

# Guidelines on the use of social media by ministers and parliamentary secretaries

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*These guidelines were originally issued by the Commissioner for Standards in Public Life on 7 May 2020 as part of his report on case K/010. As is stated in the case report, the government was consulted over the guidelines when they were still in draft form, and it agreed that ministers and parliamentary secretaries should adhere to them. The guidelines are being reissued as a standalone document for greater ease of reference.*

## **Introduction**

1. These guidelines aim to establish a clear distinction between:
  - (a) official social media use for government communication purposes; and
  - (b) personal use of social media by ministers and parliamentary secretaries, in so far as use of public funds and resources and official content are concerned.
  
2. These guidelines do not deal exhaustively with all issues arising from the use of social media, and neither do they cover the use of specific social media tools. If it so chooses, the government may therefore incorporate them in a broader set of instructions on the use of social media.

## **The use of social media for official government communications**

3. Official use implies that social media is used for the express purpose of communications on behalf of a ministry, department or other government entity, or of the government as a whole. Communications may be made by the entity or government in its own right or in connection with a specific official policy, programme or activity. The protocols that apply when one is acting as an official representative of the government or a government entity should be the same whether one is interacting with the press, speaking at a conference, or using social media.
  
4. Official social media channels should have the following characteristics:
  - (a) they are financed through public funds;
  - (b) they are administered and maintained by public employees using public resources and equipment, or by third parties who have been contracted by the entity and are acting under its direction;
  - (c) the content of such channels is non-partisan;
  - (d) it is clear from the content that each channel is an official one, with the use of official symbols and other identifying material as appropriate;

- (e) such channels aim to inform, educate, reach out to, consult, engage with or seek feedback from the public in a transparent and accountable manner.
5. Official social media channels should not include:
- (a) personal logos;
  - (b) political content or partisan statements;
  - (c) references to unofficial activities by individuals holding state office;
  - (d) expressions of personal views by individuals holding state office.

### **The use of personal social media channels by ministers and parliamentary secretaries**

6. Personal social media use means the use of social media for purposes other than official governmental purposes. Such purposes may relate to the user's private life or professional and political activities, including the expression of their political views. Personal social media channels remain the responsibility of the individual regardless of their profession, job or position in government.

7. Ministers and parliamentary secretaries have the same rights to free expression as any other person. As such, ministers and parliamentary secretaries can use their social media channels to publish content relating to their personal, social and professional lives as well as party-political content. They can also link to or share content from official social media channels. This is subject to any obligations arising from their official roles that carry over to their personal behaviour, and subject to the need to maintain a clear distinction between their private social media channels and official social media channels.

8. Personal social media channels should adhere to the following rules:
- (a) under no circumstance should such channels benefit from public funds and resources, whether directly or indirectly, even in relation to content that deals with the official activities of a minister or parliamentary secretary, except through the sharing of official content as indicated below;
  - (b) such channels should not give the impression that they are official in nature;
  - (c) accordingly, government or other official symbols and identifiers cannot be used, except through the sharing of official content as indicated below;
  - (d) official audio-visual material that has already been published can be shared, as long as it is clear that such content is being shared from an official source;
  - (e) official audio-visual material that has been generated for official purposes but not published can be used, as long as the source is acknowledged.
9. These guidelines are summarised in graphical form on the next page.

CAN A SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNEL:	OFFICIAL (MINISTRY) SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNEL	MINISTER'S PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNEL
Include content about the Minister's official activities?	✓	✓
Provide official information about the ministry's work?	✓	✓
Include content about the Minister's political activities?	✗	✓
Include an expression of the Minister's political views?	✗	✓
Include content about the Minister's family or personal life?	✗	✓
Include content that has been produced using public funds or resources?	✓	✗
Be administered and updated by public employees during their working hours?	✓	✗
Feature an official logo, except for shared or reposted official content?	✓	✗
Feature the Minister's personal logo?	✗	✓
Be administered and updated by privately funded third parties?	✗	✓
Be administered and updated by third parties contracted using public funds?	✓	✗
Share or repost official content that is already in the public domain?	✓	✓