

# Trolls and Their Tolls on Social Media Communicators





## Introduction

Dealing with online trolls can be a real pain, but with the right strategy and a cool-headed approach, social media communicators can keep the peace on their websites without clamping down on free expression and meaningful and productive conversations.



## Online Trolls: **When to Respond and When to Ignore?**

When it comes to communicating with trolls (the online ones, not those who live under bridges), it can be difficult to know when to respond and when to simply ignore them.

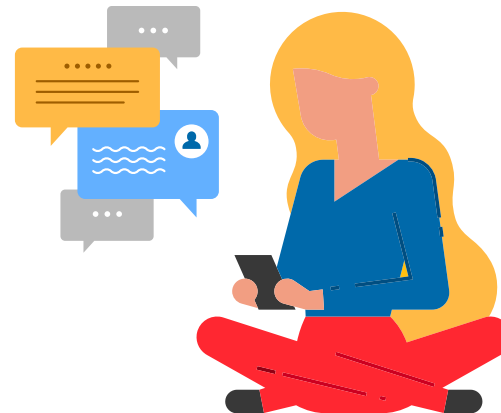
Well, first and foremost, it is always important to keep in mind that you don't have the answer to everything, especially rhetorical questions. Where possible, it is always best to simply ignore trolls. And who knows, in a best-case scenario you might be lucky enough to have created a loyal following who will provide you support. If you must respond, you should do a little research on your troll, as this will help you to determine the appropriate way to answer. If you work in public safety, and a troll has commented on something potentially dangerous, you should respond immediately.

Be cautious when responding on behalf of your administration, and tread very carefully when it comes to using humor in a response. Ask yourself, what could go wrong?

It is also important to consider the time at which you respond to a comment or post. You may not want to let trolls know that you are online and active at midnight, for example, or to post something related to a potentially contentious topic at 4:30 p.m. on a Friday, (if you at all value your weekend, that is).

### **What is a Troll?**

A troll is a person who posts or makes inflammatory, insincere, digressive, extraneous, or off-topic messages online with the intent of provoking others into displaying emotional responses, or manipulating others' perception.





## When, and When Not, to Delete, Hide, or Turn Off Comments

Government communicators must allow the public to exercise their first amendment rights. Just because you don't like what they say, doesn't mean they can't say it. At the same time, however, what you permit, you effectively promote. If you don't currently have a social media policy, you should work with your team and legal counsel to create one as soon as possible, as this will help you answer trolls quickly and consistently by outlining the behavior you will allow or not allow on your page.

You should also follow a comment moderation guide, as this will allow you to moderate inappropriate or irrelevant content while still respecting relevant opinions and First Amendment concerns. If you decide to hide or delete a post, be sure to do it quickly, before people realize it and only if you have a great social media archiving service.



### What is a Libel?

Libel is the publication of false statements that damage someone's reputation. You'll also see it referred to as defamation. An opinion is not libel. Libel refers to specific facts that can be proved untrue.



## Separating Your Business and Personal **Online Identities**

To avoid trolls commenting on your personal social media profiles, set up strict account privacy settings. For example, on Facebook and Instagram, you can adjust your settings so that all posts on your page, or access to your page information, can only be viewed by friends. You can also restrict people from posting on your page, and set up permission settings so that you won't be tagged in any posts or photos without your approval.





## Avoid Burnout by Remembering to **Decompress After Dealing**

In general, try not to dwell on comments made by trolls. Try to take your mind off of things, at least temporarily, by engaging in something that you find fun and relaxing that is unrelated to social media. You can also find support amongst friends and talk it out or read about others going through the same thing by looking at posts on the Government Social Media Conference (GSMCON) Facebook Group.





## But What If Some of the Things a Troll Is Saying are True?

Sometimes you simply have to hold your hands up and admit the truth even when you are not proud of the facts. In these cases, you have no choice but to “go ugly fast.” This means that you say, yes, this information is true and here is what we are doing to correct it and ensure it doesn’t happen again — and then encourage your audience to call or email you and take the conversation offline. While this course of action opens you up to some heat, it at least shows transparency and openness.

Prior to posting, try to consider every way a post might be taken before you publish it. And remember, not every message needs to be delivered on social media. Sometimes your website, or email subscribership can be the best way to get a message out.





# How to Stop Trolls Spreading Lies and Misinformation



It is crucial that you do not react emotionally and respond with facts.



If a troll is attempting to defame someone by saying they have committed a crime, that's libel.



Depending on your social media policy, you may be able to delete any dangerously inaccurate information meant to mislead followers — with the caveat that you have good social media archiving in place.



Try to stay on topic and to steer any off-topic or negative comments offline. Offer your audience the right information, thank commenters for their feedback, and take the conversation offline with the offer of a phone call or by directing them to an FAQ page.







## How Sunshine Laws and Open Government Impact Social Media Management

In Florida, the Sunshine Law and Public Records Law (which are strict compared to other states) are designed to guarantee that the public has access to public records, meetings are publicly advertised and open for all to attend, and agenda items are not discussed in settings that don't adhere to the Sunshine Act's intended transparency. Commissioners know not to comment online about how they are going to vote on items before the meeting, and they don't post on each other's pages to ensure that discussions on agenda items are not made public before voting.

Social media is a great place to promote upcoming meetings and their agendas, so your public can get involved. If there's an item that you want public feedback on before a meeting or in lieu of attending a meeting, you can direct the community to an email address, comment form, or survey. That way, you'll have an official record of their response. As far as open government goes, social media is a great way to show transparency with links to board meeting broadcasts and minutes, surveys, documents, and more. Just make sure you have a good archiving service so that you can research those posts quickly and accurately if they are requested of you.





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## Limiting Your **Social Media Output**

Since social media is 24/7 and accessible from just about anywhere, it can create unrealistic user expectations that their questions will be answered around the clock. This is why it's important to have a schedule for monitoring to avoid burnout. While some social media platforms require that comments be allowed, there is a time and a place for using platforms that don't allow comments.

Not all messages need to be delivered on a platform that could potentially invite so much moderation as to make it a drain rather than a boost to your organization. When you're managing a lot of accounts, consider leveraging those messaging platforms that don't require 24/7 moderation.





## Creating a Strategy for Navigating Facebook Live Trolls

In cases where you think a topic may attract trolls, you could consider pre-recording and posting video content later. However, sometimes trolls will just show up anyway. If you have the available manpower for it, you could always have a staff member monitor comments from a laptop in accordance with your social media policy. Remember that if you don't notice a troll comment pop up during the Facebook Live event, you can go back and moderate it later.





## About State **Right-To-Know**

If you don't already have a social media policy in place, work with your team and legal counsel to develop one. This will outline the consequences of abusive or off-topic comments. Make sure your team knows the rules.

On Facebook, you do have the option to report posts and to block words not allowed on your page. You can also set your profanity filter to strong, and Facebook will hide comments for you. Also — reconsider Facebook's badges for "top fans" if your top fans are trolls.





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## Encouraging Law Enforcement to **Get Active Online**

Social media is a terrific way to humanize your agency and officials and show off some personality. As a trusted resource to your community, you can't let trolls stop you from protecting your public and people, and sharing necessary information, updates, and clarifying misinformation. Social media is also a critical communication tool in a crisis, not only for you to reach your audience and let them know everything is ok, but for your audience to reach you with updates and videos. With an established social media policy, comment moderation guide, and a way to capture, monitor, and retain your social media correspondence, you will be in a good place to take on any potential trolls and protect your agency.





# Best Practices

What follows are some best practices for dealing with persistent trolls that just won't go away.

- ✓ Don't react emotionally.
- ✓ Research your troll (friends, likes, reviews, locations).
- ✓ Respond with facts.
- ✓ Create a comment moderation guide.
- ✓ Archive, monitor, and retain your social media, as no policy guide is foolproof.
- ✓ Create a social media policy that outlines the consequences of abusive or off-topic comments.

- ✓ Stay polite and professional.
- ✓ Steer negative conversations offline.
- ✓ Create a schedule for monitoring social accounts.
- ✓ Protect your public from bullies or incorrect information — especially in disasters.
- ✓ If you don't have the resources for moderators, there are tools available for every platform. Leverage things like Facebook's option to report posts, block words, and set your profanity filter to strong.



## About The Author

CivicPlus® is a technology company focused on building trust in government by fostering consistently positive digital experiences for residents and staff. With over 12,000 global customers, CivicPlus solutions are used daily by over 100,000 administrative staff members and over 340 million people in the U.S. and Canada alone. For more information, visit [civicplus.com](http://civicplus.com).

## CivicPlus Social Media Archiving

CivicPlus Social Media Archiving connects directly to your social networks to capture and preserve all the content you post and with which you engage in context and in near-real-time. Our easy-to-use, secure archive empowers you to easily manage your online communications and stay compliant with public records laws, regulations, and record keeping initiatives.