



ADDENDUM TO SOCIAL MEDIA ADVISORY: BLOCKING OR UNFRIENDING MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

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November 1, 2016

General

From time to time, Members of Council will have challenging interactions with members of the public on social media – as public figures involved in making political decisions, this is to be expected. The natural instinct of some Members will be to “block” or “unfriend” these individuals but doing so is not always appropriate.

As a general rule, Members of Council should not block or unfriend members of the public from social media platforms. When an individual’s conduct is violent, personally derogatory, or in violation of the platform’s terms of use, “blocking” or “unfriending” may be appropriate actions. **Blocking or unfriending a member of the public due to disagreements or dissenting opinions is not an appropriate use of this function.**

Different Platforms, Different Standards

Different social media platforms come with varying degrees of privacy. Subsequently, these different platforms must be considered to have different standards for when a Member’s blocking of a constituent is considered appropriate. For public pages, such as a Member’s unrestricted Twitter account or public Facebook page, it would be appropriate for the Member to block or unfriend a constituent if the constituent’s conduct was violent or promoted violence, constituted a violation of the laws of Canada (for example the *Criminal Code of Canada*) or the laws of the Province of Ontario (for example the *Ontario Human Rights Code*), was personally derogatory or abusive, or was in violation of the site’s terms of use. As mentioned in paragraphs 5 and 7 of the ***Social Media Advisory Bulletin***, any accounts in which Members holds themselves out to be a Members of Council will be held to this higher standard.

A Member’s personal Facebook profile or a restricted-access Twitter account, however, will be held to a more lenient standard when determining whether “blocking” or “unfriending” is appropriate. On these more personal platforms, a Member has much greater control and choice over who may follow or be “friends” with the account holder due to the more personal nature of the information maintained on the profile.

Trolling

Inevitably, there may be some members of the public who are repeatedly and intentionally rude and disrespectful on social media. Users whose behaviour is consistently abusive are considered “trolls” and often act in bad faith to harass other users of the platform. If a Member of Council comes across such an individual, it is recommended that the Member not engage with the user and block them if they exhibit a pattern of this abusive behaviour. **Members must still be mindful that mere disagreement is not trolling and is not appropriate reason to block a member of the public.**

The Code of Conduct

Quite obviously, there is no provision in the **Code of Conduct** which deals directly with “blocking” or “unfriending” on social media; indeed, only one provision seems to have relevance in even an indirect way. Article XVI deals with “Discreditable Conduct” and, in part, provides: “All members of Council have a duty to treat members of the public, one another and staff appropriately and without abuse, bullying or intimidation, and to ensure that their work environment is free from discrimination and harassment.” In some cases, it is conceivable that “blocking” or “unfriending” may reach this level resulting in a Complaint of misconduct under the **Code**.

In spite of the fact that the **Code of Conduct**, at best, covers “blocking” and “unfriending” in only a tangential manner, I believe the foregoing represents the best practice on the use of social media in municipal governance.

Acknowledgments

This Bulletin was informed by the work of other jurisdictions, particularly that of Andy Williamson of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in **SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR PARLIAMENTS**.