix on how/when to respond to comments and posts on social media.





Adapted from the Department of the Interior

Now What?

Keep Calm and Carry On

When responding to comments on your organization's social media posts, be sure to:

- Respect your time - Don't spend more time than the response is worth.
- Use a professional tone - Respond in a tone that reflects positively on your organization.
- Cite your sources - Stick to facts and cite your sources by including hyperlinks, images, video, etc.
- Ask for help - If you're unsure how to respond to a comment, ask the Department Head who is responsible for that area or ask your Manager.
- Don't argue - Respond and provide the commenter a way to contact your organization offline.
- Get expert advice - Any comments about threatening or illegal activity should be reported to your city attorney and police department. Take a screenshot of the post to have as a record in case the post is later deleted.



Let it Go

Sometimes, the best thing to do is just let a comment or post stand. Use the response matrix on page 17 of this guide and if the answer is “Do Not Respond”, then don’t respond. Your fans may take on the work of correcting/arguing with the commenter, but you don’t have to.

What is a troll hungry for more than anything? Usually, attention. **So, don’t feed the trolls!**





**TROLL
FEEDING**