In an interview with Fox Business Network’s Maria Bartiromo, Donald Trump attributed his presidential election victory to the success of his social media campaign saying, “I doubt I would be here if it weren’t for social media, to be honest with you.” In late 2017, Trump surpassed even Pope Francis as his Twitter following amounted to 39.7 million followers, making him the most-followed world leader (Samuelsohn, October 2017). The ability of social media to deliver instantaneous thoughts was unimaginable even a couple decades ago. The notion of world leaders’ ideas or political policies transmitted through seemingly unofficial avenues would never replace the professional press conferences of previous presidents or be as iconic as the Fireside Chats delivered by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Still, Donald Trump gains new followers every day on his personal Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) as well as the official White House accounts (@potus and @WhiteHouse), which he inherited in January of 2017.

While celebrated by some for his frankness and use of modern technology to stay connected with constituents, Donald Trump has also experienced endless ridicule for unpopular opinions as well as high scrutiny to evaluate the legality of his Twitter posts. The Trump Administration is facing a lawsuit regarding several presidential tweets that have been deleted for a variety of reasons such as typos, or more importantly, apparent oversharing of information or opinions that held less than favorable reactions from the public. The lawsuit claims that presidential record-keeping, also known as the Presidential Records Act, is applicable to Donald Trump’s Twitter account (CREW, June 2017). Therefore, any posts must be archived and preserved, and any posts that are deleted without being archived are essentially an intentional breach of the Act. However, there is a distinction in the Act that states personal records of the President are not required to be archived. The argument is complicated further by the intermixing of Donald Trump’s personal posts while also tweeting White House business such as a meeting with generals at his Mar-A-Lago resort (Kruzel, September 2017). What was meant to be a clear separation to keep the President’s personal life out of official records has been muddled by his blending of personal and business communication.

Similarly, persons viewed as experts within engineering must be responsible with the information they share on social media, especially when that information can be combined as a personal and professional post. As with most medical and legal professions, engineers are held to high-standards and a code of ethics. Specifically, ASCE’s Code of Ethics is listed as “the model for professional conduct for ASCE members” (ASCE, 2017). The eight Fundamental Canons within the Code of Ethics provide guidance to civil engineers in the sometimes-murky waters of engineering practice. While some ethical issues are easy to discern, others, such as emerging practice of social media posting, are far less transparent. For instance, Canon Three states “engineers shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner.” Given the audience of social media platforms, any posting could essentially be viewed as a public statement. An argument could certainly be made that personal posts should not be held under the same scrutiny as professional posts, such as posting to a private Facebook account versus posting to a group page on LinkedIn. Either posting could be seen by a mass audience, but clearly a Facebook page is meant to be a personal platform while LinkedIn is considered a professional platform.

There were undeniably strong opinions about the performance of engineered systems in Houston, Texas during Hurricane Harvey, which was “the most significant tropical cyclone rainfall event in United States history” according to the National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report (Blake
Emotions during natural disasters run high, and specifically on social media people are usually more inclined to showcase emotional responses. However, despite an engineer’s potential frustration relating to topics such as failing infrastructure or global warming, it would not be ethical for that engineer to use his or her social media account to voice that frustration, as so many people did during the flooding of Houston. To comment on the infrastructure of a city when that engineer has not assessed, evaluated, or inspected the infrastructure in any capacity, except by limited photographs made available online, is irresponsible and influences that engineer’s followers to draw conclusions based on incomplete evidence. While it is seemingly a good intention to ask people to account for their actions, it can also influence people to make decisions on solutions while only knowing half of the information. This could result in resolutions that do not effectively mitigate or remediate the problem completely, causing an additional set of issues during a future event. It is imperative that engineers navigate social media with caution regarding the news articles they share as well as personal opinions to ensure that they are not crossing an ethical boundary and issuing a subjective account in a way that the public may view as an expert statement.

Identifying the distinction between personal and professional posting is especially important in an ever-changing world that is continually becoming dependent on constant contact with others as well as the sharing of one’s own life and viewpoints. There are even monetary benefits associated with becoming an “influencer” on various social media platforms. An influencer develops a following and can reach a mass audience with their reviews. These reviews can range from product reviews, television and movie reviews, as well as reviews of people and policies. The influencer market is anticipated to become a five to ten billion-dollar industry by 2020 (MediaKix, December 2015). The confusion mounts when influencers are meant to provide opinions, as their stances are often laced with bias, yet followers treat the reviews as fact, developing their own arguments from the opinions of others rather than unbiased information.

Despite an increasing awareness of fake news articles and postings on social media, as of August 2017 nearly two-thirds of Americans received at least some portion of their news from social media, with an increase from 2016 numbers specifically seen by Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat (Pew Research Center, September 2017). Indeed, fake accounts or bots have the capability to create as many as 1,000 posts in a single day (Earle, October 2017). It is an everyday occurrence for complex and proprietary algorithms to evaluate a person’s social media feed, analyzing and predicating the posts users will find most interesting (Oremus, January 2016). These algorithms utilized on social media feeds can shape the bias that most people have toward major news stories and events as well as the type of advertising they encounter on a day to day basis.

As people are encompassed in their own sphere, there is a struggle for companies attempting to navigate the new world of marketing by incorporating social media and reaching a specific audience. It has become an overwhelming responsibility for companies to decide how best to advertise their products and services, whether that may be with the use of a social media influencer, or to pay for target-advertising which extends to specific people on social media who may be interested in those goods and services. These strategies are now essential to every industry where services or goods are sold, as traditional marketing avenues will become obsolete and outdated by comparison. In a technical and scientific field such as research, development, engineering, medicine, etc., the perspective of a company as using outdated methods for marketing can be perceived as a negative reflection on their ability to deliver state-of-the-art solutions. More than ever, consumers and potential clients refer to peer reviews such as Yelp to determine not only restaurants where they should dine, but which doctors are the most personable and approachable. LinkedIn has provided a space for companies to post job openings, projects,
and accomplishments. These postings improve a company’s worth in the eyes of the client for several reasons, including the willingness to appear transparent, which makes the company appear more trustworthy, while also publicly celebrating employees, which in turn can result in higher employee satisfaction and potentially higher retention rates.

However, it is not uncommon for employees to share professional stories regarding projects or even professional extra-curricular activities supported by their company. This could range from posting pictures of a job site or highlighting the volunteer activities in which a company participates. If an employee then begins to promote the company through his or her personal social media, there is no longer a clear divide between personal and professional postings. While seemingly innocent, the posts can crossover from objective to biased as the employee may start promoting opinions that specifically benefit the company. For instance, on the 2016 election ballot in Clark County, Nevada, Question 5 called for an extension of the fuel revenue tax that originally took effect in 2013. This question boasted an estimated three billion dollars to pay for nearly 200 transportation projects (Marroquin, October 2016). If an engineer has established employment with a firm largely involved with local transportation projects, it would violate Canon Three of the ASCE Code of Ethics for that engineer to post support for the approval of Question 5, as the engineer is now supporting legislation that will potentially profit his or her own company. In addition, this individual is now well-known amongst his or her friends and/or followers as an engineer in the transportation industry. As a social media influencer (no matter how small-scale), this employee is now persuading in public statements support for a tax that would potentially benefit his or her own salary, benefits, etc. Once an individual establishes themselves as an expert in a field, he or she cannot publicly comment on matters that would benefit professional progression without considering a potential conflict of interest. This is further expressed by Canon Four in which “engineers shall act in professional matters for each employer or client as faithful agents or trustees, and shall avoid conflicts of interest.”

The Sixth Canon in the Code of Ethics details that “engineers shall act in such a manner as to uphold and enhance the honor, integrity, and dignity of the engineering profession and shall act with zero-tolerance for bribery, fraud, and corruption.” The first half of this canon is particularly interesting when applied to social media posting, as it opens the argument for employers to potentially monitor employee activities. For instance, if an employee lists the company on his or her online profile, the employer could potentially see that employee as an extension of the company image, therefore making postings susceptible to employer scrutiny. The potential for disciplinary actions or even termination could be based on the content the employee posts online if those actions do not align with company policy, even though the employee engaged in those activities during his or her own personal time. There exists a possible danger that employers could request access to an employee's social media postings to evaluate their conduct, and that employees could see repercussions for purely private opinions. It is increasingly important to separate professional and private social media space to remove the uncertainty of defining professional conduct outside of the office environment.

Whether it’s the President of the United States or an engineer at a local consulting firm, there is a clear indication that combining private social media posts with professional posting can teeter on the ethical boundary and potentially open the door for an employer to scrutinize an employee’s personal life choices. Several of the ASCE Code of Ethics Fundamental Canons can apply to social media posting and guide engineers toward making ethical decisions. In addition, responsible posting can be beneficial for companies as future marketing strategies are clearly going to incorporate some level of social media posting. As professional and private social media posts seemingly comingle without intention, engineers must be especially careful when sharing
or commenting subjective opinions, photos, or even project details, as they are held to a high
caliber of professionalism, honor, and integrity so that they do not influence the public
irresponsibly.

References


