⧉ English Regions Social Media Strategy

Vision
Our people, and our content, active daily in the social spaces that matter locally.

Objectives by end of 2012

1 All English Regions journalists and programme makers to have/develop a working knowledge of social media tools and their editorial value.

2 For each of our 6.30 programmes, a minimum of
- one programme Facebook page
- one programme Twitter account

3 For each of our local areas, a minimum of
- one Facebook page, posting a mixture of radio- and online-based material
- one hand-curated Twitter account, posting a mixture of radio- and online-based material
- one automated or hand-curated Twitter account, posting headlines and links as they're added to the local News index

4 Social media to be a formal element in performance review - especially growth (or otherwise) in engagement stats.

5 ER HQ to monitor and send around regular "league table" updates on
- engagement and user figures for official ER Facebook & Twitter accounts
- "most shared" online stories

6 All accounts to comply with News division guidance - including all Twitter accounts with "BBC" in their name to be complied as specified, or renamed to remove "BBC" and become "unofficial".

7 All defunct/dormant accounts to be closed elegantly, according to best practice.

8 All programme account graphics to be optimised so they
- match current approved branding
- work at the dimensions they are normally seen at

9 ER to be early adopters of social media authoring/analytics tools being trialled by Network News.

10 ER HQ to upgrade BBC England Twitter account to hybrid model of manual updates during office hours and automated updates outside office hours.

Practical Guidance

Social Media and Content Creation

Understanding social media is not an optional extra for modern journalists and programme makers. Whether or not we choose to use Facebook, Twitter or other social networks as individuals, we need to understand how our audience uses them - and how we can deploy them as research tools for finding contacts, real-time news tip-offs, case studies and more.

The College of Journalism runs a number of courses on social media and other modern web tools, most notably Making The Web Work For You (http://academy.gateway.bbc.co.uk/courses/making-the-web-work-for-you/11288). Any English Regions journalists and programme makers without a working knowledge of these tools should attend this course as soon as possible.

News Division Guidance

Any activity conducted by English Regions on social networking sites is bound by the News division's social media guidance notes - whether that activity relates to news output (e.g. 6.30 programmes) or other types of English Regions output (e.g. sport, weather, music programming).

Those notes can be found here: http://jportal.bbc.co.uk/uk-global/teams/newswire/Pages/SocialMedia.aspx.

They explain what constitutes an official or unofficial BBC social media account, how official accounts should be complied, and who needs to give approval before they're set up. (This is usually your editor, HRLP and Robin Morley in ER HQ.)

Role of Social Media Reps

Each local and regional newsroom must have at least one social media rep appointed and on the England-wide email d-list (ER Social Media Reps).

This person should have a watching brief on the social media activity of programmes/individuals within that newsroom. They do not necessarily need to be an admin of any of these accounts, but should have a good understanding of social media and able to answer questions / action requests which come out from ER HQ.

They should ensure that admins for all social media presences in their local/regional area are in touch with each other and are intelligently linking to / sharing / retweeting relevant content from account to account.

Editors should inform Robin Morley if their social media rep(s) move on, and nominate a successor in their place.

Expectations re Posting

Facebook
All Facebook updates must be written "natively", specifically for Facebook (i.e. not pulled in automatically from RSS or Twitter).

There is strong evidence that Facebook content which is pulled in automatically from elsewhere is "down-ranked" by Facebook - meaning the content (and your page as a whole) is less likely to be seen in users' news feeds.

Pages should be checked several times a day for

- inappropriate comments, photos or links from users - these should be removed and a polite message left from us explaining why they've been removed
- other posts from users which deserve a response - we should reply to a reasonable proportion of user comments regularly, as this builds engagement and a sense of community
- potential story leads/contacts - we should either get in touch with these users via private message, or post alternative means to contact us (e.g. phone/email) so their lead can be followed up

It is a good idea to set "Profanity blocklist" to "High" on all pages (this setting can be found under Edit Page / Manage Permissions).

Facebook pages should have a short URL registered for them (e.g. facebook.com/BBCCountyshire) for ease of promotion and recall. This can be done by a page admin visiting http://www.facebook.com/username once their page has more than 25 "likes".

Twitter
All updates must be produced by hand, specifically for Twitter (i.e. no cross-posting from Facebook) apart from accounts tweeting online News stories automatically, which should be clearly labelled as such.

Admins for a programme/brand Twitter account should monitor mentions of its Twitter account name multiple times a day. We should reply to a manageable proportion of users who mention us, where appropriate, even if just to thank them for their comments: this helps make the account feel less like a broadcast and more like a genuine conversation.

Tone

All messages posted on Facebook or Twitter must adhere to - and be complied according to - the News division's guidance. A friendly, informal tone is acceptable - and often desirable - but "txtspeak", misspellings and poor grammar are not allowed.

On programme accounts, it's a good idea for individuals to announce themselves when posting ("Hi - Robin here...") especially in the case of on-air talent and others who will be recognisable to the audience. Research shows that messages which have clearly come from individuals, rather than entities, are much more engaging.

But even when our names are attached, as the BBC we must always maintain the same balance and editorial judgement we would use on air. If you wouldn't say it in a two-way, don't say it on Facebook or Twitter.

Building and Monitoring Engagement

Our aim on Facebook and Twitter is to build engagement, and in doing so bring users to - and deepen their relationship with - our radio, TV and online services.

Increasing our number of Facebook "likes" and Twitter followers does not, in itself, mean we're increasing our level of engagement with the audience. It is a step in the right direction but these numbers in themselves are not particularly meaningful.

In practice, a good measure of engagement is to monitor the level of

- replies to our tweets / replies to our Facebook postings, especially when these replies are editorially valuable (e.g. story leads, new contacts)
- Twitter retweets / Facebook shares
- "likes" for Facebook postings

On Facebook we should avoid high numbers of low-interest postings (e.g. "we'll be on air again at 10.25 tonight") - due to the way Facebook works, posts like this can prove counterproductive by making us less likely to appear in users' news feeds even though they've chosen to receive our updates.

Instead we should aim for a small number of posts each day, picked for the engagement they're likely to generate - e.g.

- questions / talking points
- stories with a strong level of impact/controversy/quirkiness (Facebook users love to share humorous and emotive stories in particular - "things that make me laugh or make me angry")
- sporadic "behind the scenes" insights/photos which give Facebook users a sense of being on the "inside track"

Images are a proven means of increasing engagement. A recent Facebook study found that links shared by journalists which included a thumbnail image in the link preview received 65% more "likes" and 50% more comments than those without images.

Each Facebook page must have at least one admin who

- understands Facebook Insights (Facebook's tool for monitoring usage of pages)
- checks these figures weekly and shares successes with the rest of the newsroom
- monitors the page's number of "active users" - this means those who have interacted with the page in some way, as distinct from purely those who have "liked" the page at one point

On Twitter, users are generally more receptive to frequent posts, especially where a story is breaking and new angles / pieces of information are emerging in real time. They appreciate expert BBC analysis to help them make sense of events, though we should be careful that - as on air - our analysis does not stray into the realms of opinion.

Facebook and Twitter admins for local and regional accounts should keep across their relevant local News Interactive index(es) so suitable stories can be identified for sharing. Regional News Interactive teams should also proactively flag up stories which are likely to have "legs" on social media to the relevant Facebook and Twitter admins, as soon as they are live or major updates have been made to them.

Official BBC Accounts for Individuals

Facebook

We do not at this time use Facebook profiles as promotional or community-building tools for BBC content or personalities. Programmes built around an individual (e.g. Joe Bloggs at Breakfast) may have an account for the programme but this should be a page, not a profile (contact Robin Morley for guidance if you're unsure of the difference).

It should be clear from the "About" section of the page whether updates are posted mainly by an individual presenter or by a programme team.

Journalists and programme makers are, of course, permitted to have personal (i.e. non-"official") profiles on Facebook, provided they're run according to the News division guidance linked to above. Those with a personal profile

- should not refer to it directly on air ("be my friend on Facebook")
- should not have a programme name or the word "BBC" in their profile name
- should exercise care when accepting or making friend requests

Twitter

Reporters, presenters etc must demonstrate proficiency with Twitter before being considered for an official BBC account. Just as we shouldn't put a new presenter on air without dry runs and a decent level of technical competence, social media in the name of the BBC should be no different (especially since everything posted online is automatically permanent).

In practice this means potential BBC tweeters must successfully run an unbranded (i.e. "personal") account for several months first unless there are extraordinary reasons why this is not possible. Twitter's technical set-up allows this unbranded account to later be renamed, turning it into a BBC account, without losing any followers.

If someone with an official BBC Twitter account leaves the BBC, they must remove "BBC" from the account name. But they are free to retain the account and its followers; they are also free to rebrand it when they move to a new organisation. (This is a publicly stated policy outlined here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/08/from_laurak_to_normans.html.)

The BBC News guidance notes linked to above contain good direction on how an official BBC Twitter account for an individual should be approved and managed.

Facebook/Twitter Accounts for Programmes/Strands

An individual programme (e.g. drivetime) or strand (e.g. sport) on a radio or TV service may launch its own Facebook page or Twitter account, but only if

- there is a clear rationale, agreed by the editor, for why that programme/strand's activity could not be more effectively reflected on the main local/regional account
- there is sufficient resource to keep it regularly updated and checked
- those involved have a good track record of understanding and consistently maintaining social media presences
- it is signed off by the editor, HRLP and Robin Morley at ER HQ
- it is complied according to the News guidance linked to above

Crisis Management

Every official BBC social media account must have a plan for what will happen in each of these eventualities:

- the account is hacked by an unauthorised person
- a message is posted which is factually incorrect, or turns out to be
- something editorially inappropriate is inadvertently posted

Our general policy is not to delete problematic tweets (as this can create more of a firestorm than leaving them live), but to apologise/clarify as quickly as possible afterwards.

There are exceptions to our "don't delete" policy, especially if we have published something with legal ramifications (e.g. defamation, contempt). You should refer any specific incidents up immediately if you are unsure of what to do.

Your editor and press office should be informed of any incidents which are likely to attract interest from the press/Twittersphere/bloggers etc.

Account Administration

Admin access for BBC Facebook and Twitter accounts should be held by at least two members of the team so there is no risk of a single person leaving the BBC with access rights which cannot then be revoked.

The optimum number of people to have admin access (including the simple ability to post) will vary from case to case. A good rule of thumb is to have as many admins as you need (for cover across the day/week, taking into account rotas/sickness/leave) but as few as you can get away with.

Having too many admins can leave an account's output with a confused, jumbled feel. Better to have a consistent tone of voice and a smaller number of well-targeted, well-crafted posts each day.

Passwords for BBC accounts should be shared with as few people as necessary - not emailed to the whole newsroom - and must be changed when anyone who knows them leaves the team or, especially, the BBC.

Passwords should contain a mixture of upper and lower case letters, numbers and punctuation. They must not be a dictionary word or anything guessable (e.g. the name of a town in your patch, your postcode, your radio frequency etc). Common substitutions of numbers for letters (e.g. pa55w0rd) are not a strong security device.

You can find further advice on avoiding (and planning a response to) Twitter hacks here: http://explore.gateway.bbc.co.uk/technology/technology/need_to_know/information_security/twitter_security.aspx

Closing an Account

If an account is no longer needed, or has become dormant and will not be reactivated in the near future, it is a good idea to close it. This is especially the case for any accounts (such as Facebook pages) where users can post their own comments or material: if we are not regularly monitoring what is being posted, we must close the account.

The normal process for doing this is to

- post a message announcing to users that the account will be closing soon - and specify a date when it will close (ideally between two and four weeks away)
- suggest alternative places where users might find similar content - for instance, if closing a radio programme's Facebook page, suggest that users should "like" the station's page instead
- monitor reaction regularly, answering any feedback/complaints as they arise
- post reminders as the closure date approaches
- on the agreed date, close the account

What to Avoid

Facebook profiles and groups should not be used for BBC purposes.

Any existing Facebook groups which are still being used as promotional / community-building tools around our output must be wound down and closed by the end of April 2012. Please contact Robin Morley for advice on closing Facebook groups as it is very easy to accidentally leave them "in limbo" - unable to be deleted and/or with only one admin who may have left the BBC.

Any existing Facebook profiles (as distinct from pages) which are still being used as promotional / community-building tools should have any public reference to BBC removed and should no longer be referred to on air or via our web output.

Working with Indies

If an independent production company is producing output for English Regions, that company may maintain a social media presence (or presences) on behalf of the output provided:

- updates are complied by a "second pair of eyes" from the BBC before going live (in the same way that BBC-generated updates would be)
- there is a written agreement (ideally put in place at the original commissioning stage) which specifies expectations from both sites - approval process for the account(s), how often updates should happen, the nature of these updates, compliance process, period for which the account will run etc

Beyond Facebook/Twitter?

Facebook and Twitter should be our primary third-party social media tools.

Facebook's benefits are its huge userbase (more than 800 million active users at Nov 2011) and growing use by non-technophiles - including a large chunk of our (traditionally 50+) audience. As of Feb 2011 Facebook delivered 56% of all social clickthroughs to UK news websites.

Twitter has considerably fewer users and less mainstream recognition/penetration - but those who use the service are more likely to be news junkies and avid sharers of the latest headlines. Some subject areas - like sport and politics - are particularly well-served and active on Twitter. Despite Facebook's userbase being 15 times bigger, Twitter still delivered 26% of all social media clickthroughs to UK news websites as of Feb 2011, and its userbase is growing rapidly.

Clearly there are other social media services on the market, and there will be many more in the future. Some have been around for a while but are still niche (e.g. Audioboo); others are relatively new and unproven (e.g. Google+); others are not traditional social networks but rather new social storytelling tools (e.g. Storify).

Any use of these services around our output must

- be considered a trial
- be signed off by your editor, HRLP, and by Robin Morley at ER HQ
- have a plan ahead of time to gauge their impact after a few weeks

This policy should not discourage innovation - Facebook and Twitter were once niche and untested too - but aims to ensure the bulk of our available effort goes on services whose benefits are proven.

Further Guidance

The College of Journalism runs an excellent course on Developing a Social Media Strategy. This is aimed at management and those who are likely to have influence over a station-wide or region-wide social media portfolio. It goes into more detail on - and encourages discussion of - the areas outlined in this note.

More information can be found here:
http://academy.gateway.bbc.co.uk/courses/a-successful-social-media-strategy/11886