

# Journalism and the use of information from social media

Information for the public

# About us and how we can help

We are IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation), the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspapers and magazines.

We protect people's rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press.

Website: [www.ipso.co.uk](http://www.ipso.co.uk)

Email: [inquiries@ipso.co.uk](mailto:inquiries@ipso.co.uk)

If you need advice about the Editors' Code of Practice (the Code) or are concerned about a story or a journalist's behaviour, you can contact us on 0300 123 2220. In an emergency after hours or at the weekend, you can also contact us using our emergency 24-hour advice service on 07799 903929.

Our staff are also able to help you to deal with urgent harassment issues. They will talk about your concerns, and can give practical advice and guidance. In some cases we can send out a notice, which will allow you to pass on a specific request to the industry (for example, to stop phoning you) or concerns about the future publication of material which might break the code.

If you want to make a complaint, you will need to do this in writing, either on our website ([www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint](http://www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint)) or by emailing [inquiries@ipso.co.uk](mailto:inquiries@ipso.co.uk).

# About this guidance

This guidance is for people who are concerned about how a newspaper or magazine has used information or pictures from social media. This guidance explains the rules which journalists and editors must follow under the Editors' Code of Practice when publishing this information. It also gives advice about who we are and what we can do to help if you are concerned about these issues. This guidance does not provide advice about your rights under copyright law, which is a legal matter.

The main points:

- When you put information onto social media, you are putting it into the public domain for other people to view. Unless your posts are protected by privacy settings, anyone, including journalists, can see them.
- Most social media websites allow you to restrict what you put into the public domain by allowing you to change your privacy settings.
- Journalists are normally allowed to publish photos, comments and information from social media profiles, forums or blogs if there are no privacy settings protecting them and they do not show anything private.
- Journalists may publish information about you which is in the public domain. This may have been put there by you or someone else via social media.
- Journalists may use social media to get in touch with you, to gather information or to check facts.
- Journalists must always consider whether publishing information taken from social media might intrude on your grief or privacy.
- Journalists should not publish information which is about a child's welfare without parental permission, or which might identify a victim of a sexual offence, without the permission of that person.

# Can journalists publish information which has been posted on social media?

People often contact us because they are concerned about newspapers or magazines publishing photos or personal information from websites. These websites include social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as other internet forums or blogs.

People use social media regularly to share pictures and information about what is happening in their lives. Usually you can choose how you share this information and who can view it by changing options in your privacy settings. When you do not limit your privacy settings, the information on your profile is available to any member of the public who can see it, including journalists. This means that when you put information onto social media websites without privacy settings in place, you have put this information into the public domain.

While you are able to edit the privacy settings of most posts of social media websites, there is some information which is always public. For example, on Facebook and Twitter, it is not possible to prevent people from viewing your profile picture. This is something which is controlled by social media companies.

Newspapers and magazines can publish information about you which is in the public domain because you have posted it on your own profile or another person's profile. However, there are limits to what journalists can publish. These are explained in the next section.

Even if you have shared information in private groups or private pages, journalists may be allowed to publish this. This may depend on how many people have access to the private group or page and/or whether you have made similar posts publicly. There may be other legitimate reasons why journalists are allowed to publish this kind of information, this would depend on the individual circumstances.

It is common for journalists to take a picture of comments or pictures posted on social media, called a screenshot. This means that even if you delete the comment or picture, it can still be published as a screenshot. A newspaper or magazine would not automatically have to remove screenshots of posts, if you choose to delete them.

# Are there limits to what can be published?

Once a journalist has found any information on social media, they must consider whether publishing it might break any of the rules in the Code. Unless there is a public interest, journalists should generally not publish information which:

- is protected by privacy settings and is not in the public domain
- is private information about a person, such as medical information
- is about a child's welfare or time at school (see section: Are there any special protections for children?)
- might intrude into someone's grief or shock.

If you have posted a number of photos or comments publicly, then journalists would normally also be allowed to print privately-shared posts which are similar to these.

Occasionally, people who are not journalists name the victims of sexual offences in court cases on social media websites. This is illegal. Even if victims are named by members of the public on social media, journalists are never allowed to publish the name, or any information which might identify a victim. The only exception to this is if the victim chooses to waive their anonymity.

# Are there any special protections for children?

The Code offers more protection to children than adults. This means that journalists must be more careful when publishing photos of children or their comments.

The Code says that journalists must not do anything which might intrude on a child's time in school. Journalists should be very careful about publishing stories about a child's personal circumstances. Where a journalist wants to publish a story like this, they must be able to show an exceptional public interest to outweigh the interests of the child, which are normally more important than anything else.

The Code also says that children must not be interviewed or photographed on issues affecting their welfare or the welfare of another child, unless their parent, or a similarly responsible person, has given consent. A child's consent alone is not sufficient for a journalist to publish a quote or a comment from a child, if it relates to something serious.

Although the Code makes specific reference to interviews and taking photos, this also covers taking information which a child has written or posted themselves. This includes publishing comments or photos posted by a child on Facebook (for example) in an article. Again, this means that a parent's permission should be given before a child's comments from social media are published, if they relate to something serious.

# Is it normal to be contacted by a journalist via social media?

Journalists often contact members of the public to gather further information, or to check facts. It is normal for journalists to get in touch with members of the public via social media. Sometimes, this may be the best way for journalists to get in touch with people they do not already know.

However, journalists must ensure that they do not harass people and should stop contacting you if you ask them to, unless there is specific public interest to justify a decision to carry on.

As mentioned above, journalists should not contact a child under 16 via social media to ask them about any issues affecting their welfare or the welfare of another child, unless there is an exceptionally strong public interest.

If you are concerned about approaches from journalists, you should read our guidance about how to handle this, which is available on our website, [www.ipso.co.uk](http://www.ipso.co.uk).



# What should I do if I am concerned about copyright?

Copyright is a legal issue which relates to the publishing of a photo or other material by someone else (such as a newspaper or magazine) without the permission of the owner of the material.

We cannot help with or advise on legal issues. If you are concerned about copyright issues, you should seek legal advice or contact the Intellectual Property Office.

# What should I do if I am concerned about what information I have put onto social media?

If you are concerned about the information you, or a friend or relative, have put onto social media or you are unsure about your privacy settings, you should consider the following.

- Check your privacy settings for the relevant social media websites which you use. Most social media websites provide helpful information about how to do this: such as [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). It might also be helpful to read the terms of use and privacy policy for all social media websites which you use.
- Visit the website of the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), which has helpful information about online safety and social networks. The ICO protects data privacy rights for individuals.
- Visit the website of the UK Safer Internet Centre, which has guides for most social media websites and how to use their safety features.

# Other helpful organisations

[The Information Commissioner \(ICO\) \(www.ico.org.uk\)](http://www.ico.org.uk)

The ICO protects data privacy rights for individuals and has information about online safety and social networks

[UK Safer Internet Centre \(www.saferinternet.org.uk\)](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk)

The Safer Internet Centre has guides for most social media websites and how to use their safety features.

[Facebook \(www.facebook.com\)](http://www.facebook.com)

You can view privacy settings via your profile.

[Twitter \(www.twitter.com/privacy\)](http://www.twitter.com/privacy)

Find out more about Twitter's privacy policies and how to adjust your settings.

[Instagram \(www.help.instagram.com\)](http://www.help.instagram.com)

Find out more about how to adjust your privacy settings on Instagram.

[Intellectual Property Office \(ipo.gov.uk\)](http://ipo.gov.uk)

The IPO is a UK government body which offers general advice on copyright law and is responsible for intellectual property rights.

