

Drawing the virtual line on conduct

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As more councillors use social networking to keep in contact with their citizens, Joanne Sheppard looks at the implications on ethics and conduct.

US president Barack Obama, PM Gordon Brown and Tory leader David Cameron all communicate via online media and social networking.

Using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs, politicians are realising that to engage directly with the electorate, it pays to be web-literate – especially when it comes to younger voters, who can be notoriously hard to reach.

And now it seems that councillors are also starting to embrace social networking and blogging. The Local Government Association has launched www.tweetyhall.com, which lets users track councillors' activities on Twitter – as does www.cllrtweeps.com – and organisations such as the IDeA are rapidly arranging social media conferences for public sector communicators.

Standards for England, which provides support and guidance to authorities and their members on the members' Code of conduct and other ethical issues, is keen to remind members that if they are blogging or communicating online in their capacity as a councillor, their obligation to meet certain standards of conduct still applies.

Councillors who use blogs, Facebook and Twitter to help them carry out their work as a councillor, rather than in their private capacity, are likely to be considered as representing their office or authority, and should aim to maintain the same high standards online as they would in person.

That doesn't mean they can't be involved in robust political debate and state their opinions strongly – the Code doesn't exist to gag members or stop them expressing political views in person, and it allows for them to do so online. But it does warn against treating others with disrespect, bullying and bringing one's office or authority into disrepute.

Members might use their blog to draw attention to a particular local issue and call the council to account, as they would in a public meeting. But blog entries ridiculing or attacking particular officers, or making serious accusations about personal competence or integrity, could amount to disrespect, even bullying, in some circumstances.

Comments posted online can carry more weight than a passing remark. One of the advantages of online social media is its immediacy. A councillor armed simply with a mobile phone can Tweet on a matter, seconds after discussing it in the council chamber. But equally, this can result in broadcasting spontaneous remarks which may quickly seem unwise. By the time the member has reconsidered and deleted them, they may have been seen by thousands, Facebook-shared, re-Tweeted, linked to, and committed to local headlines.

Great, if you've got your message across just how you wanted to. Less so if your post was an angry outburst in the heat of the moment.

Similarly, the necessary brevity of a Facebook status update – or a Tweet on Twitter, famously restricted to 140 characters – is not always ideal for expressing certain

ideas. It's easy to create the wrong impression about a controversial issue. Your truncated 140-character statement can seem more abrupt or insensitive than intended.

Moreover, good ethical standards are not limited to the Code of conduct. While councillors may not be investigated for using online media in certain ways, their conduct might still be viewed as less than exemplary, and attract adverse publicity for their office and authority, even where the Code does not apply.

A regional newspaper recently said of what it called a councillor's 'toilet-mouthed tirade' against a rival party on her blog: 'A [Code] breach it may not have been. Childish, crude and demeaning to all who vote or follow politics it certainly was.'

Even when social-networking in their private capacity, councillors should consider that sites offer limited privacy. Councillors have every right to a private life and the Code is clear that their official capacity is distinct from that.

However, when a councillor discussed two opponents' deaths and how they might benefit his party on his Facebook wall, visible to all his contacts, fellow members and the press were quick to disapprove and demanded a public apology, which was duly made.

All that said, when it comes to reaching certain groups quickly, cheaply and directly, online methods are hard to beat. The more councillors communicate well with the public, the more visible they are, and the more residents are likely to engage with local democracy. Plus, advice is available for councillors who want to get it right.

Standards for England or monitoring officers can offer guidance on the Code of conduct, for instance. [CivicSurf](#), an organisation encouraging councillors to blog, offers advice and resources to help them do so effectively, paying attention to issues such as predetermination and bias.

Online media can be powerful and liberating, and used well, should increase public confidence in local government, not undermine it.

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