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**PUTTING SOCIAL MEDIA TO USE
IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

**by
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This paper accompanies the lecture given at UNIDEM on 3 May 2011. It takes a broad view of the recent and current landscape which has seen social media begin to play a role in the work of public administration and explores some of the issues resulting from this. It is illustrated with examples of successful and challenging experiences where social media has been used in public administration.

The communications landscape then and now

The last five years—the period in which social media has come to play an increasing part in public experience of technology in all sectors—have also been a period of transition in the way in which communications in public administration have been addressed.

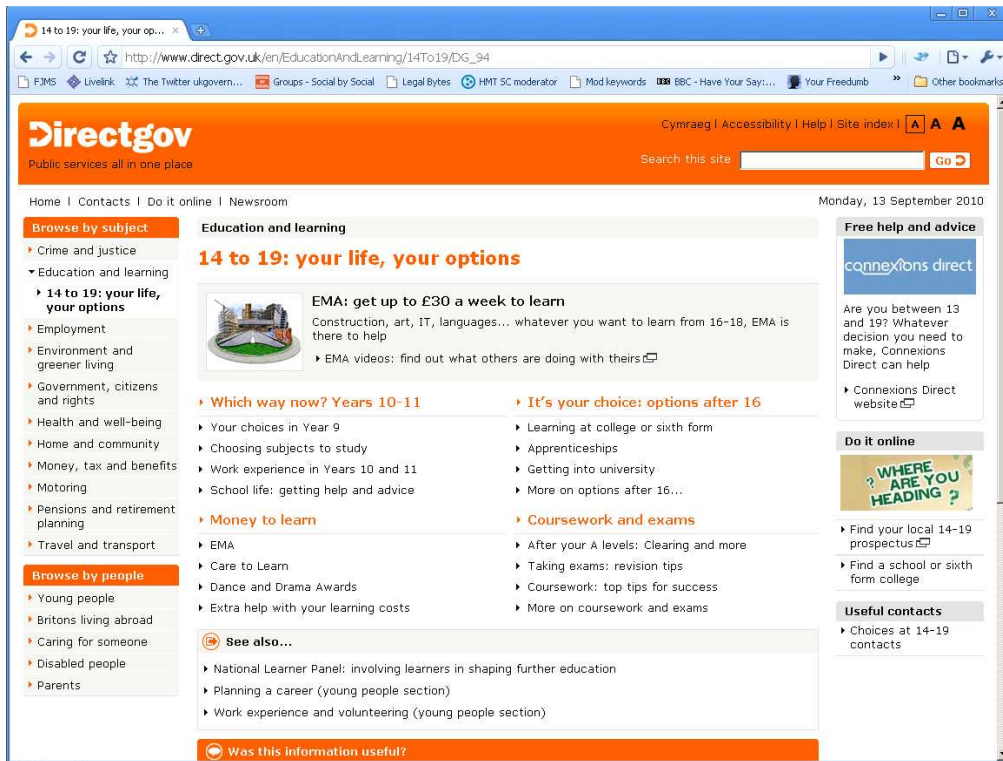
The Phillis Report into UK government communications in 2004 paved the way for a renewed emphasis on more direct communication with citizens, not just a relationship intermediated through traditional media channels, and found that the mixture of skills required to achieve this would need to change. It was also apparent that the emergence of digital technologies would place even more pressure for change on the traditional role of public service communicators.

“We found that, as a whole, the Civil Service has not grasped the potential of modern communications as a service provided to citizens”. *Phillis Report 2004*

Following this, a number of enabling policies were put in place that supported change in the role of new technologies in communication.

The Transformational Government Strategy of 2005 saw that fundamental processes between citizen and state would have to change—to be transformed—rather than just a superficial change in the mechanisms of delivery. And the Varney Report of 2006 concluded that provision of services to citizens were fragmented, and much could be done, through the use of technology—and the streamlining of the ways that technology was being used—to improve this. This led to a strategy to see the number of digital channels to the citizen reduce, with services converging to simpler points of contact, and a renewed emphasis on services designed with the needs of their users placed first and foremost, rather than serving the needs of the organisations delivering them. Making this strategy a reality required work on setting new standards for digital services, ranging from quality and accessibility through to measurement.

The primary focus for central government online delivery to the citizen was to be Directgov—a single destination site delivering central government services itself, and providing a route to access relevant local government services.



It brought services together in a way which individual departmental and agency sites could not, but it did not have a meaningful “social” component.

Introducing the potential of social media

The incentive to incorporate social media within public administration was driven by the realisation that effective communication wasn't—and with new technologies, didn't have to be—a one-way relationship. Social media is the use of online technologies and practices to share opinions and information, promote discussion and build relationships. It has been described (*Wikipedia*) as: “a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologues (one-to-many) into dialogues (many-to-many) and is the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers.”

A test question that has been used in UK public services to identify whether a technology use is *social* is: “Does it allow you to **create**, **connect** and **share** more easily?”

Beyond media, to engagement

An important shift of emphasis came as social media was seen not just as the use of particular tools or techniques, but to the fostering of **digital engagement**.

This involves:

- dialogue: moving from broadcast to conversation;
- not only listening but responding;
- two-way collaboration sharing information, data, opinion, discussion;
- opening spaces for peers to interact—facilitating communities;
- moving audience from **awareness** to **action**.

Engaging through social media

We saw some valuable lessons in practice about *where* to engage: with a trend towards being where the audience already is online, rather than expecting them to engage where government says they should.

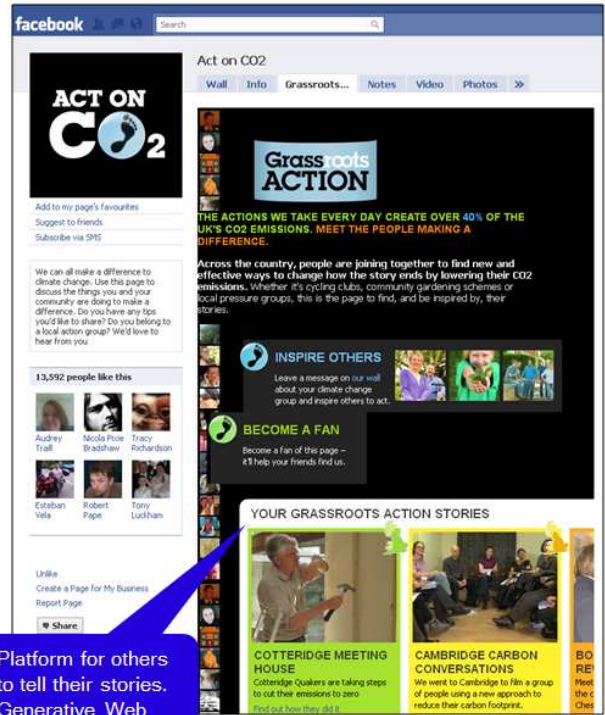
The existence of mature communities like Netmums made it essential to have a set of practical

operational standards for engaging in these forums.



We also legitimised the use of social media; building social capabilities on government platforms. To be truly social, such facilities had to play by social rules: allowing public comment, engagement, interaction, voting or other functions. A website that has the same general visual design principles as a blog, forum or social network may look similar, but it is not social media.

Guidance and support for staff were essential: both in the day-to-day practice of engaging—from moderation to dealing with criticism and user disputes—and in reconciling a *personal* voice with that of the organisation being represented. Separate, detailed guidance was produced on each of these critical areas.

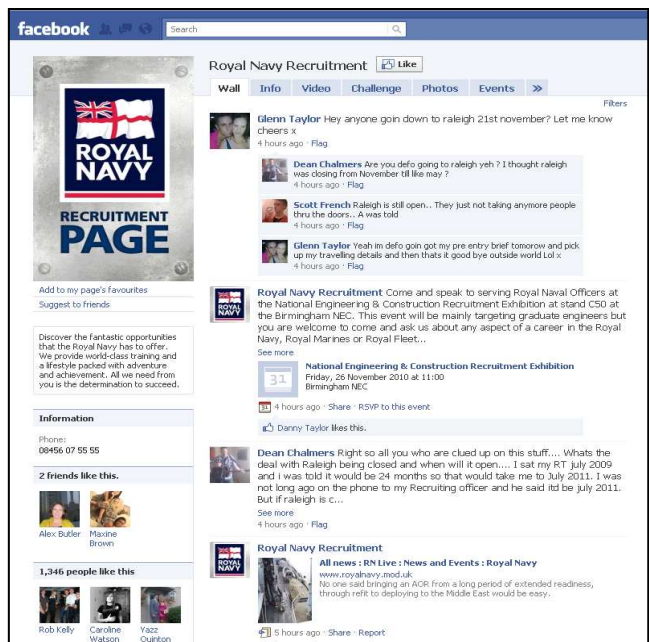


Allowing non-comms staff to be spokespeople

Platform for others to tell their stories. Generative Web

Reusing digital assets

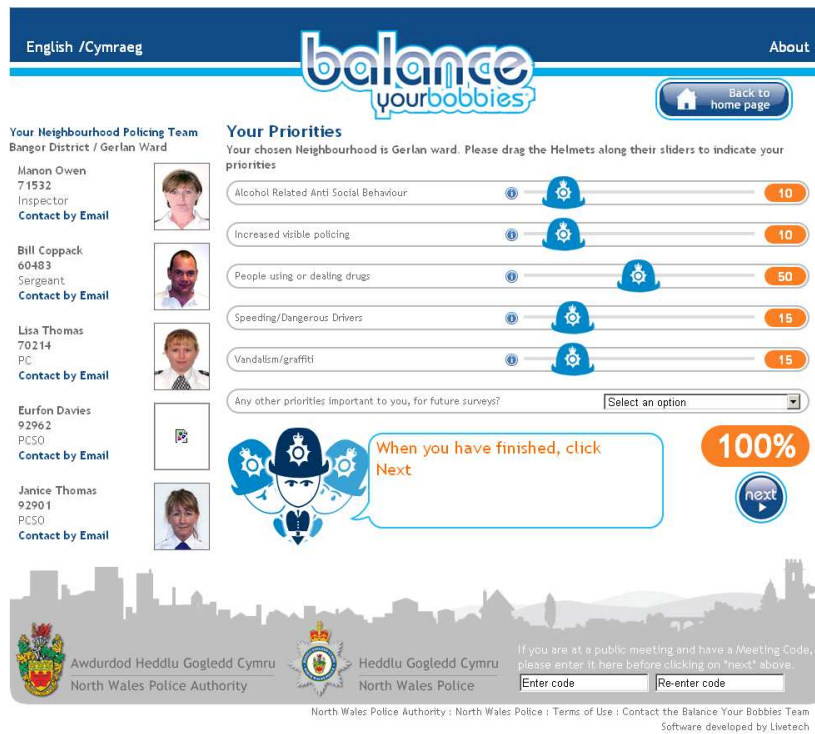
We saw that user experience was now becoming truly multi-channel: the same user may move freely between website, smartphone app, and traditional channels such as paper forms. Having a consistency of look and feel ensured the integrity of the service, as well as making more sense financially.



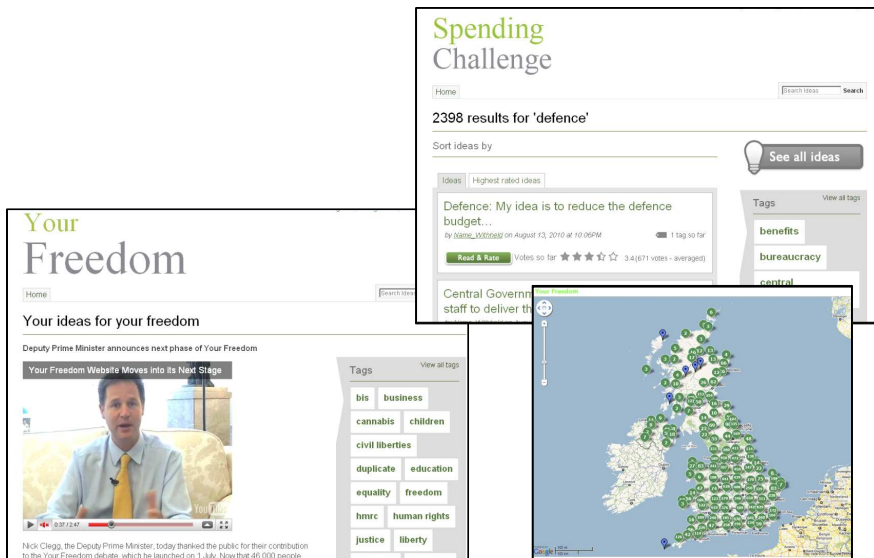
Direct user involvement

Being interactive by definition, social media permits public administration to do things that could not have been done in traditional channels. Consultation on emerging policy, or user involvement in the formation and design of their own services, could only be attempted slowly

and clumsily in traditional media. Using social media, a whole range of new engagement possibilities opened up. From co-creation of services, to user involvement in balancing priorities, as in this policing example from one innovative police force:



...and the large-scale involvement of the public in determining policy priorities and crowd-sourcing new ideas, in these two national-level examples from 2010:



Working with elected politicians

Alongside the administrative use of social media, we saw numerous examples of UK politically elected officials being introduced to its use. Some of the approaches that worked well in doing

this included:

- Looking for clues as to what approach might work best for engagement, within their existing political online presence
- Recognising that some are more likely than others to make a sustained commitment to communicating in new media
- Setting up events with the potential to be complemented by social media use, e.g.
 - Webchats: The Student Room, Mumsnet, Democracy UK on Facebook
 - Ministerial visits: film and post “behind the scenes”
- Preparing a ready-to-use set of tools for a new minister:
 - Twitter account, Netvibes digital dashboard, blogging tools, coaching
- Ensuring ministerial and departmental digital communications are aligned (one way of approaching this was to second an e-comms team member to the press office)

We also saw that importance of positioning Twitter accounts with different branding to reflect the nuances of being in a personal, organisational or political role, all clearly indicating their identity and operating within clearly understood guidelines.

General policy principles

The underpinning principles are:

Open information:

To have an effective voice, people need to be able to understand what is going on in their public services; government will publish information about public services in ways that are easy to find, use, and re-use.

Open feedback:

The public should have opportunities to have a fair say about their services and contribute toward their ongoing development.

Open conversation:

We will promote greater engagement through more interactive online consultation and collaboration. We will also empower people to be active on online peer-support networks.

Open innovation:

We will promote innovation in online public services to respond to changing expectations and bringing the concepts into mainstream government practice.

Operating principles for civil servants

It was also important to have clear guidance for staff participation in digital channels, over and above principles and guidance relating to the application of social media in general. These can be summarised as follows:

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

Share insight and create a dialogue.

Be integrated

Make it part of something bigger, not just an add-on.

Be a civil servant

Remember that you are an ambassador for your organisation. Wherever possible, tell people who you are.

(from Principles for Online Participation. Part of the Civil Service Code. <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/resources/participation-online.aspx>)

Social media strategy and digital communications strategy

Rather than being a stand-alone piece of policy, we have seen the most effective use of social media arising as part of a more general strategic approach to digital communications. Although much social media work began as an “add-on” to other activities, perhaps implemented around the edge of other processes, by part-time staff, and with a particular emphasis on individual drive and enthusiasm, it should eventually form part of wider, mainstream activity. This is characterised by being resourced, planned, enabled by tools, and leading to the same overall goals.

An integrated digital communications strategy should include a focus on:

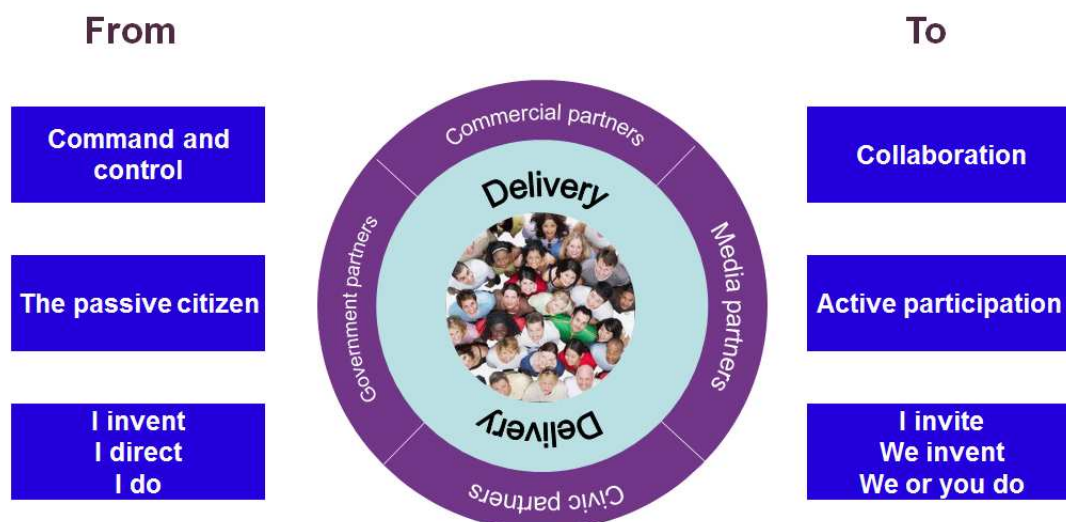
- **Content:** reuse, sharing, signposting
- **Cooperation** across paid, owned, earned channels
- **Conversion:** pulling towards common action goals

...and contribute to digital engagement strategies going forward, with an emphasis on integrating with other agendas, from public participation, to the freeing of public data for reuse, to reusable tools and techniques: all supported by an overarching business plan.

Implications of change of government, May 2010

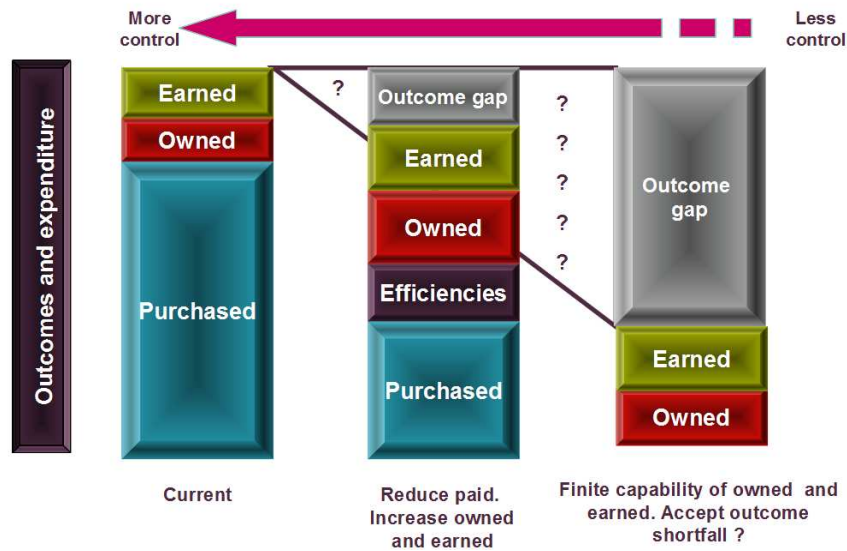
The election of a new coalition government in 2010 brought with it new policies, many of which had a complementary fit with the adoption of new media strategies. A centrepiece policy, “The Big Society”, had at its heart the ceding of control to localities, a reduction in central regulation, and an enabling of communities to address their own priorities, and even deliver their own services.

This had implications for the role of communications, both in substance and in voice, as the following diagram highlights:



It also set the stage for a redefinition of the role of government marketing, with greatly reduced expenditure, and an expectation that fewer new channels and destinations would be created. Less spend, and more focus on new skills. This requires more disciplined planning, better focusing on objectives, and a change of thinking in the model used.

With this model, it is arguable that the greater use of social media and other “non-owned” channels will lead to reduction in expenditure, but will require a reduction in central control, and may lead to gaps in the delivery of outcomes against expectations.



Communication principles, in the light of new policy focus

Behavioural Insights

Use shared behavioural insights to create collective choice architecture for a Big Society.

Partnerships

Moving from one-way partnerships to co-authored delivery.

Channel Balance

Moving from “purchased media first” to “purchased media last” to ensure government dependent outcomes.

Evaluation

Extend evaluation approach to provide accountability across Big Society spectrum.

It is evident that there is a clear fit between these principles and the use of social media in public administration. Further examples of the application of social media in practice can be found in the slide deck which accompanies this paper.

Paul Clarke

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Useful links:

Participation online: <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/resources/participation-online.aspx>

Engaging through social media: http://coi.gov.uk/documents/Engaging_through_social_media.pdf

Moderating online: <http://www.coi.gov.uk/guidance.php?page=380>