

Engaging through social media

A guide for civil servants



About this guide

Digital technology has revolutionised the way in which people communicate and share information – at local, national and international levels.

Civil servants need to understand these changes so that they can operate effectively in a dynamic media environment.

The Government is making its services more convenient through online access, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This process is being assisted by the Central Office of Information (COI), the government centre of excellence for marketing and communications, which helps to ensure that online government services are effective and achieve the best they can for all concerned.

This guide provides an overview of the guidance contained in *Using Social Media*, which is an introduction to how government officials can use social media (available on CivilWiki at <http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>).

As well as providing guidance for communications and policy staff, this guide explains where to go for expert advice on using social media in your work.

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What is social media?

Social media is a term used to refer to online technologies and practices that are used to share opinions and information, promote discussion and build relationships. It is equally useful to communications staff and policy officials.

Social media services and tools involve a combination of technology, telecommunications and some kind of social interaction. They can use a variety of different formats, for example text, pictures, video and audio.

The term ‘social media’ is applied to the tools in question, their applications and collaboratively developed practices.

What are the benefits?

Good use of social media can help government to better understand, respond to and attract the attention of specific audiences. It enables real two-way communication with people in the places where they are already engaging with their interests.

Social media can:

- increase government’s access to audiences and improve the accessibility of government communication;
- enable government to be more active in its relationships with citizens, partners and stakeholders;
- offer greater scope to adjust or refocus communications quickly, where necessary;
- improve the long-term cost effectiveness of communication;
- benefit from the credibility of non-government channels;
- increase the speed of public feedback and input;
- reach specific audiences on specific issues; and
- reduce government’s dependence on traditional media channels and counter inaccurate press coverage.

Example initiatives

The use of social media in itself does not make for good practice. In order to be effective initiatives must form part of a wider communications strategy and bring at least some of the tangible benefits listed above.

The New Opportunities online consultation

(www.hmg.gov.uk/newopportunities.aspx)

provides access to the *New Opportunities* White Paper and seeks opinion on how the UK can draw on the opportunities offered by the global economy.

The site is a primary source of information that encourages users to engage in discussions in other locations before submitting their comments.

The Sustainable Development Commission website

(www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/sd-panel.html)

The Sustainable Development Commission has recruited a 500-strong panel of multi-discipline stakeholders to which it can pose regular consultation questions.

Number 10 webchats

(www.number10.gov.uk/news/webchats)

allow the general public to direct questions at the people who make decisions that affect their lives. They are a cost-effective and engaging way of involving the public in government processes, and embed good content.

The Communities and Local Government discussion forums

(<http://haveyoursay.communities.gov.uk/forums/>)

enable users to debate issues that are relevant to their local community through the Department's own social media channels. They are a low-cost way of gathering public opinion and placing the views of the public at the heart of policy-making processes.

The Listening to Students blog

(<http://talk.dius.gov.uk/blogs/studentlistening/>)

provides the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) with an opportunity to post information that will engage university students in government decisions. The Department's dedicated social media unit creates technical solutions, policy and communications. The student listening blog is a good example of the way in which DIUS creates dedicated spaces for key stakeholders using low-cost social media.

RAF careers promotion

(www.bebo.com/theroyalairforce)

has benefited from social media activity. Its Bebo page successfully exploits the network effect by giving users highly engaging content that they want to talk about and share with others. To do this they allowed frontline staff to tell their own stories using video and chat.

Expertise within government

In 2005 the Government's Transformational Government strategy set out how the UK could harness technology in order to transform government services. Since then, digital engagement has played an increasingly vital role in changing the way in which government communicates with its audiences.¹ COI provides departments with expert advice, support, guidance and services for operating in a digital world.

There are three broad government strategies for digital communication.

Communicate where people are present

- Put information in the places where people go.
- Participate where people are present, particularly through forums, wikis and blogging.
- Deliver access to online services where people go.

Create better user experiences for government services

- Enable people to find the information and online services they require by having fewer communication channels and focusing them around audience needs.
- Aggregate relevant information into one place on government sites rather than across several sites, saving users time and effort.
- Create a consistent high-quality experience through a dedicated set of standards.

Enable non-governmental bodies to reuse information

- Help non-governmental bodies to build new services by structuring information so that they can combine public data with private data.
- Avoid replicating what is already being undertaken by non-governmental bodies.

COI has an in-depth understanding of how citizens and businesses engage with digital technology. We are, therefore, uniquely placed to develop strategies, policies, standards and guidance to improve public digital engagement.

¹ The Strategy is available at www.cio.gov.uk/documents/pdf/transgov/transgov-strategy.pdf

How have we helped so far?

In recent months, COI has:

- **issued guidance for civil servants** on how to participate in forums and blogs and how to form partnerships with social media organisations;
- **produced strategy** for archiving online public records, so that they don't just vanish;
- **developed a pan-government search strategy**, including the monitoring of use of XML sitemaps, which makes it easier for search engines such as Google and Yahoo! to find government content for users looking for specific information;
- **set a standard for all websites to be AA Web Accessibility compliant** so that everybody has equal access to public information;
- **introduced a process to ensure that links to official documents on government websites always work**, including navigable PDFs – thus improving user experience;
- **initiated a new standard for all public sector job ads** so that they can be gathered in one place on Directgov;
- **project managed the web rationalisation programme**, reducing the number of government websites and re-purposing relevant content for Directgov and businesslink.gov.uk;
- **administered the issuing of 'gov.uk'** domain names to exercise control on the number of new websites;
- **produced strategies to encourage the re-use of information**; and
- **researched ways in which government has undertaken consultation** and engagement activity for future planning.

Contact the team

As the Government's centre of expertise for communication, COI can develop strategies, policies, standards and guidance to improve public digital engagement.

Contact

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General guidance

There are some common principles shared across all forms of social media. Knowing these basic 'rules of engagement' will help you whether you are running an online community or simply contributing.

The basic principles

Be credible. Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.

Be consistent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Be cordial, honest and professional at all times.

Be responsive. When you gain insight, share it where appropriate.

Be integrated. Wherever possible, align online participation with other offline communications.

Be a civil servant. Remember that you are an ambassador for your organisation. Wherever possible, disclose your position as a representative of your Department or Agency.

Disclose your position as a representative of your Department or Agency unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. Never give out personal details such as your home address or phone numbers.

Always remember that participation online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being re-published in other media. Stay within the legal framework and be aware that libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply.

This means that you should not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activity on behalf of government unless you are authorised to do so. This authority may already be delegated or may be explicitly granted, depending on your organisation.

Also be aware that this may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity. If you have any doubts, you should take advice from your line manager.

Civil Service Code

As a civil servant, you must also operate within the Civil Service Code when engaging with social media (<http://beta.civilservice.gov.uk/about/work/cscode/index.asp>). This applies to your participation online as a civil servant or when discussing government business. You should participate in the same way as you would with other media or public forums, such as speaking at conferences.

Guidance for press officers

As well as adhering to the general guidance set out on page 6 and following the Civil Service Code, press officers should evaluate departmental initiatives discussed on social media applications and participate in debate about their organisation's decisions.

Monitoring and evaluating other initiatives

- Identify relevant sites and use them regularly in order to gain an understanding of users' online behaviours and their opinions.
- Gauge how effectively other sites engage your target audiences.
- Gain experience of how stories can jump from digital channels to other media.
- Map key channels that opinion-formers use so that you can use them early in the news planning process.

Engaging with social media

- Before engaging with a specific social media channel, ensure you understand its specific benefits and risks.
- When using blogs, forums or wikis, correct any factual inaccuracies you find relating to government policy.
- Where users ask questions about policy or published information with which you are familiar, provide answers to the queries.
- Refer people to government sites, where appropriate.
- Media-sharing sites offer a good opportunity to promote events and news in video, picture or data formats.

More comprehensive guidance is available in *Using Social Media*, which is available on CivilWiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>).

Guidance for marketers

As well as adhering to the general guidance set out on page 6 and following the Civil Service Code, marketers should evaluate departmental initiatives discussed on social media applications and participate in debate about their organisation's decisions.

- Make the most of social media opportunities to gain insight into your audience, identifying them and the channels they use before determining how they use them.
- Engage creatively with user-led online communities (by becoming strategic partners, for example) in order to inform users, generate insight or use these communities as regular forums for campaign planning.
- Monitor social media for discussion about your organisation, its proposals, campaigns or the services it delivers.
- Track influential brands or voices that may compete for your audience time.
- Set up groups on social media channels or start discussion threads in communities. Remember to inform your press office of groups or discussions that you are initiating.
- Create video, audio or data content that can be published simultaneously across diverse channels.
- Create useful tools and applications that users can incorporate into their site, for example, an online body mass index calculator to support a branded health campaign.
- Be transparent and evidence-based when setting up partnerships.

More comprehensive guidance is available in *Using Social Media*, which is available on CivilWiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>).

Guidance for internal communicators

As well as adhering to the general guidance set out on page 6 and following the Civil Service Code, internal communicators should evaluate departmental initiatives discussed on social media applications and participate in debate about their organisation's decisions.

- Cross-cutting policy initiatives are driving changes in organisational structure and culture and in staff behaviour. Internal communicators need to exploit the new opportunities offered by social media in order to engage staff across departments.
- Take advantage of social media tools and channels for collaborative working. Strengthen delivery of, and encourage two-way commentary on, key messages regarding the initiatives affecting staff. Remember to inform your press office of groups or discussions that you are initiating.
- See page 11 for examples of social media initiatives that are already encouraging interaction between civil servants.

More comprehensive guidance on *Using Social Media* is available on CivilWiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>)

Using wikis for internal communications

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has set up an internal wiki to manage corporate information around briefings, lines to take and frequently asked policy questions. The content of the wiki is available to all staff but is primarily designed for the Information and Briefing Unit. The system is heavily used. The wiki has greatly improved the efficiency and quality of briefings.

More comprehensive guidance is available in *Using Social Media*, which is available on CivilWiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>).

Guidance for policy officials

As well as adhering to the general guidance set out on page 6 and following the Civil Service Code, policy officials should evaluate departmental initiatives discussed on social media applications and participate in debate about their organisation's decisions.

- Policy officials should be aware of the new and exciting ways in which social media initiatives can help them engage with and consult the public, stakeholders and peers in government.
- Effective monitoring and use of social media channels can, for example, give policy officials and delivery teams an inroad into networks of consumers, citizens and service users – vastly increasing the quality and quantity of data gathered.
- There is evidence to suggest that using online engagement techniques encourages participation by those who do not normally interact with government or respond to consultations.
- Policy leads should actively seek out opportunities to engage with existing stakeholders online and seriously consider the value of initiating involvement with other relevant communities.
- Policy officials can intervene to correct inaccuracies on social media sites, but remember to inform your press office if you do so.

More comprehensive guidance is available in *Using Social Media*, which is available on CivilWiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>).

Connecting civil servants through social media

Use of social media techniques is not restricted to government interaction with citizens or business. There is already a range of tools dedicated to encouraging discussion and sharing knowledge and best practice among civil servants.

Tools for civil servants

Civil Pages (<https://pages.civilservice.gov.uk>) is a networking directory of around 3,000 users and 28 communities. It allows users to find colleagues, showcase skills, share and comment on documents and create communities of interest.

Civil Wiki (<http://wiki.gsi.gov.uk>) is a knowledge-sharing and collaboration tool for civil servants. As it is hosted on the Government Secure Intranet (GSI), it can only be viewed by those working within government. All content is generated and moderated by users, of which there are currently around 900.

CivilBlogs (<http://blogs.gsi.gov.uk>) is a personal publishing tool to enable sharing of work experience, knowledge and thinking across GSI through the setting up of blogs.

Communities of Practice (www.communities.idea.gov.uk) is a community platform to encourage knowledge sharing across local government and the public sector. It provides a secure environment for users to set up or join communities wanting to develop or share knowledge around specific issues.

Background reading

Social media is part of the wider picture of political engagement and use of online communications. The following cover some of these broader issues.

A Review of Government's Use of Social Media
(Government Communications Network)
Available via www.comms.gov.uk

A comprehensive view of government's use of social media in 2007 for communications.

The Communications Market Report 2008
(Ofcom)
www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cmr08

The most comprehensive appraisal of technology ownership and its use by the public.

The Power of Information
(Cabinet Office)
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/power_information.pdf

The Review in 2007 and Task Force Review 2009 cover ways in which government shares data and communications in the digital space, including use of social media.

Digital Dialogues
(Hansard Society)
www.digitaldialogues.org.uk

A series of reports commissioned by the government from the Hansard Society containing case studies. These deal with the use of social media to support policy-making process. The Phase Two Report, in particular, has some interesting detail.

An Audit of Political Engagement 5 (2008)
(Electoral Commission and Hansard Society)
www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/downloads/pages/Audit-Series.aspx

Useful for understanding the wider question about if and how citizens wish to engage with government, covering efficacy, awareness and participation, based on representative sampling of UK citizens.

Contact the team

As the Government's centre of expertise for communication, COI can develop strategies, policies, standards and guidance to improve public digital engagement.

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