

COULD SOCIAL MEDIA CANCEL CULTURE CANCEL YOUR SECURITY CLEARANCE?

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What you post on social media may seem harmless – an off-the-cuff comment made in the moment. Unfortunately, some have learned the hard way that a moment truly lasts forever. Comments, memes, and images posted years earlier have resurfaced and what might have seemed harmless has come back to haunt some individuals. Oversharing on social media has been a problem for years, but even if you changed your behavior, what you did years ago can still be a problem.

Part of today's so-called "cancel culture" is that there are those who will actively seek out to find any of those proverbial "skeletons in the closet," and many firms do now give at least a cursory scan of social media to see if any opinions have been voiced and where applicants may stand on hot button issues.

"It's certainly a concern for people applying for jobs requiring background checks, but it's also an issue that most other job hunters should be aware of," technology industry analyst Charles King of Pund-IT explained.

"Social media posts can act as an informal guide to someone's personality – showing often unvarnished details of past activities, plus personal interests and associations," King told ClearanceJobs. "All of these points can provide insights into an individual's character so prospective employers are understandably curious."

Scrubbing the Digital Footprint

Movies and TV shows suggest there are ways to “erase” past comments, but the truth is that even deleted posts can suddenly turn up. If so much as one person saw and saved them – via a screenshot or other methods – what someone posted can remain forever.

Truly “scrubbing” one’s history isn’t exactly easy, but not impossible however.

“There are certain things a person can do to make social searches more challenging,” King explained. “Those range from making accounts private to purging posts to removing or deleting social accounts. That won’t help if someone has copied or made screenshots of offensive posts. However, that mainly seems to be a problem faced by celebrities, political figures and other high profile individuals.”

There are also firms that offer “scrubbing services” but how effective they are is debatable. There are some ways to remove old posts, but most experts agree that if you posted something controversial, the best course of action may be not to hide from it. Instead, address it head on if needed.

Social Media and Security

In a webinar sponsored by the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, Director of the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency William Lietzau noted that while QAnon or domestic terrorism might not be terms you see listed on the SF-86, that doesn’t mean the current security clearance process is unequipped to root out extremists and criminals.

“We don’t have a specific social media pull that looks for these kinds of things, but we’re looking for any criminal records, incident reports that would come from some kind of report hub,” said Lietzau. He also noted that those who committed crimes on January 6 have come to the attention of DCSA.

Social Media and Security (Cont.)

While changes aren't required, that doesn't mean there aren't opportunities for improvement on the current SF-86.

"Does it need to be changed? No. Should it be changed: We're not the policy makers, but we absolutely inform the policy," Lietzau said. "And yes, in fact, there should be changes to the questions we ask, and the team is looking at that right now."

Lietzau said the government currently has the authorities to conduct social media monitoring or review of cleared applicants (thanks to Security Executive Agent Directive 5), but what it lacks is the clean capability and ability to scale. Identity verification is just one of the issues that comes up in pulling social media into the investigation process, but that doesn't mean it can't become a component due to investigator interviews or new reporting criteria. "There's a direct impact on national security on a daily basis," said Lietzau. "We're not just collecting intelligence for a future conflict. We're in that conflict every day as we seek to keep our defense industrial base safe."

Any Questions? Please contact us:

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