

## 22. SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

### 22.1. Background

The phenomenal growth in digital technology and the rise of social media platforms over the past few years have revolutionised the way in which people communicate and share information. The use of social media tools in government around the world has been gaining acceptance in all spheres of government.

This provides an opportunity for two-way communication between government and citizens, partners and stakeholders thereby increasing the frequency and speed of engagement. At the same time social media presents new challenges to governments who must address resulting citizen expectations and the differences in communication culture while navigating the blurry line between official and personal use.

All around the world, including South Africa, people are embracing digital technology to communicate in ways that could never have been imagined just a few years ago. With this in mind, governments across the world have begun to recognise the need to embrace social media, but are generally still finding their feet in terms of the most effective use of these new communication tools.

### 22.2. Purpose

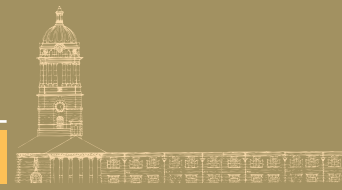
The purpose of these guidelines are to create awareness of some of the opportunities that social media presents for government, as well as making government agencies and staff aware of how to manage the risks associated with the use of this kind of technology. The guidelines focus on guidance in the use of social media within the South African government communications environment, in order to improve government transparency, participation and interaction with the public. These policy guidelines establish the principles for:

- government employees using social media for official government communication purposes; and
- personal use of social media by government employees, when the employee's government affiliation is identified, known or presumed.

The intention is to provide:

- a standard personal responsibility for government employees;
- an introductory overview of the social media tools that are most likely to be relevant in a South African environment;
- the potential benefits and risks associated with these tools;
- guidance in best-practice use of social media; brief examples of where such social media tools have been used in government; and
- general advocacy applications.

These guidelines are not an exhaustive user manual or instruction guide on social media or specific social media



tools. Government departments or agencies differ when it comes to communication objectives, audience profiles, availability of human and technical resources, Internet use policies and other factors that will dictate if, what, when and how social media is used.

Also, the social media environment is an extremely fluid one, and the available tools and applications are constantly evolving to address evolving user needs. An exhaustive user manual would run into hundreds of pages, and generally be redundant before it is published, in terms of accuracy of information. While governments around the world may face some challenges in adopting social media tools, we are convinced that the potential benefits of using selected social media tools far outweigh any risks, and these benefits will continue to grow as more and more South Africans bridge the digital divide.

As public servants we have a unique opportunity to step out and be part of the digital revolution, joining a historical transition that allows conversations with the public, rather than simply communicating to them. South African government employees have the same rights of free speech as other citizens when it comes to the use of, and participation in online social media platforms. As public servants, however, government employees have some additional obligations when it comes to sustaining, building and defending the reputation of government through social media. Social media are powerful communication tools that have a significant impact on institutional and professional reputations. Because they blur the lines between personal voice and institutional voice, the GCIS has produced the following policy guidelines to help clarify how best to enhance and protect institutional and personal reputations when participating in social media.

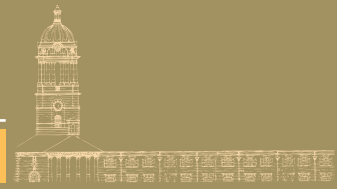
The use of social media in a government department will also be governed by the department's Internet and email policies, which sets out unacceptable behaviour while using the Internet. As technology and social media platforms evolve, this policy and its accompanying handbook of resources will also evolve as our collective experience in the use of social media evolves.

### **What is social media – A brave new world for government communication**

Social media is the platforms that can be used by the general public using highly accessible digital technologies such as blogs, podcasts, social networks, wikis, micro-blogs and message boards.

The following are some benefits to government of using social media;

- increasing government's access to its audiences;
- improving the accessibility of government communication;
- allowing government to adjust or refocus communications quickly, where necessary;
- improving the long-term cost effectiveness of government communication;
- increasing the speed of constituent feedback and input;
- reaching specific audiences on specific issues; and
- reducing government's dependence on traditional media channels to communicate with constituents.



As a government communicator, the measure of success for any social media tool or application should be: does it allow you to engage with your internal and external stakeholders by facilitating one or more of the following:

- communication
- disseminating information
- interaction; and/or
- education.

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 – supplementing rather than replacing traditional communication platforms – and deliver at least some of the tangible benefits listed above.

### **22.3. Scope**

These guidelines serve to provide standards of professional practice and conduct when using social media as with other standards applied to any other area within the Public Service. Limitations to the scope of these guidelines. Related areas that fall outside the scope of these guidelines include:

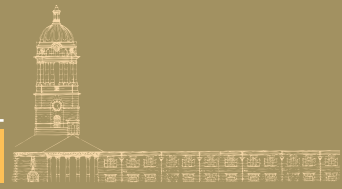
- Internet and email use and policy
- Internet search engine optimisation
- technical implementation of social media platforms i.e. a focus on the hardware, software, technical protocols and human resource issues relating to the actual implementation of social media tools within a department
- comprehensive “How to...” guides to set up social media accounts and participate online – social media applications regularly change their protocols, and may have different tools and channels for different user needs.

### **22.4. General guidelines**

There are some guidelines that can be applied across all forms of social media. Knowing these basic guidelines of engagement will help you, whether you are fully responsible for establishing and hosting an online community, or if you are just a contributor in an existing community.

When using any type of social media, you must:

- Be credible – accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
- Be respectful – encourage constructive criticism and deliberation.
- Be cordial, honest and professional at all times.
- Listen before you talk – before entering any conversation you need to understand the context,
- Who is the potential audience?
- Is there a good reason to place a comment or respond?
- Write what you know – you have to know your facts and cite credible sources.
- Acknowledge if a mistake is made through your comment or response and respond to it immediately.
- Be both reactive and responsive – when you gain insight share it where appropriate.



### **22.5. Social media guidelines for official government communication**

The protocols that apply when you are acting as an official representative of government and/or government department should be the same whether you are talking to the media, speaking at a conference or using social media. Note: The government employees making comments or contributions on behalf of government and/or government departments should only do so with express approval or authority.