



Social media guidelines for MRC individuals, centres, unit and institutes

These are guidelines, not rules! They're intended for anyone who uses social media in an MRC context, not just MRC employees. We hope they are helpful. We'll review them periodically, so please do send feedback to socialmedia@mrc.ukri.org

Please also make sure that you adhere to any other relevant local policies, whether those be a university's if you are not an MRC employee, or the MRC Code of Conduct if you are an MRC employee.

Introduction

The term 'social media' describes web services and tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube that allow you to interact with others in the sharing of information, opinions and content. With social media, the emphasis is very much on building communities of interest and encouraging people to participate, rather than simply broadcasting information.

Social media can help you in many ways in your role, for example to:

- Communicate with the public
- Consult and engage
- Be transparent and accountable
- Access help and support from other experts

All information conveyed through social media should be considered public. It should be assumed that unless particular restrictions are put in place all such information could end up anywhere at any time.

We don't recommend trying to establish private social media accounts through which to make comments concerning medical research; personal views can too easily get read as the MRC's views.

Social media principles

1. **Be aware that social media posts have a long life.** Anything you post in a public space will live there for a very long time and may be copied, re-purposed and redistributed in different contexts from the one in which it was posted. Even though posts can be deleted they will have already appeared in other users' timelines, and may have already been shared, saved on website archives or had screenshots taken.
2. **Don't fire off posts in anger or frustration.** Consider what you have written carefully before posting and, if you have any doubts, don't ignore them; come back to it later or ask a colleague to check it. Remember, you are personally responsible for what you write.
3. **Protect privacy.** You are personally responsible for the content you publish. Use available privacy settings, and never give out your postal address or phone numbers. Limit the personal data you publish.

4. **Identify yourself - name and, when relevant, role at the MRC** - when you discuss the MRC or MRC-related matters, and write in the first person. Do not use an alias to obscure who you actually are.
5. **Own your posts.** If you publish content to any website outside of the MRC and it has something to do with work you do or subjects associated with the MRC, include a statement, such as: "These are my own views, not those of my employer." Write in the first person ('I think...'). These are your opinions and you take personal responsibility for them.
6. **Respect the law.** Respect copyright, fair use and financial disclosure laws. Don't post libellous content. Under most laws it is the individual that is liable for any breach of UK or international law. Remember, laws of other nations may apply to any posts. Do not be fooled by the informal nature of social media – the law still applies and a disclaimer will not protect you eg a UK Local Authority has utilised US law to access a Twitter account.
7. **Respect your audience and peers.** Don't use personal insults, obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the MRC's workplace. You should protect others' privacy and take care around topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory—such as politics and religion. People may disagree with what you say and express it in many ways, from the helpful to the downright rude. Rise above it and ensure your engagement is constructive and positive. Remember, some comments are not worthy of a response.
8. **Consider policy and confidentiality.** Respect what you can legitimately say about the MRC in public - don't provide confidential or other proprietary information. Bear in mind any internal policies or initiatives relating to the area you are posting on, and don't contradict them. You must check with your line manager before sharing any documents. Don't report on conversations that are meant to be internal to the MRC or private. If in doubt, consult your line manager, Information Security Officer or Data Protection Officer.
9. **Consider reputation.** Your own and the MRC's. Conversing with people is what social media is all about, but if you receive or come across a comment online that could cause reputational damage to either you or the MRC, speak to the Corporate Communications Team. Bear in mind that any response could be taken as MRC policy and spread as such across social media sites, so in many cases a more formal corporate response will be the most appropriate.
10. **Think about how you are presenting yourself and who you are talking to.** Be aware of your association with the MRC in online social networks. If you identify yourself as working for the MRC, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself with colleagues and stakeholders. When talking with national journalists on social networks, you should treat it like any usual media enquiry and pass it on to the Press Office (press.office@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk).
11. **Have integrity.** Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation and be honest about your thinking. Be cordial, professional and the first to correct your own mistakes. Don't alter previous posts without indicating that you have done so (and when), or delete comments just because they are critical – chances are you will be found out and exposed. Owning up to a mistake on social media is a good opportunity to be human.
12. **Write about what you know.** You add value by contributing views, opinions and perspective on topics you know something about. The MRC's image is best represented by its people and what you publish will reflect on the MRC so be aware that you can potentially damage the MRC's reputation by posting on subjects where you are not an expert or are not aware of all the facts.
13. **Provide timely responses.** The whole point of social media is to participate in conversations and receive replies to your posts. If someone who replies expects a response, try to respond in a timely manner, even if you do need to reflect or look something up. Where you have a lot of comments, you don't need to respond individually to every comment, but could post one response that references a selection of comments.

14. **Be responsible.** Don't use social media to communicate policies or office or unit events/news to colleagues; this should continue through the usual office or unit routes. Be sensible with the amount you use social media websites, and don't forget your other work. Even though you are using social media in a work context, it should constitute a small amount of your work. Don't neglect your other work commitments.
15. **Be secure.** Do not use the same password for all social media sites, and definitely do not use the same passwords on social media sites as you would in the office or sites containing your personal or payment card information. Do not post information that you do not want to be public, even if the site seems secure. Remember, many of these sites may not have safe practices concerning the privacy or storage of your information and are often the target of hackers.
16. **Be sure.** Always read the terms and conditions of use of a site and abide by them; failure to comply may have consequences you were unaware of. Some sites have privacy settings or secure areas that make you feel you can make comments securely between friends. Sometimes, more people can view these than you realise at the time you post, and the information could be released under subpoena laws without your knowledge.
17. **Be aware of Freedom of Information (FOI).** As with all systems used to conduct MRC business, information or comments posted on social media sites are subject to the same legislation, and may be subject to FOI and data protection requests. We reserve the right to request the cessation of communication by any staff member or the use of specific services to protect staff and our information or reputation.

See [annex 2](#) for our 'before you hit tweet' checklist.

The basics

For the nuts and bolts of how Twitter works, read Twitter's own [Getting started with Twitter](#) guidance. See Appendix 3 for a table on who can see what on Twitter. There are also help pages for [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [YouTube](#) and [Instagram](#).

The different channels are broadly accepted as meeting slightly different needs. Facebook, for example, can work particularly well for communities wanting to discuss particular topics, whereas Twitter is more of a fast-moving newsfeed and way to directly engage with people. YouTube can allow you to access large numbers of members of the public with the right content, and Flickr is a great place to share your photos for reuse throughout the web. But there are no hard and fast rules — it's the message, not the medium, which determines who you reach and engage with.

The simple rule to remember is that the principles covering the use of social and other digital media are the same as those that apply for any other activity:

1. Honesty about who you are
2. Clarity that your opinions are your own personal ones
3. Respect and humility in all communication
4. Good judgment in sharing only public information – including financial data
5. Awareness that what you say is permanent

Where to begin

If you're establishing a new social media account, taking one over from a colleague or revamping the way you do things, there are a few essentials to think about:

- Why are you doing this? Because you feel you should, or because you have identified a genuine need for it and have clear objectives?

- Who is the audience? Do you know if those people use the social media channel you're proposing to establish a presence on? For example, if you want to directly engage children in science, is Twitter the place to do that?
- What will the content of the channel be? How will you source or produce content?
- How much resource will that require, and do you have enough to achieve your aims?

Not all establishments need a presence on all channels. It's much better to think through the objectives and realities of a social media presence and decide against it than it is to establish one and then allow it to lie fallow. It's also fine to close down accounts that are no longer meeting your needs.

Make sure you consider channels together. How will your Twitter account work with your YouTube account? Do they have the same audiences with different content, or potentially different audiences for the same content? Will the same person/people be responsible for it? How will you coordinate them?

Don't assume that you can set up a social media profile and it will look after itself. Social media requires investment in time, often on a daily basis. There's no set rule for how often you need to post, but it should look as if it is being maintained when people visit it. Don't post for the sake of it, but don't be afraid of repeating posts about the same thing, particularly on Twitter when tweets will disappear quickly out of your followers' timelines.

Names, appearance and branding

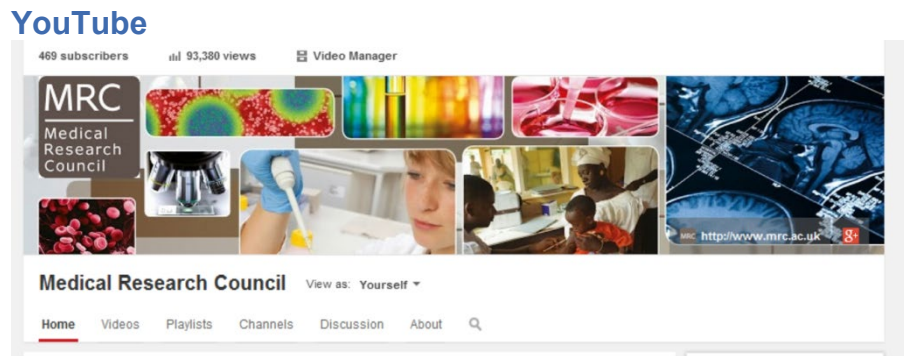
It's a good idea to keep your appearance consistent across all social media channels so that you are recognisable. At MRC Head Office we've got a social media banner that we use across the sites:

Twitter



Facebook





Abide by the [branding guidelines](#) in any decisions you make about the appearance of your social media profiles.

If you're setting up an account for an MRC unit, centre or institute please use your MRC affiliation in your names on social media, and try to incorporate 'MRC' into character-restricted names. For example, on Twitter:

- The MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology is 'MRC LMB' and @MRC_LMB
- The MRC Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre is 'MRC SGDP' and @MRCSGDP
- The MRC Clinical Trials Unit at UCL is 'MRC CTU at UCL' and @MRCCTU.

Try as much as possible to keep your name consistent across all profiles to reduce confusion.

Channels come with the option of including a short bio about your organisation. Always fill this in – it's an opportunity to grab the attention of your audience. Write the bio in the first person – social media is all about being human (see tone and style). Take advantage of the opportunity to link back to your website.

People may decide whether to follow/like/subscribe to a channel within seconds, so make it easy for them to see what you're about.

Who tweets? Teams and working

Often it will be communications people who look after social media accounts, but it can be a good idea to encourage other people in your organisation to suggest ideas for events, topics and content that they think it would be good to post about, or conversations that you can get involved in. The more people within your organisation who understand social media and how you are using it, the easier it will be to be responsive and timely in your activity. It's worth producing some kind of brief documentation on your objectives for a channel that you can share with people.

At Head Office we have a dedicated email account that people can use to suggest topics for Twitter, for example, and we try to make specific people and teams aware of what is being said on social media about relevant topics. Lots of people across the office also get involved in responding to queries regarding their area of expertise.

However, in terms of who actually has access to accounts, it's a good idea to keep this to a handful of people at most. This is to ensure that the style and tone of social media content has some consistency (therefore helping you build and maintain a 'voice') and so that you know who is responsible for each piece of communication which goes out. It also reduces the chance of duplication and confusion. You might want to create a rota for who is looking after social media on particular days.

Tone and style

One of the things that sets social media apart from some other communications activities is that it's an opportunity — and a requirement — to be human.

Try to adopt an informal, conversational style. It's a chance to engage with people on a personal level, as if you were talking to them at a conference. Write in the first person, but use 'we' rather than I, unless it's very clear that an organisation account is identified with just one person (not recommended).

Be respectful. This may be an informal space, but offensive language, personal insults and other disrespectful behaviour are just as unacceptable here as in your work environment. Remember that you're representing your organisation, and that social media channels are just as 'corporate' as any other.

What and when to post

- Remember that social media is about being part of a community – don't just shout about your own agenda, share interesting and relevant things of others that you think your followers might be interested in.
- Another important part of being a community member is crediting people. If you've found out about something from another social media account, say so. If you're using [creative commons](#) licensed images, add a credit.
- Use social media as a way of finding out about the interests and concerns of your audience. Don't just send out information, take a look at what other people are saying and, if appropriate, get involved.
- Carve out your niche. Produce content about what you — or your organisation — know. Add value by contributing expert views and opinions. But take the opportunity to be human and go off-topic occasionally as well.
- Try to avoid automated posting, particularly the obvious kind where the same content is posted across all your social networks. For example, though it saves time, it can look obvious if all your tweets are being posted to your Facebook page using a service like Hootsuite.
- Keep things brief. Even on channels where you have no constraints on how much you write, less is often more, particularly on Twitter and Facebook.
- Think about the best time to post content. Use tools such as [Tweriod](#) to figure out when your audience is online.

Engaging with comments and questions

One of the aspects of social media that people are most concerned about is opening up to engagement with your audience — both positive and negative. But this is the whole point of social media, so you should be prepared to interact with people.

Mentions

At Head Office we 'favourite' or like posts that mention us neutrally or positively as a way of acknowledging that we've seen the post. We simply don't have time to respond to every post. However, in the early days of an account, when you probably don't have a lot of interaction to deal with, it's a good idea to acknowledge and reciprocate new follows and likes. As your account becomes busier, this kind of personal service is difficult, and people understand that.

Occasionally, time permitting, we will engage in short interactions with people based on such comments. These are good opportunities to demonstrate a 'human' side, and it can be a good idea to embrace them if possible.

You might want to share/retweet positive posts. This is fine, and a nice way of demonstrating the importance of work, but try to ensure that your updates aren't dominated by this kind of content.

Sometimes people might mention you in a negative way, or in a way that is clearly intended to draw you into a difficult debate, but which is not a direct question. At this stage, deciding whether to reply is dependent on whether the account appears to exist purely or largely to cause trouble, and whether there is misinformation that requires correction.

Remember, some comments are not worthy of a response, and we don't recommend responding to comments which are abusive. Sometimes you may start to engage with someone and it will become clear that you're not going to be able to have a constructive conversation, in which case it's fine to stop the interaction, or suggest that it is moved to another medium.

See [Annex 1](#) for a social media assessment flowchart to help you make decisions about how and when to engage with mentions on social media.

Questions

You should try to respond to genuine direct questions, even — or perhaps particularly — difficult ones.

The first thing to do is decide whether they are looking for facts or opinions, as this will help you decide where to get the answer. Factual questions to which you know the answer should be straightforward to deal with. But you should ask the best placed people for help with answering a question — just because you run the social media account doesn't mean you are responsible for all the answers. It's often essential to go to the appropriate person for an answer/link which you can then translate into a response (which can be particularly challenging for Twitter's 280 characters).

If you receive responses that are difficult to deal with within character limits, or look like there may be better discussed in private, you can suggest they email — it's not a good idea to have an argument in public (unless you want to do so to demonstrate your position on something).

MRC staff must remember that freedom of information (FOI) requests can be made using social media, and these requests must be dealt with in the same way as requests received through other modes of communication.

Hashtags

Hashtags are used largely on Twitter and Instagram as a way of collecting together posts on a particular topic eg #dementia or #animalresearch. It's a good idea to use a hashtag if appropriate because they can make searching easier (though anyone searching for the word 'dementia' in search bar would obviously find those tweets too). Try not to use more than a couple of hashtags in one tweet — they change the colour of the words, so using too many can quickly render a tweet unreadable.

Where hashtags really come into their own is for events, whether they are real-world conferences or scheduled Twitter Q&As. When lots of people from a conference are tweeting using the same hashtag, their collective tweets can become a useful resource for people who couldn't attend the event, or as ways of identifying themes within a conference itself (they also help with arranging to go to the pub afterwards...). Some hashtags will have a short life eg #maxp14 was specifically for the 2014 Max Perutz Science Writing Prize. Others, such as #phdchat, have longevity (it is used to tag any tweet to do with being a PhD student).

When choosing a hashtag:

- Make it unique (or as close to unique as possible). The whole point of hashtags is that they help to cut through the noise. If your research symposium hashtag is also used to discuss dog grooming and DIY, it's not going to do much good.
- Make it short. People don't want to use valuable characters on using your hashtag – make it easy for them (and yourself).
- Make it relevant (and therefore more memorable). #d3pf9 may be unique, but it's not going to be easy to remember as the hashtag for a conference on open data, or help people know what you're talking about.
- Think about future-proofing a hashtag. Twitter isn't going anywhere, so – with the Max Perutz Writing Award - we searched for #maxp15 and #maxp16 and so on, just to check we weren't likely to run into problems in the future.
- Before you invent a hashtag think: 'Do I really need one? Will it get used?' If not consider using a topic hashtag. For example "Heard about lots of great #dementia research today at our event."

Tweet in good time to let people know what your hashtag is, and use it in any promotional material your produce. If you don't make up a hashtag, someone else might, so it's best to make it fit in with your theme.

Evaluation

You can only evaluate your success on social media if you know what your objectives were in the first place. It's difficult to define 'industry standards' because each organisation and each social media channel is different and operating in a different environment.

For example, if you've stated that your aim for your Twitter account is to engage with and stimulate discussion among a specific research community, you'll want to be looking at parameters like the kinds of followers you have (ie whether they are in that community), the engagement rates for your tweets, and your rates for responding rather than broadcasting. Your number of Twitter followers is less important, because the people you're trying to reach are relatively small in number and finite.

If, on the other hand, you've stated that you want to reach a broad public audience with the aim of boosting attendees at your annual science festival, the overall number of followers is more important, as is looking at the number of festival attendees and asking them where they heard about the event.

At a smaller scale, you can use analytics to look at which of your tweets, Facebook posts etc has done the 'best' in terms of what you think is most important (ie the reach of a particular post or engagement in terms of clicks, favourites and likes). This will help you understand what your audience is interested in and how it likes information to be presented.

Most social media channels offer a basic level of analytics for free. Twitter's analytics can be found at analytics.twitter.com. If you're logged in to Twitter, it will take you straight to an analytics dashboard. Facebook and YouTube analytics can be found in the dashboard.

Have a dig around in the information to find what you are looking for. For example, Twitter analytics provides information on impressions (ie the how many accounts have seen a particular tweet), engagements (numbers of clicks, retweets etc) and engagement rate (how many engagement events taking into account the number of impressions). It also shows you top words used in people's bios — a proxy for whether they are in the community you're trying to reach.

There are lots of tools, free and paid for, that can help with evaluation. If you're not getting enough detail from in-site analytics, you can use tools such as [Tweetreach](#) to see how far your tweets are travelling and which accounts are sharing tweets the most, and [Tweriod](#) to find out when the best

times to post are on different channels for your audiences. More sophisticated paid-for social media clients such as Hootsuite have these features incorporated, and also allow for the scheduling of tweets in advance.

In terms of setting specific targets such as increases in followers, engagement rate etc, it's a good idea to do some research into similar accounts trying to do similar things, so you can benchmark yourself against them.

And remember that stats delivered by analytics packages are relative – you might double your Facebook likes but if it's from two to four, it's not time to open the champagne, particularly if similar organisations with similar aims are counting likes into the thousands.

It's also a good idea to get up and running and get an idea of the resource/time required to run an account before setting yourself unreasonable targets.

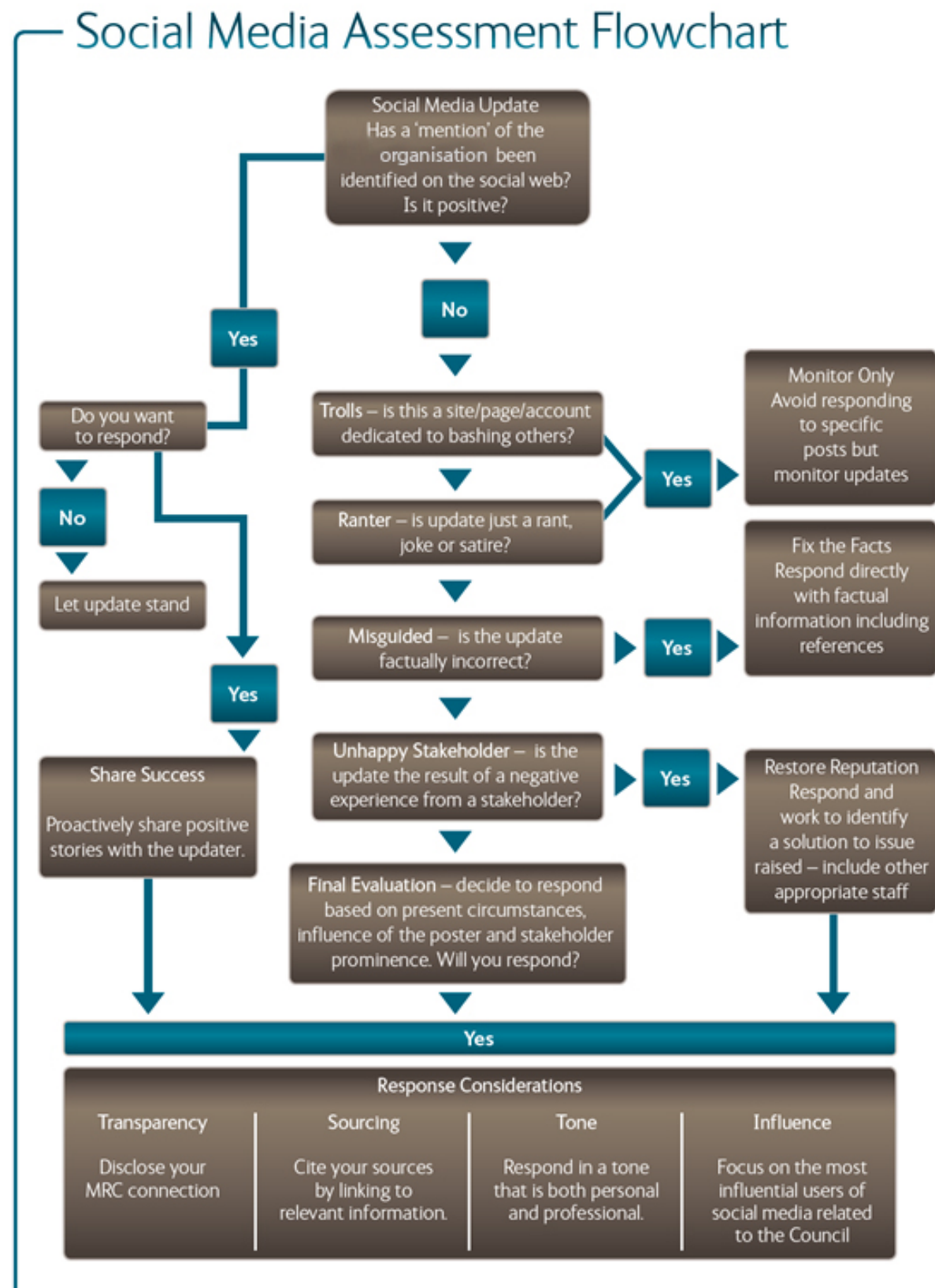
Using information from social media sites

Three key problems exist with the use of social media sites as a source of information:

1. **Terms and conditions:** All sites are covered by terms and conditions for the use of the information they host. In many cases this will allow the free use of information; however, in other cases there may be restrictions covering issues of copyright, attribution, etc. Before using any information garnered from these sites you must read the terms and conditions and also ensure any disclaimers attached to the post/article by the author are also followed.
2. **Use of contact details:** It is not permitted to use contact details from a social media site for use in campaign or mass mailing without getting the approval of the person concerned.
3. **Non-repudiation:** It is not always possible to be sure that the person posting is who they claim to be. In general it is difficult to guarantee this unless the social media site is hosted by the organisation that the person works for/is affiliated with. Effort must be taken to authenticate the author of material, and the material itself, if it is to be used for any other purpose. If you are in any doubt, don't reuse the content.

Annexes

1. Social media assessment flowchart



2. Before you hit tweet...

- Is that really the most engaging way you can express that idea?
- Could it be shorter/simpler and say the same thing?
- Is there a picture/video/audio? If so, can we use it and how should we credit it? Who should we tag in the picture?
- Are there any relevant hashtags, even if not directly related?
- Which handles could you include to increase reach?
- Is this the best time to tweet this particular thing? If not, schedule.
- Is there anyone you should direct it towards? (“@XYZ).

3. Twitter mentions and direct messages: who can see what?

Tweet content	Who can see it?	Publicly visible? (in search and/or timeline)	Additional notes
Tweet from someone else that starts with @YourName	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your timeline, if you follow the poster You, in your mentions stream, even if you don't follow them Anyone who follows both poster and you, in their timeline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visible in search Visible on original poster's timeline 	If the person who sent the tweet has a protected/private account their tweets will only be visible to their followers. If you are not following them you won't see their tweets even if they mention @YourName
Tweet from someone else that includes @YourName (but tweet doesn't start with @YourName)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your timeline, if you follow the poster You, in your mentions stream, even if you don't follow them All of the poster's followers, in their timelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visible in search Visible on original poster's timeline 	If the person who sent the tweet has a protected/private account their tweets will only be visible to their followers. If you are not following them you won't see their tweets even if they mention @YourName.
Tweet from you that starts with @AnotherName	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your timeline, whether or not you follow that person The person you direct the tweet to (ie @AnotherName) in their mentions stream Anyone who follows both @YourName and @AnotherName, in their timelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visible in search Visible on your timeline 	If you've got a protected/private account only people who follow you can see your tweets. If @AnotherName doesn't follow you they won't see the tweet.
Tweet from you that includes @AnotherName	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your timeline, whether or not you follow that person The person mentioned in the tweet Any of your followers, in their timeline, including those who don't follow @AnotherName 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visible in search Visible on your timeline 	
Direct message (DM) from someone to you (ie d @YourName)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your DM stream The sender, in their sent DMs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not visible in search Not visible in their timeline or yours 	Someone can only send you a DM if you follow them. Be aware that DMs are vulnerable and should be treated as an insecure channel.
Direct messages (DMs) from you to someone else (ie d @AnotherName)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You, in your sent DMs stream The person you sent the DM to, in their DM stream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not visible in search Not visible in their timeline or yours 	You can only send someone a DM if they follow you. Be aware that DMs are vulnerable and should be treated as an insecure channel.