Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

DEMOCRATIZING THE JUDICIARY:

WHY JUDGES SHOULD ENGAGE 'WE THE PEOPLE' THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

A judge with over 41,000 followers on X shares why – and how – to communicate meaningfully on social media.

By Stephen Louis A. Dillard

Judges are different, but we are not special. And for far too long, many judges have acted as if being a neutral interpreter of the law somehow makes them a different and special kind of public servant — one that should, out of supposed necessity, be largely detached from and inaccessible to the public.

I believe it is time to shake things up a bit — for the sake of the courts and the rule of law. In a relatively short period of time, the public's faith in the American judiciary has decreased significantly. Even so, the public remains keenly interested in understanding the inner workings and culture of the judiciary; and modern technological advancements have provided courts and judges with "unique, cost-effective tools to [directly] engage and educate the public."[1]

I firmly believe that more judges should embrace social media as a primary vehicle for educating the people we serve about the third branch of government, and that we should drastically rethink how we engage our fellow citizens in the modern age.

To be blunt, judges are making a serious and harmful miscalculation by staying largely disconnected from the public. And as far as I can tell, many of them have done so because

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

they believe that being overly visible to the public or too "out there" is unbefitting of a judge. I strongly disagree. Without assessing the substance of a judge's public remarks and appearances, this objection strikes me as merely an unpersuasive appeal to tradition — a tradition that, quite frankly, comes across to many citizens as deeply rooted in elitism, arrogance, and entitlement. Again, if a judge is educating the public about his or her duties and responsibilities, the inner workings and culture of the judiciary, or engaging citizens in a manner that enhances the public's faith in the judiciary, how is that demeaning to the office? It isn't — not in the slightest.

We serve the public. We are not cloistered, black-robed philosophers or rulers, and "the public has a right to know who we are and what we do." Indeed, I believe the most effective — indeed transformative — way to meaningfully educate the people we serve about the judiciary's work is to fully take advantage of the social media platforms used by our fellow citizens on a daily basis.

Many of my fellow judges will take issue with my somewhat unorthodox approach to public outreach. They are deeply skeptical of and worried about their colleagues' use of social media, and they understandably wonder whether the accompanying risks far outweigh the benefits of using these platforms.

To that end, here I offer my thoughts on a judge's crucial role as a digital citizen in the modern age, make the case for increased judicial outreach through social media, address many common objections, briefly discuss the nature and efficacy of certain popular social media platforms, highlight potential pitfalls, provide my own ideas about best practices — based on over 15 years of experience on social media as a judge — and discuss how judges can and should use these platforms to make the judiciary more transparent and accessible and increase the public's confidence in the American judicial system.

EXAMINING DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BY JUDGES AND COURTS

There is something deeply disconcerting about "the least understood branch of government" — the judiciary — also being the one that "most people directly interact with and are personally impacted by on a daily basis." No case is an island. Indeed, there are often far-reaching implications from any judicial decision, and the citizens who interact with the judiciary need to have confidence that the judges making these difficult decisions are people deeply committed to the rule of law and heavily invested in the communities they serve. Unfortunately, there remains a troubling and unnatural separation between the judiciary and the public. This can and must change.

To state the obvious, the law intimidates and frightens many people — and for good reason. Unfortunately, judges have not always helped matters. To the contrary, we have "long been criticized for being inaccessible and a source of mystery to the public." Stated differently, the judiciary is often viewed as "a wise but entirely detached body of individuals who sit on elevated benches, adorn themselves in majestic black robes (with gavels in hand), and dispassionately rule on the various and sundry disputes of the day (and do so largely out of the public eye)." Again, we can and should strive to be far more accessible and transparent to the people we serve.

Judges serve the public, and we have "a duty to educate the public about the judiciary's unique role in our democracy, its decision-making processes, and what the public has a right to expect in our courthouses." But to do this in an effective and meaningful way, judges (and our respective courts) must thoughtfully reconsider how we engage the public, move beyond our collective discomfort with technology and social media, and "fully embrace the . . . platforms those we serve use every day." The people we serve desperately want direct, meaningful engagement by judges and the judiciary, and they are entitled to it.

Judges should be meaningfully involved in their respective communities and other spheres of influence. They can and should regularly visit and speak to schools and civic groups, "as well as attend[ ] events where they will have an opportunity to stay connected to the people they serve." Judges are also, understandably, committed to spending a considerable amount of time with law-minded high school students (usually as part of a high school mock trial program), prelaw undergraduates, law students, and lawyers of all ages.

This is as it should be. Judges should strive to be public-facing, community-involved leaders. But unfortunately, there are "only so many [in-person] events a judge can attend, only so many hands a judge can shake, and only so much time in the day." And as important as it is to have a positive and meaningful relationship with the bench and bar, a judge's public appearances should not be limited to the legal community.

The newfound ability of judges and courts to "use technology and social media to communicate with the public is [nothing short of] revolutionary." Even so, a judge's reputation as a good and faithful "digital citizen" necessarily begins with ensuring their court is easily accessible and

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

transparent to the public. And this is far more likely to happen when a court's official website provides "citizens with increased access to the judicial process" through "effortless access to court records," implements an "effective digital marketing strategy" to ensure that citizens "find a court's website when they need it," and makes the website as easy as possible to navigate.

Unsurprisingly, easily accessible, user-friendly court websites and livestreaming of judicial proceedings are widely supported by many judges, but there is far "less enthusiasm" in the judiciary for "more direct engagement with the public via social media platforms."

I hope to convince at least some of my leery colleagues that the benefits of judges using social media to engage and educate the public far outweigh any potential risks.

ENGAGING THE PEOPLE WE SERVE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The judiciary plays an essential role in upholding and safeguarding the rule of law, and the people we serve are entitled to this crucial civic information. By directly engaging citizens on social media, judges can begin the difficult process of demystifying the judicial branch. Even more importantly, when judges do this in a meaningful and authentic way, we can increase the public's waning faith in the judiciary, which is critical these days.

So, what to do? I don't have all the answers, and the varied reasons behind the public's significant loss of confidence in the judiciary are well beyond the scope of this article, but I am confident the answer isn't for judges and courts to stay largely disconnected from the people we are so fortunate to serve.

What may help is for the judiciary to seriously rethink how it engages with the public and embrace (at least to some degree) the social media platforms used daily by our fellow citizens. Here I highlight some specific, key benefits of judges using social media.

Educate the public

We can use social media to meaningfully educate the public about the judiciary. I use these platforms to advise when my court is holding an oral argument and to highlight press releases and job announcements by my court and the Supreme Court of Georgia.

> A judge's reputation as a good and faithful "digital citizen" necessarily begins with ensuring that his or her court is easily accessible and transparent to the public.

Additionally, I make a point of regularly explaining my court's internal processes and constitutional deadlines, posting links to scholarly articles and essays, and sharing other civic-minded writings. I also post photos and further information about interesting court-related events that I attend, such as Georgia's State of the State and State of the Judiciary speeches.

Create learning labs

I have also received other (tremendous) benefits from actively participating in social media. I have built meaningful lifelong friendships with justices and judges in other jurisdictions, been invited to speak at national and international conferences and events, and been given opportunities for unique and enriching learning experiences that almost certainly would not have been possible without my active online participation.

I have also been fortunate enough to have numerous online and in-person conversations with my colleagues from other areas of the country. These delightful and frank discussions have led to more efficient, creative, and modern methods of doing certain aspects of my job as an appellate judge. Put another way, "judicial relationships developed through social media platforms have created a live national learning lab."

Connect with students

The ability to mentor students and lawyers through social media has also been especially rewarding.

As Bridget McCormack, former Michigan Supreme Court justice, and I have previously emphasized, "Because social media interaction and reach is scalable to infinity, it creates opportunities for mentorship that are otherwise not achievable." Students and young lawyers hunger for this kind of direct engagement with judges, which would have been almost unthinkable even 20 years ago.

I firmly believe judges have a solemn duty to mentor and educate the next generation of lawyers; social media enables and empowers us to do this in a revolutionary and transformative way.

Promote important issues

Judges can also use social media to promote important nonpartisan issues to the bench, bar, and public writ large. ▸

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

For instance, my views about civility, kindness, and professionalism reach a much larger audience when I express them on social media than at any public speaking appearance I might make. And these views are then promoted, echoed, or endorsed by others, reaching audiences that might have otherwise been inaccessible to me (and other judges). Similarly, positive stories about our profession and the judiciary can be relayed to the public far more efficiently and effectively through social media.

Improve competency

Like many of my colleagues, I am convinced that my engagement on social media greatly enhances my ability to do my job more effectively. There is a basic competency-based reason for judges to familiarize themselves with social media. Indeed, given "the plethora of technological issues before our courts and the pervasive use of social media by most Americans, how can a judge effectively do his or her job without having [at least] some basic understanding of how social media works?"

Encounter criticism

There is also another rarely discussed benefit of justices and judges having accounts on the most popular social media platforms, even for those who are only "lurking": constructive criticism and feedback from the public. While judges should never allow external commentary to unduly influence them or keep them from faithfully doing their job, it is not unusual to see thoughtful critiques of the tone of judicial opinions, the use of humor or pop-culture references, judicial temperament, and the like. And for judges who often live in criticism-free bubbles of unending praise, I think occasionally reading honest opinions about your work product is a nice — and maybe even helpful — reality check.

Serve as an Example

Perhaps the most compelling reason for judges to actively participate on social media is to offer the public shining examples of civic engagement at a time when many are making a concerted effort to undermine the independence and integrity of the judiciary, as well as the rule of law. If judges are unwilling to thoughtfully engage and educate the public about the judiciary, then the public square is likely to be dominated by those attempting to politicize and denigrate our courts. We cannot allow this to happen.

For judges who often live in criticism-free bubbles of unending praise, I think occasionally reading honest opinions about your work product is a nice – and maybe even helpful – reality check.

Network

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, social media provides elected judges with an extraordinary means of networking, connecting with the public, forming new relationships, and messaging. Indeed, in my experience, the people who follow me on social media feel much more invested in my judicial career than they otherwise would through a traditional, more detached campaign or outreach approach. And a judge's social media profile can — when done correctly — enhance and amplify other public appearances and outreach efforts. Public speeches, podcast interviews, and articles written by judges can all be shared with a far wider audience through social media.

It should come as no surprise that judges who actively participate on social media are far more likely to establish national reputations. Consider Don Willett, judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. Before he joined the federal judiciary, Willett was arguably the most followed (and celebrated) judge on any social media platform. As a result, he "quickly established a national reputation on social media as a result of his ability to strike the proper balance between accessibility and appropriate judicial decorum."

After Willett, the follower counts for judges on social media go down considerably. As far as I can tell, I have the most followers of any active U.S. judge on X with just over 41,000. I also have 6,000 friends or followers on my personal Facebook page; over 1,000 followers on my professional Facebook account; 6,300 followers on BlueSky; just over 2,500 followers on Instagram; over 1,300 followers on Threads; and over 8,000 connections on LinkedIn.

Importantly, even at these rather modest levels of support, I have a national (and sometimes international) voice on nonpartisan issues near and dear to my heart — like civility, professionalism, best practices for appellate advocates, access-to-justice issues, and judicial transparency and accessibility, as well as the benefits and virtues of judges using social media to engage and educate the public.

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

ADDRESSING LEGITIMATE CONCERNS

That said, there are serious, understandable concerns among the bench, bar, and public regarding judges' use of social media. Here I respond to three primary concerns.

"There is the potential for judicial misconduct." To be sure, instances of judicial misconduct can and do erode public confidence in the judiciary, and this danger is exponentially increased when such behavior occurs on social media, where news of judicial misconduct can spread quickly.

But a viral moment or lapse in judgment can happen to anyone, and this is true regardless of whether someone is actively participating on social media. And given the all-pervasive use of cellphones in modern society, the likelihood is that a misbehaving judge will end up as fodder for discussion on social media.

The "solution" to these legitimate concerns is not to shun transformative technological advancements in communication or to pressure judges to avoid social media altogether. This approach is both shortsighted and unwise. Judges are already far less inclined than other elected officials to engage the people we serve, and that is not a net positive for the public's perception of the judiciary. Now, perhaps more than ever before, "citizens are interested in understanding and following the judiciary; and technology has given judges unique, cost-effective tools to engage and educate the public." My advice is for judges to be proactive and thoughtfully consider having an established, positive presence on at least some of the most popular social media platforms — or, at the very least, encourage their courts to do so.

Judges can use social media to humanize themselves to the people they serve, help demystify the judiciary, and increase the public's confidence in it. Rather than being a random, faceless public servant, a judge's social media presence can — when done intentionally and skillfully — create an authentic personality for your online "brand," which is essential "for building trust with your audience."

"It degrades my office." Another frequent objection to judges actively participating on social media is that doing so somehow degrades the office they hold. In my view, this objection is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of social media. It is not the platform, but the substance posted to the medium that can be demeaning to the judge and the judiciary. Judges are (or should be) in complete control of the content they post on social media. If judges can dictate the substance of a speech given to a local civic club, they should likewise be able to show similar restraint and discipline in making online remarks. The bottom line, then, is this: If a judge's online content is educational, informative, civil, and authentic, it will only enhance the public's faith in the judiciary. And importantly, unlike the traditional and customary events attended by most judges (which typically involve only other members of the legal community), a judge's social media posts are (or should be) accessible to everyone.

I think the latter approach to outreach has a certain Jeffersonian, townhall purity to it and is far more likely to increase public confidence in the judiciary than the clubby confines of the former. As for ex parte communications made via social media (which is a fear many judges understandably have), the solution is the same as in real life: Report them immediately. In the end, the "responsible use of social media is really just about exercising good judgment," which should come naturally to judges.

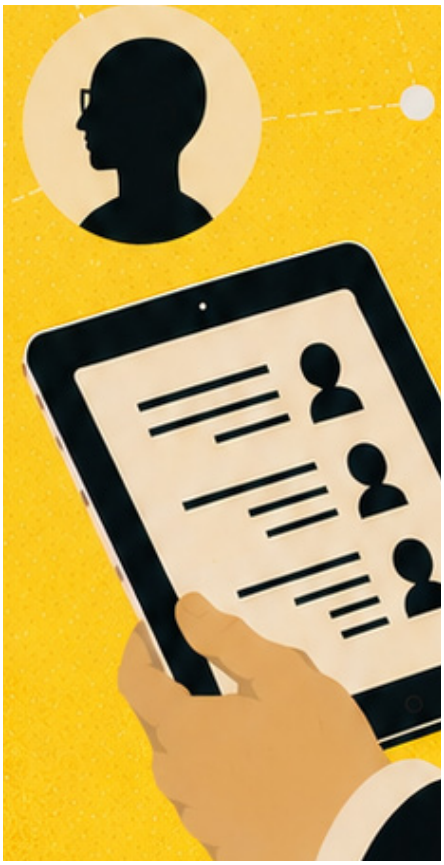
Along these lines, many legal traditionalists claim that having a social media presence undermines the public's confidence in judges' impartiality. While that is certainly how many in the older generations (i.e., the Silent Generation, Boomers, and even a significant percentage of Gen Xers) feel about how judges should behave, my sense is that the younger generations (i.e., Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alphas) do not feel this way at all. There is growing public demand that elected and appointed public servants be more accessible, transparent, and humble. I believe they are right to demand all these things. ▸

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

There is also a serious risk of reputational and institutional harm when judges remain almost entirely isolated from the people they serve. And there is something disquieting and strange about premising an objection on the presumed inability of judges to behave in a professional and restrained manner on social media. If there are indeed genuine concerns about certain judges using social media, then maybe we need to consider replacing them with better judges. In the end, "[t]ransparency reveals what it reveals," and it won't always be a pretty sight — even if it is ultimately illuminating.

"There are security risks." Finally, many judges are rightly concerned that actively participating on social media creates unique security risks. Unfortunately, much of the same information can be obtained about a judge even with no active presence on any social media platform. Even so, there are several common-sense measures a judge can take while using social media that will (hopefully) help minimize your security risks as a public official, such as waiting to publicize an event until after it is over, making sure you thoroughly understand privacy settings, using caution when it comes to posting personally identifiable information, and reporting any remotely threatening message or post.

It should go without saying that this isn't nearly an exhaustive list of the security measures a judge can or should take when using social media, and all judges should be in constant communication and consultation with the law-enforcement officers charged with their safety and protection. In the end, each judge must assess their own security risks and situation and determine how much information they are willing to share on social media (or deem prudent to share).



GETTING STARTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Before detailing the substance of what judges should or should not post on social media, let's briefly discuss choosing the right platforms to use. Your instinct will be, understandably, to choose the most popular mediums; in many cases, that will almost certainly be the right call.

Facebook. In my view, Facebook (3 billion monthly users) is probably the best (and safest) place for a novice to begin establishing a social media presence. Most judges already have a personal Facebook account, so they have at least some familiarity with and comfort on that platform. With that comes (or likely comes) a built-in audience there that primarily consists of family members, friends, and friendly acquaintances. And while state court judges who run in elections can certainly use their personal account for "soft" outreach as a judge (i.e., a more personalized approach to educating mostly in-real-life friends about what you do as a judge), a separate, official governmental page, which can then be used exclusively for judicial outreach, is advisable — as is, perhaps, an account solely dedicated to the campaign.

Importantly, although I have often mentioned work or campaign-related events on my personal Facebook page, I never mention campaign-related matters on my official, governmental Facebook page. I strongly suggest you don't either.

LinkedIn. Another relatively safe platform for judges is LinkedIn (1 billion monthly users). Unlike Facebook, most judges often use LinkedIn to post about work or career-related matters. And while LinkedIn appears to be moving toward an environment where users share more personal information (I've even done this in the past few years), it is still, in my view, the most "formal" of the platforms. And unlike other mediums, my experience has been that LinkedIn typically has fewer combative commentators and trolls.

X. Currently, X is arguably the most controversial of the platforms I recommend that judges use. I won't rehash the Twitter/X controversy here, but you should be aware it exists and that at least some of the people you serve are outwardly hostile toward this platform and its owner. That may be enough for many of you to choose not to create a public account on X, but I would, at the very least, recommend setting up a lurker account to get familiar with how this widely used medium works.

I have over 41,000 following accounts on X, making it my largest following

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

on any social media platform, so I am hesitant to just pack up and leave. Indeed, even with the ongoing controversy surrounding this medium, many of the people I serve continue to actively use X, and again, my goal is to reach as many of my fellow Georgians as possible.

BlueSky. I am also actively posting on BlueSky now, a relatively new platform that saw its user numbers skyrocket in the wake of the 2024 presidential election. And as I mentioned in an interview, I like Bluesky just from a design and functionality standpoint. It's easy to use, intuitive, and I have seen a lot less spam on it. I have also seen a sizable contingent of the former #AppellateTwitter community migrate to Bluesky (now known as #AppellateSky), and I want to stay in touch with friends who have chosen to leave X altogether. That said, the ongoing criticism of Bluesky is that it is overwhelmingly populated with progressive and left-leaning accounts and lacks diverse viewpoints — i.e., that it's an echo chamber. But again, controversy or criticism surrounding Bluesky is beyond the scope of this article. My point is simply to apprise you of the general (or perceived) nature of Bluesky, so that you have some idea of what you are getting into if you choose to set up an account on this medium.

Instagram. Instagram has been around since 2010 and is generally a "photo and short-form video sharing social networking service" used to post images and videos publicly or privately. I have used this platform considerably less than the more substantive platforms. Even so, I do think Instagram is a safe social media platform for judges to use for public outreach (with an emphasis on imagery rather than substance), and with its exponential reach, I think it would be a mistake not to create an account on this platform.

Threads. As it currently exists, this microblogging platform was launched by Instagram in 2023 to allow users to "share text updates and participate in public discussions," as they can on X and Bluesky. Threads is directly linked to your Instagram account, and the two platforms work together fairly seamlessly. To date, Threads and Bluesky appear to be the most likely platforms to compete with X. Interestingly, my experience has been that I receive far greater engagement on Bluesky than on Threads (and sometimes even more than on X).

> If there are indeed genuine concerns about certain judges using social media, then maybe we need to consider replacing them with better judges.

AVOIDING MISTAKES

Once you have chosen your preferred platforms, you will then need to decide how active you wish to be.

Follow judicial canons. Judges should proceed with the knowledge that the canons of judicial conduct apply to judges engaging the public on social media just as they do in the "real world." As a result, many of my content decisions on social media are relatively straightforward.

For example, I never discuss any internal deliberations within my Court, pending cases, or issues I may be called upon to consider in the future. Relatedly, judges should not discuss cases they have already decided or any internal deliberations regarding those controversies.

Judges should also not engage in or even come close to participating in — directly or indirectly — partisan politics. This can undoubtedly be challenging at times. Even in states like Georgia (which holds nonpartisan judicial elections), judges still need to campaign, fundraise, engage in extensive networking, and seek to connect with voters of every political stripe.

That said, there is nothing wrong with a judge speaking out on nonpartisan issues of great importance to the legal profession. But judges still need to be extremely cautious in how they express their views on any topic, even when it is an important issue about the administration of justice. Again, judges are rightly expected to exercise good judgment, and the words we use to express our opinions matter greatly.

It will come as no surprise, then, that my advice to judges is to "pick your battles." If you are going to speak out on an important issue involving the courts or the effective administration of justice (especially one that is perceived by many in the legal community to be somewhat controversial), you had better be sure that you are precise with your words and prepared to be publicly criticized for taking a stand on that issue.

Connect in a neutral way. I highly recommend adopting a consistently applied, neutral, nonpartisan policy for following or connecting with people on social media. Although I think it is foolish for anyone to believe a lawyer or party will receive preferential treatment in a case simply because ▸

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

they have a tenuous social media connection with a judge, there are preventive measures a judge can take to provide assurances to the public that these online connections are (or should be) of little concern. For example, judges can allow anyone to follow their accounts and follow back or accept connection requests from any individual residing in their jurisdiction or state (I do this with any requests from someone residing in Georgia). To paraphrase a line from one of my favorite movies, if everyone is special, then no one is special.

Be thoughtful about liking and reposting. Judges need to be especially careful about what they like, favorite, or repost on social media. When you like or favorite a tweet or post, most mediums will then publicize your favorable treatment of that content to other users on those platforms. As a result, your impartiality can be reasonably questioned simply by liking political posts, even if you are not directly making those comments. I highly recommend checking regularly (if not daily) to make sure you haven't mistakenly liked a controversial statement on social media, which can easily happen on almost any platform. It is also vital to keep in mind that you cannot like or repost a statement that you are prohibited from making directly as a judge. If you do, it will fairly be seen as an endorsement of that viewpoint. It should go without saying that you cannot do indirectly what you are forbidden from doing directly.

Be vigilant. Finally, judges need to understand and assume that anything they post on social media can or will eventually be seen by everyone, and this is true even if you only have personal or private accounts. As the American Bar Association's Formal Opinion 462 aptly explains, "Judges must assume that comments posted to a [social media platform] will not remain within the circle of the judge's connections."

To loosely quote a famous phrase from *Harry Potter*, a judge's creed on social media should be "constant vigilance." Online or in real life, you must always, always assume that people are watching you — because they are.

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

In my view, it is crucial for your social media presence to closely resemble who you are as a person. As in real life, it is a horrible idea to try to be someone you are not. Even so, there is certainly nothing wrong with using your accounts to offer up the best version of yourself to the public.

I also often share my interests outside the law with those who follow me on social media. Again, I think it is worthwhile for judges to reveal aspects of their personal lives to those they serve. It humanizes the judiciary and is a subtle way of reminding lawyers not to allow their work (important as it is) to consume them.

Now, I fully recognize that some of my colleagues may find it unorthodox for judges to disclose aspects of their personal lives to the public. Indeed, I think for many judges, lawyers, and even some citizens, there is a sincere fear that judicial use of social media will ultimately undermine the public's respect for the judiciary. Again, I respectfully disagree. I believe that when judges responsibly use social media to engage the people we serve, it humanizes the judiciary, makes judges far more accessible and transparent to the public, and promotes greater confidence in the judicial branch. "Particularly in an era of backlash against the judiciary — both domestically and internationally — external deliberation through separate judicial speech may be the last line of defense of the rule of law."

Still, not every judge can or should bear that burden immediately. It takes time and maybe even expert help to skillfully use social media as a means of public engagement. Your approach will depend on how you, as a judge, want to hold yourself out to the public — i.e., what kind of "brand" you are seeking to cultivate. In this respect, I think it helps (at least initially) to place different types of online content into buckets. Below I describe six of mine, along with examples of each: transparency and accessibility, civility and professionalism, civics, educational, mentoring, and personalization/humanization.

A judge's creed on social media should be "constant vigilance." Online or in real life, you must always, always assume that people are watching you – because they are.

Transparency and accountability. One of the most important things judges and courts can do to engender trust and confidence in the judiciary is to be as transparent and accessible as possible. And for this reason, many of my tweets are geared toward providing the public with a peek behind the curtain of Georgia's appellate courts. For example, I frequently

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

post about our constitutional "distress" deadlines, livestreams to oral arguments, appointments to our court or the Supreme Court of Georgia, job opportunities, retirement ceremonies, important committee work, and other newsworthy court-related matters and events.

Civility and professionalism. Judges must lead by example. If we fail to demonstrate professionalism and civility in our interactions on and off the bench, how can we expect lawyers or other members of the public to do so? And we can use social media to highlight and emphasize the crucial role civility and professionalism play in our chosen vocation. For example, a judge can post about civility-related initiatives, notable examples of civility by prominent justices and judges, engaging anecdotes that highlight the importance of civility and professionalism, as well as links to writings and speeches on these topics.

Civics. Now, more than ever before, it is essential for judges and courts to promote civics education. I find myself increasingly discussing the dire need for our country to heavily invest in civics education. And in doing so, I regularly post about civics organizations and initiatives — like iCivics, *Civics Break* (by the Bolch Judicial Institute of Duke Law), ConSource, the Center for Civic Education, and the like. It is crucial for judges to carry on Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's tremendous legacy of enthusiastically supporting civics education for the next generation of Americans.

Educational. One of the best things judges can do on social media platforms is educate the public about the inner workings and culture of the judiciary and other aspects of our profession. You can do this by using social media to amplify your writings and speeches (I frequently do this), or you can answer general questions about your court, law school, law practice, and similar matters in real time by holding question-and-answer sessions with your followers (I do this less often) or just answering questions from followers as they are posed to you (I do this regularly).

Mentoring. Social media provides judges with a unique and powerful way to mentor the next generation of lawyers. You can do this by providing the kind of educational material previously mentioned, but you can also move from the general to the specific with student members of your audience and provide career advice, help with goal setting, offer encouraging words, and give an insider's view of the profession or the judiciary.

Personalization/humanization. The purpose of "personalization/humanization" content on social media is to let the public know more about who you are as a person off the bench. You will often see posts on my social media feeds about various nonlegal subjects. For example, I regularly feature my undergraduate alma mater, Samford University, and its athletic teams on my social media accounts. My undergraduate experience was transformative, and a significant part of who I am today is directly attributable to the academic and spiritual formation I received at Samford. And given how actively involved I remain with the school, it only makes sense to share this part of my life with the public.

I also regularly post about my family and my dog. Spoiler alert: People love pets. I have even shared my fitness and health journey with my followers, which started in August 2022 and continues to this very day.

Finally, I have recurring X habits that have evolved over time, dating back to Twitter. I often take "judicial notice" of birthdays, remind Georgia lawyers and the public of when my court's constitutional "distress" deadlines are coming up, highlight the appellate practice classes I teach at Mercer Law School, and post the following tweet (sometimes in a video format) every Friday at or around 5 p.m.: "I hope that all of you have a wonderful and relaxing weekend. And as always, please be good to each other."

Again, I understand that many judges will be reluctant to adopt this kind of personal approach with the public, but public officials in other branches of government routinely reveal aspects of their personal lives to help voters feel more connected to them. They do this for a reason: It works. Social ▸

Published by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law. Reprinted with permission.
© 2026 Duke University School of Law. All rights reserved. JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

media can humanize a branch that is called upon to make life-changing decisions for the public every day, and I believe the judiciary benefits enormously from having thoughtful and caring judges directly engage the people they serve on the social media platforms those citizens use daily.

Dealing with online critics. Alongside these benefits, there is a downside to being on social media, and judges need to know this from the get-go. You will almost certainly receive a scathing tweet or critical message at some point in your online journey. And when this happens, my advice is simple and straightforward: Do not engage. It is a bad idea to get into online spats with your critics. There is no upside to judges "fighting fire with fire," and you are playing right into the hands of someone who is almost certainly trying to provoke you for his or her own amusement.

I also highly recommend that you do not block anyone (especially from your home state). That is what they want you to do, and it will likely result in that person publicizing your block and attempting to create a narrative that you are thin-skinned and unwilling to engage with those who criticize you. Instead, my advice is to simply mute (a setting in social media that allows you to hide comments from a specific user without blocking them) your unruly critics and let them scream into the void.

But it is important not to assume that every critic is acting in bad faith. If someone is asking you a legitimate question or offering constructive criticism that you can and should address (e.g., why your court's livestreaming feed isn't working well), you should make a point of kindly responding to those types of inquiries. And if you are uncertain about your critic's intentions, you will usually find out quickly what they are. And if your critic reveals himself to be a troll or bad-faith actor, you have every right to immediately withdraw from the conversation. Judges should be accessible to the public, but we are not obliged to continue engaging with someone who's being rude or abusive.

Knowing when not to post. Finally, just as there is a time and season for everything, there is also a time not to tweet. I regularly take a hiatus from posting on social media. Needless to say, on days when your followers are on edge or understandably upset about something going on in the world, even the most benign post or comment is likely to be misconstrued or appear insensitive. As judges, even when we try our hardest, there are times when we are so focused on our jobs that we can log on to our accounts and simply not be aware of the latest news. For this reason, I strongly recommend "taking the temperature" of a social media platform before posting anything. You can do this by quickly looking at the "trending topics" section or taking a few moments to scroll through your feed to see what your followers and friends are commenting about that day.

CONCLUSION

The public's confidence in the third branch of government has declined significantly in recent years, and the rhetoric directed at the courts and judges — by both political leaders and ordinary citizens — is increasingly vitriolic and ill-informed. This is a recipe for disaster. It is crucial for the preservation of the rule of law that the people we serve have confidence in the work of the judiciary and the judges who carry out that crucial civic mission. Social media allows judges to share their views on these important issues with an exponentially larger audience.

Like those serving in the executive and legislative branches, judges are directly accountable to the people we serve, and I believe we need to start acting like it. The courts "belong to the people," and they play a "unique role" in our system of government. The public deserves (and is starting to demand) direct access and transparency from the judiciary. Thankfully, we have the ability to provide the people we serve with an unprecedented amount of information about the inner workings and culture of our courts through social media. And when judges and courts use social media in a responsible and educational way, it increases the public's understanding of the judiciary.

STEPHEN LOUIS A. DILLARD is the presiding judge on the Court of Appeals of Georgia. He holds an LLM in Judicial Studies from the Duke University School of Law and is the 30th recipient of the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence.

[1] This excerpt is adapted, with light editing, from Stephen Louis A. Dillard, *Democratizing the Judiciary: Why Judges Should Engage "We the People" Through Social Media Platforms*, 26 J. App. Prac. & Process 1 (2026). See original article for the full text and citations.