E-Participation Guidelines for Using Social Media in Government

Information Technology Authority
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هيئة تقنية المعلومات
سلطنة عمان
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❖ **Introduction:**

In line with the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in April 2011, to develop communication channels between government institutions and citizens, and in line with the e.oman strategy in implementing the eGovernment vision, the Information Technology Authority (ITA) has prepared the E-Participation Guidelines for Using Social Media in Government. These Guidelines are to be used by all government entities in Oman, as guidance in implementing modern social media technologies in communicating with citizens. The channels and tools are simple, easy to use, cost effective and use the latest of technologies, resulting in better documentation of data bases, easy access and more transparent dialogue.

ITA is taking the leadership to advise and train all government entities in the use and implementation of social media in Oman.

❖ **Social Media:**

Social media is a set of online technologies, sites and practices which are used to share opinions, experiences and perspectives. Fundamentally it is about conversation.

Social media is different from traditional media -- such as print, TV and radio – as it is not a broadcast medium.

Social media is a dialogue that happens between Government and its citizens. This means that the level of control assumed from traditional media is replaced with a deeper level of engagement with the public. The main benefit of social media for governments is that well-considered and carefully implemented social media can create greater transparency, an interactive relationship with the public, a stronger sense of ownership of government policy and services, and thus a greater public trust in government.

The potential uses of social media are wide and varied. The Government can use social media to raise awareness of certain issues, build credibility with specific audience groups, engage Oman in policy consultation, or serve as an internal communications tool to improve collaboration between government agencies or within a single agency.

❖ **Core Social Media Tools:**

The five core social media tools are:

1. **Social networks** – A term often used to refer to the websites used to connect and interact with other individuals. Interaction is often informal and entirely web-based. Examples include Facebook and Twitter.

2. **Media-sharing networks** – Websites that allow users to share video and images. They also allow users to comment on their own media and the media uploaded by users. Examples include YouTube and Flickr.

3. **Blogs** – Short for weblog. A blog is a content-managed website that presents its entries in reverse chronological order and allows visitors to comment. Blogger and WordPress are examples of popular blogging tools.

4. **Wikis** – Web-based applications which allow users to add content to or edit a web page. The most popular example is Wikipedia.

5. **Forums** – Online applications for holding themed discussions between groups of participants.

❖ **Social Media Benefits:**

Social media can bring a variety of benefits in supporting government communications and wider objectives, including:

- Increase audience reach and improve the accessibility of Government communication;

- Reflect the communication channel preferences of Omanis;

- Meet public expectations of modern service organizations and enhance reputation;

- Promote transparency in Government;

- Support more involved relationships with citizens, partners and other stakeholders;

- Enhance Government response to quickly adjust or refocus communications;

- Improve the long-term cost-effectiveness of communication;

- Benefit from the credibility of non-government channels;

- Increase the speed of public feedback and input;

- Reach specific audiences on specific issues;

- Reduce dependence on media and counter inaccurate press coverage;

- Lead Omanis directly to online transactional services; and,

- Create and develop content written by citizens.

Social Media Properties

❖ **Processes Must be Open and Transparent:**

The overall process and outcomes must be highly transparent and open. Most success seems to come when the expectations of participants are outlined from the beginning, including the purpose, the means, the processing of input and the outcomes. Thus, objectives need to be clear from the outset and, in particular, the participants themselves need to understand in a transparent way the procedure they need to use, otherwise their interest in participating will rapidly diminish. It is also important to make it clear who is accountable for what, and how redress is to be handled and who should act on the outcomes. In this way trust in the system can be increased.

❖ **Trust in Employees:**

Social media tools require quick responses and direct communication with governments, often in real or near-real time. Successful social media projects are ones where delegated employees are trusted, after proper training, to understand and manage the risks around release of information. If information needs further verification or is potentially contentious, employees need to be trusted to escalate as appropriate – and those escalation paths must be quick and efficient.

Nothing kills the effectiveness of a social media project more quickly than slow response times where each and every statement or 'tweet' needs to go up the chain of command to be approved before publication.

❖ **Participation as a Fundamental Right:**

Participation must be seen as a fundamental right in a democracy which contributes to better policies and greater societal stability, and can be a safety valve for ordinary people in their

everyday lives. However, for the latter to happen, it is essential that (e)participation efforts are acknowledged, that feedback is given where appropriate, and that evidence is provided on the impact of people's participation, even if this did not fundamentally change anything, although the reasons for this must be clear and transparent. Recognition is required and must be open and communicated, so that a participative culture is created and maintained.

Social Media use Guidelines

❖ **Basic Principles for Employees**

There are some common principles shared across all forms of social media. Knowing these basic 'rules of engagement' will serve employees well, whether they are simply contributing to or actually managing an online community.

- **Be credible** – Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.

- **Be consistent** – Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Be cordial, honest and professional at all times.

- **Be responsive** – Answer questions in a timely manner. Share your insights where appropriate.

- **Be integrated** – Wherever possible align online participation with other offline communications.

- **Be a public servant** – Remember that you are an ambassador for your agency. Wherever possible disclose your position as a representative of your department or agency.

- **Be a good custodian** – If you've introduced and/or are managing your organisation's social media profile or blog, make sure that you're posting content and checking messages regularly. An untended and out-of-date account looks unprofessional. Also ensure that information is created, kept and, if necessary, disposed of in accordance with organizational policies.

❖ **Legal Considerations & Codes of Conduct (for Communication Dept. employee)**

1. Do not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activities on behalf of government unless you are authorized to do so.

2. Be clear about the purpose and what you expect eParticipation to do (and not do), and focus on real eParticipation needs at the outset of the process.

3. Overall processes and outcomes must be highly transparent, open and in most cases negotiable, as this helps build confidence.

4. Listen, as well as ask and tell, including letting people express their anger and frustration.

5. It is important to get participants involved early in the policy lifecycle.

6. Provide feedback on inputs and show how it is used so the citizen doesn't feel that their input is simply disappearing into a black hole.

7. Use careful, independent, trustworthy moderation with transparent guidelines.

8. Clear, transparent, rules-based discourse and accountability may be more important than ICT to increase participation.

9. Take citizen inputs very seriously (whether they are asked to give them or they give them anyway) and show how they are used. A rationale needs to be provided for the final outcome or decision which specifically addresses participant inputs.

2. **Content Management**:

Government organizations are responsible to deploy and manage the contents of their pages on social media. This responsibility should be given to the organizational unit responsible for the deployment and management of the entire content, taking into account the following points:

o Communication with the public should be interactive and be directed, and not random or general, as is often the case when communicating using the traditional means of publication. This will allow the Government to broadcast its message, as well as deliver the message directly.

- A collaborative environment should be promoted in an effort to create a successful electronic society to engage in a meaningful dialogue and to contribute to building a relationship between the Government and the public.

- Content communicated through social media direct from the users represents the majority of content published on the social networking sites, which generates concerns over the reliability of this content, in addition to the challenges of coordinating and controlling the behavior of participants.

In light of the above, the following procedures should be taken by the Government organizations:

- Nominate employees who will manage the content on the government organization account and interact with the public; and,
- Manage the content published on government organization accounts, being careful to delete posts that may become irrelevant for one reason or another, should the content represent some sort of abuse or humiliation, or be out of context.

3. **Information Security**:

Like many websites, social media websites are always at risk of phishing, social engineering and attacks on web applications. Therefore, providing the necessary protection of telecommunication risk becomes necessary.

On this basis, government organizations, in addition to the security measures and procedures contained in the information security policy, must emphasize the following:

- Ensure that employees do not make use of the Government's official page to log in to their accounts in social media;

o Access should be denied to unnecessary applications such as games or other applications deployed in some of the social networking tools, so as to avoid the risk of spamming and phishing attacks on protection.

o Employees must be made aware about the various hazards related to social media, and in particular the risks associated with social engineering, and risk mitigation techniques.

Privacy

The use of social media of all kinds increases the chances of exposure to privacy invasion, which is the improper use of government information by unauthorized access or people. The Government must take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of data privacy and Government information from possible hackers. Accordingly, all Government organizations wishing to create their account on social media must consider the following:

o Clearly identify the type of information that employees may circulate through social media; and,
o Be cautious when sending or providing information to social media websites.

4. **Publishing restrictions**:

Publishing on social media is prohibited when comments/posts:
o Contain irrelevant or out of context information;
o Are abusive, offensive or derogatory in any way;
o Involve libelous, defamatory or discriminatory statements;
o Support or incite illegal activities;
o Violate any legal rights or intellectual property rights.

5. **Intellectual Property Rights**:

Using social networks leads to a lot of legal issues regarding Intellectual Property Rights. The easiness and the efficiency of publishing anything on social networks makes it simple to break the laws of Intellectual Property, whether it is on purpose or not. Thus, government organizations should publish a duty clearance on its page concerning social networks in an effort to maintain copy rights and that the organization holds no responsibility on people's thoughts or opinions. Government organizations should also highlight the law of protecting of the author's rights, and the related rights of the Sultanate of Oman according to Royal Decree 65/2008.

Government organizations should be aware of how difficult it is to protect the copy rights of the content published on any social network and should pick and choose carefully anything that may be published on those networks to ensure the protection of governmental information.

Government institutions should also consider the matter of saving the information and keeping it on social networks, because if such information is considered as public record, then comes the decision of whether it is wise to share it with the public or not.