Speaker's Digital Democracy Commission: Recommended guidance for the use of Twitter by politicians - Members of Parliament and the House of Lords

Introduction

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (@CIPR_UK) was asked by the Speaker's Digital Democracy Commission to submit written evidence on best practice to follow for national politicians using Twitter.

Twitter is an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short 140-character messages called "tweets".[i]

Twitter is used by more than 15 million people in the UK which is far less people than use Facebook. Twitter isn't just for young people as the fastest growing age group is 55-64.[ii]

However, Twitter is very important to politicians as it is a more public medium, is used extensively by influencers such as journalists, academics and politicians and can also drive the mainstream news agenda. Given the huge decline in local newspaper circulation it is highly likely that there are more people in a constituency using Twitter than reading the local evening or weekly newspaper. That fact alone is a compelling reason to be using Twitter as today it is just a part of everyday life where you need to be just as you need to be in the local newspaper and delivering leaflets through peoples' doors.

The Government Digital Service's Social Media Playbook[iii] sets out the strong case for using social media in the public sector and exactly the same applies to elected politicians. For politicians Twitter is most successful when it is used to listen and learn as well as to say what you want to. It is best when used as a personal channel to talk directly with people, rather than being used as a one way broadcast channel. One of its main advantages is it enables people to understand the 'real' person and helps to combat the commonly held belief that politicians aren't 'in touch' with normal people and that you 'only see them at election times'.

There is no one way to run your Twitter account as it depends on what you want to achieve with it, but there are some basic guidelines to help you succeed, which this report intends to outline. Some politicians will focus their Twitter activity on local constituency issues, for others it will be their national political brief perhaps as a minister or shadow minister. The best will usually be a combination of both as Twitter is meant to be about you and that reflects the reality of what you do. You don't need to share personal information relating to your family or leisure activities, but doing so helps people to understand you and relate to you better.

Twitter is a real-time medium and means that we now no longer live in a 24 hour news cycle, but in a 24 second news cycle which is the length of time it takes to compose a tweet and for it to be retweeted.

Top ten Twitter tips

1) Tweet yourself and be yourself
2) Tell the truth, all the time
3) Talk less than you listen
4) Tools make it easier and more effective
5) Your team can help you, but can't do it for you
6) Tweets should never be deleted
7) Hashtags improve engagement, but should be used sparingly
8) Lists save you time
9) Your views aren't your own
10) Photos and video make it more interesting

Setting Twitter up

Who should tweet?

You should. Twitter is personal so if you set-up a Twitter account with your name then you should be the person tweeting. Tweeting should not be delegated to a member of staff. That doesn't mean to say your team can't support you to help you get the most out of Twitter. If you can't commit to using Twitter properly then don't set up a Twitter account in your name. If you don't want to tweet yourself then it is better to set up an account for your office or for your local party which can quite legitimately be used by your team. However, you need to remember the appropriate use of parliamentary resources and ensure you don't inadvertently or incorrectly use them for party political purposes. An office or party account is unlikely to be as effective or successful as a personal account as organisations don't tweet, people do.[iv]

Account name

The ideal Twitter account name will be your actual name, however if you don't already have an account it is unlikely that your name will still be available. Possible alternatives are to include MP, however if you do so then you will need to temporarily change it when parliament is dissolved. Another option is to add an abbreviation for your party or constituency. You should aim to make your username as short as possible as this makes it easier for people to retweet you and send you @messages as it uses less characters.

Profile

Your profile should make it easy for people to work out who you are so should ideally include your party, constituency and any official job you hold in your party or government. You have a limited number of characters, but if you have space you might want list the places that make up your constituency, especially if it is a rural one where not every part of it relates closely to another part. Alternatively, active or experienced Twitter users can opt for a more humorous biography such as perhaps quoting a self-depreciating description from the media.

Views are my own

If you're a politician your Twitter profile should never say 'Views are my own', 'Personal views', 'Retweets don't indicate an endorsement' or anything similar. The fact that you hold public office means that your views will be interpreted by people as representing the views of your position and party. Including this disclaimer doesn't protect you or make people less likely to think this. It can also be dangerous as it can provide you with a false sense of security.

Profile photo

The best Twitter profile photos are full face so your tweets can easily be identified from just your photo. A profile photo is square and is best uploaded as a 500x500px image as it will be scaled down to the correct size for your profile (77x77px) and actual tweets (48x48px).

Header photo

A header photo appears at the top of your Twitter page and a suitable image would be similar to the type you would use on your website such as a photo of you standing in front of a landmark in your constituency. It should be uploaded as a 1500x500px image and will be displayed as 935x280px and can be up to 2MB in size.

Location

Including both your constituency and Westminster is the most accurate description to use, but means that your Twitter account might not appear when people are researching 'local' Twitter users. Therefore it might be better just to use the name of the place where your constituency office is located.

Security and safety

It is important for everyone that they understand internet and social media security and safety. For public figures it is even more important as your social media accounts are more vulnerable to being targeted. The first step is to use a strong password, which should be different for every single account you use. The second is to turn on verification requests (under settings/security) so that you need to receive a code via SMS before you can log-in from a different device.

If you give access to your Twitter account to a member of your staff it is better to do so using a service such as Hootsuite so you don't share your actual password with them. This means you can revoke their access via Hootsuite rather than needing to change your password.

The tweet location setting allows Twitter to add your location to your tweet. You need to consider if this is a feature you really want to turn on as you probably usually don't want to broadcast your location. You can also turn this on and off for individual tweets.

URL

The URL field on your Twitter profile can be used to direct people to your parliamentary or political website. Ideally your website should have a page which describes your approach to using Twitter and social media. You can use this page to explain to people why you can only take up case work for people in your own constituency.

Verified accounts

A verified account is one with a blue tick to indicate that Twitter has verified the account really does belong to the person it says it is. Unfortunately, there is no way of applying for a verified account and it is up to Twitter who gets one. The criteria it usually applies is 'if you need one' because there is scope for confusion, imitation or parody. That is why some politicians have verified accounts and others don't. Pure follower numbers isn't the main criteria. Twitter has a guide to verified accounts.[v]

Social media governance

It can be a good idea to publish a page on your website detailing which social media channels you use and how you use them. It can cover issues such as how you can only deal with case work from constituents and also what you consider to be 'acceptable' behaviour and that you won't tolerate abuse or obscenities.

Using Twitter for listening

Search

If you use Twitter just to talk at people or with people then you're missing out on one of its most useful benefits – intelligence gathering. It is a good idea to set up a series of searches to help you spot conversations about your constituency and issues that you are active on. It takes some work to set these searches up as you have to experiment with filters so that you aren't inundated by irrelevant tweets, but don't miss relevant ones.

You can use Boolean algebra to set up complicated searches such as AND, NOT, OR etc.

Creating content for Twitter

Every day tweets

There is no golden rule as to how frequently you should tweet, other than to do so when you have something interesting or worthwhile to say or when you need to reply to someone. In practice tweeting three to nine times a day can work well as less frequently means you'll get lost in a plethora of other tweets and too frequently will risk alienating some of your followers.

You can tweet about almost anything and it is the variety that it most likely to keep people interested. Tweet about a mix of your constituency activity, parliamentary activity, personal life as well as opinions and views on what is happening on issues you care about. Tweet about things normal people are interested in like music, sport, films and TV. But make it genuine, don't fake an interest in your local football team or Coronation Street if that's not your thing.

Beware of doing too many clichéd politician's tweets such as you going out campaigning in your constituency or boasting about the number of doors you've knocked on or 'contacts' you've made. It's good to do some of that as it helps motivate and encourage your activists, but too much of will alienate normal people for whom politics is dull, boring, strange and alien.

When you're sharing pictures, videos and websites remember that 80% of UK Twitter users access it via mobile[vi] so won't be able to easily look at big, long or complicated content.

You don't need to create all of the content yourself as an important part of using Twitter is to share other people's tweets and content. You can do this by retweeting people or by tweeting links to interesting and relevant things that you find. This is often called 'content curation'.

The most important single thing to remember is to be human. Twitter is for real people so don't be afraid of personality or humour, but remember that spoken irony doesn't always translate well into characters on a screen.

Case work

If you are using Twitter then it is likely that constituents will use it to contact you about case work. If it is a community issue then Twitter is actually a good place to do it as by doing it publicly more people will see that you are actively engaged on the issue. However, if it is case work of a more personal nature then it is usually best to try and move it off Twitter into how you deal with your usual case work. Reply to suggest they phone or email your office or attend one of your advice surgeries. If the constituent has shared personal data on Twitter (such as their address, phone number or email) then advise them to delete it (this is one of the rare exceptions when deleting a tweet is acceptable).

The 60 second rule

Because it is so quick and easy to tweet people make mistakes and there have been several high profile examples of political gaffes. This isn't a reason to be afraid of Twitter as it's also possible to make similar mistakes when make off the cuff remarks in public meetings or interviews with mainstream media journalists. In fact Twitter can be safer if you apply the 60 second rule and wait one minute before pressing the tweet button. This gives you an opportunity to think about what you've just said, which you wouldn't have in a meeting or live interview.

As well as following the 60 second rule it's sensible to never tweet while drunk!

Party tweets

Beware of using tweets that have been prepared by your party as Twitter works best when it is authentic and personal and therefore isn't the place to use your 'lines to take'. If you want to share them it is better to retweet the official party account or even better that of your party spokesperson on the issue.

Rebuttal and corrections

Twitter can also be extremely effective for rebutting inaccurate information in the media or from fellow politicians. It can even be used to hold journalists to account before an article is published.

Good examples of this include Baron Prescott (John Prescott) who has used his Twitter account to push The Sunday Times into making an apology by lunchtime on the day that an inaccurate story was published. Another is Ed Staite, a former Conservative Party media director, who used his blog and Twitter account to successfully combat a 'sting' by The Sunday Times Insight team.[vii]

You can also use Twitter to 'fact check'. For example if an opponent is claiming to have been contacted by residents complaining about a particular issue and you haven't been contacted by very many (or any!) you can ask people to come forward on Twitter. When they don't you can challenge your opponent.

Twitter chats

Twitter chats are discussions that take place on Twitter on a specific topic or issue, usually at a specific time using a hashtag. You might find that there is a regular Twitter chat that happens about a place in your constituency (these often have the hashtag #TownHour) or about issues you're active on.

Promoted tweets

Promoted tweets are relatively new and are one of Twitter's advertising products. You can pay to promote certain tweets to specific audiences (including targeting them geographically). Potentially this could be used for local election campaigning, but would need to be declared as spend in the same way that other campaign expenditure is.

Twitter etiquette

Followers and following

You don't need to follow everyone back who follows you. In fact it is probably not a good idea to follow everyone. One of the main advantages of following someone is that they will know that you have followed them and most people will take that positively as a compliment. However, it also enables them to send you direct messages so you can open yourself up to receiving lots of private messages and potentially abuse.

It is however considered to be 'rude' to not follow anyone back. A sensible approach is to follow people you know in real life, fellow politicians, journalists and other key influencers. You might also want to consider following people who you've had positive Twitter conversations with or who regularly favourite your tweets.

A useful tool to help you identify new people to follow is @MagicRecs which sends you an automated direct message whenever a lot of people you follow start to follow someone new or retweet something.

Never delete a tweet

If you make a mistake on Twitter and tweet something you later regret then it is best to apologise, but leave the original tweet in place. If it is embarrassing in anyway it will almost certainly have been saved by someone and they will highlight the fact that you have tried to hide your mistake by deleting it, which will usually result in even greater attention than the original tweet. The Politwoops[viii] website does exactly that and publishes all the tweets deleted by politicians.

The only time it is wholly necessary to delete one of your own tweets is when there is a legal reason for doing so. It can sometimes be acceptable to delete a tweet when you have made a simple factual mistake such as the wrong time or venue for an event when you can delete it and do a new tweet with the correct details.

Your Twitter account hasn't been hacked

This is an excuse often used by high profile people or organisations who make an embarrassing mistake on Twitter. However, even if it was true it is not a legitimate excuse as so many people have lied about it that it simply isn't believed. There is even an Urban Dictionary definition about it.[ix]

Twitter Hack

Noun. An excuse for in the case of getting caught sexting someone, regardless of medium (e.g. Twitter, cell phone, facebook, etc). Regardless of how you got caught, you can always claim you were hacked.

I didn't send that dirty picture of myself! I was Twitter Hacked!

If you've set a secure password and are careful about what links you click and what permissions to third-party services and apps you allow then it is highly unlikely that your Twitter account will be hacked.

Trolls and arguments

To the uninitiated Twitter can appear like the Wild West and there can be some very aggressive and rude people. If tweets are so offensive that they violate Twitter's terms of service it is best to report them to Twitter. However, if they are simply rude then it is usually best to ignore them.

If you start to get into an argument on Twitter then don't let it continue for more than two or three tweets. After this simply stop responding or try to take it offline by speaking to the person directly.

It is possible to 'block' persistent offenders, but his often isn't effective as the person can simply set up another account to continue the harassment.

Fake and parody accounts

Because Twitter accounts can be set up quickly and anonymously it is easy for people to set-up fake or parody accounts about you or against you. Unless the accounts are being really offensive (and therefore breaching Twitter's terms of service) it is usually best to ignore them. Reporting them will often result in greater publicity and attention than the original account and therefore make the problem worse rather than solving it.

A fake or parody account is less likely to succeed if you are already actively using Twitter, as they are most likely to succeed when you have left a vacuum because of your own inactivity.

Twitter best practice

Length

Although tweets can be up to 140 characters it is better to keep them under 100 characters as short tweets usually get a better engagement rate (RTs, favourites, clicks etc.) and it makes it easier for people to retweet you.

Retweets

Politicians need to think carefully before they retweet as simply putting 'RTs are not an endorsement' in your Twitter profile won't stop people thinking that they are. It is always better to use the option to 'Quote tweet' as this enables you edit it and add comment or context.

If you do edit the tweet it should only be to shorten it and not change the meaning and you should always change the RT (for retweet) to MT (for modified tweet). You can add you comment at the end using > to indicate you've added to the original tweet.

It isn't good practice to constantly retweet tweets that praise you, or even to sarcastically retweet tweets that criticise you. It is too aggrandising and pompous. A better idea is to favourite them (see below).

Replies and conversations

If you start a conversation or reply to another Twitter user using @username the only people who usually see that tweet are people who follow both you and the person you are talking to. If you want everyone to see the tweet you must trick Twitter into not realising it is a conversation by putting a full stop in front of the user name. You only need to do this if the name is at the start of the tweet, not if it is part way through the tweet.

#Hashtags

A #hashtag is simply a way for Twitter users to organise information and make it easier to share and find. All it means is putting a # in front of a word or phrase.

Hashtags should be used sparingly and are best used as part of the text rather than simply added on to the end. Never use more than two hashtags per tweet and ensure that they are relevant to the tweet content. This means don't gratuitously add in a hashtag for places in your constituency if the tweet isn't directly relevant to the place. If you are at an event make sure you use the right hashtag that other people and/or the organisers are using. Try to make your hashtags as short as possible to keep the total character count as low as possible so that followers can add comment when they retweet. Research by Twitter[x] indicates that tweets with a hashtag are likely to have 30% more retweets.

Photos and videos

Research by Twitter[xi] indicates that photos are more effective for verified users in government and politics than any other area with a significant increase in retweets (62% higher).

Photographs can make your tweets a lot more interesting and relevant to people. However, not every photograph needs to be of you! Share the love and take photographs of interesting things that you see happening when you're out and about in your constituency or attending events. The UK Government Digital Service advises that sharing photos using Twitter or Flickr is more effective than using the photo-sharing network Instagram.[xii]

You do want to include some photographs of you in action and the easiest way to do this is ask a member of your team, or if at an event one of the organisers, to take your phone and take one or two pictures which you can tweet later.
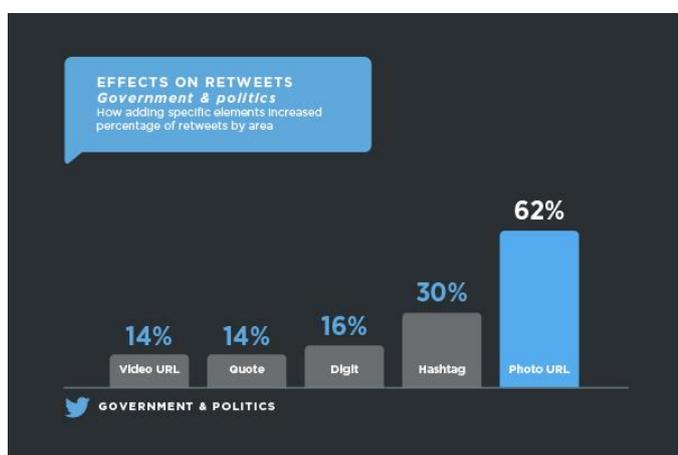
Another option is to use short videos. Twitter has a service called Vine which lets you share a six second video on both the Vine social network (which needs a separate app on your phone) and on Twitter so everyone can see it. You can also use a 15 second Instagram video, which can also be shared on Twitter, as well as the Instagram social network. One benefit of Instragram videos is that they are created using the Instagram mobile app which has far more active users than Vine as it is the same app as people use for sharing photos.

Favourites

Your favourites list is public and therefore other people can see what you add to it. You should therefore never use it as a reminder list of things you are interested in as there have been several examples of high profile people favouriting tweets that they would rather people didn't know they'd favourited.

One of the best ways to use your favourite list is to favourite every tweet where someone says something nice or positive about you. This has two benefits. Firstly, they will know you have done this so it is a way of saying thank you. Secondly, it creates a neat list of positive things about you that is easy to find when people are researching you.

Direct messages

You can send direct messages to people that are following you. A direct message is a private message that only you can see. It is essential that you use this feature carefully as there have been several high profile cases of politicians accidentally sending what they thought were direct messages, but were actually public.

Lists

It is very easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tweets from people you follow or are interested in. One of the most effective ways of preventing this is to use lists which enable you to see tweets from accounts you've added. You don't even need to be following someone to add them to a list. You can also create private lists which allow you to follow someone's tweets (perhaps a political opponent or campaign group) without them knowing that you are following them.

You can also create public lists that you can share with people. Creating and sharing these public lists can be seen as an act of public service and doing good in your constituency.

It is up to you how you organise your lists, but some categories that work well could be:

Public lists: local party activists; local community activists (residents' association members etc.), local businesses, local public sector organisations and services; official government accounts and civil servants

Private lists: favourites (ones that you want to see all of the time and you can also add them to other lists); journalists; opponents (opposition candidates, activists, councillors etc.); friends and colleagues; other MPs (this is private as you're likely to be selective and not include everyone)

Automation

Twitter is a social platform and therefore any automation should be used carefully as by definition any automated tool ceases to be personal or social. However, automation can be useful in certain circumstances.

One of the most commonly used types of automation is scheduling tweets, which can be done through many third-party apps or by dedicated services such as Bufferapp. One way to use scheduling might be to schedule a tweet for when you arrive at an event as you will want to be talking to people as you arrive, not tweeting.

However, you need to be cautious and remember to remove the scheduled tweet if circumstances change e.g. you don't attend the event or are delayed arriving.

Bufferapp can be useful if you tend to use Twitter in bursts, such as after breakfast. Using it will mean your tweets will be spread out through the day rather than a sudden burst of activity and then nothing for hours.

Links and URL shortening

A link to a website will usually get more clicks if it is part of the way through the tweet rather than at the end.

Twitter automatically shortens website addresses so it doesn't use too many characters. However, it is better to use a third-party service such as Bit.ly[xiii] as it provides you with analytics about who has clicked and shared the link. You can create a personal account on Bit.ly to keep all of your URLs in one place. Be aware that other people can see the Bit.ly analytics (or indeed you can see other people's) by simply adding a + sign to the end of the short URL.

Third-party apps

There are many third-party Twitter apps available for Android, iOS and Windows Phone mobiles and tablets. It is usually better to use a third-party app as most offer far more features and functionality than are available on the Twitter website or the official Twitter apps. These include updating multiple social media accounts (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn), searches, scheduling tweets, syncing read/unread tweets between different devices, easier access to lists, linking to your URL shortening account and many others.

One of the most popular powerful apps is Hootsuite, which is free for one user and up to five social media accounts and then very low cost for additional users and more accounts. Other similar dashboard apps include SproutSocial and MarketMeSuite.

Echosec[xiv] is another useful tool, which doesn't enable you to tweet, but does help you to find local Twitter and social media users. You can draw a rectangle or circle around a specific geographic area and see tweets within it. This is a paid service, but there is a free demonstration version. This is potentially one of the most useful tools for MPs as it enables them to identify social media activity in their own constituency.

There are hundreds of apps and websites that enable you to get more out of Twitter and some of them are listed on this list of 101 Twitter tools[xv]. Some of these tools are free and others a 'freemium' which means certain features are free, but to access everything you need to pay a small, usually monthly, fee. One downside of some of these tools is that they are created by small developers so can disappear or change with no or very little notice.

Twitter analytics dashboard

The good news is that Twitter now enables you to look at your Twitter analytics and see which tweets worked best. The bad news is that you'll see that a lot less people see your tweets than you thought. Even if you have thousands of followers your impressions can be in the low hundreds or low thousands.

You can see it at https://analytics.twitter.com/ , but you'll need to turn it on first.

This will enable you to see how many impressions (number of times users saw the tweet on Twitter) you've had over the last month as well as impressions and engagement (retweets, favourites, clicks, replies etc.) data for individual tweets. Clicking on details will show you a bar chart showing the times of the impressions

Support from your team

Twitter is personal and you should be tweeting yourself, but there are many ways your staff can help you to do it better and save you time. This can be even more effective if you use an app such as Hootsuite which is designed to enable more than one person to manage a Twitter account.

Searches – setting up search filters to find tweets about places, people and events in your constituency or on issues you are interested in.

Monitoring – watching your account and search filters to identify tweets that you will be interested in and perhaps need to respond to personally

Creating lists – setting up lists as described above.

Research - identifying new people to follow and engage in conversation.

Content curation – setting up RSS feeds into a reader such as Feedly so you can see relevant stories and news. They can alert you to content worth sharing on Twitter.

Analytics – analysing the data on your dashboard to help identify which tweets worked best so that you can see patterns such as what topics work best, what are the best times of day etc.

Next steps

The best way for politicians to learn how to use Twitter effectively is to start doing it. This guide has been written specifically for MPs and members of the House of Lords, but does not cover every tip. There are a wealth of useful resources available on the internet including the Twitter Guide Book from Mashable.[xvi]

The Government Digital Service also publishes useful guidance such as its Social Media Guidance for Civil Servants[xvii] and its Social Media Playbook[xviii].

About the Chartered Institute of Public Relations

Founded in 1948, the Chartered Institute of Public relations (CIPR) is the professional body for public relations practitioners in the UK. With over 10,000 members involved in all aspects of PR, it is the largest body of its type in Europe. The CIPR advances the public relations profession in the UK by making its members accountable through a code of conduct, developing policies, representing its members and raising standards through education and training.

About Stuart Bruce FCIPR

Stuart Bruce is a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, an elected member of its national council and a founder member of its Social Media Panel. He is also a visiting lecturer at Leeds Beckett University and has lectured on political communication at Moscow State University. Stuart has also advised senior Labour politicians on communications and social media.

Stuart has more than 25 years' experience in public relations and public affairs. He is internationally recognised as an innovator in modernised public relations and has been practising online PR since the late-90s. In 2003 he started writing what was one of the world's first public relations blogs (www.stuartbruce.biz) and in January 2007 was one of the early users of Twitter (@stuartbruce). In 2003 he was also the first councillor and third elected politician in the UK to publish a blog.

[i] Wikipedia definition of Twitter http://sbpr.co/1tQiBLp
[ii] DigitalBuzz Social Media Stats http://sbpr.co/1w5d3TC
[iii] Government Digital Service Social Media Playbook http://sbpr.co/UKgovsocialmediaplaybook

[iv] Organisations Don't Tweet, People Do; Euan Semple http://sbpr.co/1q0UFZj
[v] Twitter FAQ Verified Accounts http://sbpr.co/1FTtBx6
[vi] Twitter blog 80% of UK users access Twitter via their mobile http://sbpr.co/1vTCMeF
[vii] Social media crisis comms – outflanking the Sunday Times on stuartbruce.biz http://sbpr.co/H9nTOw
[viii] Politwoops Tweets MPs Delete http://sbpr.co/1Asfz4v
[ix] Urban Dictionary: Twitter Hack http://sbpr.co/1ymP0j9
[x] Twitter Government and Politics: The impact of tweeting with photos, videos, hashtags and links http://sbpr.co/1wE8hMG
[xi] Twitter Government and Politics: The impact of tweeting with photos, videos, hashtags and links http://sbpr.co/1wE8hMG
[xii] Government Digital Service Social Media Playbook http://sbpr.co/15Sz1Oi
[xiii] Bitly URL shortener https://bitly.com/
[xiv] Echosec location based search http://sbpr.co/echosec
[xv] CommsAxis 101 Tweet-tastic tools for 2014 http://sbpr.co/1ywcDEL
[xvi] Mashable UK Twitter Guide Book http://sbpr.co/mashabletwitterguide
[xvii] Cabinet Office Social Media Guidelines for Civil Servants http://sbpr.co/UKgovsocialmediaguide
[xviii] Government Digital Service Social Media Playbook http://sbpr.co/UKgovsocialmediaplaybook