Social media in emergencies

27 March 2023

Key points

- Document what you are seeing: take photos and short videos.
- Seek informed consent from anyone featured in your photographs and videos. Make sure they understand that their image might be distributed widely on internet, broadcast on television, etc.
- Where possible, let people talk about their own experiences; do not speak for them.
- For video, hold the camera horizontally so television broadcasters can use it.
- For Twitter, turn on the SMS feature so you can send and receive messages via SMS without need of an internet connection.

1. Overview

Social media platforms are very useful for sharing information quickly with large numbers of people and listening to relevant conversations online. They are very powerful in emergency situations, because they enable you to update colleagues, partners, journalists and people of concern with timely and relevant information. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Each is different: staff should understand their differences and use the most appropriate platform, which may vary from region to region.

UNHCR has numerous institutional social media accounts. The social media team based in Geneva manages global accounts, but regional and country-level accounts are managed locally. In addition, UNHCR encourages PI and other staff to open their own social media accounts, so that they can share information directly.

In emergency operations, up-to-date information may be shared by staff who are directly involved in the operation, via their personal social media accounts. This information can be re-
shared by institutional accounts, which in most cases have larger followings. Trust is a crucial element of social media, and during emergency operations followers want information that has been sourced directly from the ground, rather than from HQ, which may be thousands of miles distant. However, never post information that might put people of concern at risk.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

UNHCR's Administrative Instruction on the Use of Social Media:

- Explains key differences between institutional and personal accounts.
- Provides guidance on what is and is not appropriate to post.
- Lists top tips for using social media.

The most important point to remember is that, even if you post on a personal social media account, those who use that information can attribute it directly to UNHCR. It is therefore important that only staff who are closest to the operation post updates. Remember too that social media are public forums: do not post anything you would not be prepared to say during a radio or television interview.

Good practice recommendations

Top Tips for Using Social Media

- Think before you post and use common sense. Be aware that, when you share facts or opinions, it may be assumed that you endorse that information. One of the best pieces of social media advice is: ‘Don't say anything online that you wouldn't be comfortable seeing quoted on CNN, being asked about by your mother, or justifying to your boss'.
- Be honest. Do not mislead or invite misinterpretation. If you did not witness an event, do not imply that you did. UNHCR's credibility may be at stake.
- Be accurate. Outdated figures or erroneous information can spread rapidly on social media. Always double-check your facts before posting.
- Be clear. If your post might be misinterpreted, find a clearer way to phrase your message.
- Exercise discretion. Leave sensitive issues to personnel specifically authorized to speak on them. When in doubt, consult your supervisor.
- Respect confidentiality. Do not share information that is not meant for external audiences, such as details that could compromise diplomacy or protection.
- Ensure safety and protection. Bear in mind that information you post, especially locations or personal details, could put you or others at risk.
- Show respect and seek consent. When you talk about, photograph or videotape people we protect and assist, strive to respect their dignity.
- Avoid taking sides. UNHCR personnel must honour humanitarian principles, including
impartiality, neutrality and independence. Refrain from making political statements that might compromise UNHCR’s relationships with governments, partners or other stakeholders.

- **Stick with what you know.** When talking about UNHCR’s work, focus on your own experiences and areas of expertise.
- **Show integrity.** You are responsible for your online reputation, which may affect UNHCR's image. Be aware of your digital footprint and act as responsibly online as you would in any other public context.
- **Be transparent.** Don't use a pseudonym or post anonymous comments or content about UNHCR, the UN, people of concern or the humanitarian sector. Declaring your identity and affiliation helps to build trust and prevent misperceptions.
- **Be authentic.** When you speak from a personal perspective and mean what you say, your posts will gain traction and visibility.
- **Be generous.** Credit others and avoid negativity. Being superior or patronizing reflects poorly on you and UNHCR and invites criticism.
- **Listen and engage in conversations.** Do not simply broadcast. If people are misreading your posts or twisting your words, try to clarify.
- **Don't feed the trolls.** It is often best to ignore hateful, discriminatory or otherwise inappropriate comments. Answering may only encourage more of the same.
- **Seek advice.** If you are unsure whether something is appropriate to post, seek advice from your colleagues or ask socialmedia@unhcr.org in Geneva.

**Think about your audience**

While social media can reach huge audiences, it is important to consider who you want to target. Are you hoping to provide other colleagues or partners with real-time updates of the developing situation? Are you hoping to connect with local or international journalists, letting them know you are on the ground, willing to provide information, and available for interview? Are you providing vital updates to people of concern?

It is vital to think about your audience because some platforms are better at reaching certain audiences. For example, many journalists from large international news organisations use Twitter to search for breaking news and people on the ground to interview during emergencies. Local journalists or refugee communities may be more likely to use Facebook. Ask the audiences you want to reach what platforms they use, remembering that email and SMS are still very powerful communications tools.

**Creating original content**

During emergencies, many people are looking for photographs or videos. Journalists in particular are desperate for content from people on the ground. If you are in the field, it is important to document what you see. In many emergency situations news organisations cannot get access or lack the funds to send journalists or camera people. They increasingly rely on content generated by aid workers.

No one expects a flawlessly constructed news video, or a perfectly composed picture. Audiences just want a sense of what the situation is really like. Images from the window of a moving vehicle captured by your smartphone can provide usable footage for news organisations. Photographs or
videos of queues, camps or registration centres can show the scale of an emergency.

**Video.** Keep your phone as still as possible. Don't move quickly. Let movement in the scene provide interesting content.

**Audio.** Stand very close to your subjects so that ambient sounds do not drown out their voices. Try to record in a quiet spot, out of the wind.

**Photographs.** Do not shoot into the sun. Take many shots and choose the best ones later.

For more tips, see entry on Media Content Production.

Wherever possible, allow people of concern to tell their own stories, bearing in mind issues of protection and consent.

Below are some simple tools for creating photos and video clips:

- **Instagram.** Allows you to take and share photos or 15-second videos. (Though you can add a filter to make your content more appealing, do not use one because newsrooms are less likely to use filtered images.)
- **Hyperlapse.** Allows you to shoot timelapse videos. (This is a wonderful way of showing the erection of a tent, or the arrival of refugees.)
- **Vine.** Allows you to create looping 6-second videos.
- **YouTube.** Allows you to upload longer videos that you have filmed on your phone.

**Remember.** Protection issues are paramount. When you take photographs or film video of people of concern, you must get informed consent. You must explain how the content might be used on social media accounts, and that it might be picked up and used by news organisations.

**Using social media for distribution**

When you have your video, photographs, text updates or statistics, or case studies of individuals, share them on the main social media channels (Twitter, Facebook). Publish them on your own personal accounts but please email socialmedia@unhcr.org or mention UNHCR in your posts. (You can add @refugees in your tweet, or tag the global UNHCR page in your Facebook post.) This makes it easier for the social media team in Geneva to share your content on the main global accounts, which have very large followings. Sharing this type of content on UNHCR's global social media channels will increase media coverage, raise awareness of the situation, and win support for the work UNHCR is doing.

If you use Twitter, turn on mobile notifications. (Via twitter.com, click on the Settings cog, and go to Mobile. It will walk you through the steps that will connect your mobile photo to Twitter.) You can then send and receive tweets via SMS and will not require an Internet connection.

**Communicating with people who are directly impacted by the emergency**

Before you start thinking about using social media to talk directly to refugees or internally displaced persons, find out which platforms they use. In many places Twitter is used less than Facebook. Do not set up a Facebook page on a specific emergency without talking to the social media team in Geneva. Facebook pages are often not the best way to communicate emergency
updates and information, because Facebook only shows your updates to a small fraction of your followers (typically less than 15% and often as little as 5%). A Facebook Group may offer a better alternative, because you can control membership and people in the group are notified each time a new update is posted.

Consider SMS communication. In emergency situations access to the Internet can be difficult, and social media platforms may be inappropriate. If you want to message large groups of people, SMS may be more effective. It is also a private way to communicate messages that are sensitive.

**Considerations for practical implementation**

- Staff should be confident in using smartphones to create content and share it via social networks. In emergency situations, you need to create and post quickly and confidently. If you do not feel confident, enrol in the online social media course available through 'Learn & Connect'.
- Staff should also feel confident about what they should and should not post on personal accounts. If you have concerns or questions, talk to your local PI officer or contact the social media team in Geneva.
- Staff should be listening to updates posted by other colleagues and partners so that everyone is well informed about the latest developments. You may want to re-share some of this content on your own accounts, helping it to reach a wider audience.

**Resources and partnerships**

Key staff including all PI staff working in emergency situations should be issued smartphones so that they can create content and share it quickly on social networks.

**3. Links**

Twitter.com [How social media is changing communications in emergencies](https://twitter.com/); [Administrative Instructions on the Use of Social Media](https://twitter.com/)

**4. Main contacts**

Communication and Public Information Service at Headquarters:
- Melissa Fleming, Spokesperson for the High Commissioner and Head of Service, [fleming@unhcr.org](mailto:fleming@unhcr.org).
- Chris Reardon, Chief of Content Production Section, [reardon@unhcr.org](mailto:reardon@unhcr.org).
- Adrian Edwards, Spokesperson and Head of News and Media Section, [Edwards@unhcr.org](mailto:Edwards@unhcr.org).
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