

**From:**

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**To:**

Jon Keeling and Monica Sartain

D. V. Terrell Committee Co-Chairs

American Society of Civil Engineers Region 4

**Re:** 2018 Daniel V. Terrell Paper Competition

1 April, 2018

Dear Mr. Keeling and Ms. Sartain:

Enclosed please find my submission for the 2018 Daniel V. Terrell Paper Competition, entitled "Five Fundamental Guidelines for Social Media Conduct as informed by the ASCE Code of Ethics."

Therein, I propose that the use of social media by engineers can be shaped under the ASCE Code of Ethics by way of five new fundamental guidelines specifically governing social media use.

I appreciate the opportunity to be considered for this award.

Thank you very much,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane Jlelaty". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Diane Jlelaty

## **Five Fundamental Guidelines for Social Media Conduct as informed by the ASCE Code of Ethics**

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### **Introduction**

According to the Pew Research Center, nearly seven in ten Americans today use social media to connect with others [1]. As engineers, it is important to consider how the tenets of the profession should shape public behavior online. The personal and professional use of social media relates to the ASCE Code of Ethics in five specific ways. These can be summarized in the following five fundamental guidelines for social media conduct by members of ASCE:

1. Engineers shall harness social media to promote the interests of ASCE and engineering generally
2. Engineers shall not use social media to spread misinformation or knowingly exaggerated statements
3. Engineers shall disclaim when they use social media to promote or endorse products, people or practices on behalf of others
4. Engineers shall use social media to connect and share productively with peers
5. Engineers shall treat all users of social media with respect and dignity

### **First Fundamental Guideline: Engineers shall harness social media to promote the interests of ASCE and engineering generally**

First and foremost, social media is a powerful tool for sharing and spreading content relevant to users' personal and professional interests. The ASCE Code of Ethics Third Fundamental Principle states that engineers shall "[strive] to increase the competence and prestige of the engineering profession" [2]. The personal and professional use of social media can and should be used to support this principle. ASCE specifically states that successful social media usage includes increasing awareness of society presence, actively engaging current and potential membership and promoting civil engineering [3]. The ASCE Upstate Branch in South Carolina uses several social media channels to announce upcoming branch meetings, promote Younger Member Group events and highlight community outreach. The result is a greater public understanding of society and civil engineering impact in the Upstate region, as well as increased attendance by professionals to branch events, thereby increasing the competence and prestige of the profession in support of the ASCE Code of Ethics.

### **Second Fundamental Guideline: Engineers shall not use social media to spread misinformation or knowingly exaggerated statements**

There are several buzzwords in popular discourse today characterizing this very issue. Fortunately, the Third Canon of the ASCE Code of Ethics addresses this directly and resolutely, in that engineers shall

“issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner” [2]. When an engineer makes a public statement, it carries the weight of the professional engineering credential. It is imperative that engineers make every effort to be accurate and truthful online, whether posting original content or engaging in discussion with others. This is important regardless of whether an engineer is posting in a professional or personal context. By publicly representing an issue on social media, engineers effectively corroborate the facts presented. Before sharing news stories about failing infrastructure, for example, engineers should ensure that the stories are accurate and that they don’t misrepresent the underlying principles involved. Above all else, per the Second Fundamental Principle of the ASCE Code of Ethics, engineers must “[be] honest and impartial and [serve] with fidelity the public...employers and clients” [2]. Responsible and truthful social media use is essential to upholding this principle.

### **Third Fundamental Guideline: Engineers shall disclaim when they use social media to promote or endorse products, people or practices on behalf of others**

With the growth of social media has come the growth in its monetization by a particular subset of users known colloquially as social media influencers. The U.S. Law Group discusses these users in terms of their quantifiable social media influence. Based on a user’s relevance, resonance and reach – in other words, their number of followers, the average quality of posts and degree of active engagement with other users – social media influencers are in a unique position to leverage their online following on behalf of advertisers or other entities looking to quickly reach a “highly targeted and immensely large consumer base” [4]. It is commonplace to scroll through media feeds and see ordinary people with substantial followings promoting products or services online, typically in exchange for a commission or fee. Engineers are no exception to this rule, but engineers do carry an additional layer of responsibility for their statements. The First Canon of the ASCE Code of Ethics states that the priority of an engineer must be the health, safety and welfare of the public [2]. Engineers are trusted by the public to be honest and transparent in their statements. It is therefore essential that any paid promotion or otherwise influenced statement must be disclaimed as such. This is explicitly stated in the Third Canon, in that “engineers shall issue no statements, criticisms or arguments on engineering matters which are inspired or paid by interested parties unless they indicate on whose behalf the statements are made” [2]. It is clear, then, that any monetized posts published by an engineer on social media must carry a disclaimer stating the source of compensation for the statement.

### **Fourth Fundamental Guideline: Engineers shall use social media to connect and share productively with peers**

Both professionally and personally, the purpose of social media is to connect with others. Social media can be a powerful tool for collaboration, discussion and analysis of topics related to the profession. For example, by posting articles and comments, engineers from around the world can easily share perspectives, insight and technical information in an interactive and engaging way. The Seventh Canon of the Code of Ethics states that engineers “shall continue their professional development throughout their careers” [2]. Social media provides a unique platform with which to engage other professionals from around the world on an immediate, day-to-day basis.

### **Fifth Fundamental Guideline: Engineers shall treat all users of social media with respect and dignity**

Above all, engineers must uphold the dignity of the profession pursuant to the Eighth Canon of the Code of Ethics, which states that engineers “shall...treat all persons fairly and encourage equitable participation” and “shall not engage in discrimination or harassment in connection with their professional activities” [2]. This is particularly applicable to the realm of social media. The relative anonymity of social media lends itself to increased rates of harassment, bullying and general disrespect when compared to other forms of discourse. The Pew Research Center states that “73% of adult internet users have seen someone be harassed in some way online and 40% have personally experienced it” [5]. It is essential that engineers conduct themselves in a respectful, professional and courteous manner, regardless of whether they are communicating in person or online.

### **Conclusion**

Engineers should approach social media with the same care and respect that they approach the other public aspects of their personal lives and careers. The statements that engineers make on social media can be shaped under the ASCE Code of Ethics by observing the five guidelines described above. In summary, engineers should use social media to elevate the profession in a truthful and transparent way, to engage productively with peers and to always treat others with dignity and respect.

## References

1. "Social Media Fact Sheet." (2018). *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center, <<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>> (Mar. 2018).
2. "Code of Ethics." (2017). *American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)*, American Society of Civil Engineers, <<https://www.asce.org/code-of-ethics/>> (Mar. 2018).
3. "Guiding Principles." (n.d.). *Social Media Playbook*, American Society of Civil Engineers, <<http://smp.asce.org/guiding-principles/>> (Mar. 2018).
4. Shaikh, U. (2016). "Monetization of Social Media Influence." *U.S. Law Group*, U.S. Law Group, <<http://www.uslawgroupinc.com/monetization-of-social-media-influence/>> (Mar. 2018).
5. Duggan, M. (2014). "Online Harassment." *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center, <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>> (Mar. 2018).