

JUDICIAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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One of the significant developments in communication in the last few years is the astounding growth of social networking websites. Increasing numbers of people join Facebook or LinkedIn or Twitter or other on-line social networks as a means to notify others of news in their lives, to learn what their friends and relatives and acquaintances are doing, and to generally stay in touch with other people with whom they have something in common. Businesses, organizations and government agencies use social networks to communicate information about their products and services and get limited feedback. For individuals, and for some kinds of organizations, the appeal of such sites is the opportunity for ongoing back-and-forth communication among large groups of people. Typically a social network allows someone to post a profile and photographs, videos, music, etc., and invite others to become “friends” or “fans.” Some information may be shared with the whole world; other parts may be restricted to a select, small group.

For some time now state bar regulatory agencies have been addressing the effect of electronic communication on traditional ethical rules for lawyers — the extent to which law firm websites constitute advertising, whether e-mail inquiries establish an attorney/client relationship, and so on. Likewise, judges hearing cases have faced new legal issues involving electronic discovery and searches of computers. Judges are becoming familiar, too, with problems of jurors communicating with the outside world and conducting their own research via their Blackberries, smart phones and other devices.

Compared to the information available on those other electronic communication issues, there is relatively little reference material for judges concerning their own social networking and the Code of Judicial Conduct. The purpose of this paper is to share some information addressing questions of judges’ personal use of social networks. I welcome any additional material anyone knows about.

Judges’ use of social networks

A good overview of social networking issues for judges appears in an April 30, 2010, on-line article from Slate entitled “[Tweet Justice](#).” The article reports that some judges search Facebook and other sites to check on what lawyers and parties are up to, and one judge requires all juveniles appearing before her to friend her on Facebook or MySpace so she can monitor their activities. As the article says, the new social media can generate ethical issues for

judges. One question is the appearance created by a judge and lawyer “friending” each other on a social network. Another potential pitfall is the increased opportunity for ex parte communication. The article cites a North Carolina judicial discipline case arising from a Facebook friendship.

North Carolina disciplinary case

The North Carolina disciplinary case mentioned in the Slate article is an [April 2009 reprimand](#) issued by the Judicial Standards Commission. The judge and lawyer had decided at the beginning of a child custody/support proceeding to friend each other on Facebook and then exchanged comments about the case on the social network. That contact led to the reprimand for ex parte communication. The judge was also reprimanded for his independent research on the parties, without informing either side, through his visits to the wife’s business website, a photography business, to view her photographs and poems.

Articles about judges and social networks

For another example of how a judge’s use of Facebook can lead to trouble, there is the resignation of Georgia judge Ernest Wood as reported in both the [local newspaper](#) and the [ABA Journal](#).

As reported in the [local newspaper](#), a lawyer who served as a substitute judge in North Las Vegas was removed from the office once the district attorney discovered that the judge’s MySpace page said one of his personal interests was “Breaking my foot off in a prosecutor’s ass.”

There are also two recent articles on social networking in American Judicature Society publications, but they are not on-line. One is “Judges and Social Networks” in the Judicial Conduct Reporter, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 1. The other is “The Too Friendly Judge? Social Networks and the Bench,” by Cynthia Gray in *Judicature* magazine, Vol. 93, p. 236 (May-June 2010).

Ethics opinions

The question of whether judges may join social networks and whether they may be social networking friends with lawyers, law enforcement officers and others now has been addressed by seven state ethics committees. All the opinions say that judges may join social networks, but they disagree on the propriety of friending lawyers. Florida and Oklahoma say no; New York, Kentucky, South Carolina, Ohio and California say yes, though usually with qualifications. All the opinions warn judges about the potential pitfalls of social networks for embarrassment and damage to the dignity and integrity of the office. The short reviews of the ethics opinions below explain the issues that may arise under the code of judicial conduct.

Florida

The Florida Supreme Court's [Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee's opinion 2009-20](#), issued on November 17, 2009, received a great deal of publicity because it was one of the earliest opinions and because it concluded that judges may not add lawyers as friends on a social network. The opinions from other jurisdictions generally have taken a different view, as discussed below.

The Florida committee opined that a judge could join a social network and post comments and other materials so long as the material did not otherwise violate the Code of Judicial Conduct, but that the judge could not add as friends lawyers who appear before the judge, nor allow lawyers to add the judge as a friend. The committee further said that a judge's election campaign committee could post material on a social network and could allow lawyers and others to list themselves as "fans," provided the judge or campaign committee did not control who could list themselves in that manner.

The committee's concern was that the judge's acceptance of a lawyer as a friend on the judge's page on the social network would violate the canon which prohibits a judge from conveying the impression, or allowing others to convey the impression, that a person is in a special position to influence the judge. [The comparable provision in North Carolina's Code of Judicial Conduct is in Canon 2B.] The committee noted that being listed as a friend as the term is used on social network would not necessarily mean that the lawyer actually was in a special position, but the listing would convey that impression.

The original Florida opinion generated additional inquiries and has resulted in three follow-up opinions. The first is [Opinion Number 2010-04](#) which advises that judicial assistants may add as Facebook friends lawyers who may appear before the judge for whom the assistant works, so long as the assistant's Facebook activity is conducted independently of the judge and does not mention the judge or court.

The next Florida opinion, [Number 2010-05](#), advised that candidates for judicial office are not subject to the original opinion and that they, thus, may add as Facebook friends lawyers who are likely to appear before them if elected. The opinion is based on the wording of the Florida Code of Judicial Conduct which specifies the portions that apply to candidates.

Finally, the Florida Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee revisited and reiterated its support for its original opinion on March 26, 2010, with [Opinion Number 2010-06](#). The new opinion was prompted by several inquiries, two of which proposed disclaimers on judges' Facebook pages and one of which asked about an organization's Facebook page. The committee advised, first, that a judge who is a member of a voluntary bar association which uses a Facebook page may

use that page to communicate with other members, including lawyers, about the organization and about non-legal matters, and does not have to “de-friend” lawyer members who might appear before the judge. The opinion emphasized that the organization, not the judge, controlled the Facebook page and decided which friend requests would be accepted and rejected.

One judge asked whether the concerns expressed in the original opinion could be addressed by including a disclaimer on the judge’s Facebook page stating that (a) the judge would accept as a friend anyone the judge recognized or who shared a number of common friends; (b) the term “friend” does not mean a close relationship; and (c) no one listed as a friend is in a position to influence the judge. Another judge inquired about a similar approach, proposing to state on the judge’s Facebook page that the judge would accept as a friend all lawyers who requested to be added.

The Florida committee rejected both proposals and stuck to its original opinion. The committee majority said that the disclaimer failed to cure the impression that a lawyer listed as a Facebook friend had special influence. The majority observed that lawyers who chose not to use Facebook would not be listed as friends and that there was no assurance that someone viewing the page would see or read the disclaimer. A minority of the committee wrote a dissent, calling for withdrawal of the original opinion, arguing that judges are not prohibited from having lawyers as friends in the historic sense of the word and that adding a lawyer as a Facebook-defined friend creates no stronger impression of special influence than does ordinary socializing. The minority would advise that a judge may accept lawyers as Facebook friends and that any motion to require the judge to recuse because of that relationship would need to include additional specific allegations supporting the impression of special influence.

South Carolina

In October 2009 the South Carolina Advisory Committee on Standards of Judicial Conduct issued [Opinion 17-2009](#). With little discussion the committee said that a magistrate may join Facebook and be friends with law enforcement officers and court employees so long as the site is not used for discussion of judicial business.

New York

More extended discussions, tending toward the same result as South Carolina but with more helpful analysis and discussion, have come from New York, Kentucky, Ohio and California. The gist of [Advisory opinion 08-176](#) of the New York Advisory Committee on Judicial Ethics, issued on January 29, 2009, is that there is nothing fundamentally different about a judge socializing through a social network and socializing in person, and nothing fundamentally different about communicating electronically rather than face to face. The key question for the committee was

not whether a judge could join a social network but how the judge behaves on the network. The judge, said the committee, needs to be aware of the public nature of comments posted on such a site; the potential of creating the appearance that a lawyer who friends the judge will have special influence; and the likelihood that people might use the judge's social network page to seek legal advice. The committee observed that in some ways allowing a person to become a friend on a social network is no different than adding the person's contact information to a Rolodex, but still cautioned that when combined with other circumstances the friending can lead to the appearance of a close social relationship requiring disclosure or recusal.

Kentucky

One of the most extensive opinions is from Kentucky, [ethics opinion JE-119](#), issued on January 10, 2010, by the Ethics Committee of the Kentucky Judiciary. The Kentucky committee does not believe that being designated a friend on a social network by itself conveys an impression of a special relationship. The committee repeats the cautions of the New York opinion, though, and notes that "social networking sites are fraught with peril for judges" Personal information, photographs and comments that might be appropriate for someone else may not satisfy the higher standards for judges. The committee also warns of the problem of ex parte communications and cites the North Carolina reprimand.

California

[Opinion 66](#) from the Judicial Ethics Committee of the California Judges Association, issued on November 23, 2010, is particularly well written and useful. The California committee concludes, with qualifications, that a judge may join a social network, even one which includes lawyers who may appear before the judge, but the judge must disclose the social network connection and must defriend the lawyer when the lawyer has a case before the judge.

As to whether a judge may friend a lawyer, the committee answers that it depends on the nature of the social network and whether the lawyer has a case before the judge. If the social network is one limited to the judge's relatives and a few close colleagues and it is used for exchanging personal information, for example, the likelihood will be greater that the lawyer appears to have special influence. There is much less risk, by comparison, when the social network involves individuals and organizations interested in a particular subject or project, say the restoration of an historic building, and the exchanges are limited to that topic. Regardless of the nature of the social network, however, the California opinion says the judge should always disclose that the judge has a social network tie to a lawyer and must recuse from any case in which a friend from the first kind of network, the more personal one, is participating. Even for the second kind of social network, the less personal one, the judge should de-friend the lawyer when the lawyer appears in a case before the judge.

One issue the California opinion addresses but others do not is the judge's obligation when others post comments on the judge's personal social network page. The committee says that the ethical obligation to avoid the appearance of bias requires the judge to monitor the judge's page frequently for such comments and to delete the comments, hide them from public view or otherwise repudiate anything others say that is offensive or demeaning. Leaving comments on the page can create the impression that the judge has adopted the comments.

The California opinion also admonishes judges to not create links to political organizations or others that would amount to impermissible political activity. And the judge must be careful not to lend the prestige of the office to another by posting any material that would be construed as advancing that other person's interest.

Finally, the opinion admonishes judges to be familiar with a social network's privacy settings and how to modify them. And the judge should be aware that other participants in the social network may not guard privacy as diligently and may thereby expose the judge's comments, photographs, etc., to others without the judge's permission.

Ohio

One of the more recent opinions is from Ohio. It is Opinion 2010-7, issued December 3, 2010, by the Ohio Supreme Court's Board of Commissioners on Grievances and Discipline. It is the last opinion in the [list of 2010 opinions](#).

The Ohio opinion observes that there is no prohibition on a judge being a friend of a lawyer who appears before the judge, thus friending on-line cannot be an ethics violation by itself. The opinion notes the special risks associated with social networks for judges and advises that: (a) the judge must be careful to maintain the dignity of the office in every comment, photograph, etc., posted on the site; (b) a judge should not interact on social networks with individuals or organizations whose advocacy or interest in matters before the court would raise questions about the judge's independence; (c) the judge should not make any comments on a site about any matter pending before the judge; (d) the judge should not use the social network for ex parte communications; and (e) the judge should not undertake independent investigation of a case by visiting a party's or witness' page. Finally, the Ohio opinion advises judges to consider whether interaction with a lawyer on a social network creates any bias or prejudice concerning the lawyer or a party.

Oklahoma

The latest opinion is [Judicial Ethics Opinion 2011-3](#), issued on July 6, 2011, by the Oklahoma Judicial Ethics Advisory Board. Oklahoma supports the Florida point of view, that while a judge may participate in social networking sites the judge should not be social network friends with

lawyers, law enforcement officers, social workers or others who may appear in the judge's court. In the panel's view such a relationship can convey the impression that the person is in a special position to influence the judge. It is immaterial whether the person actually is in such a position, it is the possible impression that matters, and in the opinion of the Oklahoma committee, "We believe that public trust in the impartiality and fairness of the judicial system is so important that [it] is imperative to err on the side of caution where the situation is 'fraught with peril.'"

Summary

Although the number of opinions about judges and social networks is still small, there does seem to be a consensus building on several issues. There appears to be general agreement among the ethics committee that:

- (1) Judges may join on-line social networks.
- (2) Accepting a lawyer as a friend on a social network does not by itself establish such a special relationship as to imply that the lawyer has special influence and does not by itself require the judge to recuse from cases with that lawyer, but may create such problems when combined with other circumstances. In Florida and Oklahoma, though, the potential for others to have the mistaken impression that a social network friendship brings special influence is enough to forbid judges from friending lawyers.
- (3) Social networks create opportunities and temptations for ex parte communication that judges must be careful to avoid.
- (4) Judges are still judges when posting materials on their social networking pages and need to realize that the kinds of comments and photographs posted by others may not be appropriate for them.

Judges also should be aware of the security issues that come with social networking. A judge's page on Facebook or MySpace or other social network can provide lots of information to someone who is dissatisfied with the judge's decisions and wants to do harm.

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