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Section 7
Professional Communication

Electronic communications
For most of those who work as faculty members, post-docs, and graduate students in college and university philosophy departments, the use of electronic and social media for professional purposes is a routine, everyday practice. By enriching student learning, scholarship, and philosophical community, and allowing powerful opportunities for philosophers to communicate with the general public, the use of these media can bring remarkable benefits. Members of a department rely more and more on email not only to communicate with each other, but to make collective decisions. Social media can promote inclusivity; for instance, some students who might feel uncomfortable about speaking up in class might be avid participants in an online discussion forum.

At the same time, the ease with which information can be conveyed and amplified electronically can have unintended consequences. When, for instance, an email message intended for a single recipient is posted by that recipient on her Twitter account, a message designed to be seen by one person comes to the attention of the public at large. If this message contains language that is unprofessional (if, for example, it devalues the recipient’s work in harsh and dismissive terms, or makes fun of the recipient’s philosophical interests), the broad attention the message receives may result in not only embarrassment for the sender but also possible institutional or legal sanctions. Along similar lines, if a faculty member sends a message to another faculty member commenting rudely or disparagingly about that member or her professional work or philosophical interests, and copies others in the department on this message, that action not only negatively impacts the recipient individually but can also contribute to a chilly climate within a department for electronic communications that can spill over into offline communications as well.

The very seamlessness with which electronic and social media has become integrated into the lives of their users also has its pitfalls. In using email, one has to balance the importance of ready connectedness with the importance of avoiding the sorts of pitfalls that come with email communication. Institutional email accounts do not differentiate between a faculty member’s friends and colleagues. Many faculty members use their university or college email account to send messages to friends, just as they join Facebook groups out of common professional interests using the same Facebook account on which they post personal news and opinions. In addition, many faculty members may be unaware of their institutional policies regarding the use of electronic and social media, which come into play when faculty communications are routed through institutional servers. For these reasons, even knowledgeable users trying to act responsibly can sometimes be caught off guard.

In the interest of assisting philosophy faculty in minimizing confusion as well as acting professionally and responsibly when using electronic and social media, the following good practices are recommended.

Email
A good department will attempt to cultivate an environment in which all interactions between members of the department—whether personal or professional, whether face-to-face or by electronic media—are conducted with the utmost civility and professionalism. Email communication has serious limitations that
can breed misunderstanding and conflict. Furthermore, nothing can substitute for positive face-to-face interactions among colleagues and students. Good practices for email use include the following:

- Departments should not use email as a substitute for talking in person, and should take steps to facilitate face-to-face conversations, both formal and informal. It is a good idea for people to meet in person, instead of conducting important business through email.

- Many communications require discretion and must respect privacy. Individuals can be significantly harmed if confidential information finds its way to inappropriate recipients. Email is a treacherous medium for any communications that must remain confidential, especially since messages are often automatically threaded in such a way that participants in a discussion are unaware of what information they are sending when they send a message. In-person exchange or, when this is not possible, telephone conversations are often the only suitable means for discussing matters where confidentiality is required.

- Departments therefore should establish clear guidelines for what are and are not appropriate subjects for email, and should make faculty and students aware of these guidelines. Moreover, violations of these guidelines should be called to the attention of those initiating and/or receiving the email correspondence. Colleges and universities often have very strict rules about what can or cannot be transmitted through email, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides guarantees of privacy of which students, faculty, and staff should be aware. Emails should be respectful about colleagues and students.

- Departments should avoid debating contentious matters of department policy and personal or political opinion via email.

- Those in positions of leadership should be very vigilant to shut down email threads that appear to be spiraling out of control, especially disrespectful or offensive posts. It is very easy for emails to be misunderstood, especially with regard to tone.

- Some departments may want to restrict the access to addresses that send messages to the faculty or department as a whole. Discouraging blanket emails can help disputes from escalating and discourage inappropriate sharing of confidential information.

- All members of a department should be educated about the extent to which the privacy of their institutional email accounts is and is not protected; most institutions reserve the legal right to access and read messages in all email accounts. Faculty and staff should follow the “New York Times rule”: do not put anything in an email message one would not be prepared to see on the front page of the Times.

- Members of the department may also be required to use university email accounts for transacting university business, instead of using private email accounts, for both technical and legal reasons.

- Keep in mind that many faculty members already receive crushing quantities of email each day, and simply processing all these messages makes it difficult to get on to the more important business of teaching philosophy, thinking, and writing. It’s better to limit group emails to announcements that cannot be conveyed through any other means, and which do not require a reply from recipients. And if no reply is required, this should be indicated explicitly in the message.
• Have the department administrator, secretary, or chair send out a weekly electronic newsletter to announce talks, events, and to make announcements, including news worthy of congratulations.

• Be judicious in the use of “reply-all” in replying to emails.

**Social media**

Faculty and students alike employ various methods to communicate news about themselves, and maintain professional connections within the department and without, including Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Such media can provide an important means for getting to know people outside the classroom, building relationships and networks, and sharing ideas. But they can also result in messages that were intended only for close friends, or meant to be kept in confidence, or written in haste being shared with a much broader audience, including the rest of the department, field, and community. Such comments can easily be taken out of context, causing hurt and damage to reputations. Students and faculty who enjoy the benefits of social media should also be aware of these risks and should be especially vigilant in maintaining high standards of professional conduct and in fostering good relations within the department and between the department and the broader community. (See also the discussion in Section 7.)

In particular, students and faculty should be aware of the following pitfalls of using social media indiscriminately in academic settings, all stemming from the fact that most forms of social media make it possible to mix the professional and personal in ways that can blur the lines between them. First, faculty who “friend” students run the risk of sending the message that pursuing close personal relationships with them is required for a graduate student’s long-term success in the program and in the profession. That can be problematic for female graduate students in some departments where the faculty members are predominantly male. Second, this behavior may pressure graduate students into sharing personal information that the students wouldn’t normally be comfortable sharing with faculty members. Third, they run the risk of drawing in-group/out-group lines that are corrosive to the morale of students, and allowing for an appearance of favoritism. All of these problems can be avoided by a careful and thoughtful use of the media.

Good practices for the use of social media include the following:

• Faculty members may wish to consider making a policy of not adding current graduate and undergraduate students in their program to their social networks. Departments may wish to adopt an informal policy along these lines, to provide cover for faculty who wish to decline connection requests from students by appealing to a general policy. However, social media can be a useful way of developing professional relationships with students, and so social media relationships can be useful and productive as long as the following guidelines are followed:
  - Get to know the privacy settings for social media such as Facebook. Make use of distinctions between Facebook friends who are personal friends, and those who are professional acquaintances and colleagues. Make informed and ample use of privacy settings to restrict access to posts that share information best left out of a professional setting. For example, some forms of personal information—including marital status, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.—are protected information which employers or graduate admissions committees are not supposed to take into account, and which one may not want them to know about.
  - Be careful to respect students’ FERPA/privacy rights.
Faculty members and students alike should keep posts that will be viewed by colleagues and students professional and respectful. Know your audience.

Departments may want to consider adopting rules or guidelines for faculty or students in supervisory rules, such as discouraging social media relations between faculty and graduate students who are still doing classwork, or between undergraduates and their instructors (including graduate students and faculty).

Twitter and similar forms of microblogging social media (such as Yik Yak) make it possible to share news and information, to broadcast opinions and requests, and to build a professional community of individuals interested in similar academic or professional issues on a very broad scale, but they come with minimal control over who sees one’s posts. Twitter can be used in the classroom to live-blog events, build a sense of community, serve for backchannel communication, or even to provide a study guide via tweets with hashtags. Again, as with Facebook, Twitter has its pitfalls, which include the ability to mix personal opinion and professional activity, and the fact that one may use it to broadcast one’s opinions to a large audience, without nuance, finesse, argument, or evidence.

Good practices for the use of microblogging sites—and, in fact, all social media—include the following:

- Keep posts professional.
- Be safe.
- Do not share confidential information, including student information protected by FERPA.
- Respect your university’s civility guidelines. Use of Twitter or Yik Yak in order to broadcast denigrating or humiliating remarks about others is never appropriate.

Developing ESM guidelines

Departments are encouraged to develop guidelines for responsible use of electronic and social media for faculty, post-doctoral fellows, and graduate students. The following is a sample outline of points that might be covered in these guidelines concerning electronic and social media (ESM). There are many ways such guidelines could be structured, and the list of topics that could be covered in these guidelines does not pretend to be exhaustive.

- **Introduction/background:** This section of the ESM guidelines could explain the reasons for having such a policy; indicate its scope—namely, that it applies to the use of institutional computing resources, including computer equipment, networks, and systems; and provide definitions of various terms and concepts, e.g., electronic and social media, the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of expression, the difference between privacy and confidentiality.

- **Institutional computer-related policies:** Does the institution have a general policy on appropriate computer usage? Some institutions have restrictions on what can be said and done using institutional email accounts and webpages. For example, it may be prohibited to use them as vehicles for marketing products from one’s own business to one’s colleagues or for political campaigning. If so, the guidelines should link to this broader policy. In addition, department members have responsibilities to abide by all broader legal policies directly related to electronic and social media usage to which their institution is subject. Links to these policies, such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), could be included in this section as well.
• **Other relevant institutional policies:** Other policies, including Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and institutional non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, can be violated through the use of institutional computing resources. Links to these policies could be included in a separate section, accompanied by a reminder that department members have responsibilities to abide by all institution-wide policies.

Faculty should also be made aware that at most private and public institutions, employers have the right to access electronic communications made on computers connected to institutional servers, even if these computers were purchased with private funds.

Moreover, at public institutions, or in activities involving federal funding, electronic communications may be subject to Freedom of Information requests. The nature and scope of Freedom of Information rights depend upon state and federal law; for general information, see the [Freedom of Information Act website](#) or consult your state government’s websites.

• **APA Code of Conduct:** A separate section of ESM guidelines could link to the [APA Code of Conduct](#). The code grounds professional conduct in a code of ethics, which stresses the value of academic freedom to professional work in philosophy as well as other professional conduct values such as fairness, equity, and dignity. ESM guidelines could emphasize that these values are to be adhered to not only in “real world” professional interactions but in all forms of electronic and social media communications.

Additionally, the Code of Conduct contains a [Statement on Electronic Communications](#). ESM guidelines could also include this statement or a link to it.

• **Privacy:** Given that respect for privacy is critical for establishing trust in online environments, it is important for ESM guidelines to stress that information shared electronically with a faculty member, post-doc, or graduate student should generally not be forwarded or shared with others without the sender’s consent. To put it succinctly, privacy should be taken as the default mode for treating the communications of others. This extends, for example, to making student papers available to other students via email or posting them on one’s own faculty website. It would also include taking a photograph of student work and posting that on Instagram, Facebook, etc.

• **Confidentiality:** FERPA requires confidentiality as the default mode for relating to student records. ESM guidelines should mention, though, the importance of confidentiality in general with regard to electronic and social media. If the sender of an email message requests confidentiality, it should not be forwarded to others. In addition, students and others should not be tagged on the photos one posts on Facebook without first receiving their consent.

• **Other considerations:** While acknowledging the difficulty of drawing a sharp line between professional and personal email, ESM guidelines could also mention the value of reserving an institutional account for work-related email, and using other email accounts for one’s personal communications. They could also mention the possibility of creating social media accounts for classroom use, separate from personal accounts, and deleting them when the course has come to an end. At the same time, it could also be noted that no matter what account a faculty member uses to send a message or to post on social media, a recipient could, as mentioned above, broadcast the content to many others via email and social media. For this reason, it is a good practice to keep a professional tone in all employment-related online communications. In other words, it is
recommended to use respectful and collegial language in all professional communications, independently of whether the communications are addressed to one’s actual colleagues.

Departments choosing to develop ESM guidelines are encouraged to make the policy available on departmental websites, explicitly bring it to the attention of new faculty and post-doc hires, and make it a part of graduate student orientation.

**Syllabi**

Departments are encouraged to ask faculty, post-docs, and graduate students to state explicitly on course syllabi how they will use electronic and social media communications in a responsible manner. An electronic device section of a syllabus could take the form of referring to departmental guidelines and a commitment to abide by them. Faculty preferences for student use of social media in class could also be spelled out in such a section. Just as faculty members might indicate on a syllabus that, apart from a student who has an accommodation to make a recording of the class, no other recording of the class be made without their consent, they could, in an electronic device section of a syllabus, express a preference that classroom discussion not be posted on social media, e.g., tweeted, while it is unfolding. Such transparency and clarity would contribute to making the classroom environment a trustful one.

**Department websites**

Many departmental websites have pages designed to recruit undergraduate majors and/or graduate students, along with informative pages on what philosophy is about. Philosopher Sarah-Jane Leslie and colleagues (2015) have published a study showing a strong inverse correlation between the belief that success in fields such as philosophy required raw “brilliance” and the percentage of women as well as African-Americans in these disciplines. The study recommended that “Academics who wish to diversify their fields might wish to downplay talk of innate intellectual giftedness and instead highlight the importance of sustained effort for top-level success in their field.” With this advice in mind, departments should review their websites, particularly those pages mentioned here, and make changes as appropriate.

See also the discussion of email and other forms of electronic posting, communication, deliberation, and decision-making in Section 8, below.

**Communication across levels**

Effective communication plays an important role in maintaining a healthy departmental climate and in identifying problems and contending with them when they arise. The following are examples of effective practices within departments, programs, or other units to encourage open lines of communication across levels.

Departments should try to cultivate transparency, shared expectations, and a climate of inclusiveness, all of which depend on having good communications among the different members of a department. Transparency and openness are important because they help develop cooperation, trust, and a sense of fairness among members of a group. Members of a department—students and faculty alike—are more likely to be willing to cooperate if they understand the department’s (and the university's or college’s) rules and are confident that they will be followed. Since many decisions seriously affect the lives of students and faculty, the existence of standard procedures and clear criteria, as well as appropriate procedures for grievances of the appeal of decisions, is vital to maintaining trust. And if some are perceived as having
received special treatment or unequal access to departmental resources without any procedural explanation, this will tend to break down the sense of fairness generally.

Transparency and openness also help all members to be aware of what is expected of them and what they can expect of one another. Shared expectations allow students, faculty, and staff to hold themselves and each other accountable for their actions and behavior.

Inclusiveness, too, is an important goal for departments—both as a matter of fairness and as a way of encouraging the most effective development of the capacities of all members. This, in turn, can have a positive effect on rates of retention and satisfaction with the program, both for faculty and for students, and make a program better able to grapple with the problems and crises that inevitably will arise.

Some forms of effective communication are top-down, some are bottom-up, and others are neither or both.

The top-down forms of communication come from advisors, supervisors, directors of undergraduate and graduate studies, and the chair and executive committee (i.e., those in positions of responsibility or supervisory roles), who are responsible for in communicating accurately and clearly departmental expectations of its faculty, staff, and students. Some policies can be made most accessible if posted on the website, though posting should be accompanied by communications at appropriate times to remind faculty, staff, and graduate students of rules and regulations they are expected to follow. This is inextricably tied with holding people accountable for their actions. Good practices for effective top-down communication include the following:

- Communicating expectations for promotion to tenure-track and associate faculty.
- Communicating to faculty members expectations for annual merit reviews in teaching, service, and research.
- Communicating expectations for graduate students concerning the meeting of MA or PhD program requirements; for advancement to candidacy, including the passing of qualifying exams or submission of qualifying papers; and for the creation and approval of a prospectus. Students should be provided with a clear timeline that will enable them to assess whether they are making expected progress.
- Communicating, typically in consultation with the departmental administrator, expectations for office staff members.
- Communicating clearly to faculty, staff, and student representatives which deliberations and decisions should be kept confidential and why this is important.
- Encouraging the keeping of minutes for meetings of the department and its committees, and ensuring that committee chairs or student representatives report on deliberations and decisions as appropriate—for example, student representatives should be aware of their responsibility to keep the entire student body informed, and chairs should provide assistance in making this possible.

The bottom-up forms of communication come from all members of the department in reporting to those who are responsible any problems and issues that need attention in the department. Of particular concern to a department’s climate is the question of whether department and college rules and regulations are being followed by the more powerful in their relations to the less powerful. Familiar examples of this are sexual harassment and gender-based and other forms of discrimination. In a department with a poor
climate, members of the department report these kinds of problems without getting much “uptake” or action on the part of those responsible in the department, or they are too intimidated to report them at all. But other forms can include violations of basic principles of collegiality and mutual respect.

Good practices include the following:

- Communicating to faculty and those in reporting roles the rules for reporting and the mechanisms for protecting those who act as “whistle-blowers” or who bring forward complaints.
- Communicating to faculty and students their rights as members of the academic community.
- Creating ombuds roles in the department or identifying those on campus who have been assigned as ombudspersons or whose advisory roles make them exempt from mandatory rules for reporting, and communicating to everyone in the department who they are.
- Maintaining a climate page on the department website with information about where students can go for help and assistance.

**Communication in discussions**

Another area of communication of great concern is, of course, the quality of communication among members of a department. Here, students and faculty alike have the right to conduct their business in an environment where their work is taken seriously and where discourse is civil, respectful, and professional. In addition to civility and mutual respect, the collegiality expected of each faculty member includes common courtesies, personal accountability, and willingness to contribute a fair share to the effective functioning of the academic unit. Faculty should defend the free inquiry of associates; show due respect for the opinions of others in departmental deliberations and in the exchange of criticism and ideas; acknowledge academic debt; strive to be objective in professional judgment of students, candidates, colleagues, and staff members; not discriminate against or harass colleagues or staff members; and respect the privacy of colleagues and staff members. Good practices include the following:

- Faculty should use professional discourse toward each other and to students, and demonstrate a high level of respect toward each other—not just politeness but respect and appreciation.
- Students and faculty should be open-minded and cultivate a wide interest in philosophical work. They should investigate and not disparage areas of philosophy other than their own or disciplines in which they do not work or with which they are not familiar.
- Criticism is an important source of progress in philosophy, but it is generally better when criticism is constructive and focused upon particular arguments and theories, rather than whole areas of the discipline or approaches to philosophy. Criticisms that could reasonably be construed as personal attacks are to be discouraged—especially when the context is public.
- Finally, a department with a good climate will also cultivate norms of respectful, constructive, and inclusive discussion in classrooms and seminars. The seminar room can be a hostile environment, and colleagues and teachers in their zeal to “do philosophy” can often be perceived to be highly judgmental. In such an environment, those who lack confidence will sometimes stop participating, to their own detriment and the detriment of the climate and productivity of the department.
- Moreover, students and faculty alike should be aware that hostile and aggressive behavior has been explicitly or implicitly seen as stereotypically male and heterosexual, with the result that such an
atmosphere may engender stereotype threat or a sense of alienation among women, those not belonging to dominant groups, and those who differ in their sexual orientation (see Antony 2009, 238–40, and Beebee 2013, §2).  

Departmental colloquia and public talks pose special challenges to the pursuit of constructive, inclusive exchange. Among good practices for chairing talks are the following:

- Take a short (3–5 minute) break between the talk and the questions. This allows those who aren’t confident about their question to think it through and discuss it with colleagues, and permits speakers a moment to rest and reflect.

- Designate a chair to organize the Q&A session. The chair can keep track of those seeking to raise questions, and then attempt to allocate time and to order the sequence of questioners in such a way as to permit fully inclusive discussion. For example, the discussion chair can prioritize questions from graduate or undergraduate students at the outset of the Q&A period, or call upon those who speak up less frequently.

- Adopt (and enforce) the hand/finger distinction. A hand represents a new question, and the discussion chair can keep a list of questioners based upon the showing of a hand at any point in the Q&A. A finger may also be used at any point in the discussion, and represents a request to pose a follow-up question or to ask for clarification on a point that is highly relevant to the exchange that has just taken place. This can give people who tend not to speak the opportunity to ask smaller, “safer” questions. However, this distinction also is open to abuse, and the chair should feel empowered to decide whether some questioners are using the finger convention to monopolize discussion, and so cut short a long series of follow-ups in order to permit others to pose new questions. The chair should also not hesitate to intrude if bullying occurs, either from the podium or from the floor.

- Follow the “one question per question” rule. Sometimes what is presented as “a question” will in fact be an extended statement or a series of distinct questions. This, too, can lead to a monopolization of discussion by a few most vocal or influential members of the audience. A discussion chair should be able to decide when it is appropriate to move on to other questioners in order to make the discussion more open to all.

- For similar reasons, one should not automatically grant questioners a follow-up question. It should be clear that granting a follow-up is at the chair’s discretion, and chairs should make an effort to be equitable in the use of this discretion, regardless of the questioner’s rank or status.

For more discussion of general norms for discussions, see Appendix A to this section.

References

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6 The text in this section is adapted from the BPA/SWIP UK Good Practice Scheme section on “Seminar chairing policy suggestions.”

Section 7, Appendix A
Some general norms for discussion

Because of the distinctive importance of discussion in the development of philosophical ideas and in the training of our students, it might be helpful to have a list of some general norms that can facilitate these goals. Such a list, or a modified form of it, might be shared with students and faculty and form the basis for meetings to consider the climate for discussion in the department, its talks, and its classes and seminars. Placing the question of adopting such a set of norms on the agenda might encourage taking the question of the climate for discussion seriously.

The norms below are excerpted from a list compiled by David Chalmers.

Norms of respect
- Be nice.
- Don't interrupt.
- Don't present objections as flat dismissals (leave open the possibility that there's a response).
- Don't be incredulous.
- Don't roll your eyes, make faces, laugh at a participant, etc., especially to others on the side.
- Don't start side conversations parallel to the main discussion.
- Acknowledge your interlocutor's insights.
- Object to theses, don't object to people.

Norms of constructiveness
- Objections are fine, but it's also always OK to be constructive, building on a speaker's project or strengthening their position. Even objections can often be cast in a constructive way.
- Even when an objection is destructive with respect to a position, it often helps to find a positive insight suggested by the objection.
- If you find yourself thinking that the project is worthless and there is nothing to be learned from it, think twice before asking your question.
- It's OK to question the presuppositions of a project or an area, but discussions in which these questions dominate can be unhelpful.
- You don't need to keep pressing the same objection (individually or collectively) until the speaker "cries uncle."
- Remember that philosophy isn't a zero-sum game. (Related version: philosophy isn't Fight Club.)

Norms of inclusiveness
- Don't attempt to dominate the discussion (partial exception for the speaker here!).
- Raise one question per question (further questions go to the back of the queue).
• Try not to let your question (or your answer) run on forever.
• Acknowledge points made by previous questioners.
• It's OK to ask a question that you think may be obtuse or uninformed.
• Don’t use unnecessarily offensive examples.