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Use of Social Media by Pilots

BACKGROUND

The omnipresence of social media in modern society has blurred the separation between our working lives and our personal lives. As innocent as posting a status update or a short comment may seem, what people do and say on social media can have serious consequences.

IFALPA is extremely concerned with the potential risk taken by pilots who are unknowingly putting their own flying career – and that of their colleagues – in jeopardy. Although this is not a new problem, the speed and extent at which the information spreads is unprecedented.

THREATS

Equipment

There have been several incidents where devices have impacted flight safety. In one incident, many passengers were injured after a pilot's personal camera pushed the side-stick as he moved his seat forward, causing a rapid descent of the aircraft. In another, the thrust levers were jammed by a device being used for filming, and could not be retarded.

Distraction

Accessing social media pages and contributing to them can easily focus attention and presents a significant source of distraction from flight deck duties.

Misuse of personal data

Unlike recordings made by onboard equipment, social media content has no protection whatsoever, even on so-called "private pages", and can always generate undesirable attention and be subject to misinterpretation and misuse. Consequently, images taken by/of pilots have a strong potential to be used as evidence in disciplinary procedures against them or their colleagues on the flight deck. Pilots should remember that it only takes one upload for content to become permanent and therefore retrievable for later use.

As a recent example, in September 2018, an executive member of one of IFALPA's Associations in Europe was suspended by his airline without any notice or even a chance to defend himself, following a comment he had made on a theoretically "protected" social page and that had been taken out of its context by a local web news portal.

POSITION

IFALPA strongly recommends that pilots think twice and exercise extreme caution when they are tempted to make a comment online or upload pictures or videos of themselves. They should also be aware at all times of their company's social media policy (if any). Online contributions are there forever, and the seriousness of their consequences on a flying career and private life should never be underestimated.