

A Series:

PROFESSIONAL

Practice Standards:

PROGRESS OR PASSÉ

SOCIAL MEDIA ETHICS



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STANDARDS:

Progress or Passé

Since the advent of mainstream social media (Myspace 2003, Facebook 2004, Youtube 2005, Twitter 2006, Instagram 2010, Snapchat 2011, and Tik Tok 2016) we, as a society, have had to grapple with how to coalesce our daily 9:00 to 5:00 profession with our after-hours extracurricular activities. While this has increasingly become a challenge, it is even more noticeable when our personal politics and our office politics collide or when our professional and personal choices conflate. What we post and how we choose to engage on social media has now become a benchmark to numerous would-be employers to gauge not only our abilities, but our capabilities as responsible, credible, and dependable employees fit to represent their brand. In fact, many qualified individuals have lost lucrative job opportunities due to conduct or behavior deemed unprofessional on various platforms. Business entities, including consumers of services, now have the same opportunity to assess the 'fitness' of individuals with whom they may work. The crux: These aforementioned platforms are powerful tools used to garner business, build a company's brand, showcase talent, and dispense vital information. We are now witnessing the spill over of this phenomenon impact the field of Sign Language Interpreting, leaving us to analyze the following questions: Are the ideas of freedom of expression and professionalism on social media mutually exclusive? Is it fair for entities and consumers to treat social media profiles as a determining factor for measuring qualifications? Should there be clear guidelines and standards that regulate interpreter practitioners in this space?



GROUNDING

THE CONVERSATION

Let's start with a brief summary of the current landscape. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc (RID) is a non-profit organization founded in 1964 that seeks to uphold standards, ethics, and professionalism for American Sign Language Interpreters. RID collaborated with the National Association of The Deaf (NAD) to develop an updated code of ethics coined as the Code of Professional Conduct (CPC) in 2005. Since its development, the use of social media has exponentially exploded. With the inability to have predicted such an unprecedented and drastic shift to access through virtual mediums, including social media platforms, the CPC never factored in professional conduct and its application in these spaces. Social media ethics was and still is uncharted territory and will always be difficult to discuss given the diverse experiences, beliefs, opinions, and vantage points that must be considered in every individual instance. Presently, they are often referenced in overly vague, sometimes distorted terms, serving the personal interests of the practitioner's ethical, and moral compass. This can lead to the misapplication, and even weaponization, of both normative and descriptive ethics to undergird a particular agenda. It has also become a conduit for allusive gatekeeping which is evidenced by faulty inconsistent implementation and imposed accountability. The intention of this conversation starter is not to make definitive decisions on the matter, but rather to address it head on. The topic is currently so polarizing, it is often exclusively discussed in small groups, or only to address public outrage after an egregious event takes place. This yo-yo, reactionary approach, abruptly forces us to assuage the clamor and foreground how the impact and the role that a lack of standards in this context further perpetuates racism, audism, linguicism, and a misguided public facing impression of the profession. It is also designed to open a dialogue around authenticity and whether there should be regulation respecting social media conduct for practitioners. The goal is to spark collaborative, proactive, and productive discourse instead of solely addressing this issue as a means of trolling a perceived wrongdoer, or as a response to backlash.

With access literally now being just a click away, it is even more imperative for us to be intentional and deliberate about our professional image. It is clear, given the varying myriad of settings and events readily accessible today through virtual mediums, that a code of professional conduct with seven tenants that wasn't designed to encompass this particular landscape is simply insufficient. The RID-NAD CPC has not been updated since the above-mentioned date, therefore, many gaps remain unfilled and unaddressed. Knowing this, we have the option of continuing to confront this issue on a case-by-case basis, further causing divisiveness amongst fellow colleagues and the communities we serve, or establishing tangible and actionable goals in an attempt to modernize our overall professional impression.

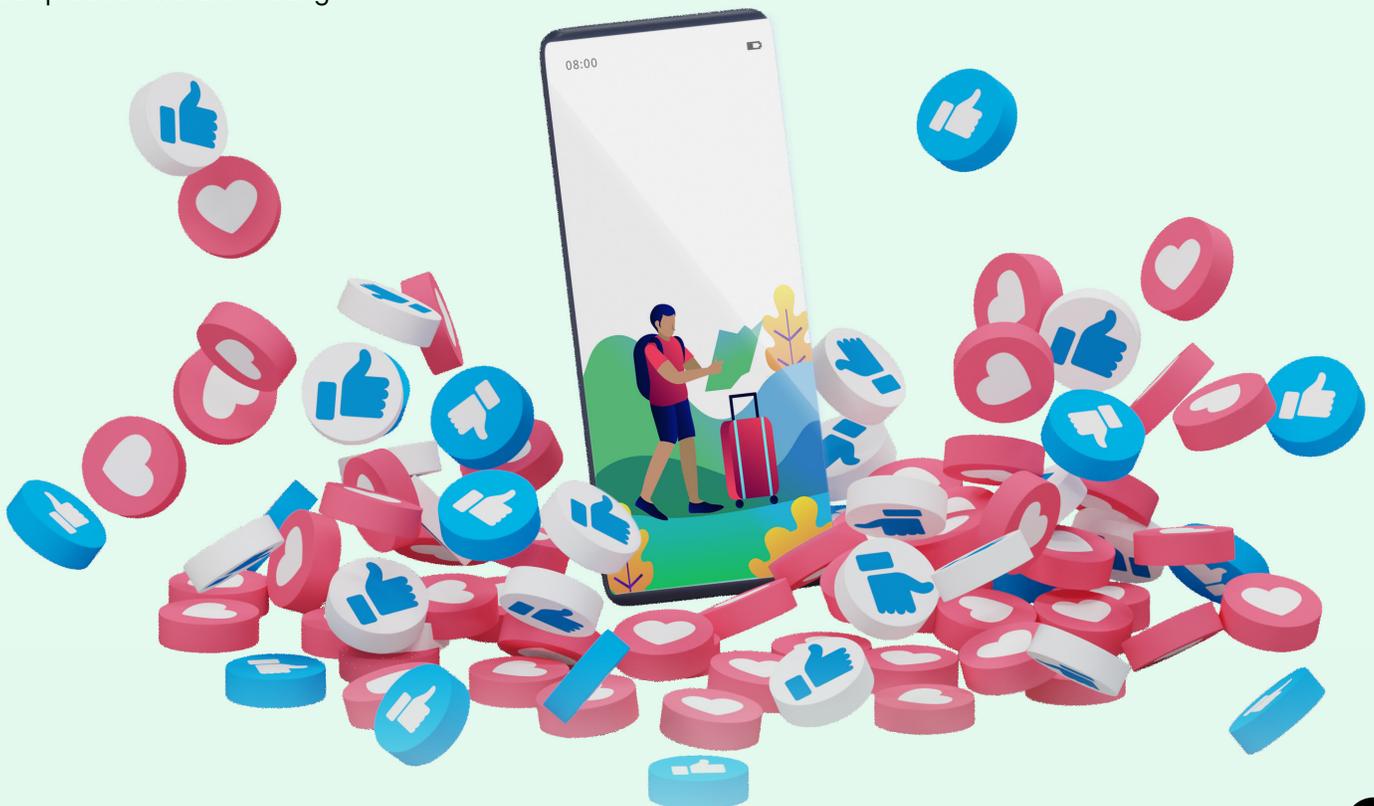


WHOSE BUSINESS IS IT?

It has been argued that professionalism upholds White standards of acceptability, limiting the sense of belonging of people from diverse (non-White) backgrounds. The tendency for these populations to be judged more critically with a lower threshold for what is suitable and/or simply different, has inspired more interpreters to stand their ground, choosing nonconformity. This has led to an overarching shift for interpreters from diverse backgrounds to show up as their authentic selves - a mantra which stems from these communities historically having to alter their image to fit within the confines of what the majority deems appropriate. Still, no change comes without resistance, and this resistance often presents itself through reckless public dialogue. Ethics are always debatable, however, more often than not, these debates on social media are far from respectful or eloquent and frequently played out in plain view of clients and consumers. So, how do we uplift people with differing views from those of our own while simultaneously maintaining sophisticated professional practices on public platforms?

Folks that hurl accusations of inappropriate social media activity are often met with the following retorts, "I can do what I want with my free time!", "What I post on my page is my business!", "If you don't like what I post, unfriend/don't follow me!". These responses become problematic when we, as interpreters, the consumers that we serve, and the entities that hire us, commingle outside of deemed "work settings". These multifaceted and complex relationships aren't extremely controversial until they are broadcast for public consumption. Ethically, we must consider that our actions will fall somewhere on the conservative to liberal scale. We are all human and must be able to understand that ethics are not always black and white nor does a difference of opinion always constitute right or wrong.

While many would still insist that 'professionalism' is a White construct, we can't for self-serving purposes, attempt to break it at the expense of the consumer for whom we're providing services. Showing up as your authentic self should be celebrated and embraced, but more priority should be placed on showing up in a manner that highlights the authenticity of the client instead of distracting from it. It's one thing to show up as your authentic self when the impact is limited to you. Unfortunately, in many instances, the actions of the few affect the many, therefore, we must be mindful of the impression we are making.



GUIDING

PROFESSIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Within the past several years, there have been countless occurrences involving interpreters on social media platforms that have sparked impassioned debates. Since there are no current guidelines or standardized processes in place for navigating such occurrences, responses tend to be more emotionally-charged than pragmatic. Historically, issues of social media ethics have wholly been handled by the court of public opinion. However, due to the Profession's dependency on one's reputation, careful steps should be taken to avoid galvanizing stakeholders towards particularly destructive actions, only later seeking to rectify the damage. Understandably, after many years of insufficient action, there exists a lack of trust in the entities installed to support and protect its members and their recourse processes (i.e., RID's Ethical Practices System (EPS)). Nonetheless, taking matters into our own hands should be done in a way that leads with respect. The viral nature of social media can take an issue from local to international in the blink of an eye. This virality can be positively repurposed to spotlight access, effective communication, spread awareness, and uplift the communities involved as well as the general public at large. On the other hand, being the target of negative feedback or ridicule can have insurmountable repercussions on a personal, professional, and cultural level.

How do we discern whether something is unprofessional, inappropriate, or simply incongruent with our personal preferences? From the longstanding and controversial tradition of ITP instructors requiring their students to interpret music (an extremely advanced skill), to commentary on BIPOC interpreters' aesthetics, to inappropriate opinion posts on what Deaf people discuss during video relay calls – we are cyclically challenged to make ethical judgments. No matter the issue, true or false, everybody always got something to say! This factual rhetoric, notwithstanding, should not erase the obligation of each individual to take certain considerations into account when making decisions and projecting their potential repercussive impacts. This is, after all, the entire fulcrum upon which rests the code of professional conduct. With all of the aforementioned references to the gaps in the CPC, undoubtedly, one tenet is true and applicable across the board:

¹ The EPS is a comprehensive approach to establishing the standards RID maintains for its membership. It provides guidance and enforcement to professionalism and conduct while offering a complaint filing and review process to address concerns regarding the ethical decision-making of interpreters.



RESPECT

FOR COLLEAGUES

5.1 Maintain civility toward colleagues, interns, and students.

5.3 Approach colleagues privately to discuss and resolve breaches of ethical or professional conduct through standard conflict resolution methods

With all of the training we receive and communication we dispense daily as language practitioners, we often fall short when it comes to constructive discourse amongst ourselves. This, in part, can be attributed to constant inconsistencies by way of general responses to topics such as: dress and grooming, where commenting on social media (in support of or against) inevitably shifts to a space of horizontal violence thus rendering the environment toxic.

We'd be remiss not to talk about the content, however, there are far too many scenarios to cover them all in this one document. So instead, let's discuss the following prompts for reflection:

- Am I only promoting access when I am the interpreter and/or part of the interpreting team? If so, is there a way to promote the same access while decentering myself?
- Is there a professional way to brand myself as an access provider? Am I considering the consumer's right and/or desire to live an autonomous life without being made a spectacle?
- Am I compromising anyone's privacy? Is there a way for me to share my life and work without causing (unintentional/potential) harm?
- Can I wait and post this in a couple of weeks instead of in real time?
- Can I take a pic that doesn't share details about the where or the who and still have the intended impact?
- What is my desired outcome from sharing this post?
- To validate my work or who I am as a person? To celebrate the event/occasion? To showcase the consumer's work? To promote myself or the consumer in order to acquire future work? To involve friends and family in my life experiences?
- Was I asked by the consumer and/or hiring entity to post? Is there a different way to achieve that outcome?
- Will it reflect negatively on me or call into question my professionalism?



CONSIDERATIONS:

- . Consider whose space you're in.
- . Check your privilege, particularly when working with minoritized communities.

Some public-facing decisions on social media cannot be undone or unseen. Proceed with caution.

CLOSING

There are a lot of gray areas when it comes to ethical decision-making in the field of Sign Language Interpreting; even more so as personal and professional interactions become more dynamic in nature.

Navigating our way through the gray matter is necessary for our continued professionalization. Assessing the impact our presence has in the spaces we choose to occupy should be fundamental. It is our hope that these Professional Practice Standards conversation starters become fodder for much needed dialogue and growth, ultimately leading to tangible and actionable outcomes.

Social media is and should be a fun outlet. But remember... freedom of speech ain't free!

