

# USDA'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA



USDA's Use of Social Media – Informational Report

Inspection 50801-0008-12 December 2023

## Purpose

Social media consists of a number of technologies that facilitate interactions among stakeholders using a variety of web- or mobile-based tools.<sup>1</sup> The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses social media to reach stakeholders quickly and easily, delivering information through a variety of digital platforms and formats as part of its integrated communications strategy. Social media facilitates improved communications that are relevant, timely, credible, and responsive to USDA's mission and the public's interest. USDA encourages the use of social media to foster a more open and transparent relationship with the public.

USDA's Office of Communications (OC) approves all USDA social media accounts. OC has an inventory of 437 approved social media accounts across USDA as of Quarter 3 of fiscal year 2023. OC also manages the primary USDA social media accounts across multiple platforms. These accounts include:

- USDA on X® (formerly Twitter®)
- USDA on Facebook®
- USDAGov on Instagram®
- USDA on LinkedIn®
- USDAGov on YouTube®
- USDA on Threads<sup>SM</sup> (currently inactive)

OC also develops policies, standards, and guidance associated with digital communications including content management over social media accounts from USDA agencies and offices. With OC's approval, agencies within USDA are permitted to use social media to share content and engage with stakeholders. Before using a new social media platform, OC and the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) jointly evaluate social media efforts and supporting technologies to ensure appropriate and efficient use of resources. All USDA social media efforts support the *One USDA* approach for style, content, and engagement with the public.



### KEY DEFINITION: SOCIAL MEDIA

"Social media" and "new media" are umbrella terms that encompass the various activities that utilize digital technologies, social engagement, and content delivery. Such activities can include blogs, photo and video sharing services, social networking, geospatial mapping tools, and discussion forums. See footnote 1.

<sup>1</sup> USDA Departmental Regulation (DR) 1495-001, *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities* (May 23, 2011). This DR defines social media; see Key Definition callout above.

The *One USDA* approach “seeks to provide a consistent, valuable experience for stakeholders that unify all mission areas and offices, leveraging available expertise and technologies.”<sup>2</sup> Content published to official social media accounts must be Section 508 compliant<sup>3</sup> and accessible to USDA stakeholders and employees.

## USDA Social Media Accounts by Platform

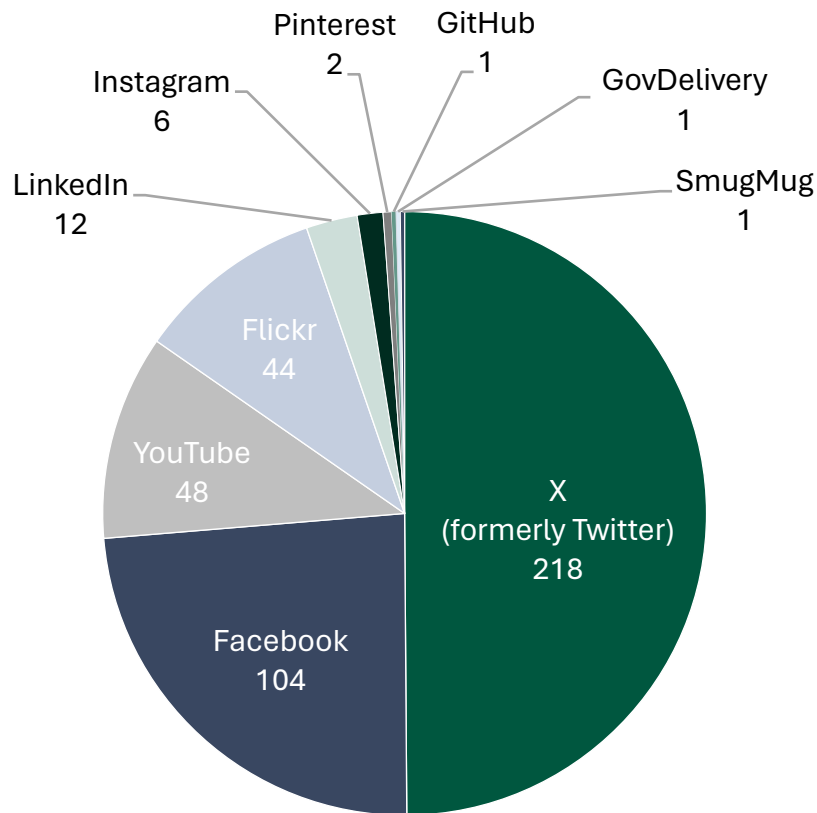


Figure 1: Pie chart showing the number of USDA social media accounts per platform.

<sup>2</sup> USDA DR 1495-001, *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities*, § 2, “Background,” (May 23, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (29 U.S.C. § 794d), requires all Federal departments and agencies to ensure that their information and communications technology is accessible to individuals with disabilities.

## Approving New Accounts

USDA may only establish a presence on social media channels<sup>4</sup> that have been evaluated by the General Services Administration and whose Terms of Service agreements<sup>5</sup> have been reviewed and approved by USDA's Office of General Counsel (OGC). OC and OCIO, and OGC as appropriate, jointly evaluate agency, program, and individual requests to establish official social media accounts or activities. Agencies must coordinate with OC before they are permitted to use these channels to share content and engage with stakeholders.

Agencies must submit a social media account request and business case or strategic communication plan to OC's Digital Communications Division. This plan should include the social media account's purpose, goals, intended audience, and plan for content. The plan should also describe why it is the best technology or tool for its stated goals, how the agency will measure success, and whether the new account is on an approved channel with a Terms of Service agreement.

OC and OCIO, and OGC as appropriate, will evaluate this information and approve or deny the social media account based on existing contracts and services, availability of similar tools or resources, and capacity to support social media activities or digital technologies. If the requested account is approved, the agency must register it with the U.S. Digital Registry.<sup>6</sup>

## Monitoring Accounts

OC is responsible for monitoring the primary USDA social media accounts and individual agencies within USDA are responsible for monitoring their own social media accounts. According to the *Social Media Approval Checklist*,<sup>7</sup> agencies must have the appropriate resources to properly monitor their social media accounts for currency, frequency of posts, comment moderation and general operation. At a minimum, these resources should include one Federal communication/public affairs professional familiar with social media communication and outreach and one Federal backup with equal experience. Contractors and/or non-Federal

<sup>4</sup> Channels are digital communication mediums that are often associated with a given platform.

<sup>5</sup> Terms of Service are the legal terms that set forth the nature, scope, and limits of a service (such as one offered through a website or an app, which is an application software designed to run on a mobile device) and the rules that the service's users must agree to follow.

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Digital Registry serves as a resource for agencies, citizens, and developers to confirm the official status of social media and public-facing collaboration accounts, mobile apps, and mobile websites.

<sup>7</sup> USDA, *Social Media Approval Checklist* (Nov. 20, 2019).

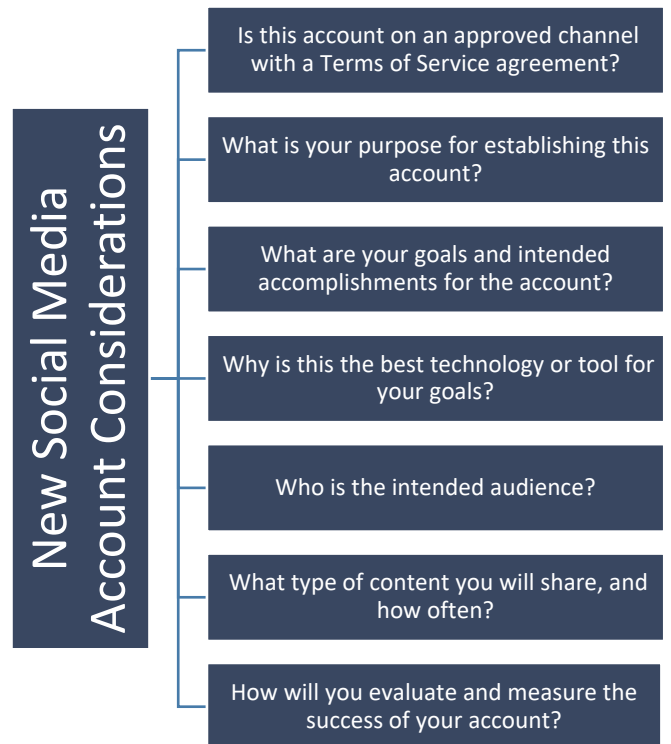


Figure 2: OC's list of questions that agencies should ask themselves when applying for a new USDA social media account.

employees may create content for social media on behalf of an agency, as long as a Federal employee reviews and approves all content.

Agencies are not expected or required to allocate resources to manage comments 24 hours a day; comments should be monitored during regular business hours, Monday through Friday. Agencies are also responsible for monitoring their social media accounts for reach and effectiveness using internet-based social media tracking tools. According to OC, agencies have the freedom to choose a tool that fits their needs and budget, as USDA does not mandate standardized tools. OC's social media manager leads a monthly Social Media Committee meeting with all agencies' social media managers across USDA. This meeting serves as a resource for sharing Department-wide announcements and campaigns, as well as an opportunity for agency social media managers to ask OC questions.

OC does not actively monitor for USDA-branded accounts that are not approved, nor does OC have a written policy for dealing with unapproved USDA-branded accounts. However, when OC encounters unauthorized accounts, OC's practice is to first attempt to work with the account holder to examine why the unauthorized account exists and evaluate its use in relation to the agency's business needs. If reaching out to the account holder is not an option or has proved ineffective, OC will contact the Government team of the respective third-party social media company to have the unapproved account removed. OC reports that the social media platforms' dedicated Government teams are typically able to remove unauthorized accounts within 48 hours.

## Posting

Social media is an effective tool to communicate directly with stakeholders. Used correctly, it builds a positive narrative about how programs and initiatives work to improve the lives of everyday Americans. According to USDA's *Social Media Plays*,<sup>8</sup> posting to social media requires scrutiny due to the immediacy and reach that platforms grant to account holders. Content must be reviewed for accurate and timely information, as well as for typographical errors and other grammatical mistakes.

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<sup>8</sup> USDA, *Social Media Plays* (last visited July 18, 2023), <https://www.usda.gov/digital-strategy/social-media/plays>.

According to USDA’s *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities*,<sup>9</sup> content published to USDA social media accounts or distributed through digital media must be Section 508 compliant and accessible to all USDA stakeholders and employees.

USDA personnel must first obtain approval from Department, agency, or program supervisors before publishing content to external social media accounts related to official duties. USDA personnel supporting social media activities or representing USDA in an official capacity should use e-mail addresses or websites created specifically and solely for official duties that are separate from personal accounts for private use. Personal or private users of social media websites or accounts should not claim to officially represent USDA or its policies or use USDA or other U.S. Government seals or logos.

USDA has outlined posting baselines and requirements within the *Social Media Approval Checklist*<sup>10</sup> for agency social media accounts on X (formerly known as Twitter). The established baselines include:

- minimum five posts per week;
- minimum one retweet<sup>11</sup> per day – including reposts of USDA Agencies and partners;
- Federal communications professional reviewing all social media content prior to publishing;
- a 60-day evaluation period consisting of verifying the social media account, submitting 60-day performance metrics, and a 60-day performance evaluation.

Posting baselines and requirements have not been created for other social media platforms because the primary USDA social media accounts are on Facebook and Instagram. According to OC, this is a longstanding USDA strategy. Agencies requesting a non-X social media account must meet with OC and present a business need requiring that account.



Figure 3: This USDAGov Instagram post from April 2023 was in reference to a viral Barbie filter trend. As of April 2023, it was USDA's top engaging post of 2023.

<sup>9</sup> USDA DR 1495-001, *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities* (May 23, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> USDA, *Social Media Approval Checklist* (Nov. 20, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> A message that has been shared or forwarded on X (formerly Twitter).

## Engaging Stakeholders

By using a variety of tools and increasing accessibility, USDA encourages greater informational sharing with stakeholders. According to USDA's *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities*<sup>12</sup> regulation, approved USDA personnel may contribute content and engage with stakeholders on social media accounts and platforms in their official capacity. When responding to comments, social media managers should follow the *USDA Comment Guidance* and be polite, use facts and data, and aim to show a different perspective and share positive stories.<sup>13</sup>

Per the *USDA Comment Guidance*,<sup>14</sup> if a social media manager encounters an inappropriate comment or a direct message, then the social media manager may take the following actions:

- If the comment does not warrant a response and is not harmful, then social media managers may ignore the comment.
- If the comment includes false information about USDA and the social media manager feels that clarification of accurate information is important for the public, then the social media manager may respond to the comment.
- If the comment includes inappropriate content such as hate speech, profanity, nudity, defamation, personal attacks, spam, copyright infringement, advertisements for inappropriate websites or social media accounts, or attempts to sell a product, social managers may hide the comment.
- If an individual repeatedly makes inappropriate comments that warrant hiding, then social media managers can block the user from the social media page.

For the primary USDA social media accounts, OC uses a third-party social listening tool<sup>15</sup> for sentiment monitoring relating to posts, campaigns, products, and other relevant topics. Sentiment analysis is the process of analyzing digital text to determine if the emotional tone of the message is positive, negative, or neutral. In the context of social media, sentiment analysis is used as a social listening method to determine the public's general feeling about a brand. In its monthly internal *Social Media Analytics Report*, OC includes sentiment analysis and reach tracking for current initiatives and/or mission areas that are shared frequently on the primary USDA social media accounts. The sentiment metrics are ranked as positive, neutral, or negative, and these metrics help report on the public's reaction to and reception of USDA programs and initiatives.

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<sup>12</sup> USDA DR 1495-001, *New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities* (May 23, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> USDA, *USDA Comment Guidance* (last visited Sept. 5, 2023), <https://www.usda.gov/media/digital/usda-comment-guidance>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Social listening* is the practice of monitoring social media channels for mentions of a specific brand, competitor brands, and related keywords.



Figure 4: USDA OC includes sentiment analysis on current initiatives and programs in its monthly and quarterly social media reports. Sentiment analysis of the Improvements to Greenhouse Gas Emissions Initiative shows a mostly neutral response.

## Managing and Protecting

Individual agencies are responsible for identifying and archiving records<sup>16</sup> contained within USDA social media accounts and posts. Social media records typically consist of content records such as entries, comments, links, videos, and other social media communications. To comply with National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) schedules and USDA guidance, records created or received through social media must be captured, preserved, and managed appropriately, following the designated retention periods and disposal guidelines. USDA has established NARA-approved records schedules for social media records, which are temporary, meaning they are destroyed when no longer needed by the agency.

OC is responsible for enforcing policy through compliance reviews of agencies' accounts, automated tools (according to OC, this includes ensuring social media content management systems are compliant), maintaining archives, quarterly reporting, or other technologies. OCIO is responsible for working with OC to ensure that social media technologies comply with established USDA IT security, archival, and records management requirements.

USDA does not collect, disseminate, or maintain any personally identifiable information about users maintained by third-party sites. However, users should be aware that USDA may read, review, or rely upon information that users make publicly available to USDA on these services (for example, comments made on USDA's Facebook page), as authorized or required by law. According to OC, a Privacy Threshold Assessment is done to evaluate all social media services

<sup>16</sup> According to 44 U.S.C. § 3301, *records* include “all recorded information, regardless of form or characteristics, made or received by a Federal agency under Federal law or in connection with the transaction of public business and preserved as appropriate for preservation by that agency or its legitimate successor as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the United States Government or because of the informational value of data in them.”

that may require a Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, per USDA’s privacy policy, these social media services are controlled and operated by third parties and are not Government websites or applications. Any information collected by a third-party service is subject to the privacy policies of the third-party service provider.

## Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to review and report information about USDA’s use of social media for transparency and disclosure. We conducted our fieldwork from July 2023 to October 2023.

To accomplish our objective, we gained an understanding of USDA’s use of social media through review of publicly available information, discussions with OC officials, and a review of relevant documentation obtained from OC. We provided a draft of this report to OC officials for their review and technical comments. We have incorporated their comments into our report, as appropriate.

We conducted our inspection in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Cover banner photo by Carly Whitmore obtained from USDA's Flickr account. It does not depict any particular audit or investigation. Banner overlay is a re-creation of the social media logos located at the bottom of the USDA.gov website.

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<sup>17</sup> A PIA is an analysis of how personally identifiable information is handled to ensure compliance with appropriate regulations, determine the privacy risks associated with information systems or activities, and evaluate ways to reduce the privacy risks. A PIA is both an analysis and a formal document detailing the process and the outcome of the analysis.



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