Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Social media guide for parliaments and parliamentarians

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Foreword

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) published its first set of guidelines on social media use in 2013; but the online world has changed considerably since that time. Social media is now embedded in many of our lives, directly or indirectly influencing our news, views, knowledge and friendships.

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in 2020 has again brought into sharp focus the vital role that social media plays in keeping people connected and allowing them to share information and opinions. With restrictions on meeting face-to-face, parliaments and parliamentarians have intensified their social media presence as a way of maintaining contact with the people they serve.

The World e-Parliament Report highlights the importance of digital tools and tracks growth in the use of social media. The 2018 report found that 70 per cent of parliaments use social media platforms to communicate with citizens, and that a further 17 per cent are considering doing so. In addition, 96 per cent of parliamentarians use a digital device, 67 per cent use Facebook, 40 per cent use Twitter, and 54 per cent communicate using WhatsApp and similar messaging platforms.

Parliaments and parliamentarians are using social media for many reasons: to increase public awareness, to enhance their public image, to help form and shape public opinion, and to campaign for re-election or to promote inquires and calls for evidence. In short, social media platforms are places where parliaments can inform, educate and engage.

We are mindful that social media also has a dark side. Disinformation and deliberate attempts to disrupt democratic processes are well reported. It is vital that parliaments and their members understand the risks and challenges – and that they have the skills to manage their social spaces safely and effectively. This guide will help them to plan, execute and measure social campaigns and to maximize the potential for wider and deeper engagement.

In a departure from the previous version, this guide is structured as a "playbook": a more informal and adaptable format that includes a series of short case studies. As well as supporting parliaments in using social media more effectively, it is also geared towards parliamentarians.

In publishing this new guide, the IPU is furthering its commitment to supporting strong, democratic institutions, and recognizing the growing importance of both social media and public participation in the work of parliaments and parliamentarians. I hope you find it useful and informative.

Martin Chungong
Secretary General

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I. Introduction

Social media use is commonplace among both parliaments and parliamentarians, allowing them to connect and communicate more than ever with citizens. Yet using social media is not always as easy as it sounds. The sheer variety of platforms available, coupled with the risks they present, demands good planning and thought-through execution.

This guide has been written for both parliaments and parliamentarians, while recognizing that there are some differences in the way these two groups will use social media. In broad terms, it is designed to help institutions and individuals think about their relationship with social media and to plan and manage its use in a safe and measured way.

There are many things you can do make social media work better – for you and for the public. These include understanding what you want to do and why, planning the project or campaign, and evaluating your social media activity. You also need to be aware that social media can be a problematic place in which to work: it has many detractors, and the impersonal nature of digital spaces makes them natural targets for abusive behaviour. Being mindful of this possibility, preparing for it and understanding how to manage it will all help you maximize the returns and ensure a positive experience for all concerned – not just for yourself.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for safe social distancing and remote working. Virtual and hybrid parliaments, where most staff and parliamentarians operate and connect from home, have become familiar for many. At times like these, social media platforms have become key tools for informing the public, and channels for parliaments and members to stay connected with citizens.

A guide for parliaments and parliamentarians

This guide is intended for parliaments (and parliamentary staff) and parliamentarians. We understand that the needs of these two groups are different. While much of the information and good practice covered here is useful for both audiences, the way institutions use social media will, of course, be different to the way that elected members use it.

Below are just some ways in which parliaments and parliamentarians might use social media differently:

- Increasing public exposure: for parliaments, the strategic aim might be to strengthen democracy by engaging more people and making the work of the institution better known. Members, meanwhile, might be more focused on the short-term need to publicize their work in order to be seen as effective.
- Enhancing public image: parliaments might use social media to build trust in, and awareness of, the institution and democracy more broadly. Politicians, however, not only communicate and express their opinion, but also use social media to portray themselves in a particular light (e.g. accessible, friendly, youth-focused or tech-savvy).
- Shaping public opinion: it is not the role of parliament to try to affect public opinion, although this is exactly what parliamentarians often wish to do. Social media helps stories travel quickly, is cheaper and more accessible than traditional media, and allows members to target the message in a more controlled way.
- Campaigning: parliaments often run institutional (non-political) campaigns to promote parliamentary inquiries, highlight events or share historical information. Parliamentarians, meanwhile, use social media heavily for promoting election campaigns (and must abide by election law during, and in some cases before, the campaign period).

About this guide

Following this Introduction, the Guide has two parts, the first of which is a "playbook": a set of informal ideas that follow the logical sequence of a social media campaign. The playbook is designed to help you develop your social media skills and to encourage you to think about how things can be done. Users of the guide are encouraged to localize the approaches suggested – and to ignore the ones that don't work for them.

> *Think of this guide as a "health check" that will help parliaments and parliamentarians better understand their use of social media and identify ways to learn, innovate and improve.*

The subsequent part contains a series of case studies showing how parliaments have used social media to extend their connection with the public.

This guide is not a rulebook, and it is not intended to be a tight set of policies. Instead, it is a tool to help you get a better return on your investment in social media. While it does describe strategic approaches and policies that are useful, it is not prescriptive in nature.

Audience for this guide

The first IPU Social Media Guidelines were written for parliaments. This guide is intended for two audiences. The first is parliamentary staff, i.e. those within parliament who are responsible for social media strategy, planning and use, or who are considering using social media in the future. The second is parliamentarians. This guide considers social media broadly and looks specifically at the issues members and their staff face in using them.

This guide is a starting point. Its aim is to act as a catalyst for parliaments and members to develop their own thinking around social media use, adapting and refining the practices that work best for them.

Considerations and context

Social media is used to support the wider work of parliament, whether this is to promote opportunities for engagement, to share what parliament is doing or to educate the public about the work of parliament and its members. For parliamentarians, social media provides a way to connect with the public in what should ideally be a two-way process.

Parliaments generally use social media for four purposes: publishing, educating, connecting and participating. Some also use it as a recruitment tool. Typical content and activities might include:

- Publishing
  - information about members
  - calendar of parliamentary business
  - plenary and committee agendas
  - legislative proposals and draft legislation
  - links to debate transcripts and other archives (text, audio and/or video)
  - access to parliamentary publications (including reports and research)
  - urgent information and extraordinary events, such as emergency debates or notice of cancelled/postponed sessions or meetings
  - technical issues with live broadcasts
- Educating
  - history and role of parliament
  - information about how parliament works, plus learning resources and tutorials
  - parliamentary statistics
  - details of how to visit parliament (in person or virtually)
  - educational blogs on parliamentary issues
  - events
  - engagement
- Connecting
  - keeping people informed about what's happening at parliament
  - building and sustaining networks of experts or academics
  - learning about how others want to engage
  - publishing submissions
- Participating
  - calls for submissions to committees or inquiries
  - tools for online engagement and participation
  - open data updates and links.

Social media landscape

Social networks are not neutral. They reflect the wider opinions, moods and sensibilities of their members. They also reflect power and counter-power within society as a whole and are more likely to be disruptive and uncoordinated than traditional media. They can magnify strong views and obstruct the views of others, they change quickly and disseminate virally.

When you publish or engage via a traditional website, you are in charge: you define the terms of engagement and can control who takes part and how. Email is generally a one-to-one (or one-to-a-few) method of communicating with a known audience. With social media, you are not in charge. Social media is a one-to-many – often many-to-many – form of communication with formal and informal rules, norms or mores that control how the network operates and how members behave.

Social networks are less formal, less controlled, less rigid and more open. They are less respectful of position and tradition and conversations evolve much more quickly than in the traditional media. This can be challenging for formal institutions like parliaments and presents risks for public figures such as parliamentarians.

> *Parliamentarians understand the nature of social media only too well when a political crisis unfolds or a controversial event occurs. Their inboxes, social channels and offices will be inundated with communication from people who are concerned – or worse. While this shows how valuable social media is for sensing the depth of public feeling and sentiment, things can quickly get out of hand and become unmanageable.*

Strategic alignment

Social media is a subset of a wider communications strategy and can also form a core part of a parliament's engagement strategy. For this reason, the use of social media – and the selection of channels and tools – is best considered in this wider context. Doing so also ensures that there are clear hierarchies for support and, if needed, escalation.

Although many platforms are inexpensive or cost-free to use, social media itself is not a free communication channel. Depending on which options they take, parliaments and parliamentarians will need adequate long-term financing, qualified staff – internal, external or both – and appropriate technical infrastructure, including systems and arrangements for the security and protection of data and digital assets.

While often defined through their capabilities to publish, share and connect, it's important to recognize that social media platforms are also valuable for listening and monitoring wider conversations, trends and sentiment. Using them in this way should be considered as part of a strategic plan.

Roles and responsibilities

Both parliaments and parliamentarians should have clear processes and rules governing social media use, outlining who is responsible for what aspect of communications, who is allowed to post, what can be posted and how to respond to comments. More specifically, institutions and members should:

- have adequate staffing and resources for day-to-day social network use and administration;
- have systems in place for quickly and efficiently verifying information and responding when events unfold;
- establish rules for moderating debates, liking or sharing third-party content, following other users and declining friendship requests;
- provide an unambiguous statement concerning the official status of the social media account;
- develop guidelines for social media use, ensure the guidelines are followed, and develop a crisis communication plan where necessary.

Legal requirements

While legal requirements and limitations on the use of social media will vary, there will typically be rules governing language and hate speak. There may also be a ban on posting during election periods, as well as a requirement to disclose who is authorizing content at this time. It's important for parliamentary staff and parliamentarians to be aware of the current legal requirements and to ensure that these are adhered to.

In addition to legal requirements, there might also be guidelines that apply to the public sector or to members of a particular political party.

Voice and visual identity

Many institutions have a formal voice that they adopt. Likewise, parliamentarians will have developed a voice or personality that they wish to convey. Social media needs to look familiar and appropriate but it can also challenge the conventional voice of institutions, which may need to experiment until they find something that maintains the right tone but is also engaging for the typically less formal audience.

Figure 1:
A more formal social media tone adopted by the Swedish Riksdag (translated from Swedish)

Sveriges riksdag ✔ @Sverigesriksdag · 20h

On Thursday, June 18, at 1 p.m. is the open meeting of the EU Committee. The Prime Minister will inform and consult ahead of a meeting with EU Heads of State and Government on Friday. Follow the meeting directly on

riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/vid...

Visual identity needs to be replicated or at least recreated so that it is consistent.

The voice you use on social media can change to suit the intended audience, so long as there is an overall consistency to the message.

Training

Social media may be near-ubiquitous in many places today, but that does not negate the need for training. Staff should be equipped not only to produce content effectively, but also to manage and moderate the social media platforms that parliaments and parliamentarians are using.

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II. Playbook

This section of the guide is designed as a "playbook". It presents a range of ideas and approaches that you can consider, adapt and use when thinking about social media.

Social media is about people – about engaging, listening and interacting. This guide is built on the principle that the most important consideration is what your "user" needs, and on the assumption that there is no one right answer, no one way to do social media well – its use is always contextual. Therefore, the guide will not tell you what you should do, but rather suggest things that you could do or might want to try. The playbook will guide you through thinking about what will work best under what conditions.
The playbook will help you to:

- set clear objectives for your use of social media;
- understand how social media integrates and aligns with other activities in parliament and beyond;
- learn how to develop a business case for using social media;
- understand how to select the right tools and develop a clear campaign;
- manage the environment around you, including working with others, engaging with wider communities (online and offline) and handling detractors;
- evaluate and learn from your experiences.

The last section of the guide contains examples of social media campaigns and strategies, demonstrating how some of the ideas in this playbook can be implemented.

Situating social media

Social networks are an important tool for parliaments and their members to communicate, engage and connect with the public – including sections of the population that have previously been hard to reach. They allow parliaments to share information, provide educational resources and advance scrutiny of parliamentary process, and to engage more easily and more often with the public.

Social media equally presents a number of problems and challenges, as noted by the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Development (ECPRD):

> *"Social networks enable direct contact with various audiences and a rapid dissemination of information using the different channels. Promoting dialogue, providing and exchanging information and consolidating relations (all closely related to the pace of events) requires special consideration in setting the rules and principles of proper communication."*

The World e-Parliament Report 2018 shows that social media use is continuing to grow, with a significant rise in the use of instant messaging in the last few years, and with digital broadcasting and video streaming overtaking traditional broadcasting for parliaments. According to the report, parliaments see knowledge of how parliament works as the biggest barrier to greater citizen engagement and view social media as a key way to overcome this.

The survey of parliamentarians shows that members are increasingly using digital technologies as core tools in their work: 96 per cent of members surveyed use a mobile device and 80 per cent expect their digital communication with the public to increase. Three quarters of respondents say that email is the most important digital tool, followed by Facebook (67%) and WhatsApp (54%). While 71 per cent of members write their own social media content, training is a key issue for them and their staff.

Figure 2:
Top digital combinations used by parliamentarians
(World e-Parliament Report 2018)

25%	Email + Facebook + WhatsApp
20%	Email + Facebook + Twitter
14%	Facebook + Twitter + Website
13%	Email + Website + Facebook
8%	Email + Facebook + Instagram
5%	Facebook + WhatsApp + YouTube
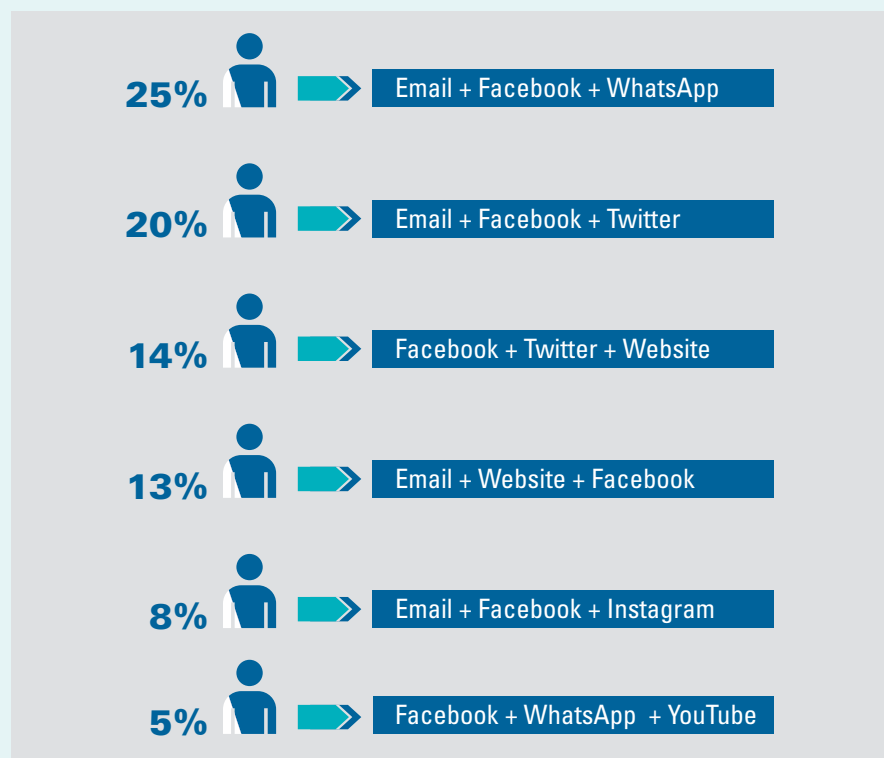
When communicating via their own websites, parliaments and parliamentarians are in control. On social media, however, they are just another publisher and must adhere to the protocols and cultural norms of the platform – whether they are using it for active engagement or as a gateway to deeper, more engaging content elsewhere.

Social media is at its most useful and effective when it is viewed as an active instrument – as somewhere to connect and engage, respond to comments and answer questions in real time. Good social media practice means listening, responding, asking and sharing. In other words, it's about being an active participant in the network.

Parliaments are using social media to share what's happening: the United Kingdom House of Commons uses Twitter to share the work of committees.

Parliaments are using social media to educate the public on the way they work: the Parliament of Slovenia uses Instagram to share images of the parliament and what's going on.

Parliaments are using social media to engage: the Finnish Parliament uses Facebook Live to enable members of the public put questions directly to the Speaker.

Figure 3:
Bridging the real and online worlds with an image of parliamentary votes in the Italian Chamber of Deputies

Before you start

Social media is fashionable and we often hear that it's a "must" for institutions and individuals in the public domain – including parliaments and parliamentarians. Before you start, it's useful to think about why you're going to use social media and what you want to get from it. In other words, consider how you're going to build a case for social media.

Social media is useful and valuable, but it's a complex and dynamic space that requires careful consideration. Simply jumping in without any planning is a bad idea and, more often than not, will result in a poor return on your investment in terms of time, money and – potentially – reputation.

Treat social media as a strategic communication channel. Build a case for social media before embarking on individual campaigns or entering randomly into the space.

It's important to understand the landscape you're entering, who's out there and what they expect (or hope) to get from you.

Consider the following questions:

- What tools and platforms are used by the people you want to connect with?
- How will using them help you?
- Do you have the knowledge and resources to use them?
- How much will it cost?
- How long will it take?

Ultimately, you want to know what you hope to achieve by using social media, and set realistic expectations about what you need to do in return for an outcome.

Bear in mind, however, that social media is a dynamic and democratic space, so you cannot expect to micro-manage or control the environment if you want to be successful in it.

Likewise, in such a dynamic space, things change. Many variables dictate why various demographics use (or don't use) specific social platforms. Part of your social media function is following these shifts in taste, fashion and usage. Nothing remains static – and that should include your research and planning.

This playbook assumes that you're using social media to listen, inform and engage. If you've thought sufficiently about the "big picture" of social media, this statement should be both obvious and unsurprising.

Building your team

How much resource you need to run an effective social media presence is something of an open-ended question. In many, cases the answer will be "what we can afford" or "who we have available". Even if you have no resource constraints, having a clear strategy and well-organized plans in place will allow you to get the most out of your team.

When it comes to building a team, there's no hard-and-fast rule. Some of the roles in the table below could be merged into a single job, while others might be part-time or shared.

Table 1: Typical social media roles

Social media manager	Takes care of the higher-level things, such as strategy, managing the editorial calendar and ensuring that your team is on the right platforms and using the right tools. They are probably going to have a key role building and managing relationships with other areas of parliament, such as your web team, documentation specialists, committee clerks and outreach.
Content writer	Connecting your strategy and vision to the audience means writing good content.
Content designer	Understanding complex messages is easier with pictures. You will likely want to have access to someone who can produce clear, high-quality graphics, even animations and videos, and weave these into your content.

Copy-editor	Always have someone double-check content before it goes out. You're not just looking for typos but for factual errors and anything that might be misconstrued, is unclear or could be insensitive.
Community manager	Helps maintain relationships, understands the audience and works to engage directly with them. They're also the person who'll be responding to questions and suggestions. This role is at the sharp end of your social media presence and needs to be responsive.
Social promoters	They don't work for you but you've built a relationship with these key influencers across your network. Keep in touch and work with them to provide meaningful content that resonates with their networks. They're your conduit to a bigger, more receptive audience.

Using social media

While often defined through their capabilities to publish, share and connect, it's important to recognize that social media platforms are also valuable for listening and monitoring wider conversations, trends and sentiment. The power of social media lies in conversations and networks. They work most effectively when you treat them as space to connect and engage, responding to comments and answering questions in real time.

Figure 4:
Social media modes of use
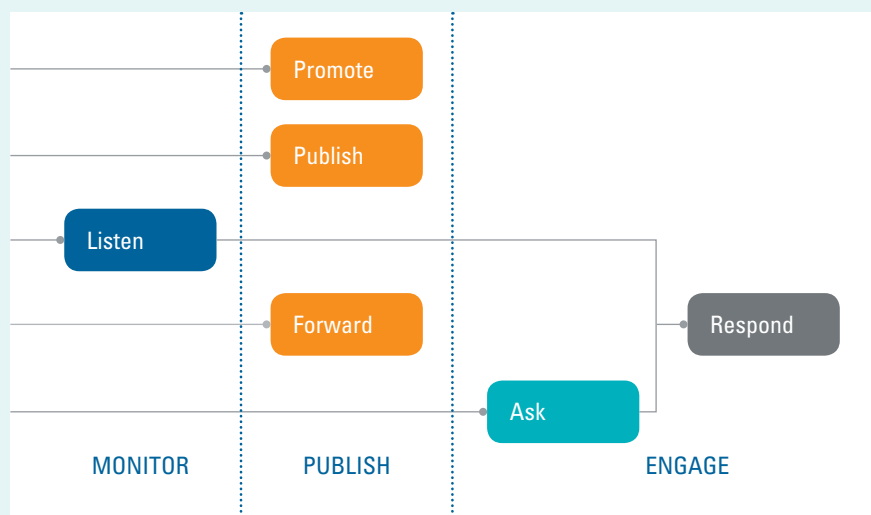
Consider social media engagement as a set of sequential stages which can include other online and offline activities, such as:

- conception and ideas;
- preparing information and educational resources to support the engagement;
- engaging in deliberation with the public and generating recommendations;
- deciding on a course of action (which can include extending the deliberation stage);
- implementation and follow-up;
- evaluation and analysis.

Context

Social media use within parliament and by parliamentarians should be considered in the context of:

- communications and engagement strategies;
- security policy;
- ICT usage policies;
- parliamentary protocol, guidelines for courtesy and conventions (e.g. members speaking in the chamber might enjoy parliamentary privilege, but this would be unlikely to extend to comments on social media simply because they are posted from the chamber).

Legal and policy considerations

There may be specific legal or public-policy directives you must follow when producing content. These need to be understood and documented to ensure compliance. Examples include:

- accessibility (to make sure no one is excluded);
- information management and archiving;
- use of official languages;
- privacy and access to information;
- copyright infringement.

Planning for success

Good social media is not created by accident. Being effective and efficient, and establishing the right strategy, requires planning and research. Doing this early will help you to:

- identify the audience you're trying to reach;
- understand where that audience can be reached;
- understand the channels you've chosen to use.

The United Kingdom Government recommends that social media campaigns should follow the OASIS model, which it calls a "series of steps that can help bring order and clarity to planning campaigns". The model is used for social media but applies equally to all government communications and is not digital-specific. It takes its name from the constituent steps:

1. Establish your **OBJECTIVES**.
2. Understand your **AUDIENCE**.
3. Set out your **STRATEGY** or the approach you will take.
4. Develop your **IMPLEMENTATION** plan to show what you will do, and how.
5. Create meaningful metrics to **SCORE** and evaluate what you've done so you can learn from the campaign.

Establishing clear objectives

Objectives need not be set in stone. They can and likely will change over time. But it is important to define them at the very start. Clear objectives underpin your entire social media strategy. They guide you in what you do and are vitally important in helping you to define clear, meaningful and measurable metrics. In turn, these metrics will help you review and revise your objectives as time passes.

Before you think about social media, think about your overall objectives for what you're doing. Then start thinking about how social media can be used to help and support these. Try to avoid doing this the other way around: social media is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Start by identifying the role you want social media to play across your organization and with the stakeholders with whom you wish to engage. Ensure that your objectives are measurable and that these measurements will be useful.

Your objectives are likely to be broad. For a parliament, they might be:

- to bring the public closer to the work of parliament;
- to inform and educate people about what's happening in parliament;
- to let people know about a specific piece or work and how they can get involved.

For parliamentarians, possible objectives could include:

- to explain to the public what you're doing and what you think about a piece of legislation;
- to solicit opinions and ideas on specific topics;
- to maintain a regular and positive communication channel with your constituents.

For example, the United Kingdom Parliament has developed a six-point Facebook content strategy:

- Quality over quantity will balance our content.
- Using Facebook Live will allow our audiences to engage with us in new ways.
- Launching Groups for Pages will grow our communities.
- Building the links between social media and internal communications will help promote Parliament as a great place to work.
- Sharing our own Instagram content and content from our followers on Facebook will grow engagement on both channels.
- A Facebook Messenger chatbot will help us to improve public engagement with Parliament.

Audience mapping

Who you want to engage with will, in part, determine what, where and how you communicate. You might want to reach a wide audience, but it's still important to consider demographics and whether you can more effectively address certain groups in different ways (the answer is almost always going to be "yes").

Once you understand your audience segments – who these people are, where they go and what they want to hear – you'll be able to create calls to action and messages that engage with the right people. For instance, you'll adopt very different messaging for under-18s and over-65s. That doesn't mean the core message changes – it must be consistent or you'll lack credibility but the way you frame that message will change.

For each of the user groups you want to target, consider:

- who are they (age, gender, ethnicity, education, location, interests, challenges, etc.);
- where they go to engage (which social platforms they use);
- what their touchstone issues are likely to be;
- how you can overcome any resistance (to you, to engaging, to the issue);
- who the (direct and indirect) key influencers are among that demographic, and whether you can work with or through them.

User personas

Once you have a broad idea of the various audience segments, it can be helpful to create "user personas" so that you can model what these people are like and what they want to see. A user persona is a made-up but believable character, based on a particular type of user that you want to reach, that helps you understand what they need and how they function. Here's what a typical user persona might look like:

Sally is 20 years old, studying at university. She's interested in climate change and student politics and many of her friends are turning vegetarian. Sally wants to know how she can get parliament to listen to the concerns she and her friends have about the environment. Sally uses social media but she never reads a newspaper and rarely watches television.

Social media listening

Listening matters. Take time to stop and listen to what's being said across social media. You probably have an idea of what you want to achieve, but listening in to existing conversations on and around a topic will help you to gauge audience mood, attitude and sentiment, and to understand what messages are getting through, where they are coming from, and what people respond and react to.

Listening in to existing social networks will give you a much clearer picture of your audience, and of which influencers and messages are gaining traction. It will also help you to consider how, when and where you can most effectively engage.

If you're operating with little or no budget, you can still listen yourself. Search for key terms, explore what other terms or "hashtags" come up and dive into those. Set up alerts, follow key people and dig down into previous conversations on the topic. Go back in time as well as looking at the live chat. All of this can be done manually using free online tools and, although time-consuming, it's a worthwhile exercise.

If you have some budget or want to professionalize this role within parliament, there are numerous commercial social listening tools. Examples include:

- Brandwatch
- Crimson Hexagon
- Coosto
- Meltwater
- Pulsar
- Socialbakers
- Sysomos

The tool you choose will depend on what you're trying to do and what your budget and resources are. Remember that the more complex tools will be more expensive and that cost is also likely to be based on the scope of the listening you need to do – cost rises as the volume of communication (and number of channels) increases.

Also consider where you want to monitor. As well as the obvious social media platforms, are there any specific websites or blogs that you should consult?

Social listening helps you to plan your social media strategy and ensure that the focus and processes are appropriate, optimal and correct.

Audience insight

Beyond listening to what's being said, there are tools you can use to gain insights into your potential audience, including demographic data, location and interests. These tools will also help you identify influencers and potential opportunities to share content more widely or collaborate with people who can engage with audiences beyond your direct reach.

Most social media platforms will have some form of built-in analytics to help you learn about your audience, while some will give you further insights to help you reach new communities and improve how you communicate with your existing followers:

- Facebook Analytics helps you to track when your content is busiest (times of day and days of the week).
- Twitter Analytics lets you to compare the interests of your followers with those of your organic audience, helping you discover new communities to target.
- LinkedIn's Visitor Analytics can tell you the industries your visitors work in, as well as their seniority and job functions. This can help you to create more effective and targeted updates.
- Instagram Insights, like Facebook Analytics, indicate on which days of the week your followers are most active and at what times.

There are also third-party audience insight tools available, some of which are listed above.

Influencer engagement

Influencers can help you reach a bigger audience and create more engagement online. An influencer is a person, group or brand that others in the demographic you want to target know, listen to and respect. When your budget is limited, a network of influencers can help boost your profile and spread your message far beyond the reach you could expect on your own.

Use tools such as Upfluence and Hashtagify to identify influencers on Twitter.

Whichever platform you choose to use, spend some time reviewing the feeds, networks and forums. This will help when you make an initial approach, since you'll understand exactly how your content is going to fit. You can identify potential influencer partnerships by looking at the quality of their content, how it relates to your own aims and how engaged their followers are (and how engaged they are with their followers).

While some tools will claim to generate lists of influencers for you, the best method is to gather a few names yourself – a short list of well-curated influencers is always going to be more effective than an automatically generated one.

Before making contact with the top influencers, review their posts and objectives and ask yourself what you intend to achieve by engaging this particular influencer. Be clear about what you want them to do and consider what's in it for them. Consider, too, that they might be a valuable source of advice – they know your audience and you can probably learn from them if you're willing to listen. Above all, be clear about why you're engaging and what your brief is. All of this needs a personal, one-to-one approach. Mass emails simply won't work.

It takes time, energy and resources to build good relationships with others.

Choosing your channels

You can't be everywhere all the time, and nor should you want to be. Decide which social platforms you want to be part of and that work best for you, your message and your audience. Find out which channels are active in your country and understand how those channels will help you meet your communication and engagement goals. Each platform has its own pros and cons, personality, users and style of engagement.

Understand the role that social media plays in fulfilling your overall communications and engagement strategy.

Once you decide to commit to a channel, make sure you set up your page or profile properly (with the correct branding and identity). At the very least, post some kind of initial message and information about who you are and how to get hold of you on other channels. Although tone and voice might vary across platforms, look to keep branding and identity consistent – because consistency is vital to building familiarity with your personal or institutional brand.

Editorial calendar

Social media is complex and can be time-consuming. Having an editorial calendar will help you plan, manage and organize your content production, and be consistent and reliable in your social media use.

An editorial calendar doesn't have to be complicated. It can be something as simple as a spreadsheet. Alternatively, you can use one of the various applications that are available, many of which also include additional social media management and analytics features. Some of the most popular tools at the moment are:

- Agorapulse
- Buffer
- ContentCal
- CoSchedule
- DivvyHQ
- Edgar
- Hootsuite
- Kapost
- Loomly
- Monday
- Percolate
- Sprout Social

If you've been monitoring your social content, you'll probably have an idea of the days of the week and times of day when it has the greatest impact (in terms of reads, replies, forwards and shares, or posts that lead to engagement). You'll also know which subjects attract the most interest and how language can affect the response from different audiences.

You can plan social media campaigns and posts around parliamentary activities and events, such as specific legislation going through parliament, a committee inquiry or other topical issue. Above all, remember that social media needs to align with any wider communication strategy and is there to support what's already happening, not to take over from it.

You can also schedule regular social media posts. These are a good way to maintain interest, to build familiarity and rapport, and to keep up the rhythm of posts even when there aren't specific events happening. Regular posts might touch on topical issues, provide historical information or educational content, or give insights into the way parliament works or the life of a parliamentarian.

An editorial calendar will help you with one-off campaigns and regular content. You can plan what to say, when and how, and decide on which platforms to use. A calendar is a valuable way to keep your social media content aligned with what you want people to know about and what's going on.

Social media content

This section contains guidance on creating compelling and effective content. The idea is to get you thinking about the type of content that your audience will respond to and engage with.

Creating a content strategy

Social media shouldn't be a random process. There may be times when you want to react or respond – after careful consideration, of course. Most of your social media content should be planned, thought through and aligned with your key communication objectives.

A content strategy can help you achieve this. Again, your strategy doesn't have to be complicated, and it should always been seen as dynamic and flexible. In your content strategy, you would normally consider:

1. the key messages you are trying to communicate, and how you plan to monitor and measure their effectiveness;
2. your messaging priorities, to ensure that your social content aligns with your core messages and communication priorities;
3. your key contacts and escalation routes, so that social media can be brought into play in a crisis or if problems arise;
4. the relationship between online and offline events, so that they can be synchronized;
5. an editorial calendar, which allows you to plan campaigns and content over time (as discussed earlier).

Social media can be the destination – the place where the conversation happens. It can also be the gateway to deeper and richer content and to a more in-depth or personal engagement experience. Either way, you're using social media to get connected to more people, more effectively, more of the time.

Promoting your channels

Use your various web and social channels to share, promote and cross-pollinate each other. Make sure that your website has clear links to all your social media pages and profiles, and use video-sharing sites and image-based applications to host content that's then shared across your other social media channels.

Figure 5:
Facebook post directing people to a WhatsApp group for a specific campaign
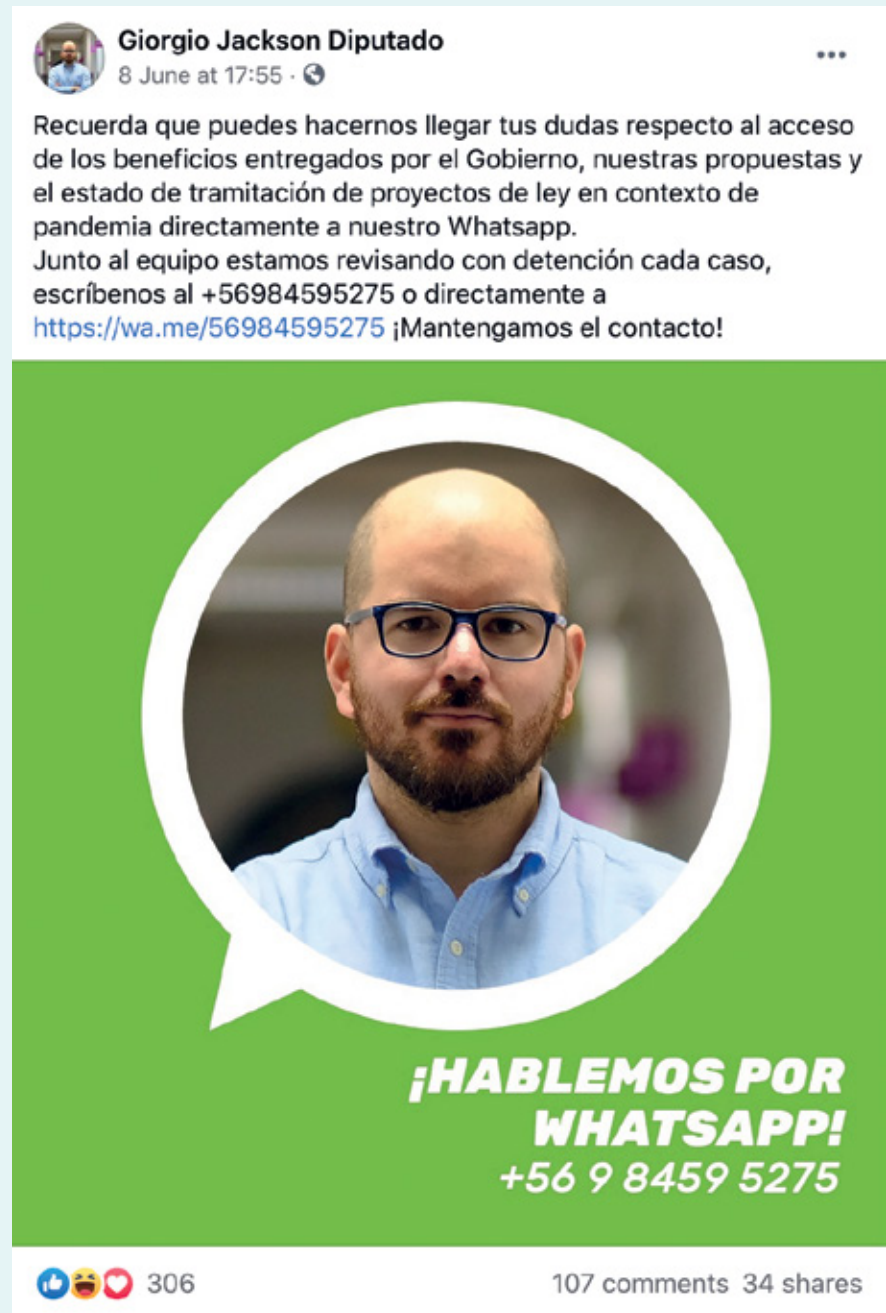
Social media and storytelling

Social media is about listening and engaging. More than anything else, it's about telling a story. A good story connects directly with people: it has resonance. It can help you to build loyalty and trust. Brands use social media to craft stories.

Let's say your content strategy is built around three messaging priorities: "the history of parliament", "daily business" and "getting young people involved". Now consider how, over time, your social content tells a powerful story about these priorities that people will find interesting and be drawn back to. You'll want to build a narrative by sharing things that are happening, publishing interesting background information and highlighting personal stories.

Sometimes, this might be a short, highly topical campaign, such as to coincide with a committee visiting somewhere to hear evidence. Here, you can use social media to raise awareness and encourage involvement, but also to build up the back-story and to tell the stories of those who do get involved (and this will then feed in to future events). At other times, there might be longer, ongoing campaigns, for instance to increase public engagement. Showing that parliament is where the people are and is listening will often meet some negativity and resistance, but persistence can pay off over time.

Consider a simple three-step process for telling your story:

- Explain the opportunity, question or problem your campaign is addressing.
- Make the story personal, write it in the first person and make it compelling.
- Keep it relevant and be clear about what you want to happen (the call to action).

The following tweet, from the Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons, is informal and written in the first person, but it also contains information from the committee itself and explains how to watch. It was retweeted by the official House of Commons account and is a good example of clear voice, consistent messaging and connected social media within the institution:

Figure 6:
Sample tweet from the Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons

Enhancing the message through visual identity

You're a brand – not one that sells products and services, but a brand nonetheless. Good social content should look consistent and professional, inviting and fresh. You want your content to be familiar, to engage people and to keep them coming back.

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is particularly true of social media, because content is about far more than the words. Where resources permit, having good content producers who can think about and work with your visual messaging will enhance the experience for your users. It will also help you to tailor content to your different social channels.

Have a consistent visual identity and keep the messaging simple and attractive: one subject per message. Be aware of opportunities for cross-channel pollination and keep the final destination in mind: do you want people to sign up for something, visit an event or watch a video?

Figure 7:
The National Assembly of Ecuador's Facebook page shows how graphics can make a post stand out

Some social media platforms allow you to produce "stories" rather than publish a series of disconnected posts. Current data suggest that stories are far more popular with users than posts, are more likely to be seen, and are effective at building a stronger, more engaging narrative. So where this option exists, it's worth exploring – especially if you're conveying something that can't be captured in a single post, or building up a story over a period of time.

Understand your tone of voice and how you want to sound. This can be different for different audiences – after all, it's important that people hear you. Social media is less formal than traditional media, particularly in parliaments, so consider how to maintain your gravitas while appearing accessible and open.

Consider these two social media posts. Which one is more compelling?

"Parliament invites young people to submit evidence to their inquiry into youth television."

"Lights, camera, action: Tell us what you think about TV for young people #myTV"

Graphics, videos and animation

Experience shows that good infographics, short animations and videos are the best ways to drive traffic to you – and towards deeper, more in-depth content elsewhere in your digital estate. The fleeting nature of social media lends itself to visuals, which help the eye process a complex story, data or ideas in less time. Likewise, posts that contain some form of visual content are much more likely to be read and, therefore, more likely to lead to an opportunity to engage and build your network.

If you do decide to post video-based content, keep it short (you can always link to a longer version). The following length guidelines apply to clips posted on different social media platforms:

- Facebook: less than 1 minute 30 seconds, and preferably less than 1 minute.
- Twitter: less than 30 seconds.
- Instagram: less than 1 minute.

If you're filming a piece to camera, consider the location, lighting and background. A talking head can be less engaging than a packaged video that includes text, infographics and relevant images. Think about how to make the content more attractive to your audience and what might encourage them to share it more widely. Videos can be hosted on platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo and shared using social media or directly.

Figure 8:
Embedded video in a social media post

Promoting the work of parliament

In many cases, parliaments will mostly use social media to promote and share details of parliamentary business. Well-timed posts like these can build awareness of special events and the general work of the house – what debates are taking place, what committees are meeting – as part of a parliamentary openness strategy. They can also include links to the official record, to broadcast channels and to educational resources that will help people better understand what parliament does and how it works.

Figure 9:
The South African Parliament sharing information on its hybrid sitting during the COVID-19 pandemic

Social media can be used as part of a multi-media campaign or event. For example, the Speaker of the New Zealand Parliament took part in a public question and answer session as part of a broadcast TV news programme, which was later repackaged and shared on the parliament's Facebook page.

Figure 10:
Broadcast TV programme repackaged for social media for greater reach and longevity

Event-based campaigns

Your social media posts shouldn't wait for something to happen. It's important to keep up a regular flow of posts so that people have something to engage with and feel connected to. You'll also want to use social media to keep people informed about specific events and encourage them to engage (on social media, somewhere else online or in the real world).

Figure 11:
Promoting an event in the French National Assembly

Plan the campaign for such events in advance. Think about lead times and the call to action that's going to get people engaged. Who is your target audience and where are they? What message do they want to hear about this event?

Refer to the earlier discussion on editorial calendars for more information.

Call to action

Much parliamentary social content merely reports what has happened or provides information for the public. Yet the most powerful and engaging posts contain a call to action: they prompt readers to respond in a specific way. For instance, a committee seeking evidence on a particular subject might want to engage with a wider audience or make contact with hard-to-reach groups by encouraging others to share the call. Likewise, parliamentarians trying to promote a policy or political issue or cause might include a call to action in their post.

Figure 12:
New Zealand House of Representatives encouraging young people to make submissions

Managing your communities

Social media success doesn't happen by accident – it takes careful planning and preparation, and a concerted effort to be part of the community you're engaging with. It's all about reach: the greater the diversity of your followers, the wider the reach of your social media presence.

The United Kingdom Parliament's Knowledge Exchange Unit has built a network of researchers and academics and uses Twitter to regularly engage, interact and extend it. The network adds value to parliament through outreach and engagement, breaking down barriers and supporting researchers who can broaden and deepen the range of submissions to parliament, thereby enhancing the deliberative process.

Figure 13:
Building a network can include a personal touch,
even for institutions

Accountability

Social media is just that: it's social. Using it effectively means being active and engaging with your audience. Failing to do so will severely limit your reach and returns. This also requires a commitment to resourcing your social media properly. Just as you plan the resources you need to design, launch and publish content, it must be someone's job to monitor and engage.

People will ask you questions, and you need to respond. When they ask for clarification, you need to be able to provide it. When people want to know where to go for more information or to get more involved, you need to be able to tell them. If you're unable to do these things, the conversation will wither very quickly.

Don't assume people understand the difference between parliament, parliamentarians and the government. Treat social media as a way to make educational and background information more easily accessible to the public.

Also, don't overlook the importance of trust and accountability. Some social media platforms run verification programmes that allow an account to be authenticated as genuine. For example, verified Twitter accounts show a blue tick next to the name:

Figure 14:
Verified Twitter account

Engaging and participating

Remember: social media isn't just about you broadcasting. Consider how you can affirm and engage with the people who are interested in your work by taking an interest in what they say and do. You can do this by liking or retweeting tweets or by liking Facebook posts – perhaps look out for people tagging a visit or engaging with parliament in some other way and let them know you've seen it.

Be careful, however, not to retweet and like everything or at random. Whatever your disclaimer might say, echoing someone else's post suggests at least some degree of tacit support or agreement. Retweet something if it's relevant, appropriate and of value to your own followers. Here, your decision should be guided by the nature and tone of the page or profile you've created. If it's an official channel for reporting what happens in parliament, it might be less appropriate to retweet what others are saying. Equally, it might be completely appropriate for you to retweet posts from parliamentarians about what they're doing as part of a successful and considered outreach and engagement strategy.

Tools such as Buffer, Conversocial, Hootsuite, Falcon, Sprinklr and Sprout Social can be used to track user comments and questions and to manage responses (and response times) across a social media team.

Decide how often, when and under what circumstances you'll respond. Never acknowledging or responding to comments or posts suggests to the public that you aren't listening, and is likely to be perceived negatively. Conversely, responding to everything will take a lot of time and resources and is unrealistic.

Be aware of deliberate attempts to seed false stories, disinformation or inflammatory tropes. Parliamentarians should take extra care not to endorse hate speech spread by extremists or through bots (fake computer-generated accounts). If you make a genuine mistake and do forward or retweet something that's subsequently exposed as fake or offensive, the best course of action is to own the mistake, delete the post and apologize.

Monitoring and responding

Every social media platform has different requirements and provides different ways to track and monitor what's happening. It's important to track your interactions across all the platforms you're using, so take the time to explore each and find out what analytics and tools are available. There are also some generic (third-party) social monitoring tools that can help you keep track of questions and prompts so that you can be responsive to the public.

Not all social interactions require you to respond, although it can be difficult to judge, and when a response is warranted, it's sometimes hard to know what to say. Whatever you decide to do, have a clear policy on how long responses will take. You should absolutely try to reply within 48 hours, or even within 24 hours if you can. Bear in mind that social media is a live experience, so the faster you respond, the better.

At the same time, you should be realistic about your resources and capabilities. Don't rush the response if you need to find information or escalate it to someone else. It's better to sacrifice a little speed for greater accuracy, and you can always tell someone that you're finding the answer and will get back to them.

Part of managing your relationship with engagement is to understand what kinds of questions and comments require a response and, where they do, how urgent they are. There are a number of things you can do make this process more streamlined and transparent internally:

1. Develop a list of frequently asked questions and a set of clear, pre-approved responses, so you can respond automatically when someone asks one of these questions. Remember to keep this list regularly updated as new questions emerge over time.

2. Learn to differentiate urgent questions from everyday ones. Again, there might be regular topics that come up which require a more urgent response. You can create a separate list of these and use a simple method to prioritize which ones need answering more quickly (e.g. using a traffic-light system).

3. Be on the lookout for emerging issues that fall outside the areas for which you've planned. Just because it's not on your list doesn't make it unimportant. Your social media team needs to be able to recognize these issues and escalate them quickly and dynamically. These are the sorts of problems where, if left alone, others can fill the void – often unhelpfully. A swift and clear response can both disarm and placate.

Response checklist

The table below lists different types of social media post and some suggested responses.

Table 2: Types of social media post and suggested responses

Post type	Question(s) to ask	Action to take
Positive feedback	Is the comment useful to others? If yes:	Forward/retweet and consider responding.
Disagreement	Is the comment useful to others? If yes:	Forward/retweet.
	If no:	Ignore.
Question	Do you have the answer? If yes:	Respond with details.
	Can you find the answer? If yes:	Source answer and respond with details (if this will take some time, respond to say you're looking into it).
	If no:	Respond to say you don't know (you could ask if others have an answer).
Humorous	Is the comment positive and potentially fun/interesting/clever? If yes:	Forward/retweet.
Negative comments		Ignore.
Misguided or incorrect	Do you have the correct information or links to resources? If yes:	Respond with details.
	If no:	Ignore.
Intentionally misleading		Ignore.
Inflammatory or rude	Is it a one-off post? If yes:	Ignore.
	Is the poster persistently negative or rude? If yes:	Ignore.
	Does it breach the moderation or fair use guidelines? If yes:	Advise the user that the post breaches your guidelines. Consider reporting and blocking (particularly for repeat offenders).
	Have others complained about the post or user? If yes:	Consider reporting and blocking.
Abusive		Report and block.
Spam		Report and block.

Dealing with detractors

Unfortunately, not everyone will be happy about the fact that you've become active on social media. You'll almost certainly encounter detractors who talk about your account in a derogatory way for no good reason.

Don't confuse detractors with people who have valid complaints or questions, or with people who disagree with you – particularly if your posts are political in nature. Opposition is just that and is a key part of democratic systems. Avoid getting drawn into arguments that you can't win. There's a big difference between responding to genuine questions and discussions – which is important – and engaging with people who are never going to be satisfied with what you say. It's not your role to convince detractors to change their mind: the chances are you won't. Trying to do so will merely waste your time and raise the level of social "noise", which is both unhelpful and unwanted by the majority.

Effective planning can help you deal with inevitable detractors (and worse) without it taking up too much of your time and resources. First, create some rules of conduct for your social media channels. Publish these rules and state unequivocally you won't accept content that's illegal, abusive, violently graphic, defamatory, obscene, fraudulent, deceptive or misleading, or that violates any intellectual property rights. Make it clear that you won't accept content that promotes other channels, entities or commercial products. Be firm about your zero-tolerance approach to posts that are obviously intended to incite an argument or cause offence, even if the post itself isn't directly offensive.

Having stated what you won't accept, be clear about what will happen if your rules of conduct are broken. Always try to be helpful in the first instance: point out the breach, make the consequences clear, and see if there's a way you can help the user stick to the rules. If they continue to breach the guidelines, ignore them.

> *The United Kingdom Government Digital Service's social media house rules are a useful starting point for developing your own rules of conduct:* **gds.blog.gov. uk/social-media-house-rules/**.

Escalation policy

Standard problems can normally be dealt with using the strategy outlined above but some issues could escalate or require a more senior or thorough response. Here, parliaments might find it useful to have an escalation policy, which will include a list of subject areas or scenarios to look out for and a procedure for dealing with them if they arise. You can rank these in terms of low, medium and high risk (again, using a traffic-light system). The policy should also consider the wider consequences of escalation.

Banning people on social media

Banning or blocking a user should always be the option of last resort, but if someone continues to break your rules of conduct or is persistently abusive, you should consider reporting and/or blocking them. You'll have stopped attempting to engage this person long before this happens.

> *There may be laws in place that define what's permissible and what is clearly not. Beyond this, your social channels are your own and you can (and should) be clear about what behaviours you'll tolerate and the consequences of breaching your rules.*

Sample moderation policy

This sample social media moderation policy comes from the European Council and Council of the European Union. It's clear and brief. You can publish something along these lines on your own website and direct users to your policy from your social media profiles. It will help people to understand the limits of what you will accept.

> *We invite you to contribute to conversations on our social media accounts and to share our content. We are pleased to see different views and opinions expressed, but we will not accept comments that are either offensive in themselves or clearly offensive to other users.*

Individual use of social media

When communicating through social media in any official capacity, it goes without saying that you should stick to the agreed voice and message. Individuals should also think carefully about what they're saying – particularly if they're responding or engaging in a conversation. All communication should be:

- objective: communicate without bias or prejudice;
- impartial: take a neutral stance;
- consistent: use your expertise to enhance and project the agreed message;
- respectful: show respect for people, difference and the law;
- discreet: don't disclose any information that hasn't been approved for publication or is not in the public domain;
- cautious: have a due sense of proportion and propriety appropriate to the stature of parliament and its members.

As social media spreads, the lines between personal and professional communication are becoming increasingly blurred. Parliaments should therefore have a clear policy governing who's allowed to create and post social media content that represents the institution. You should also develop guidelines to manage and mitigate potential misuse of social channels, misrepresentation of parliament or activities that might be seen as bringing the institution into disrepute, while stopping short of restricting personal use of social media. All staff should be clear about the line between official and personal communication. For example, your policy might state something similar to the following:

Everyone can participate in social media in their personal capacity. However, any statement, opinion or response remains personal and does not represent the institution. You should at all times make it clear that you are not representing the institution or communicating on its behalf.

In practice, staff must conduct themselves on social media in the same way as in other social situations, but with two crucial differences: on social media you cannot control who hears what you say and there is a record of what you said.

Measuring and evaluating

If you're using social media, you should be measuring its effectiveness. First of all, you need to understand what it is you're trying to achieve.

Engagement means the conversations that take place and how many people are connected with you; community is about how people feel a sense of belonging to your network and want to be part of, or share, what you do. You should be trying to increase both.

You can measure ongoing, regular social media use and introduce more tailored or specific metrics to help you evaluate and learn from campaigns. In both cases, using analytics will help you to understand:

- what your network looks like and how its members behave;
- the levels of reach, engagement and follow-up social media creates;
- how social media has contributed to your goals.

To discover how your messages are being seen, amplified and engaged with, look to measure things such as:

- **clicks:** how many times people click on your content to view the details;
- **likes:** how often users like your posts (although this is now considered a light-touch action, it's still important to measure it);
- **shares:** how many times people re-distribute or forward your content;
- **mentions:** how often others mention you in their own posts;
- **comments:** how many replies and comments your posts receive.

Reach is a vital metric for gauging the effectiveness of your social media content. Reach simply means how far a post travels and, in doing so, how the number of people who can potentially see it increases. Be wary of metrics that suggest reach without looking in more detail at actual engagement and behaviour – reach is often reported as potential rather than actual. You can measure reach by looking at things like:

- **followers:** how many people follow you on a particular channel;
- **active followers:** how many of your followers are active (in the last month);
- **impressions:** how many times your content appears in people's feeds and timelines;
- **traffic:** how many people take action and click through to your more detailed digital assets.

Again, parliaments and parliamentarians are not brands in the commercial sense. You should nevertheless be interested in drawing the public into engaging directly with what you do. That's why it's still useful to measure conversion rates, i.e. how many people directly engage with you as a result of your social media content. This is particularly important for campaign or event-based posts.

Figure 15:
A sample Social Media Dashboard (see: Klipfolio)

Social media influencer Neil Patel suggests the following useful checklist to help you decide what to measure depending on your goals:

- If you want to measure **awareness**, then use metrics like volume, reach, exposure and amplification. How far is your message spreading?
- If you want to measure **engagement**, then look for metrics around retweets, comments, replies and participants. How many people are participating, how often are they participating and in what forms are they participating?
- If your goal is to **drive traffic** to your website, then track URL shares, clicks and conversions. Are people moving through social media to your external site and what do they do once they're on your site?
- If your goal is to **find advocates and fans**, then track contributors and influence. Who is participating and what kind of impact do they have?
- If your goal is to increase your brand's **share of voice**, then track your volume relative to your closest competitors. How much of the overall conversation around your industry or product category is about your brand?

The table below will give you some places to start when thinking about what tools to use.

Table 3: Measuring the success of social media

Goal	Metrics	Source
Awareness	Number of online mentions across all your channels	Social monitoring tool
	Number of impressions generated by your posts	Platform's native analytics tool
	Reach of a hashtag	Social monitoring or hashtag tracking tool
Engagement	Likes and comments	Platform's native analytics tool
	Shares and forwards	Platform's native analytics tool
	Video views	Platform's native analytics tool
	Subscribers (to blogs or mailing lists)	Blog or mailing list's native analytics tool
	Number of people re-using a campaign hashtag	Analytics tool
Action	Click-throughs to deeper content	Google Analytics
	Document downloads	Google Analytics
	Your content embedded elsewhere	Social monitoring tool
Advocacy	Sentiment	Social monitoring tool

Continuous improvement

Social media is a dynamic and ever-changing landscape. By knowing what you want to achieve, and by planning your campaigns and everyday communications, you'll be better able to measure and understand how effective you've been.

It is equally important to review and refresh what you're doing. Did you reach as many people as you wanted to? Did people engage with you and contribute? Did they answer your call to action? If so, who did and who didn't?

The Danish Parliament created a set of high-quality videos to encourage the public to vote, but these failed to gain traction. The evaluation showed that the videos were unable to cut through the high volume of targeted political advertising at the time of the election. The lesson here is to be fully aware of the wider context and social spaces you're entering and to understand how timing, as well as messaging and promotion, is critical to success.

Knowing what happened will help you stop and think about the way you're using social media, in terms of frequency, channel, tone and content. Getting better at social media is about a reflective process – one where you're always looking for small ways to improve. Learn about how different approaches work in different settings and build a stock of methods and ideas that you can use and re-use as appropriate.

Learn as you go: not just from statistics, but also from the feedback you receive – positive and negative – and by keeping an eye on other social media users to see what's working for them.

Channel guides

This section covers the most common social media platforms. Each does different things and is popular with different demographics. Their value is always changing, which is why it's important to do your research before investing in – or dismissing – a particular channel.

Facebook

Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform. Its 1.5 billion-plus daily users are relatively well split in terms of gender and tend to be more balanced than other platforms in terms of age, although younger users (under age 30) are over-represented and older users (over age 65) are under-represented. Facebook reach is an issue for anyone trying to engage. It's a commercial platform and targeted reach can be bought, but organic reach and growth are limited. Facebook's reputation for inadequate policing of so-called "fake news" also makes it an unreliable source of information, potentially impacting its effectiveness for parliaments and parliamentarians.

Twitter

Short messages in real time is Twitter's business model. The downside is its off-putting reputation for being like the Wild West, with conversations quickly spiralling into abuse. Twitter is a good platform to connect with people, but you'll need to manage it in real time and be on the lookout for abuse and misrepresentation. When used well, it's a valuable bellwether.

Instagram

Instagram is less about conversation and engagement and more about images in the here-and-now. It can be a good choice for parliamentarians but is more challenging for parliaments. It needs a personal touch and a personality to drive it. Strong brands on Instagram have used eye-catching content and hashtags, and encouraged user-generated content to engage.

WhatsApp and Viber

Internet-based messaging apps like WhatsApp and Viber[1] allow you to communicate with individuals and groups. The upside of these platforms is that they can be a good way to connect a group of people. They're also cheaper than conventional text messages because they use Wi-Fi or the data included in your mobile plan. The downside is that people can add you randomly to groups and the volume of messages can be overwhelming and, therefore, hard to manage.

Telegram and Signal

Telegram and Signal are alternative instant-messaging services. Telegram's unique selling point is that it's built for security and speed. Signal, meanwhile, is both secure and open-source. Although they have much smaller user bases than WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal can be useful for parliamentarians who want to create small groups for sharing ideas and information. They can also be used for internal communications.

YouTube

YouTube is the most popular online video-sharing platform. It's a place for parliaments and parliamentarians to share short clips and longer pieces that can be linked up and connected to key audiences through other social channels. With your own well-branded YouTube page and a rich mix of video content, it's possible to create a strong following. Video is also a good way to add depth to the light touch of most social networks. Alternatives include Vimeo and DailyMotion.

Snapchat

More in the moment than Twitter and more about images that Instagram, Snapchat really only works if you can create strong, visually compelling stories that keep users following you and coming back to see what's going on.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn isn't a social network, but a network for business and professionals. It can be a good place for institutions and individuals to connect through blogs and posts about shared areas of interest. Although the platform is primarily geared towards recruitment, parliaments can use LinkedIn to build networks of professionals and keep them up to date on parliamentary business.

Reddit

Reddit is an unusual platform in the sense that it hosts many thousands of articles and links added by members. The power of Reddit lies in participation and conversation: you get little traction by posting content alone. To make it work, people must engage with your content and you with them. This makes it challenging for organizations, but not impossible. The European Parliament is one of only a handful of parliaments that has a strong Reddit presence.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a visual social network for people to share ideas and find inspiration. Users "pin" images to "boards". It's not an easy platform for organizations – especially parliaments – to work with. Using Pinterest successfully takes time and effort. It could be a useful place for sharing visually rich content such as infographics, and for resharing similar things that others have created about you (the resharing function is one of Pinterest's key features).
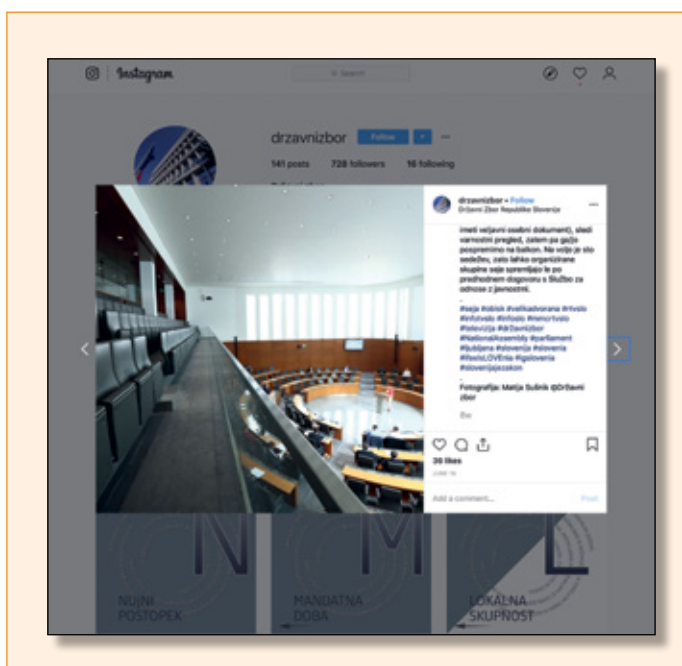
---

1   These are very similar apps. The one you choose will depend on uptake in your country or among your audience.

III. Case studies

Instagram:
National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia

What
The National Assembly wanted to increase visibility and understanding of parliament among a younger, more media-savvy demographic.

How

A new Instagram account was created.

What tools were used

The project used tools that were already available, such as smartphones and internet-based social tools.

What happened

After six months, the account has quickly established itself and now has over 700 subscribers. The page and images posted are designed to be educational and informative and to encourage people to find out more about the National Assembly.
The posts (and page) include a hashtag that connects with wider social media around parliament. This also encourages others to link to the National Assembly in their own posts, which in turns builds the account's credibility and profile.

What worked well

The responses received from the public (in terms of comments and likes) have been extremely positive.

What didn't work

Internal buy-in to the project (within parliament) has been harder to achieve.

Key lessons

Producing images and content of a suitably high quality has been vital to the success of the project.

Advice to others

Don't over-plan or over-think it, just do it. Social media is adaptable and can be fine-tuned as you proceed.

Link

instagram.com/drzavnizbor/

YouTube:
Swedish Riksdag

What
The Swedish Riksdag published easy-to-follow YouTube videos explaining how the institution works. In this example, a high-quality animated video was produced to explain the parliament's role in determining foreign policy in a way that is interesting and easy for a wider audience to understand. The choice of a short, animated video hosted on YouTube was seen as the best way to reach the target group (young people) for this outreach activity.

How
The parliament produced a short (two-minute) animated film and posted it on its YouTube channel.

What tools were used
The project was outsourced to a commercial agency, which produced the animation (they have done other, similar videos for the Swedish Riksdag in the past). This meant that the end product was clean, highly professional and designed to appeal specifically to the target audience.

What happened
In the six months after the video was published, it received around 600 views.

What worked well
The video has received positive feedback from viewers.

What didn't work
The modest view count is due to a lack of marketing for the video at this point in time. They haven't been able to market the film to their target groups yet. There are plans to promote the video more actively in the near future.

Key lessons
This is a complex area for parliaments to work in. It is important for communications and education specialists in parliament to have a good working relationship with subject-matter experts. This way, the complex details can be brought out in ways that are both accurate and easy to follow, so that a general audience is able to understand what is happening in the parliament.

Advice to others
Don't rush preparation and planning for social media projects. Give the creative and communications specialists time to work with the experts in the parliamentary processes. That way, you can achieve a much more effective end product. Communicating what can be a complicated message quickly and clearly is challenging.

Link
youtube.com/watch?v=9Z7tu5wz0sY

YouTube:
Danish Folketinget
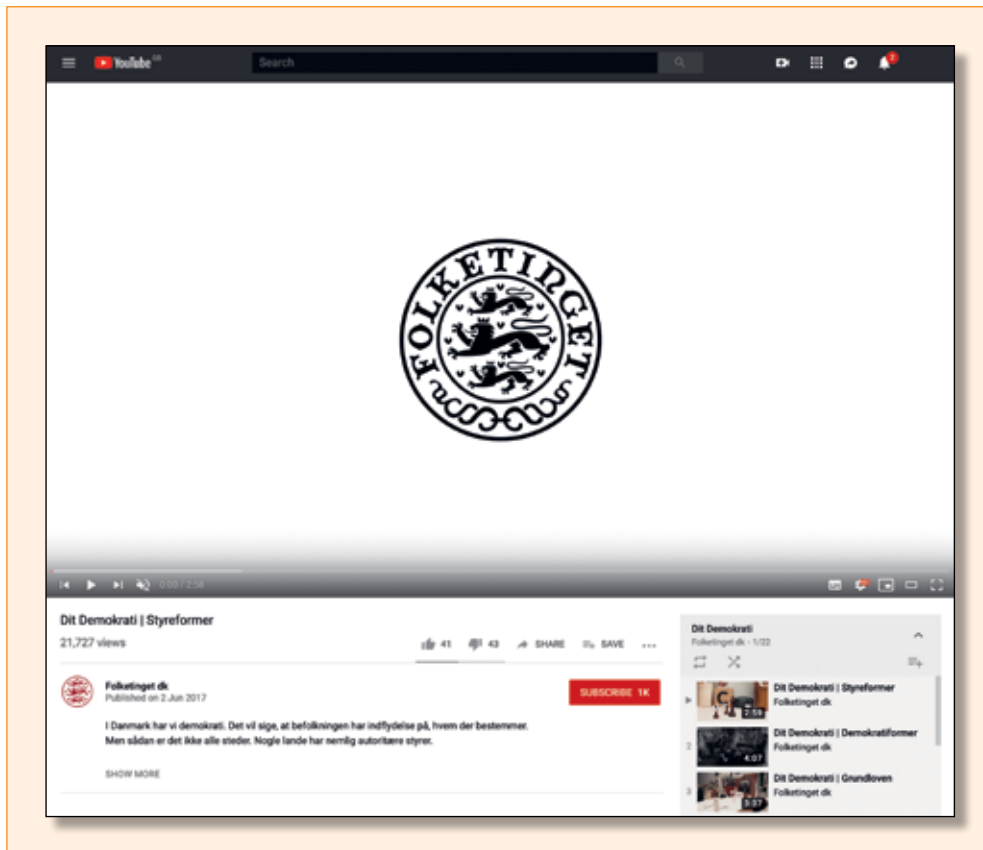
What
The Danish Folketinget devised a social media-based campaign using educational videos to encourage people to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election in Denmark.

How
The parliament created a video series in which they went out and filmed a range of people in different parts of the country talking about why they were going to vote in the upcoming election (or why they were not going to vote). This was intended to promote the value and importance of voting in the parliamentary election and to show those who might not have thought about it why voting was important and relevant to them.

What tools were used
The project was carried out using publicly available social media tools.

What happened
The parliament produced high-quality videos that were well-received by the members of the public who saw them.

What worked well
The product was high-quality and informative.

What didn't work
The videos failed to engage a significant audience as they were published during the election period. This meant that the heavy investment in social media from the political parties drowned out this video and social media algorithms meant too few people were seeing it in their news feeds.

Key lessons

In the election period, people mostly responded to political advertising:

- The parliamentary series was factual and information-based and, therefore, less engaging to a social media audience.
- At the time of the election campaign, there was too much spending on related social media advertising from political parties and media attention was on the campaign, not on parliament. There was simply too much competition for the target audience's time and attention.

Advice to others

It is useful for parliament to explain the electoral process, since it is trusted, neutral and directly involved. The evidence from this project, however, is that public institutions cannot hope to compete for social media screen time with bigger budgets and more targeted (more political) content. Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, the period around an election is not the time to launch such content as it will simply get lost. This project demonstrates that producing high-quality content is not sufficient to ensure success. It is also vital that parliaments understand the environment they are publishing in, the way that social tools work and what the audience wants.

Link

https://www.youtube.com/user/folketingetdk

Facebook Live and Twitter:
Finnish Eduskunta

What
Starting in May 2018, the Eduskunta held live "Ask the Speaker" sessions on Facebook and Twitter. In these 30-minute sessions, the Speaker answered questions posed directly by citizens.

How
The parliament created a portable "studio" and set up a Facebook Live event. This allowed the public to post questions, which the Speaker answered in real time.

What tools were used
- Tablet, laptops, big TV screen.
- Two moderators per session: one to manage the questions and the other to manage and moderate the discussion.
- Social media platform with live-streaming options.

What happened
The sessions drew up to 4,500 people, which is considered high compared to other live sessions. There was positive feedback from participants, but the public felt that the sessions were too short. There was not enough time to answer all the questions (during the second and third sessions, some extra questions were recorded and answered in a later session).

What worked well
The environment was very positive but Facebook was better at attracting ordinary citizens, while Twitter was more likely to draw in journalists and researchers.

What didn't work
A working paper was written on the concept and technical setup, but no guidelines were produced. The project was more "trial and error" and existing guidelines for Facebook moderation were re-used (e.g. no hate, threats or abuse allowed, no media or links can be posted in comments, all freedom of expression is allowed, even fierce criticism). This worked well but parliaments should consider developing specific guidelines on holding live sessions and managing attempts to subvert the conversation or promote political causes.

Key lessons
The Speaker answered at their own (political) discretion and was not obliged to answer. Staff were also on hand to answer questions about how parliament works. These answers could be given directly in the comments section, rather than taking up limited broadcast time.

Advice to others
This was a relatively low-cost and light-touch way to engage the public in a live experience of parliament and parliamentarians. While adequate planning and preparation was needed (including understanding what can go wrong), the live sessions could be done with simple and readily available technology and without the need for expensive broadcasting equipment and skills.

Link
Eduskunta on Facebook

Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn:
United Kingdom Parliament
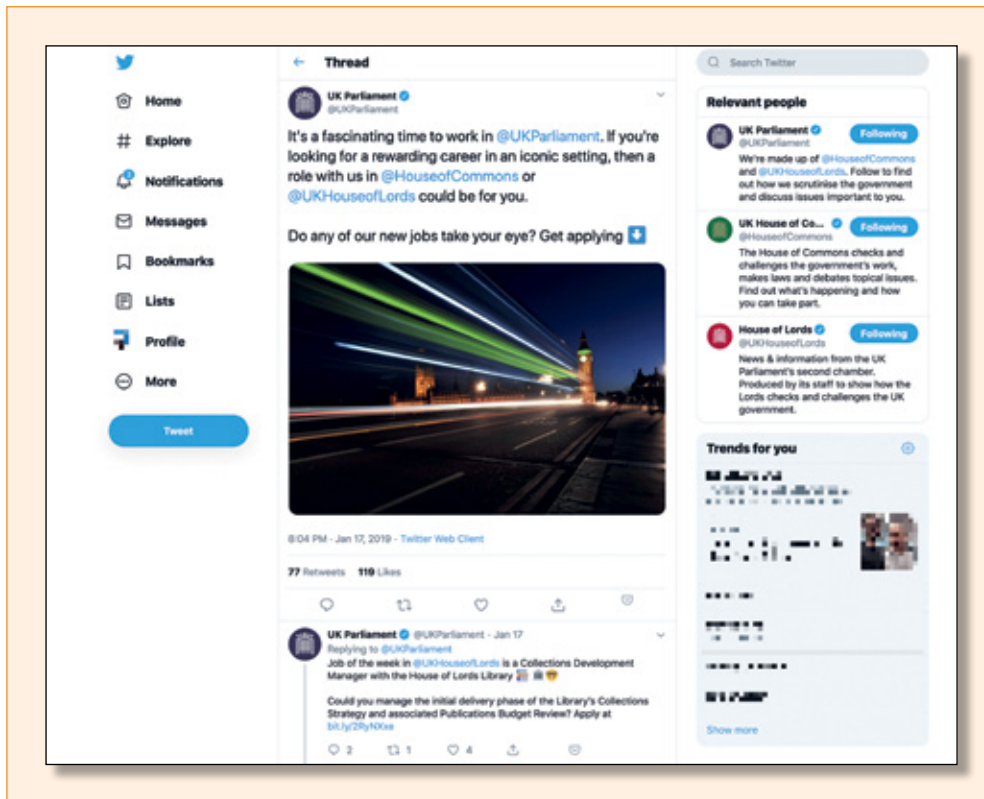
What

Good recruitment is critical to the United Kingdom Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS), which hires people who will support the parliament through challenging times. This includes restoring the parliamentary buildings, transforming the digital landscape and deepening public engagement. In response to parliament's growing recruitment needs and keeping in mind new trends, the PDS social media team worked with human resources, internal communications and other social media teams to understand more about their challenges, and to explore opportunities to join things up.

They found a lack of standardized processes for using social media for recruitment. In particular, they identified that parliament's LinkedIn pages were under-used for sharing both vacancies and general updates about what it's like to work in parliament. Internally, there was confusion and frustration about what was best practice. As a result, opportunities to engage with a larger number of good applicants and to attract a more diverse workforce were missed.

How

In an effort to solve these issues, PDS wrote a new strategy and created a model for sharing job vacancies for the UK Parliament and PDS social media channels:

- Job of the week: on UK Parliament Twitter, PDS trialled publishing "job of the week" round-up threads. This highlighted unusual and interesting jobs across the houses, as well as supporting parliament's growing recruitment needs. After experimenting, they found that threads using striking images and light-hearted emojis published during mid-week evenings get the most engagement. The threads always finish with a link to browse all vacancies.

- Making the most of LinkedIn: parliament has worked to improve the PDS LinkedIn page to make it more attractive to applicants and make sure it better represents PDS values and successes. Updating basics like branding, header image and the "About" section has made it a more attractive space. The Digital Service also focused on a clear content strategy that's balanced between new PDS blog content and vacancies. When publishing new vacancies, they write strong calls to action and use question formats to encourage engagement, often targeted at followers with particular skill sets.

- Blogging: with PDS blog content, the UK Parliament focuses on career paths and teams that are hiring and learning new skills. Human resource teams and hiring managers are increasingly using LinkedIn to find potential candidates, and shares, likes, clicks and impressions have quadrupled over six months.

What tools were used

Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter.

What happened

Using a regular weekly thread, rather than tweeting every single vacancy randomly, the UK Parliament created better audience understanding and expectation. These now drive an extra 400 clicks through to the vacancies web page and get 100 retweets each week.

What worked well

Timing tweets to go out during big debates and votes in the UK Parliament about Brexit. Social media's eyes were on the parliament, so they took advantage of that.

What didn't work

After a few months, engagement in terms of likes and comments dropped. However, the number of clicks through to job adverts remained quite steady and high.

Key lessons

Teamwork and collaboration across social media and HR teams was essential. LinkedIn was the focus, followed by Twitter and Instagram. Getting a budget for paid promotion on LinkedIn and Twitter to be able to reach more targeted audiences and interests would make the approach more effective.

Advice to others

You can use social media to share your job vacancies but make sure that you create open channels between communications and HR teams so that they are working together. Experiment with different ways of presenting the roles on social media and different channels.

Link

Parliamentary Digital Service on LinkedIn

Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.