Context: why social media matters

The FCO encourages all staff to make full use of the opportunities offered by social media to help deliver FCO objectives.

Social media:

- Allows diplomats to monitor events, harvest information and identify key influencers
- Provides real time channels to deliver our messages directly and influence beyond traditional audiences
- Can assist in the consultation process and the formulation of policy by helping us crowd source ideas
- Improves the delivery of our services through closer engagement with our customers and allow us to better manage a crisis
- Makes us more accountable and transparent through open dialogue.

The importance of embedding digital tools in policy-making and service delivery is set out in more detail in the FCO Digital Strategy.

Social media activity in the FCO

We do not expect our staff to all use social media in the same way, but we do expect social media to be a core part of the toolkit of a modern diplomat.

FCO staff should feel empowered to use social media in three main ways:

1/ All staff should use social media for listening: following discussions, keeping track of news and building networks as part of their day to day work.

- This means setting up an account with a monitoring tool (some of which do not require a social media account). You should also consider using digital tools that aggregate real time news trends from social and mainstream media. If you need further guidance on this, please speak to your Digital Hub or the Digital Transformation Unit in London.
- You do not need your own personal social media accounts to use monitoring tools.

2 / Policy and desk officers may use, or set up, personal social media accounts for low-key work related activity such as the building of networks, following influencers in your policy area and engaging with those groups in non-controversial areas.

- If you are taking up this flexibility, you may wish your profile to say you work for the FCO or Civil Service. However your profile should state your views are personal and do not necessarily represent the views of your organisation.
- You do not need permission to use social media accounts for work related activity but you should inform your Head of Department or Post that you are doing so. Staff will need to take FCO security considerations into account.

- Examples of this engagement could include the highlighting of public information, lines or reports or relevant FCO or external events. It might also include asking non-controversial questions.
- Personal accounts should not be used for making policy announcements, engaging in controversy, or breaking news – that is the job of official accounts.

If you are concerned that a post may be controversial, please speak to your line manager or the Media Office or Digital Transformation Unit.

3 / Staff for whom active engagement and communication will be essential in the delivery of objectives should use an official FCO-branded channel. This could be personal (eg HMA) or on a policy theme (eg FCOHumanRights)

- This can be in addition to points 1 and 2 above and will require sign-off from management and the digital team – channels should have a clear purpose and ongoing commitment to effective staffing.
- Official accounts will be registered, monitored and reviewed to ensure effectiveness.
- All official accounts should be clearly and consistently branded and listed on the FCO website.

For more information, see our guidance on Facebook and Twitter in the digital tools guidance. These guides provide information on setting up official channels, branding and best practice.

Safety

Information posted on social networks may result in risks to personal safety so think carefully about what you want to share in both personal and official use of social media. Whether on an official channel or a personal one be cautious about posting detailed personal information. You should never mention your security clearance online. For more on staying safe online, see this guidance (only available through FCO intranet) and the Civil Service Code.

What are the rules?

We should not say anything on social media that we would not say on any other public channel; this means contradicting HMG policy or being politically partial, bringing the office into disrepute, divulging classified information, taking part in illegal or inappropriate behaviour, or breaching the Civil Service Code or the terms of your employment in any other way.

Failure to follow these rules and inappropriate use of official social media accounts may be considered as potential misconduct and referred to Human Resources Directorate.

All staff should also be familiar with:

Principles for participation online (Civil Service Code)

Social media guidelines for civil servants

FCO Principles of Conduct (only available on FCO intranet)

Official accounts

Official accounts allow us to target key audiences, deliver our messages and information directly, engage and be open to challenge, opening up access to our officials and Ministers.

If you wish to apply for an official social media account please refer to the online guidance and complete this application form.

Official social media channels should provide relevant, useful information on UK Government activity; promote the FCO, HMG and relevant partner content in line with FCO objectives.

More specifically official accounts should have a clear purpose and audience and be evaluated against those criteria.

Below is a framework on when to seek clearance before publishing content on official channels:

Go ahead	Established policy and press lines within your area of expertise.
Seek guidance from head of team and/or Media Office & Digital Transformation Unit.	Breaking news where there is no press line. The interpretation of a change of policy where the line is being agreed. Ministerial movements. Rebuttal.
Don't do it	Subjects not in your area of expertise or direct responsibility. Any classified data.

Update social media channels regularly or it is not worth doing at all – tailor frequency, length and type of updates to audience needs and expectations.

You are encouraged to share interesting third party content e.g. media articles, NGO blogs, foreign government information but only if you are sure that it is appropriate and it is politically impartial.

Take into account cultural sensitivities and avoid posting anything that could be considered offensive by anyone who may see the page (including audiences from other countries)

Debate is good, a protracted online argument is not. Take discussion best dealt with in private offline.

Do not post or share anything which breaches Copyright or that could be construed as advertising or promoting a commercial company.

Do not disclose information that is classified or privileged, or that may put you or your colleagues at risk, whether from crime, terrorism, or espionage.

As with any form of communication, if in doubt, seek advice from a colleague or do not post at all.

Personal use of social media

We have no bar on staff using social media channels, but there are some rules.

Where your social media accounts are personal, you do not need to say you work for the FCO or Civil Service.

It is important to remember that when posting in a personal capacity you may still easily be identified by others as working for the FCO even if you don't state it.

Stating that your views are personal is no insurance against negative media or other publicity.

On personal social networks – even closed ones like Facebook – you should be aware that posts can be shared outside your network.

You should avoid taking part in any political or public activity which compromises, or might be seen to compromise, your impartial service to the government. The precise restrictions are specific to different staff (e.g. politically restricted grades) and you should know them already as they apply to you offline too.

See the safety information above.

Dealing with mistakes

In making full use of social media, mistakes will occasionally happen.

How the FCO deals with a particular mistake will depend on the nature of the error. Your online conduct is subject to the same disciplinary rules as your offline conduct.

There are a few steps you should take if you make a mistake:

Delete the post and apologise for the mistake, explaining that the material was posted by mistake and is not an official view.

Post the correct information if the mistake was factual, making clear what you've corrected.

Inform your line manager and the [Digital Transformation Unit](#) for advice on further handling.

If you work for FCO Services, please consult the FCO Services Social Media Policy which can be found on 'One Way' (accessible only to FCO Services staff).