

Medical Journalists Association: Social media guidelines

Passed by the EC on November 11, 2024

Social media is one of the strongest tools that member associations have to engage their members and ensure renewal. Journalists tend to be social media savvy, and it is an appropriate place for us to market the MJA. Students and journalists in training also use social media, and this could be a good place to attract new members.

We also have a mission to promote good health and medical journalism, and social media gives us an important platform to do that to a wider audience. The purpose of these guidelines is to help MJA committee members involved in posting content on social media to do so in a constructive way, with agreed aims while being aware of potential pitfalls.

These guidelines only apply to official MJA social media accounts. Members, including of the executive committee, are free to post whatever they choose from their personal accounts.

General principles

- Always communicate respectfully and professionally
- Ensure the information shared is accurate and not misleading
- Avoid arguments and escalating conflicts online and engage in a positive way whenever possible
- Promote the MJA values, achievements, and events in a positive and inclusive way
- Keep content relevant to the MJA and its members
- Do not discuss political, religious, or controversial issues that are not directly related to the MJA. This does not prevent us sharing or championing the good journalism of our members
- Social media should not be used to advance one cause or issue at the expense of others or at the expense of the MJA's reputation among its members
- We support balanced evidence-based journalism, no matter what it covers
- Any images, photos or videos should be of high quality, while also respecting copyright
- We must comply with data protection laws, including GDPR, and not share personal information without consent
- Nothing should be shared or posted that has the potential to be libellous

Our aims

- Attract new members
- Foster a feeling of belonging to a community among existing members
- Increase engagement with MJA events and initiatives
- Highlight good journalism
- Encourage sponsorship
- Share useful resources

What this means in practice

We have divided up the workload of social media between members of the executive committee. It has the potential to be a full-time job and some organisations would have staff who focused just on this. Currently, although this may change in the future, Twitter/X is the social media platform to which we post most frequently. Recently journalism engagement has been growing on both Threads and BlueSky which may be worth serious consideration. We also make use of Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube to a lesser extent. To ease the burden on our EC members who are doing on this on a voluntary basis, we have devised a rota for a small team to take on the task of Twitter/X for one month at a time. Currently this is Shaun and Emma. Having one person take over this role for a month avoids duplication and confusion as well as enabling them to see the bigger picture of the issues and topics they have posted about at any one time. The other team member is available if they have questions or an issue or a complaint arises. The approach the team has agreed to take is:

- Aim for at least two to three posts (or reposts) a day (can be more if needed), that reflect the broad range of work our members do and topics they cover. Where possible stick to work done by our members, or this can also be people who we would expect to be members as a way to attract them to the MJA. Priority is given to:
 - Original journalism
 - Exclusives
 - Topics of national importance (eg, patient safety)
- But also please consider:
 - Showcasing a range of work across national/local/specialist/trade/broadcast media. Don't forget podcasts!
 - Covering a variety of topics on everything from early science to patient care to highlight the breadth of what our members do
- Try to avoid:
 - Repeating a topic multiple times in a short space of time
 - Accidental favouritism towards members who may be more active on social media and come up more often
 - Resharing press releases for example on a new piece of research – stick to where reporting has been done
- Don't forget:
 - We need to celebrate the work we do as the MJA, which includes all our events, awards and resources on the website. Make sure details of these get shared when relevant

- It would not be possible to post everything that might be of interest to all members, and this is also not the best use of our time

Ways to boost engagement

There are other things we could be doing more of to encourage relevant engagement with MJA social media. These include:

- Greater use of images and short videos to promote MJA events
- Videos of EC members talking about the benefits of joining the MJA
- Semi-regular online questions or polls relating to members work, eg, Exclusive of the month, Question of the month, New member of the month
- Posting more resources for journalists e.g. jobs, freelance opportunities, grants, style guides, pitch guides, info on rates, etc. Could also extend to resources related to understanding medical issues in the media if there were particularly useful ones
- Getting hold of new members social media handles to be proactive about engaging with them

When problems occur

Social media can be very messy at times and is increasingly polarised, particularly on Twitter/X. We have seen that particular with negative reactions to our awards shortlists in recent years. Just one misjudged tweet can have a devastating impact on an organisation, and so we must be able to defend what we post on these platforms.

As a diverse membership organisation, we have a responsibility to defend our own and our members' interests; however, we must be careful to be impartial and not appear to be taking a side on issues that our members may be reporting on.

There may occasions when the MJA or one of its members (or both together) is criticised for their work, for not covering a story, or accused of wrongdoing. We are under no obligation to respond to all negative comments and any decision should take into account:

- Who has complained – is this a member, another organisation or a high-profile person, or a random account/lobbying group?
- Is the complaint or criticism directly aimed at the MJA?
- The nature of the complaint or criticism, ie, is this something that requires a response?
- Is there a risk of escalating a situation or making it worse by responding?
- If a criticism comes from a member, would it be more helpful to have a conversation offline to address their concerns?

Treading this fine line between defending the MJA and its members where necessary and providing fuel for an issue that would otherwise get no further attention can be tricky. Journalists are criticised for the way they have or have not covered a story every day; it comes with the territory and does not automatically require a defence. There may however be circumstances where it is felt it is appropriate to respond. Members responsible for posting should not make that decision in isolation but discuss

with the social media team in the first instance. More serious problems or where agreement cannot be reached may need to be referred to the wider EC.

As mentioned above, we have received criticism in the past on social media about some awards nominations. We should and can easily defend ourselves against this following the principle of being polite and professional. Depending on the nature of the criticism, it can also be worth a response flagging up information on our website about our judging process, etc.

Where an MJA member has been accused on social media of wrongdoing or there has been sustained criticism or what might be described as a 'pile on', we need to be mindful that the journalist in question might be taking a strategy to ignore the issue or not engage and may not appreciate our wading in. Asking them what support they would like us to provide, if any, is a good starting point.