EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE NOTE
LINKS AND FEEDS

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- **Accuracy**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 3: Accuracy
- **Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 4: Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion
- **Harm and Offence**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 5: Harm and Offence
- **Re-use and Reversioning**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 13: Re-use and Reversioning
- **Editorial Integrity and Independence**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 14: Editorial Integrity and Independence
- **External Relationships and Funding**
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 16: External Relationships and Funding

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- All links on the BBC public service site or on the editorial pages of a commercial site must be editorially justifiable

- When audiences use BBC Online, they need to be confident that our decisions on links and feeds are influenced neither by political or commercial pressures, nor by any personal interests

- Whenever producers are creating content on a BBC site, they should actively consider which external websites it may be editorially justifiable to link to
• A link must never be included on the public service site or within the editorial content of a commercial site in return for cash, services or any other consideration in kind.

• An external site which is a candidate for a link should, generally, be relevant to the BBC content from which a link is envisaged; meet the needs of a UK–based audience; meet the expectations of the likely audience; be regularly reviewed and refreshed; and normally be free to access.

• The producer must check the contents of the external site before adding a link to a BBC page. The relevant Interactive Executive Editor should review the suitability for retaining these links as appropriate.

• We should do nothing to “own” or support the message, information or promotions on outside sites.

• In order to maintain impartiality, BBC sites which cover matters of controversy or public policy may offer links to external sites which, taken together, represent a reasonable range of views about the subject.

• For programme support pages, an external link should be justified by the relevance and value of the material to the programme’s viewers and listeners.

• When linking to any commercial site, great care must be taken to avoid giving the impression that the BBC is unfairly endorsing a commercial product or service.

• Links or navigation buttons from individual pages on the public service site to the BBC’s commercial sites are acceptable only when clearly editorially justified.

• It is likely to be editorially justifiable to link directly to the source of tickets if the event for which the tickets are being sold is a BBC Event.
If not, a link to eg the band’s own site would be editorially justifiable, from where a user can click to the ticket agency’s site.

• Before offering automatically generated links to external sites from BBC content, a number of factors should be considered, including the genre of editorial content, the ability to select from appropriate recognised and reputable sources and how to remove links from specific stories quickly

• Pulling third party feeds onto BBC Online pages may be more editorially sensitive than linking externally, because users are more likely to expect the feeds to have been through a rigorous editorial examination and to comply with BBC editorial standards.

• Feeds and embeds require the approval of the relevant Interactive Executive.

• The person responsible for the page on which a feed or embed appears will be responsible for the content from that feed or embed.

• They will have to decide what level of editorial monitoring is appropriate and whether they have the necessary resources to carry it out.

• When we take in content from an external supplier, we should be transparent about this with our users.

• If one supplier is known to favour or advocate a particular view or position, we should normally take care to offer a reasonable range of views from different suppliers at the same time.

• We should be clear about what our users can do and where they should go if they see a mistake or find something offensive.

• It should be clear to a casual user that an inbound embed (for example, of video from a social networking site) is not under the editorial control of the BBC and is not primarily the responsibility of
the BBC. But we are responsible for deciding what non-BBC content to embed on BBC pages and we should be alert to the possibility of the original content being changed or removed and to rights issues.

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PART 1: LINKS

Scope

Linking is the essence of the web. BBC strategy is to turn BBC Online into a window on the web and to double monthly clickthroughs to external sites.

This Guidance Note is designed to help you select and manage suitable external links to other sites from BBC Online. It is also designed to help you select and manage suitable inbound feeds and other online sources of third party content for publication on BBC Online.

For advice on syndication, see Editorial Guidelines Section 13 Re-use and Reversioning: Syndication and Distribution on Non-BBC Channels and Spaces.

Introduction

The BBC’s global reputation is based on its editorial integrity and independence. Our audiences need to be confident that our decisions are influenced neither by political or commercial pressures, nor by any personal interests. We must not undermine these values by any actions which could bring the BBC into disrepute.

(See also Editorial Guidelines Section 14: Editorial Integrity and Independence from External Interests.)

The following principles apply to BBC services:

• we must be independent from outside interests and arrangements which could undermine our editorial integrity
• we must not endorse or appear to endorse any other organisation, its products, activities, services, views or opinions

• we must not give undue prominence to commercial products or services

• on air and online credits must be clearly editorially justified

• we must not unduly promote BBC or BBC related commercial products and services on our public service outlets

• we must never include a link on a public service website, or within the editorial content of a commercial site, in return for cash, services or any other consideration in kind

• there may be no sponsorship of any online content on any BBC publicly funded Internet service. Publicly funded BBC online content may not carry advertising. The BBC’s commercially funded sites may carry advertising and some limited sponsorship in accordance with the BBC’s Advertising and Sponsorship Guidelines

**Links to external sites**

Part of the BBC’s role is to act as a Trusted Guide on the web. Whenever producers are creating content on a BBC site, they should actively consider which external websites it may be editorially justifiable to link to.

**Editorial justification for linking to external sites**

Producers may wish to offer links to external sites for a number of reasons, including:

• for further relevant information
• for further background information or other key source material
• for useful practical information
• for further informed comment
A link must never be included on the public service site or within the editorial content of a commercial site in return for cash, services or any other consideration in kind.

All links on the BBC public service site or on the editorial pages of a commercial site must be editorially justifiable.

Links are not acceptable as a form of credit.
(See Guidance: Credits and Logos Online and Software Downloads)

**Criteria for linking to external sites or other content**

Criteria for linking to third party sites will vary to some extent depending on the reason for offering the link.

In general terms, the external site should:

- be relevant to the BBC content from which a link is envisaged
- meet the needs of a UK-based audience
- meet the expectations of the likely audience. For example, a link from a BBC site which is likely to appeal to a high proportion of children should contain content which is suitable for children. It should not contain content which is clearly unsuitable for children. A site which creates content designed specifically to appeal to 6–12s should not normally link to a social networking site whose minimum age requirement is 13.
- be regularly reviewed and refreshed where necessary
- normally be free to access. However, it may be appropriate, where there is a strong editorial justification, to link to a specific subscription site. If we do, where this is practical, we should normally indicate to our users that the link is to a subscription site.

**Factual accuracy**
We would normally link to sites which are factually accurate and of high quality. However we may link to external sites which give particular views of a person or organisation significant to a current news story. In such cases we may not be able to guarantee their factual accuracy. We should not, however, support the message, information or promotions on third party sites.

Examples of appropriate linking to external sites

**US elections**

Our online coverage might offer links to the official sites of the two main US political parties, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. It may be appropriate to add links to specific US newspaper sites and reputable political blogs. Content producers should be aware of the editorial standpoint of any newspaper or blog and aim to offer a reasonable range of editorial perspectives.

**Band’s official site**

A link from content created about a band, for example to the band’s official site, may be a useful way of offering more relevant information. Sometimes, if the home page is unduly promotional, we may wish to consider deep linking direct to the relevant editorial. But we should not normally link directly to the pages of a band’s site whose main purpose is transactional e.g. selling tickets or downloads. See below for more guidance.

**Sports tournament**

It may be appropriate to link to the sites of the competitors in a tournament, for example, to Premiership football clubs. Links to sponsors’ sites are not normally acceptable and should be treated with great caution. Links from BBC pages covering events to the main pages of the sponsor’s corporate site are not acceptable. In some cases however, for strong editorial reasons we may link to specific pages run by the sponsor which give further information about the event.
Joint editorial initiative

If the BBC is running a joint editorial initiative with a museum which is staging a history exhibition, it will normally be editorially justifiable to link to that museum site. But we should also consider whether there are other exhibition sites which may offer additional useful and relevant information about the same historical period or themes.

We should not normally link directly to the pages of a partner museum’s site whose main purpose is transactional, for example, selling merchandise. See below for more guidance.

Editorial checks

The producer must check the contents of the site which is signposted before adding a link to a BBC page.

The relevant Interactive Executive Editor should review the suitability for retaining these links as appropriate, taking into account the criteria for linking above. Our tiered approach will be based on several factors including user expectations, topicality and sensitivity of content, and whether the third party site is itself an acknowledged trusted guide. For example,

- All third party links on children’s sites should be regularly reviewed
- Where the audience is likely to expect the links we offer to be to the most timely or topical sources of information, all manually selected third party links should be regularly reviewed: for example, third party links via BBC Search. (See below for guidance on editorial use of automatically generated links)
- Where the content linked to may change in ways which could affect the suitability of the link itself (for example, issues of harm and offence on a user generated comedy site), then links should be regularly reviewed. If the relevance of the link is likely to change over time, the same applies. For example, if we have selected which mortgage
comparison sites offer the best deals, our selection may need to be refreshed periodically to reflect changes in the marketplace.

- Where there are regular reviews of links, intervals between the reviews should be decided by the relevant Interactive Executive Editor.
- Links to reputable and trusted third party sources of information such as the Natural History Museum or the British Museum may not need to be reviewed as frequently.
- Links in user generated content will normally be checked to the same standard as the content itself. If the user generated content is reactively moderated, the links will normally be treated in the same way.
- We would normally rely on users to alert us to any problems with external links from BBC sites or pages which have been clearly archived or mothballed.

Where a site owner is conducting an editorial review of current or legacy content online, internal and external links should normally be checked as part of that process.

Where this is practical, we should consider ways to make it easy for users who find broken, stale or inappropriate external BBC links to report these to us so that we can check, update, replace or remove them.

We should not link to an outside site if it would be clearly inappropriate for the BBC to recommend a visit. We should ensure that the establishment of any link does not damage the BBC's reputation for editorial integrity and harm and offence issues must be very carefully considered.

(See Guidance: Interacting with Children and Young People Online)

See below for automatically generated links.

**Removal**

Content producers should be able readily to remove a link to a third party site, whenever necessary.
**Disclaimers**

We should do nothing to 'own' or support the message, information or promotions on outside sites. Where we publish a list of links we should add the standard disclaimer to the effect that "the BBC is not responsible for the contents of any other sites listed". If the links are to controversial or challenging material, it may be appropriate to add a specific disclaimer and more information, closer to the links, even when there are only one or two links on a page. For "in story" links to such material, for example to very sensitive content such as a gruelling account of torture, it may be helpful to alert the user to this, in context, as part of telling the story.

**Links to sites which do not share BBC editorial values**

Context is important in deciding whether a link is appropriate and it is often useful to explain why we are offering the link. In some cases we may offer a link to a site which does not share our editorial values, but which offers a useful insight. For example we might link from a current affairs page to the site of a government-run national news agency so that the user can see the precise words used in a government statement.

**Controversial content**

We must be duly impartial. BBC sites which cover a controversial or public policy matter may offer links to external sites which, taken together, represent a reasonable range of views about the subject. We should ensure that when we link to third party sites that we take into account any concerns about potential breaches of the law, for example, defamation or incitement to racial hatred.

Where content is likely to cause serious offence to some users and yet there is a strong editorial justification for covering the story, it may be editorially justifiable for the BBC to link to the relevant site rather than to host the content ourselves: for example, by linking to the Danish newspaper site which was hosting the cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.
For moderation of links which are published as part of user generated content, see separate guidance.

(See Guidance: Moderation, Hosting, Escalation and User Management)

Charities

Links to charity sites have to be based on sensible editorial criteria. If one charity is in the news, it may be appropriate to establish a link to the site of that charity. But we must take care not to promote one charity above another. If we are giving advice or general information about the subject and wish to refer to a charity and there is a range of charities working in the field, we should normally link to the other significant charities working in the field as well. This guidance applies to online links offered by BBC Action Lines.

Programme Support

For programme support pages, an external link should be justified by the relevance and value of the material to the programme’s viewers and listeners. If we give a link to an outside advice agency from a support page, we should give links to a reasonable range of other relevant agencies as well.

Where a consumer programme reviews a product or service, we should only offer links to the sites of the manufacturers, suppliers or retailers of any goods or services mentioned where strictly editorially justifiable. This will be more likely where the related programme or BBC web site has conducted a proper review of the strengths and weaknesses of the product or service and, where relevant, a comparison with similar ones. Simply reproducing the promotional text or tone of marketing literature accompanying the launch of a new product or service is not appropriate and would not normally help to justify an external link.

Undue prominence

The BBC must not unfairly promote any commercial organisations. Therefore great care must be taken when linking to any commercial site to ensure that
we do not give the impression that the BBC is unfairly endorsing any commercial product, brand or service.

BBC sites with links to commercial sites should normally explain the criteria by which the links were assessed in order to avoid the impression that the BBC is unfairly endorsing any commercial product or service. It may be appropriate in some cases to offer a route for other commercial organisations to suggest relevant additional links.

BBC public service sites should not normally link direct to pages whose main purpose is transactional e.g. selling merchandise, downloads or tickets.

See exceptions below for links to buy BBC-related programme content and links to buy tickets for BBC Events. There are some occasions where we may also wish to link directly to a donations page for a BBC charity or Appeal.

If in any doubt, refer to Editorial Policy

**Competitions and prizes**

We should not normally link to the web site of a supplier or manufacturer of a prize in connection with a prize or competition. In very exceptional cases, it might be done if editorially necessary. It should never be done as a condition of donating the prize.

**Links from BBC public service to the BBC’s commercial sites**

General points:

- Links or navigation buttons from individual pages on the public service site to the BBC’s commercial sites (e.g. those operated by BBC Worldwide and BBC World News) are acceptable only when clearly editorially justified. We should not be seen to promote the BBC’s commercial sites and we should not link to such sites in preference to other editorially relevant sites
• Links or navigation buttons from an individual public service page to a corresponding commercial page which features BBC branded products are governed by Section 14 of the Editorial Guidelines: Editorial Integrity and Independence on trails. See the section on Transactional Links below for the journey to online commercial suppliers generally.

• Where appropriate, an interstitial page may appear on the user's journey between the public service site and the BBC’s commercial site. It will let users know that they are leaving the public service site and offer them a choice.

Transactional Links from BBC Online to commercial products related to BBC programmes

In order to act as a Trusted Guide on the web and to better fulfil our Public Purposes, BBC Online may from time to time offer users the opportunity to purchase selected BBC-related programme content from a range of online commercial suppliers. See the Editorial Guidelines Section 14: Editorial Integrity and Independence for the principles which apply to transactional journeys from BBC Online.

Links to buy tickets

BBC programmes and sites regularly cover music concerts and tours. Linking policy to sites where users can buy tickets will depend on the nature of the event.

If it is a BBC Event (where the BBC is organising the Event and we are offering free or cost recovery tickets), then a direct link to the source of the tickets is likely to be editorially justifiable.

(See Guidance: Ticketing for BBC Events and Programmes)

If it is not a BBC Event (and where for example a BBC network is simply broadcasting a concert organised by someone else) then a direct link to the relevant band’s site is likely to be editorially justifiable, with one more click from there to the ticket agency’s site.

Links repeated across the site
Where the BBC offers the same selection of external links across a significant section of BBC Online for a specific purpose, for example, to social bookmarking sites, we need to take special care. These sites should be carefully selected according to robust, objective criteria before publication and we should review the selection periodically. Advice should be sought before publication from Editorial Policy and, if necessary, Fair Trading.

**Links selected by third parties for BBC Online**

Sites must be selected in accordance with the Editorial Guidelines and with this Guidance Note. The selection should reflect the needs of a UK-based audience. We should think very carefully before arranging for the links to go live before they have been checked by a BBC person. The person who is editorially responsible for the pages on which the external links may appear should decide what measures are appropriate in the circumstances.

**Automatically generated links**

Before offering automatically generated links to external sites from BBC content, we will need to think carefully about:

- whether the relevant genre of editorial content is suitable for this method
- only doing this where we can select from appropriate recognised and reputable sources
- which content pages may be editorially suitable for this method
- how long the links should remain up
- doing regular monitoring of the quality of the material on the pages or sites being linked to
- legal risks
• how to remove automated links from specific stories quickly

• telling our users how the links are selected and who has selected them

• where practical, ensuring our users can easily notify us of any broken or unsuitable links

Content producers should refer to the relevant Interactive Divisional Head before adding such links.

PART 2: INBOUND FEEDS AND EMBEDS

Pulling third party content onto BBC Online pages is in some ways more editorially sensitive than linking externally. Following an external link takes you away from the BBC site and users have a chance to adjust their expectations in the light of that journey. But as third party content sits with BBC content on BBC branded pages on BBC Online, users are more likely to expect it to have been through a rigorous editorial examination and to comply with BBC editorial standards before being published on our site.

Editorial responsibility

The person who is editorially responsible for the page on which the feed or embed appears will be responsible for the content from that feed or embed. This principle will apply whether it is a bespoke feed to a single page or a general feed to many pages.

Risk assessment

As this material is not under BBC editorial control, the editorial owner of the relevant page or pages will need to make a very careful assessment of the risks before deciding whether and on what terms to enable the feed or embed. They will need to decide what level of editorial monitoring is appropriate and whether they have the necessary resources to carry it out.
It may be worth running a live trial outside BBC Online, or one which is only visible to BBC staff, to help assess the risks and the editorial value first.

The material may be supplied by a commercial organisation, a community of volunteers or by a single individual. It may be provided entirely by professional journalists (a Press Association feed of match reports) or it may be user generated content (blog, status update or message board comments about specific BBC programmes from third party sites which link to those BBC programme sites).

BBC Online pages which publish inbound feeds may need to be regularly reviewed and the editorial impact of any changes or updates should be considered. The frequency and depth of review should be based on an editorial assessment of the likely risks and audience expectations.

Third party content which is likely to be sensitive may need to be checked more often. Regular spot checks may also be necessary to monitor quality. In cases where the risks are particularly high, it may be necessary to check the content before it is published.

Factors to take into account when deciding whether and, if so, on what terms, to enable a third party feed or embed on BBC Online include:

- How much third party content do we intend to display. Is it a title, a short headline or a paragraph? Is it only text or will it contain stills or video content?
- The overall quality, consistency and accuracy of content provided by the supplier
- The sensitivity of the content e.g. harm and offence and privacy
- How far that content is likely to match the expectations of the users on that page
- The level of filtering and monitoring done by the supplier
- Availability of contact details for technical support on supplier sites
- The supplier’s proven ability to remove inaccurate or inappropriate content or to fix a broken link promptly
- Legal risk
Transparency

Where we take in content from an external supplier, we should be transparent about it with our users. They should be able to tell who is editorially responsible for third party content on our pages, where the supplier’s content has come from and, in general terms, how it has been made or selected. Attribution should be as close as possible to the content in question. This can usually be done with a simple text credit. A “What is this?” or FAQ page may be useful.

Impartiality

If one supplier is known to favour or advocate a particular view or position, then we should normally take care to offer a reasonable range of views from different suppliers at the same time. If you are thinking of adding a single supplier whose content deals with political or public policy issues who may not generally be seen as an impartial source of information, for example, a government run health site, refer to Editorial Policy before establishing the feed.

Feedback

We should be clear about what our users can do and where they should go if they see a mistake or find something offensive.

We can either take responsibility ourselves for removing or altering the feed or the content or we can direct users straight back to the site which is hosting the content. In that case, it may still be useful for us to know the substance of the user’s complaint so that we can act if necessary.

Where we are importing text feeds from a site run by a community of volunteers, we should normally point our users directly to the originating website so that they can rectify a mistake at source. We may also wish to offer our users an FAQ about why we are doing this and a BBC feedback route, particularly where we are trying out new suppliers.
Where there is a bigger risk, for example where pictures are being fed live from a third party and they are due to be published immediately by the BBC, we may need to check each one before we publish it. See the risk factors above.

If the third party supplier of pictures already has proven effective measures in place and the risk to the reputation of the BBC from publication of any inappropriate pictures is low, it may be possible for us to rely instead on spot checks by the producer and an alert button.

In this case, a prominent user alert button could automatically cut the feed of a specific picture to our site immediately a user activated it, 24/7. A moderator could then check the picture later and reinstate it if the user’s complaint was unjustified. Alternatively, if the material is first published on a BBC space on a third party site (for example, on a picture sharing site like Flickr), we could use the “favourite” functionality on that site to preselect suitable images to go on the feed to our site.

Feeds and embeds require the approval of the relevant Interactive Executive. If you have any doubts about what measures we should put in place, refer to Editorial Policy before establishing the feed or embed.

**Embeds**

Inbound embeds, for example of a social networking site video player on a BBC page, may be a useful way to display non–BBC content to users of BBC Online.

It should be clear to a casual user that the embed part of the page is not under the editorial control of the BBC and is not primarily the responsibility of the BBC. But we are clearly editorially responsible for deciding what non–BBC content to embed on BBC pages and we should be alert to the possibility that the original content on the third party site may change or be removed – and to rights issues. If the content changes, we may need to remove the embed quickly.
Links from within the embed are not technically BBC links from a BBC page. They sit within a window which shows part of a page on a third party site. But these links should preferably lead directly to editorially relevant content, such as the user's profile page where that video content is hosted, rather than to a generic site home page or to other content which is not directly relevant to the video content.

Very strong third party content may require a short content label, close to the embed. We should aim to apply the same principle to third party embedded content on BBC Online as we do to our own content: that users should be able to take an informed decision about what content they wish to consume before they do so.

While third party branding is one way to signal that the content is not under the editorial control of the BBC, prominent third party branding within the embed is likely to be unacceptable. Where the embed is a bespoke or negotiated or commissioned presence, a text credit is likely to be preferable because it does not risk unduly promoting the third party.