

# Social Media: Transformative tool or #whybother?

You may see the title of my talk and think that you already know the answer to the question or that the answer is self-evident. However, I think the answer is not as simple as it looks, and it may be different for different institutions.

## Why would we want to use social media?

### 1. Go where our citizens are

In the 'Good Old Days' it was easy – you created a website and if anyone wanted to find out what you were saying and doing then they had to come to your website. But things have changed.

Nowadays we are dealing with the Digital Generation(s). Social media is where they get their news & information, it's where they debate ideas, form and share opinions. If we want to be relevant and have credibility in their eyes then that's where we need to be.

### 2. We want to connect

We are wasting our time (and our budgets) if we don't connect and engage with our customers. Of course, that means Members and the public. But we also need to think in terms of other customer segments who can take our messages or information and spread it further through their own networks – so the media, citizen groups, teachers, policy advocates, ...and, of course, Libraries!

Each of us has a limited reach on our own but we have a network of customers and, collectively, their reach is much bigger than ours. Our aim is to encourage them to share our information widely through their communities and followers, with the hope that they will do the same.

### 3. We want to drive traffic to other channels

Yes, we want to tweet to our customers, share video clips, and present infographics that answer their questions and inform them about legislation. But it is hard to summarise government policy in just 280 characters! So, we still need our research briefings, where we can go into detail, explain different viewpoints, describe the impact of policy and outline scenarios and trends. Then there's all the Parliamentary documentation – Hansard, policy papers, committee reports, and so on. Our websites are still a natural home for this wealth of information.

But if our audience won't come to us, then we need social media to go to them, entice them with snippets of what we have to offer, making it easy for them to find our information.

### 4. It's just better at some things

Social media is fast, immediate, interactive, responsive.

It's very visual and good at handling multimedia, and infographics.

It's short, quick & easy to read or view, and packs a lot of information in.

It encourages you to share, engage and interact with content.

It can act as a hub with pointers to a range of other resources across the web.

So, what's not to like?

## 5. What would people think if you didn't?

Can we really afford to ignore social media? For our citizens, particularly the young, it is how they interact, part of their everyday lives. We risk appearing arrogant, or worse, irrelevant by not being part of social media?

### Why bother?

But now let's look at the other side of the argument – why bother with social media?

#### 1. So many channels

There's just so much of it! Which platforms should we use? Which ones will be best for the audiences we want to reach? Which ones will best suit the messages we want to put out there?

Yes, there are the big names – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. But there are also regional / local channels that may have more impact where you are. Then there are the specialist channels, for particular audiences – academics/researchers, educational, local/communities, citizen advocacy, the young, millennials, parents, etc.

We need to pick our channels carefully to get the audience and level of engagement we want.

#### 2. So much work

But picking your channel is only the start. Once you're active on social media you need to stay active. Social media channels constantly need to be fed content if you want to build up an audience (and keep it). Content must be relevant and interesting, and it must be tailored to the channel you're using and the audience you want to reach.

Social media users can be demanding – they want engaging content and they can get bored very easily and very quickly. You will need to make it someone's responsibility to keep the content flowing (or possibly even a team of 'someone's). This is not something you can do in a half-hearted way as your credibility and reputation with your audience is at stake. Be prepared - it's a **lot** of hard work...and a **lot** of content.

#### 3. So many opinions

What about our audience, how will they engage?

If we are lucky, they will publicise and share our content, follow us, retweet our tweets, go to our website or even use our services or visit our Parliament. But successful social media is usually Interactive – users reply, post comments, have discussions with other users, respond with their own comments or content, link to other discussions, and so on. It is designed to encourage the sharing of opinions and ideas.

However, in an open society we have to accept that not all those comments will be positive or constructive. Some may be misinformed, some may have their own agendas, some may even be abusive. We need very clear policies in place that govern how we interact with users:

- Do we allow users to post comments or content?
- What are the rules for our staff about how they engage with posts (or do we simply not engage)?
- Do we moderate the channel and how do we deal with trolls?

#### 4. In addition to, not instead of...

Social media **complements** traditional channels, it doesn't **replace** them. You will still need to publish your research briefings, keep your website up-to-date, and so on – after all, that's where much of your original content will be coming from. But my point here is that maintaining social media is extra work, so you will need to find extra staff time to do it. Therefore, it's a good idea to plan for that from the start. Also, start small and gradually build up your presence, which makes it easier to assess and manage the additional workload.

#### 5. You'll never get as many views as Gangnam Style!

Well, you won't – I'm just saying!

But there is a more serious point here – how do you judge success? Traditional measures – number of views, followers, likes, etc. – may not tell you much in absolute terms. So, what other measures or indicators could you use instead?

- Are there comparable public institutions you can measure yourself against?
- What kind of audience are you building?
- Are your followers sticking with you or promoting you to their networks?
- How are they reacting to or using your information?
- Are you getting more visits to your website or readers of your briefings?

This is an area, like many of the others mentioned in my presentation, where the IPU's [Social Media Guidelines for Parliaments](#) can help you.

#### In summary...

#### Is Social Media a transformative tool for Parliamentary Libraries and Research Services?

I think the answer is yes, it is. Why?

- It can transform how we engage with citizens and the hard-to-reach in a way we simply can't do otherwise. We need to go where they are and be part of the conversations they are having.
- It makes us think about how we write and present information in a digital age – it's different to how we have traditionally written reports and briefings. Our customers are time-poor and social media users can have short attention spans. It is a good discipline for us to develop ways to convey complex information that is quick to read and easy to understand.
- Helping Members (and others) by providing ready-made resources. Our Members are increasingly using social media themselves to reach citizens, voters and their communities. Having material that they can easily re-use or retweet is a valuable service.
- Providing an authoritative source of information in a world of 'fake news'. More and more information is out there on the web and being shared through social media. Social media is often about immediacy and most people do not have the time to fact-check everything they see, particularly if it appears to confirm their own opinions. Therefore, the values of our 'brand', as Parliamentary Libraries & Research Services, of impartiality, accuracy, timeliness, relevancy, and knowledgeable expertise are just as important to the public, as they are to Members, in ensuring the information they receive from us is authoritative.
- Our role is to ensure that Members and citizens have the facts and are aware of the arguments on all sides of an issue so that public debate is well-informed.

### But sometimes it can also be #whybother

- There's an old English proverb – “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink”. In social media terms this means that you can provide great content, but you can't make people follow you. You need to work at building your audience, collaborate with others with shared interests or common goals, and just keep at it.
- The Twittersphere is a world of opinions – so be prepared to be challenged. In the House of Commons Chamber there are rules, set out in Erskine May, which govern procedures and behaviour, while the Speaker ensures these rules are observed and that debates are orderly. **Spoiler alert** – social media isn't like that! There will be people out there who won't like what you post, for whatever reason, and they will tell you (and the rest of the world) what they think of you, your institution and your post in no uncertain terms. You need to be ready for that.
- Tweet in haste, repent at leisure. The media is full of stories of people whose careers or lives were turned upside-down by a hasty, ill-considered tweet. We cannot allow ourselves to become one of those sad stories. We represent our institution, our brand is respected – so our approach to social media has to be careful, considered and follow the guidelines, protocols and standards that we have put in place.
- As we have already seen, it is difficult to measure impact and we need to look at different ways of assessing the value and success of our social media channels.
- Is it value for money – well, not always. You need to be clear about what your objectives are, how you evaluate success, how much you are prepared to invest (both funding and staff time) and over how long?

## What have we learned from our experience?

### Train staff

Writing for the web, Facebook posts, or tweets is very different to writing research briefings or reports. Social media channels work best with short, high interest and visual content – this is likely to be a different style to the one your staff use in their day-to-day work. You must be concise yet unambiguous, interesting but uncontroversial, accessible and engaging, while reflecting the norms of both your institution and the social media channel you are using. If you want your social media channels to be successful, then it is worth the investment of training your staff so they can use them effectively. It's also a great staff development opportunity.

### Develop guidance & standards

Your social media channels represent your institution, your service, your 'brand' – irrespective of whoever is maintaining each of them or providing the content. You want the channels to share a common voice and consistent messages. Therefore, you need guidance and standards that your staff can use and rely on. These will help to reinforce the staff training, set the 'house style' for using social media, provide clear guidance on what is appropriate, with examples of best practice, along with what to do if something goes wrong. Good guidance helps staff develop their skills and gives them the confidence to use social media safely and well.

### Be selective about the channels you use

I spoke in the presentation about the wide range of social media available and the importance of choosing the channels you use that will be most effective for the audiences you want to reach. You won't have the resources to be everywhere all the time. It is far better to choose one or two channels, do them really well and build up a strong following, rather than try to cover lots of different channels and not build up a presence anywhere. If you only have limited resources, target them well, where you will get most impact.

### Look for opportunities to re-use, link & cross-promote content

There are many advantages to re-using and cross-promoting content across your social media channels.

- Constantly creating new content is a lot of work – so it saves time and money to re-use the content you create, tailoring the same basic content for each channel.
- If you are running a campaign or advertising a project or event then you want to have consistent messages across all your social media – re-using content helps do this.
- You are likely to be talking to different audiences across the different social media. You may want to use one channel to promote your presence on another (e.g. use a tweet to draw attention to your Facebook page) or to bring users back to your website where they can find more information about your campaign, project or event.

### Co-ordinate messages across channels / teams

This probably sounds like common sense to most of you. But it can become an issue where different channels are managed by different teams, who each have their own priorities or services they wish to promote. Social media messages and campaigns are much stronger and more effective when they are coordinated and combined. Uncoordinated or, even worse, conflicting messages across your social media damage your institution's credibility and reputation.

## Be clear about what you want to achieve

Just as there are lots of different social media channels, there are just as many different reasons why you might want to use them. Before you start, if you want to be successful, you need to be very clear about which social media channels you want to use and why.

- Do you want to raise awareness in specific audiences? If so, what is it you want them to know (and will be interested)? How will you know if you are reaching your target audience?
- Do you want to engage with a specific audience and build a relationship with them? What kind of response do you want from them? How will you develop and maintain that relationship?
- Do you want your audience to do something – some form of call to action in response to a campaign (e.g. register to vote, submit evidence to a committee, take part in an event, etc.)? What do you want them to do? What's in it for them? What happens after they've done it?
- Do you want feedback from a specific audience? What do you want to find out from them? How will you motivate your audience to respond? What will you do with the feedback? How will you let your audience know what happened because of their feedback?

## Post regularly

It's a bit like running a race – once you start you have to keep going! Different social media channels have different norms for how frequently you should post – the response you receive from your audience will help you decide on how often you post or engage with them. But if you want to build and keep your audience, then you will need to keep updating them with interesting content (note – when I say 'interesting', I mean interesting to your audience, not just to you!).

## Be authentic & authoritative, not too chatty

It's about striking the right balance – you can't be overly formal (it's social media, after all!) or too personal. Remember this will be a corporate social media account, not a personal one – you are representing your institution.

## Tailor your content to channel you are using

Each social media channel is different, with different audiences and with different expectations in terms of content. While you are aiming for consistency across your social media that doesn't mean that everything should be identical. A good tweet will not necessarily work as a good Facebook or Instagram post without some tailoring.

## Be relevant, interesting and shareable

Your efforts on social media won't be successful if people don't read what you have to say. Social media users are spoiled for choice with so many people/institutions out there to follow and so much content to read. You need to attract their attention and, if you want your audience to make a commitment to follow you, ensure they have a stream of interesting and informative content. And if you want to more people to see your content then it helps if it can be easily shared by your audience with their own networks.

## Avoid being formulaic, avoid jargon

We work in an environment that is full of jargon – procedural, political, management and, dare I say it, even librarianship jargon.

*The Bill was taken on the nod but ping ponged with the Lords until it received assent.*

*Our strategic approach to continual change is a complete paradigm shift.*

*Our acquisition and accessioning processes will have to accommodate the use of open access material and discovery tools.*

And so on...

These are sentences that may have meaning to us (sometimes!) but mean nothing to the wider public. We use a lot of shorthand in our work because time is short, things are wanted urgently and everybody within Parliament understands what we mean. So, we don't always realise that we are doing it. We need to be careful when we are using social media and think about what we are saying and that it is clear to anyone who reads it.

It's also important not to use the same phrases all the time (e.g. 'Today Parliament will debate X Bill', 'Tomorrow Parliament will debate Y Bill', etc.). And as for the same old tired clichés – well, you need to avoid those like the plague!

**Get advice from others who understand the channels you use (potential partners) /**

**Use specialists in areas where you don't have expertise yourself**

If you aren't lucky enough to have your own social media specialists in-house then don't be afraid to talk to others who have more expertise – you will be surprised at how many people will be willing to help. There may well be other Parliaments who are able to help you or local organisations with similar goals that support citizen engagement, who may even want to partner with you. In some cases, if you have specific requirements or particular audiences you want to target, it may be worthwhile looking for someone with specialist expertise to help you.

**Be prepared to experiment and learn from your failures**

Ultimately, it comes down to just doing it and seeing how that goes. Be prepared to be flexible and adjust things as you go, depending on how your audience responds (or doesn't!). And if it doesn't work out, learn from the experience so that, next time, you will be more successful. Remember – it's not a crime to make a new mistake, but repeating a past one is!

## Case Study: VOTE100 Anniversary



### What is VOTE100?

2018 marks 100 years since the UK Parliament passed a law which allowed some women, and all men, to vote for the first time: the 1918 Representation of the People Act. Throughout 2018 the UK Parliament is celebrating this important milestone in the UK's democratic history.

The Vote100 Project involves a series of exhibitions, events, talks, tours, community activities (the Equali-teas), along with educational courses and resources, all themed around this anniversary.

The digital element of VOTE100 is an important part of the project as it allows us to take the celebration beyond Parliament itself and out into all parts of the UK. The website acts as a central information hub for the project, while the different social media channels enable us to engage with citizens, students and the wider community

The VOTE100 website: [www.parliament.uk/vote100](http://www.parliament.uk/vote100)

The purpose of the website is three-fold:

- To explain what VOTE100 is, what it celebrates, and why it is important to citizens.
- To provide signposts to all the activities, resources & social media that are part of the project.
- To act as a central store of information about the project for anyone who wants more information about any aspect of the project or suffrage history in the UK.

The project (and website) has its own visual identity that links the different activities and events, which in turn have their own visual identity as well – making it easy for users to navigate their way through the website and see where they are. The website provides access to a range of specialist content, created specifically to support the project.

### VOTE100 Social Media

The VOTE100 project makes extensive use of social media to raise awareness of the project, promote events & activities, and seek engagement with different audiences and communities.

A series of YouTube videos have been created featuring women who share their personal stories of how laws passed by Parliament have changed their lives for the better, under the banner of "*Your Story, Our History*". In addition to providing VOTE100 content, these videos are designed to work with and cross-promote other UK Parliament social media campaigns:

- They promote the broader "*Your Story, Our History*" series of YouTube films which explore how Parliament and the laws it has passed has impacted on people's lives and have their own Twitter hashtags, #YourStoryOurHistory and #Vote100, for the public to share their own stories. In turn, these promote the UK Parliament's YouTube channel.
- The films consider different laws that have been passed during the last 100 years that have had a significant impact on women's lives, linking these films to other themed campaigns such as race relations and the NHS 70 anniversary.

- The films are repurposed and used as content for other Parliament's other social media channels, such as its Facebook pages. They are also used as part of Parliament's educational website as resources that teachers can use in the classroom.

The UK Parliament's Facebook page features posts and photos promoting events & activities along with links back to the main VOTE100 website and other social media channels. Alongside the main Parliament page there is also a dedicated [VOTE100 Facebook page](#). As well as posts promoting upcoming events, there are also behind-the-scenes stories and photos from recent activities, along with background stories to important historical figures and photos. In addition, there is a series of blog posts from guest contributors, collected together in a [VOTE100 blog site](#).

### VOTE100 - EqualiTeas

One social media channel has been designed to support a community activity campaign – [EqualiTeas](#). The idea is a simple – host a tea party, bring your friends, neighbours and community together and chat about what equality means to you over a nice cup of tea. There are resources available to help participants set up and advertise their tea party, even down to a recipe card for shortbread from The House of Commons' own Head Pastry Chef! Like all the VOTE100 social media, EqualiTeas has its own hashtag and links to the UK Parliament website, Facebook page, etc.

### VOTE100 Strategy

All of Parliament's social media channels are used to cross-promote VOTE100 activities and events, encourage community engagement, share individual experiences, and drive traffic back to the website for more information and resources. But at the same time, it also promotes engagement with Parliament:

- Encouraging citizens to register to vote
- Explaining how citizens can contact their MP
- Providing an opportunity to connect with a Peer in the House of Lords, with relevant expertise and experience
- Public and school visits to Parliament
- Submitting evidence to Select Committees
- Stressing the importance of public debate in shaping government policy and legislation to the benefit of citizens and society.

And even after 2018, when VOTE100 ends, the content that has been created can be still re-purposed and re-used for future projects and campaigns.

Campaigns like VOTE100 take a lot of planning and resources to put together. The purpose of using it as a case study is not to suggest you replicate it or use it as a template for something else. Instead, my aim is just to show how social media can be used to promote awareness, engage with citizens and even provide a call to action. I hope it may spark ideas for things you might want to do or ways you could use social media to help promote your services or connect with your citizens.

Steve Wise

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