

# **The Digital Persona: Ethics of Social Media in Personal and Professional Capacities**

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## **Introduction**

Social media is composed of networks of online communication that facilitate the formation of communities for the purposes of sharing ideas and content (Merriam-Webster 2018). As of January 10, 2018, 69% of American adults used social media (Pew Research Center 2018). The most active age group on social media is 18-29 year olds, boasting 88% usership. As Millennials and Generation Z enter the workforce, it has become increasingly important to examine the ethical implications of social media usage. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Code of Ethics is an agreement among professional engineers to adhere to higher standards than legally required. It has acted as a guideline for ethical practices for over a century, originally adopted in 1914 (ASCE 2017). However, as times have changed, so has engineering practice. The introduction of the Internet has muddled distinctions between personal and professional life, which in the past was more clearly defined. No longer does professional activity occur purely in the office, and personal at home. With increased expectations of constant professional availability comes increased difficulty in differentiating between personal and professional life online. While the Code of Ethics is incredibly clear in terms of ethical expectations relating to professional practice, the relation of the code to personal social media usage falls within a “gray” area. Engineers have greater responsibilities to the well-being of their communities than most citizens, and thus possess higher ethical obligations. It is imperative for the honor of the civil engineering profession that engineers are viewed as trustworthy and fair individuals. While a more distinct differentiation between personal and professional activities by the ASCE may help to eradicate the ambiguity of personal usage, the moral and ethical expectations of engineers should not be lowered for social media.

## **Personal and Professional Content**

When working with the ASCE Code of Ethics, it is essential to define professional activity, as the majority of the code focuses on a purely professional scope. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a profession is “a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation” (Merriam-Webster 2018). Personal, on the other hand, is much more broad. Merriam-Webster defines personal as “of, relating to, or affecting a particular person” (Merriam-Webster 2018), while the Oxford English Dictionary defines personal as “of or concerning one’s private life, relationships, and emotions rather than one’s career or public life.” (Oxford Dictionaries 2018). Since the ethical code in question was produced by the American Society of Civil Engineers, the professional activities being referred to are within the field of civil engineering. Although someone who is a civil engineer may play golf, a sport which has many professionals, the engineer’s general involvement with golf as a hobby is not in question in regards to the ASCE. The same logic should hold while online: individuals who use social media to post or interact with content unrelated to engineering, for the most part, are considered to be acting in a personal capacity.

This distinction may prove to be a slippery slope in situations where association as a professional engineer is questionable. A common online spot where this may be misconstrued is LinkedIn. According to LinkedIn’s about page, they are “the world’s largest professional network with

more than 546 million users in more than 200 countries and territories worldwide” (LinkedIn 2018). From this, it can be assumed that all accounts on LinkedIn must belong to professionals, and those who are civil engineers are thus bound to uphold the ethical code. However, LinkedIn is used by individuals with personal accounts. Individuals are not professionals in fields outside of their own, and thus non-professional interaction on websites such as LinkedIn is still ethical. An example of this can be seen on the LinkedIn profile of Jessica Mah, the CEO of a small-business accounting application called InDinero. On her profile, she has included that “she holds a commercial pilot license and loves flying her Cirrus SR22T on the weekend” (Mah 2018). This is a personal fact that is unrelated to her professional life, and is ethically acceptable. The reverse of this would be a situation where personal usage is assumed, but a professional exchange occurs. For example, if an engineer posts a status on their personal Facebook profile indiscriminately criticizing a colleague’s work, then a violation of canon 5 category (g) will have occurred. A situation where this occurred can be seen in an exchange between a University of Tennessee, Knoxville Professor, Judy Morelock, and her student Kayla Renee Parker (Johnson 2017). Morelock made disparaging comments regarding her student on her private Facebook page. These comments were screenshotted and made public (Parker 2017). Although the Professor’s intention was to complain on a personal Facebook page, the fact that the post was regarding her professional life opens it up to ethical scrutiny. If this situation occurred between two civil engineers, it would be grounds for the involvement of the Committee of Professional Conduct (ASCE 2017).

### **Privacy: Where is the Line?**

Everything posted online is open to ethical scrutiny. While there is a difference between personal and professional posting, ethical codes broken while on “private mode”, as seen in the UT Knoxville Case (Johnson 2017), are still broken. Online privacy settings provide individuals with a false sense of security, as anything that is posted online can easily be publicly shared through screenshots (Beres 2015), regardless of the original poster’s intention for the content. As any information sent can easily be made public, the expectation of acting in an ethical manner applies to any correspondence an engineer participates in, regardless of medium.

The question of privacy is especially prevalent in canon 3 of the Code of Ethics. Canon 3 states that “engineers shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner” (ASCE 2017). As the barriers of online privacy are practically nonexistent, it must be considered that all online posts are in some way “public”. Thus, all statements related to engineering posted online must be both objective and truthful, in accordance with the Code of Ethics.

### **The Gray Area**

Personal social media usage tends to fall within an ambiguous, or “gray” area, in relation to the Code of Ethics. The perception of an individual as an engineer holds ethical weight, regardless of whether they are acting in a personal or professional capacity. Thus, online etiquette is extremely important.

Perception is especially relevant in relation to canon 2 of the code, “Service with Competence” (ASCE 2017). Category (a) of canon 2 states that “engineers shall undertake to perform engineering assignments only when qualified by education or experience in the technical field of engineering involved” (ASCE 2017). Performing engineering assignments when unqualified in

the specified field of engineering is unethical. On social media, this is relevant in situations where individual discourse may be taken in the context as professional discourse. This is also applicable in situations in which an engineer may give approval or advice without being fully aware of the matter at hand. A situation in which this occurred is the case of Tim Noakes, a dietician who gave advice on diet to a breastfeeding mother over Twitter in 2015. Although in his situation, the professional conduct committee found him to be not guilty (News24 2017), the act of giving professional advice in a situation wherein he was not competent regarding the context of the situation violates canon 2 category (a) (ASCE 2017).

Another issue of perception arises from canon 2 category (c). In this category, ethical guidelines relating to an engineering signature are discussed. Although a username may not hold the cultural significance that a physical seal or stamp does, posts associated with an engineer's username must be seriously evaluated. Although not signed with a physical pen, the affirmation of any plans or documents online holds the weight of approval from the engineer, which is equivalent to the purpose of signatures and seals. Thus, engineers must be careful to not electronically "sign" any plans or documents for subject matters in which they are not competent (ASCE 2017) on social media.

Questionable conflicts of interest may also arise with the use of social media. While personal connections to colleagues with whom one is friendly is within an individual's right to a personal life, there are ethical obligations that stem from such connections. Engineers must be diligent and vigilant about their online relationships as well as the potential impacts on any professional activities that they may be performing. In accordance with canon 4 category (a) (ASCE 2017), engineers must provide notice of potential conflicts of interest, which should include acknowledgement of online connections.

Canon 8 is the most recent addition to the ASCE Code of Ethics, and also the most unclear in terms of personal social media usage. The canon states that all persons must be treated fairly "in all matters related to their profession" (ASCE 2017). While professional service is also specified in categories (b) and (c), it is not mentioned in category (a). Thus, category (a) could be interpreted as ethically binding engineers to treat others with "dignity, respect, and fairness" in both personal and professional aspects. Category (b) then somewhat conflicts with (a), by specifying that "engineers shall not engage in discrimination or harassment in connection with their professional activities" (ASCE 2017). Category (b), by purely applying to professional situations, allows engineers to be members of hate groups with no ethical detriment. However, category (a) would prevent engineers from treating others unfairly in both personal and professional affairs. This is especially important in the current political climate, and where the sharing of political viewpoints is commonplace on social media. If content that is racist or sexist is shared or posted on social media, even in a personal context, canon 8 category (a) will be violated. Additionally, if professional capacity can be perceived in situations of online harassment or discrimination, canon 8 category (b), and canon 4 category (a) would be violated, regardless of personal intent.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of the ASCE Code of Ethics governs the ethical obligations of engineers in professional settings. While engineers are entitled to lead personal lives, the moral obligations

that civil engineers have to their communities apply beyond the bounds of privacy settings. Ethical questions from “gray” areas, such as the unclear line between professional and personal posting, the lack of online privacy, and the ethical obligation relating to perception, will continue to be topics of discussion. While a distinct differentiation of personal and professional usage of social media by the ASCE would further clarify the ethical responsibilities of civil engineers, it is impossible to establish a clear line, due to the culturally shifting relationship between personal and professional conduct. With this in mind, the personal and professional use of social media by engineers should be held to the same ethical standards that engineers are held to in every other sphere of community involvement.

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