

# TROLLS & THEIR TOLLS FAQ

*This FAQ is based on questions received during our "Trolls and Their Toll on Social Media Communicators" webinar with Brandi Bates, Public Information Officer at Santa Rosa County Board of Commissioners.*

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## HOW DO YOU GAUGE WHEN TO RESPOND TO TROLLS AND WHEN TO IGNORE THEM?

You don't have to answer everything, especially rhetorical questions. Try to ignore trolls if you can. If you're lucky you might of even created a good loyal following that will come to your support. When you do have to respond, do some research on your troll, it will help with how you should respond. If you work in public safety, and a troll has commented something that's potentially dangerous, you should respond immediately. Be cautious when you're responding to groups as your page, and tread very carefully when responding with humor. Ask yourself what could go wrong. It's also important to consider what time you're responding to a post. You don't want trolls to know you're online at midnight and they are getting to you, or, have to deal with comments about posting after hours. Lastly, avoid posting contentious topics at 4:30 p.m. or on Friday, so you can actually enjoy your evening and weekend.

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## SHOULD YOU DELETE, HIDE, OR TURN OFF COMMENTS ON YOUR POSTS? DOES IT VIOLATE FREE SPEECH?

You have to allow your public to exercise their first amendment rights. Just because you don't like what they say, doesn't mean they can't say it. But what you permit, you promote. If you don't have a social media policy, work with your team and legal counsel to create one. This will outline the behavior you will allow or not allow on your page, and help with the trolls that you have to answer quickly and consistently. Additionally, follow a comment moderation guide. This commenting policy should allow moderation of inappropriate and irrelevant content, while still respecting relevant opinions and First Amendment concerns. If you do hide or delete a post, make sure you do it quickly, before people realize, and only if you have a great social media archiving service.

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## HOW DO YOU SEPARATE YOUR BUSINESS & PERSONAL ONLINE IDENTITIES TO AVOID TROLLING OFF THE CLOCK?

Set-up stricter 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 restrict people from posting on your page, and you can set-up permission settings so that you won't be tagged in any posts or photos without your approval.

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## HOW DO YOU DECOMPRESS AND AVOID BURNOUT AFTER DEALING WITH TROLLS ALL DAY?

In general, you always want to try your best to leave it behind and not dwell on the comments. But some days that can be easier said than done. Try and find something fun and engaging to take your mind off of it, take a break from social media, and do something that you enjoy or find relaxing. You can also find support amongst friends and talk it out, or read about others going through the same thing, like posts on the GSMCON Facebook Group.

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## WHAT IF SOME OF THE THINGS A TROLL IS SAYING ARE TRUE?

Sometimes it's true and you're not proud of it, and you have to "Go ugly fast." In which case you would say, yes, this 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. You're opening yourself up to some heat when you do that, but at least you're being transparent about it. Prior to posting, try to think about every way a post can go bad 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.

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## WHAT IF WHAT YOUR TROLL IS SAYING IS A BIG FAT LIE? HOW DO YOU STOP MISINFORMATION?

It's important you don't react emotionally, and respond with facts. If a troll is attempting to defame someone by saying they have committed a crime, that's libel. And depending on your social media policy, you may be able to delete that or any dangerously wrong information meant to mislead followers. With the caveat that you have good social media archiving in place. In general, do your best to stay on topic and steer any off-topic or negative comments offline. Offer your audience the right information, thank any negative posts or trolls for their feedback, and take the conversation offline with the offer of a phone call or by directing them to an FAQ page.

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## HOW DO SUNSHINE LAWS AND OPEN GOVERNMENT FIT INTO THIS?

In Florida, the Sunshine Law and Public Records Law (which is pretty strict compared to other states) are designed to guarantee that the public has access to public records, meetings are publicly advertised and open to all to attend, and agenda items are not discussed by elected officials outside of sunshine. 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 has the opportunity to 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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## SHOULD YOU LIMIT YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA SITE TO WHERE NO ONE CAN LEAVE A COMMENT?

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. It's important you have a schedule for monitoring to avoid burnout. While there are social media platforms where you must allow comments, there is a time and a place for using social media 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 office. When you're managing a lot of accounts, it's important to have some messaging platforms that don't require 24/7 moderation.

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## DO YOU HAVE A STRATEGY FOR NAVIGATING FACEBOOK LIVE TROLLS?

For a topic that you think would attract trolls, you could record and post later. However, sometimes trolls will just show up anyway. If you have the manpower for it, you could have a staff member on a laptop monitoring comments in accordance with your social media policy. If you don't and see a troll comment pop up, just ignore it during the Facebook Live and go back and moderate it later.

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## UNDER STATES RIGHT-TO-KNOW-LAWS, WHAT RECOURSE CAN AN AGENCY TAKE TO REMOVE

If you don't already have a social media policy, 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 all trolls.

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## HOW DO YOU CONVINCE LAW ENFORCEMENT EXECUTIVES TO GET ACTIVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA WHEN THEY'RE HESITANT BECAUSE OF TROLLING?

Social media is a great way to humanize your agency and/or official, 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 great in a crisis, not only for you to reach your audience and let them know everything is okay, 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, you will be in a good place to take on any potential trolls and protect your agency.

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## WHAT ARE SOME BEST PRACTICES FOR TROLLS THAT WON'T GO AWAY?

- In general, there are a few best practices to help deal with trolls.
- Don't react emotionally.
- Research your troll (friends, likes, reviews, locations).
- Respond with facts.
- 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.
- Create a social media policy that outlines the consequences of abusive or off-topic comments.
- If you don't have the resources for moderators, there are tools out there for every platform. Leverage things like Facebook's option to report posts, block words, and set your profanity filter to strong.
- Create a comment moderation guide.
- Archive, monitor and retain your social media. As no policy or guide is foolproof.