

Presented:
2019 Advanced Patent Law Seminar

November 7-8, 2019
Austin, Texas

Ethics of Social Media

Jason Boulette

Jason S. Boulette
Michael J. Golden
Steven H. Garrett
Boulette Golden & Marin L.L.P.
2801 Via Fortuna, Suite 530
Austin, TX 78746

jason@boulettegolden.com
512.732.8901
mike@boulettegolden.com
512.732.8902
steven@boulettegolden.com
512.732.9933

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. THE DISCIPLINARY RULES AND SELF-HELP DISCOVERY 1

 A. Early Developments..... 1

 B. The Model Rules and the Texas Rules 2

 1. Determining Whether Social Media Constitutes a
 “Communication” 4

 2. Determining Whether the Lawyer “Knows” A Social Media User
 Is Represented..... 7

 3. Reminding a Social Media User of the Lawyer’s Role 8

 C. Statutory Concerns..... 9

 1. The Stored Communications Act..... 9

 2. The Electronic Communications Privacy Act..... 16

 3. The Computer Fraud and Abuse Act 17

 D. The Constitution 24

 E. Public Policy 28

 1. The Evolving Privacy Concept 28

 2. *Stengart v. Loving Care Agency*..... 30

 3. *Holmes v. Petrovich Development Company* 32

III. FORMAL DISCOVERY 34

 A. Early Development 34

 B. Continuing Application..... 34

 1. Courts Denying Discovery..... 35

 2. Courts Granting Discovery 36

 3. SCA Limits on Discovery..... 38

 4. Electronic Information on Employer-Owned Computers 39

IV. ADMISSIBILITY 41

 A. The Maryland Approach..... 42

 B. The Texas Approach..... 45

 C. The Delaware Approach: *Tienda v. Griffin* 49

 D. The Maryland Approach Revisited..... 50

 E. The Texas Approach Confirmed..... 57

V. CONCLUSION..... 61

I. INTRODUCTION

Businesses, governments, employers, ordinary citizens, and even attorneys are becoming increasingly creative in how they use social media. This paper provides an overview of some of the potential ethical, legal, and evidentiary issues implicated when entities and their attorneys attempt to use social media for gain in dealing with their employees and litigation adversaries.

II. THE DISCIPLINARY RULES AND SELF-HELP DISCOVERY

Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and others represent new opportunities for attorneys to conduct discovery cheaply and occasionally lead to exceptional evidentiary finds. At the same time, the use of “self-help” discovery—typically without notice to other parties—can implicate an attorney’s ethical obligations and may even brush up against statutory limits governing the review of electronic information. Moreover, independently discovered social media evidence must still be authenticated and proved up if the attorney wishes to admit it into evidence (as opposed to using it simply to educate other formal discovery requests), which can create unique challenges if the origin, authenticity, or connection to the party is in doubt.

A. Early Developments

Blogs were the first example of social media to emerge as fertile ground for informal discovery.¹ Some examples of potential uses of blogs or more “modern” forms of social media for

¹ See, e.g., *Goupil v. Cattell*, 2007 WL 1041117 (D.N.H. 2007) (slip copy) (defendant moving to set aside criminal conviction after discovering that the jury foreman had been composing a blog before, during, and after the trial that included the foreman’s negative impression of criminal defendants); *Mark Hanby Ministries, Inc. v. Lubet*, 2007 WL 1004169, *6-8 (E.D. Tenn. 2007) (slip copy) (analyzing whether blog postings, among other things, provided sufficient basis for exercise of jurisdiction); *Healix Infusion Therapy, Inc. v. Helix Health LLC*, 2008 WL 1883546 (S.D. Tex. April 25, 2008) (slip copy) (same); *Pitbull Productions, Inc. v. Universal Netmedia, Inc.*, 2008 WL 1700196, *6 (S.D.N.Y. April 4, 2008) (slip copy) (same); cf. *Lorraine v. Markel American Ins. Co.*, 2007 WL 1300739, *39-55 (D. Md. 2007) (analyzing a variety of hearsay exceptions as they relate to blogs and other electronically stored utterances).

informal discovery purposes include monitoring an opposing party's posts for useful tidbits of information or searching for potential witnesses to support a case.²

In this context, questions under Rules 4.2 and 4.3 of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct (the "Model Rules") and Rules 4.02 and 4.03 of the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct first began to arise. In particular, the use of blogs by litigators raised the issue of whether blogging constituted a "communication" for purposes of rules governing communications with represented and unrepresented parties.

B. The Model Rules and the Texas Rules

According to the American Bar Association, 49 states have rules of professional conduct relating to lawyers that follow the format of the Model Rules.³ Accordingly, analysis under the Model Rules serves as a useful guideline in addressing questions of lawyers' ethical responsibilities.⁴

The Model Rules and Texas Rules include two rules that generally govern communications by lawyers with persons other than their clients or potential clients. The first, Model Rule 4.2 and Texas Rule 4.02, addresses communication with persons who are represented by counsel, such as adverse parties in litigation:

In representing a client, a lawyer shall not communicate about the subject of the representation with a person the lawyer knows to be represented by another lawyer

² See, e.g., *X17, Inc. v. Lavandeira*, 2007 WL 790061, *4 (C.D. Cal. 2007) (not reported in F.Supp.2d) (excluding as hearsay blog entries identifying defendant as the source of allegedly infringing photographs); *Cingular Wireless, LLC v. Hispanic Solutions, Inc.*, 2006 WL 3490802, *1 (N.D. Ga. 2006.) (slip copy) (plaintiff relying on "certain 'blog' chat" to support allegations that defendant made unsolicited phone calls to the mobile phones of plaintiff's customers); *McCabe v. Basham*, 450 F.Supp.2d 916, 924 (N.D. Iowa 2006) (in suit alleging nationwide conspiracy to suppress dissent, plaintiffs moving court to consider an anonymous blog entry from someone claiming the President shot him the bird at a rally in Pennsylvania).

³ http://www.americanbar.org/groups/professional_responsibility/publications/model_rules_of_professional_conduct.html. According to the ABA, only California has not adopted the format of the Model Rules.

⁴ Despite the adoption of the form of the Model Rules and their comments in most states, there may be some variation on a state-by-state basis regarding any particular rule or comment. Therefore, the applicable state's version of the rules of professional conduct should be consulted when reviewing questions pertaining to any particular situation.

Find the full text of this and thousands of other resources from leading experts in dozens of legal practice areas in the [UT Law CLE eLibrary \(utcle.org/elibrary\)](http://utcle.org/elibrary)

Title search: Ethics of Social Media

Also available as part of the eCourse

[Answer Bar: Maximizing Technology in Your Law Practice](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
24th Annual Advanced Patent Law Institute session
"Ethics of Social Media"