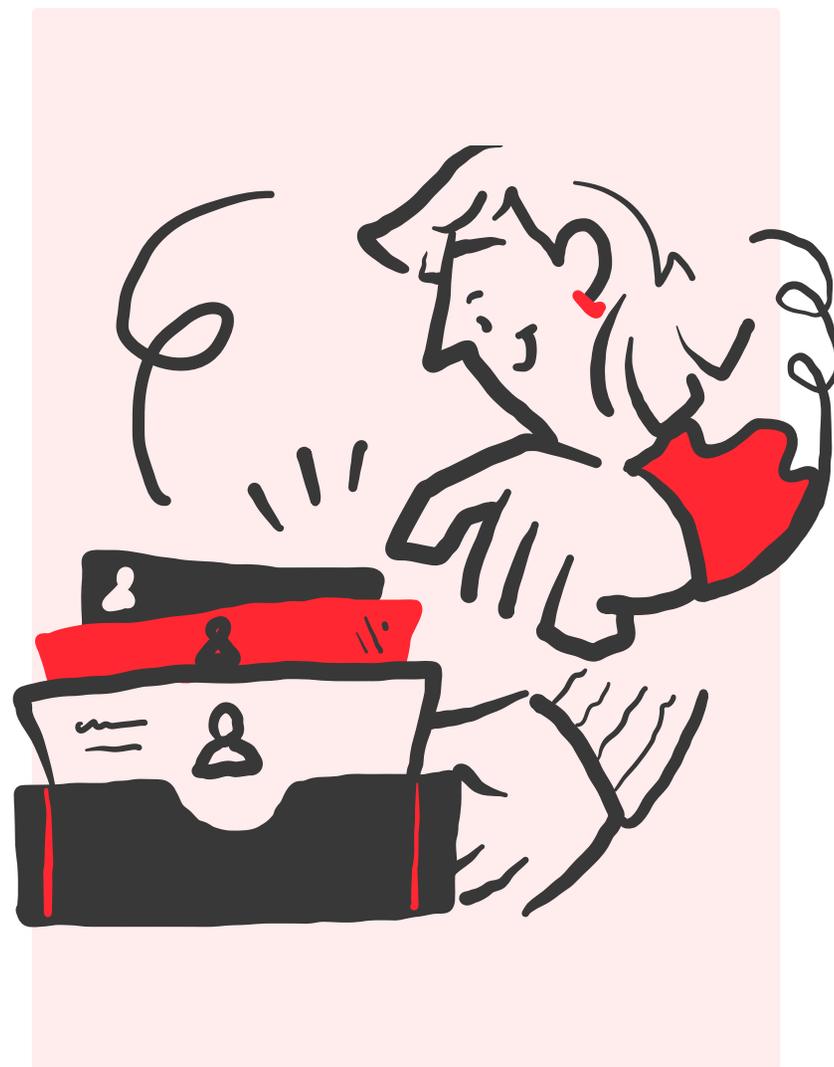


Comparing Social Media Archiving Methods:

Why API-Based Archiving is the Best Option for Local Government and Education





Social media is an important channel for keeping residents informed and engaged, especially considering [over half](#) of U.S. adults visit these platforms for local news. However, it's important to keep in mind that social posts are [public record in every state](#). To stay connected with their communities, agencies must be diligent about archiving content in accordance with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and all other applicable public records laws.

Public entities can preserve social media records using several different approaches, including screenshots, web scrapers, and technology that makes use of [application programming interfaces](#) (APIs). APIs are mechanisms that allow real-time information to flow seamlessly from one app to another, and they are the only way of capturing up-to-date data that meets FOIA regulations.

Let's take a closer look at each social media archiving method to understand why API-based archiving is the most compliant, efficient, and cost-effective option.



Comparing 3 Social Media Archiving Methods

1

API-Based Systems

Best-in-class for compliance and efficiency

2

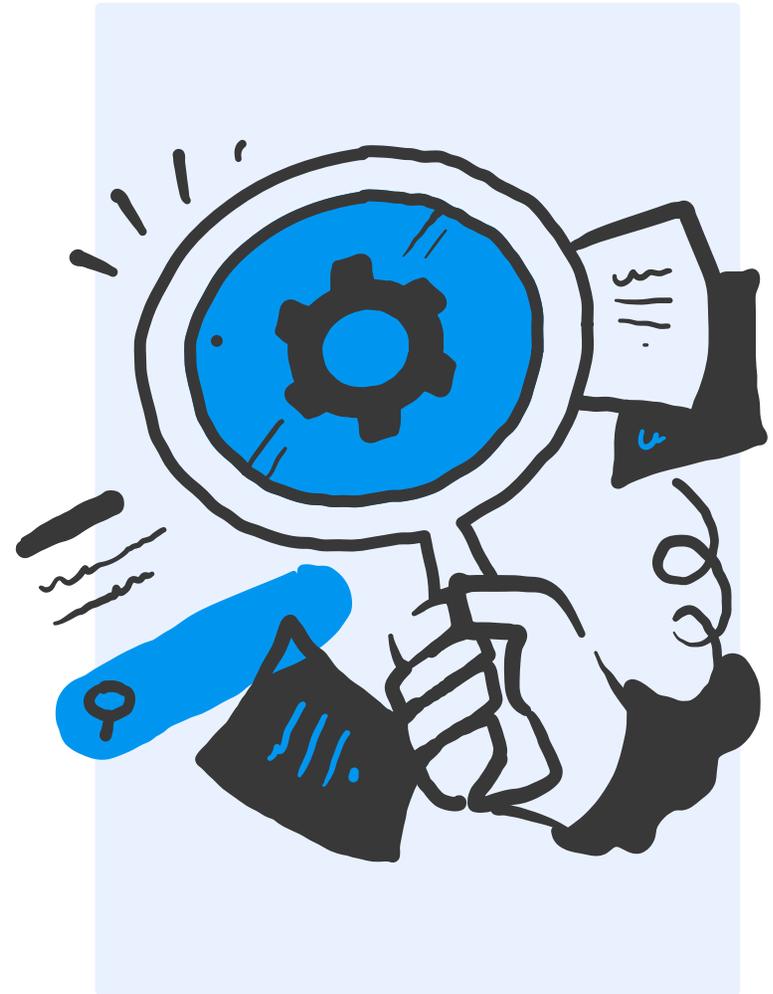
Archiving with Screenshots

The least compliant, most inefficient method

3

Web Scraping

Comes with higher maintenance costs and the risk of incomplete records





API-Based Systems

Best-in-class for compliance and efficiency

Unlike screenshots or web scrapers, API-based archiving provides structured, near real-time data feeds that capture all legally required information, including metadata, edits, attachments, and even deleted content, creating a complete and compliant archive.

This is especially critical for school districts, where student conflicts, signs of mental distress, or safety concerns often surface on social media. Since content can be deleted quickly, API-based archiving records posts with timestamps, giving school administrators the information they need to investigate and respond effectively.

With automated, continuous data capture and a structured, searchable metadata, API-based systems [eliminate hours of manual work](#) and reduce records request processing times from days to minutes. These solutions also enhance security with encryption and access controls, keeping sensitive data protected.

Furthermore, API-based solutions scale effortlessly with automatic updates and minimal maintenance, making them the fastest, most compliant way to fulfill public records requests.



2

Archiving with Screenshots

The least compliant, most inefficient method

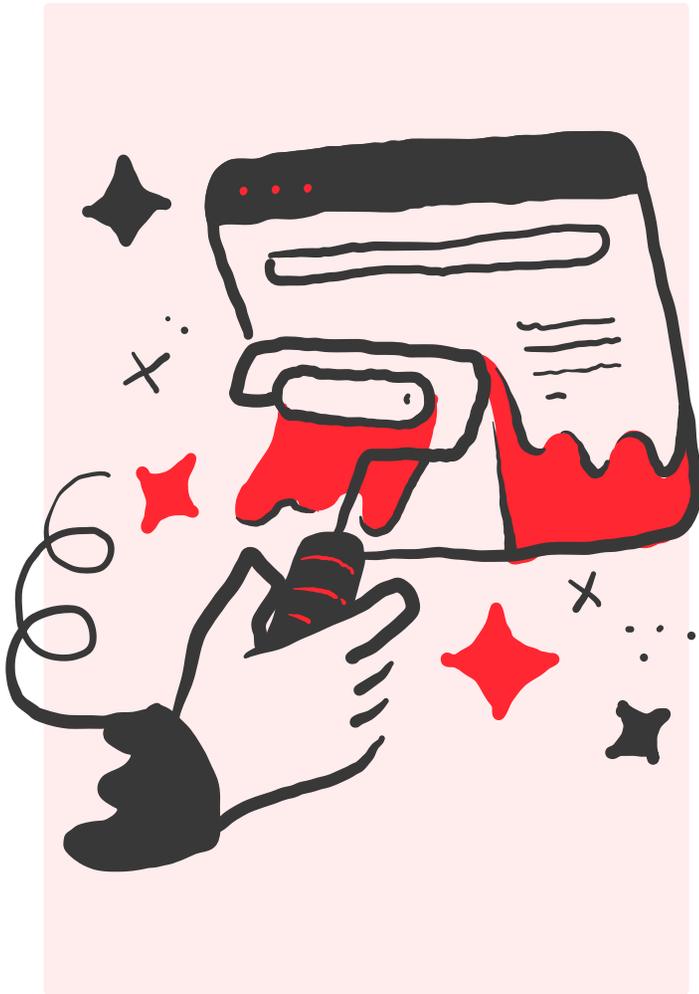
Taking screenshots of social media posts or manually downloading raw data from social networks may seem like a quick and easy way to preserve records. In reality, it's anything but.

Screenshots capture only what's visible on the screen at a specific moment, meaning they lack legally required metadata, comments, and hidden edits. Manually downloaded data, while more comprehensive, is often unstructured and difficult to interpret. These limitations lead to incomplete records, increasing the risk of inaccuracies, unauthorized access, and tampering. Manually downloaded data also fails to capture deleted content or edits. Without filtering options, agencies receive too much irrelevant data while still missing key records, adding extra cleanup time.

From an efficiency standpoint, screenshots are time-consuming and burdensome. Staff must manually capture each post, then sift through countless images or raw data files to locate specific content. Public records requests can be highly specific, requiring keyword mentions, edits, or timestamps—finding a single post in thousands of files is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Overall, this method for meeting open records laws demands excessive time and effort, and may even result in compliance or security risks.





3

Web Scraping

Comes with higher maintenance costs and the risk of incomplete records

Web scraping means using software to extract data from the visual elements of a web page. It captures more legally-required information than screenshots do, however, it can't capture [dynamically loaded content](#), a comprehensive capture of authentic metadata, or real-time data. This means it can miss the latest updates to social posts.

Web scraping is also not the most efficient option. While it collects records automatically, it must be scheduled in batches. Its speed depends on how fast each page loads and how long it takes the software to parse through content. In addition, data storage tends to be inconsistent, so retrieval can be time-consuming, and sensitive information isn't necessarily protected from unauthorized access.

One of the biggest issues with using web scrapers, aside from potentially incomplete records, is high maintenance requirements. Simple changes in website layouts or structures can confuse the software, so frequent updates are needed. Agencies using this method for social media archiving won't get the most value for what they spend, and are still at risk for non-compliance.



Social Media Archiving Comparison Chart

	 API-Based Archiving	 Screenshots	 Web Scraping
Data Accuracy	Near real-time capture for the highest accuracy rate	Limited to what's visible at the moment	Often incomplete, missing hidden or dynamic content
Compliance	Designed for compliance, captures legally-required data	Doesn't meet legal requirements	May fail to capture some legally required information
Security	Encryption for secure data transfer, access controls to prevent tampering	Vulnerable to unauthorized access and tampering	Often bypasses access controls, creating security gaps
Speed	Data access is near-instant	Slow, with manual captures for each page	Depends on page loading speed and scraping schedule
Maintenance	Updates are automatic after set-up	No maintenance, but greater need for records management	Requires frequent maintenance
Record Completeness	Captures all available data, including metadata, attachments, and edits	Lacking metadata, comments, and version history	Incomplete without dynamic page elements, may miss backend data
Data Retrieval	Structured and searchable for efficient retrieval	Manual and time-consuming	Inconsistent, often requires manual steps
Cost-Effectiveness	After initial costs, efficiency and scalability lead to high ROI	Significant time and labor costs	High cost due to maintenance, need for frequent updates, and incomplete data



Investing in the Right API-Based System: Try Before You Buy

Now that we've explored why API-based archiving is the only truly compliant method, how can you be sure you're getting the right kind of solution from a vendor?

The reality is, company representatives and salespeople may try to obscure the fact that their software isn't API-Based. They might promise that technology is user-friendly and captures all legally-required data whether or not this is the case.

Take the City of Nashville, TN: government staff didn't realize that their archiving software [wasn't actually archiving everything](#) until it came time to export a large volume of social media records.





To make sure this doesn't happen to your agency, keep an eye out for the following warning signs:



A Skimpy Free Trial

A free trial is essential before investing in any software, but it's important that the demo you're offered reflects the full product experience. Nashville staff ran into issues that didn't occur during their product's trial because it only allowed them to archive a single page. Before making an investment, check that you've tested the full capabilities of an archiving software, not just a scoped or choreographed version.



Inconsistent Capturing and Missing Records

During your trial, compare the software's archive with your social media accounts to confirm data is being captured accurately in real time, and ask vendors about any limitations or variances in how different types of data are saved. In Nashville, staff found their first archiving software wasn't preserving posts, comments, and private messages at the same rate. This led to information gaps in records that staff had to correct manually.



Inability to Respond to a Mock Records Request

Social media archiving software should make it simple for your team to respond to open records requests. Conduct a mock request during your software trial to test whether the solution is able to provide all the information you need quickly.



Get the Best in Social Media Archiving Technology with CivicPlus®

When Nashville's first archiving platform didn't live up to expectations, staff turned to Social Media Archiving from CivicPlus for a more comprehensive, cost-effective solution.

Our industry-leading, API-based software automatically preserves content from platforms like Nextdoor, Instagram, Facebook and X. It's reliable and user-friendly, storing data in an organized, searchable database that makes it quick and easy to complete records requests. When integrated with our public records management software, [NextRequest](#), compliance and transparency workflows become even more seamless.



With features built to help governments meet efficiency, security, and regulatory goals, it's no wonder that Nashville joined the U.S. Department of Justice and other agencies of all sizes in relying on our Social Media Archiving solution.

Learn more about what our API-based software could offer your community. Start a free trial to test the capabilities of Social Media Archiving for yourself.

[Start Your Free Trial](#)