



National  
Co-ordinating  
Centre for  
Public Engagement

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# How to... ...work with digital media

# Introduction

If you want to reach wider audiences and encourage a more two-way participation, you might want to consider using online and digital technology to reach your audience. It can be a very cost-efficient way of connecting with your audience, at a time that suits them, and you, over a long period. The web is uniquely suited to interactivity and the use of multimedia, so don't forget to think of ways to enable your audience to contribute.

## Guidelines & approach

What are the advantages of using digital media?

- Aside from the initial outlay involved in building a new website, using online media can be inexpensive. You do not need a venue because the internet provides a virtual venue for you.
- You can interact with people at a time that suits you, and more importantly, at a time that suits them. You don't both need to be online at the same time. This way you can reach much wider audiences than a physical event would ever allow.
- People with shared interests tend to congregate online, for example within forums dedicated to a common interest – in this way you can hope to target very specific audiences.
- Digital media, and social networking in particular, lends itself very well to interaction and audience participation. You can get people to do the leg work for you - if you grab their attention, or set them a challenge, they will forward your questions to their friends and followers, thereby disseminating information and gathering data rapidly.

## What can you do with digital media?

There are many ways of using the internet and digital technology, both as a means of running large scale, participative projects, and as a marketing tool for other projects and events. There are many different types, and a number of different ways, of using online media:

### Hosting a website

**Information sharing:** If you are running an engagement project you might wish to create a website (or web pages hosted via your organisation's website) to support it, act as a depository for resources and link to updates, articles and further information.

**The web as a venue:** The website itself could constitute the engagement project; acting as a virtual venue to host discussions and display contributions from audience members.

**Providing a portal:** If your engagement project involves prolonged audience interaction, you might want to create a restricted access facility on your site, in the form of a portal which enables users to share experiences and access advice and resources.

**Blogging:** A blog is a dedicated webpage, which features regular articles (written in the form of a personal account) on a given topic. It is usually created using blog software templates (e.g. blogger

and blogspot). Most blogs have a comment facility so that readers can contribute, thereby starting or continuing conversations. A blog can also be used as a means of reporting and sharing outcomes from events and network activity.

## Social media

Social networking sites are highly participative and dissemination is very fast. They are a great opportunity to start conversations, gather data, and consult a potentially very wide audience.

Some of the most popular social media include:

**Facebook:** users become 'friends' with people and create profiles which they update with pictures, links and comments which appear in the 'newsfeeds' of their followers. They can also join 'pages' and 'groups' dedicated to certain topics. You could create a Facebook page to interact with your audience.

**Twitter:** a site where people write short comments (up to 140 characters), known as 'tweets', which then appear in the timeline of their followers. There is also a facility whereby people can 're-tweet' (forward) other people's posts. They can also post links and pictures. In order to group 'tweets', people can add a 'hashtag' (a word preceded by a hash symbol) which helps to categorise comments. This means that wide audiences can contribute to multi-user conversations by adding their own comments.

**Forums:** some people join discussion forums which are dedicated to a specific topic or series of topics e.g. 'Mumsnet' for expectant mothers and mothers of young children and 'Digital Spy' where people discuss entertainment programmes. You can contribute to their conversations, thereby engaging a very specific group.

## Collaborative working

Wikis, the most famous of which is Wikipedia, are websites that allow the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages. They can be edited by all users. This means that information and resources can be co-generated with your audience.

## Video, image and audio sharing

Online media lends itself very well to using multimedia options. You can use videos, images and audio to illustrate your points.

**Podcasting.** You can create video or audio podcasts to engage listeners/viewers. These can be hosted directly on your website or via third party sites.

**Video sharing sites.** There are a number of sites dedicated to sharing videos (the most famous of which is YouTube). Users can comment on videos, which means that, more than just imparting information; videos can be used to start conversations. Users can also be challenged to make their own videos in response, which are then linked to the original video.

**Picture sharing.** Sites such as Picasa and Flickr, are a means of sharing images, which can be tagged according to category. This is an opportunity not only to illustrate your research but also to create engaging projects whereby users can contribute their own images and impressions.

## Other platforms

**Gaming.** Many people use the web for playing games, from simple flash games (e.g. at Miniclip), through to multiplayer, role playing games such as 'World of Warcraft'. The creation of games which can be played online may be an opportunity for your audiences to learn and engage while having fun.

**Virtual worlds.** Some people spend time in virtual communities, such as Second Life, where they can purchase and build on virtual land. Users create an 'avatar' (virtual representation of themselves) and can walk around the virtual world, interacting with and talking to other users. It is possible to host a virtual discussion event or lecture which users are invited to attend.

**Mobile phones.** More and more people are using their mobile phones to access the internet, particularly since the advent of smartphones. You may wish to explore ways that enable engagement through mobile phones, including the design of apps (applications) which they can download. (See [appmakr](#)).

## Getting started - planning and research

- Do your research. As with any engagement project, do your research first. Take time to think about your audience – who do you want to engage and why? Think about the most appropriate places to reach them. There are places online where people already congregate, so with a little research you should be able to target your audience very effectively. Ask yourself if your chosen medium is really appropriate e.g. if you create a Facebook group, why would people want to join?
- Listen. Use digital media to gain an insight into your audiences before you engage them. Take some time to observe conversations currently taking place online.
- Use digital media yourself. Take time to use different digital platforms – work out how you interact with it, how others tend to use it, and how you can make this work to your advantage. The way people interact online changes frequently, so becoming an active user will help you to stay up to date.
- Market externally. Don't assume that simply creating a website will automatically attract visitors. The World Wide Web is huge and you need to find ways to get people to visit your site. This might include offline marketing and online marketing. Combine your webpage with a Facebook group and a twitter page. Visit forums. Post links to other sites and ask them to reciprocate.
- Think about interactivity. People expect to be able to comment or contribute online. Think of ways that you can enable participation from your audience e.g. a comment facility, questions to answer, a link to forward, or the option to upload their own ideas/videos/audio/images etc

If you decide to build a webpage to support or run an engagement project, there are a number of things you need to think about before you get started:

**What's in a name?** Your website's URL (or your profile name if using social media) is the way that your audience will identify you as relevant to them. It is tricky to change a URL at a later point so make sure you choose wisely. Does it explain who you are and what you are trying to achieve?

**Think key words.** Don't expect to be at the top of every Google search. You will need to drive traffic to your site in order to improve your Google ranking. However, there are some things you can do to increase your rating e.g. inserting metatags, creating links and ensuring that key words (i.e. search terms) are present, right there on your front page.

**De-clutter your website.** Make sure your website is clear, uncluttered and that navigation is easy. People get bored easily on the web so if they have to search for information, or go through hundreds of links to reach the one they want, they will give up.

**Consider accessibility.** Make sure that you consider accessibility issues. Avoid using bright colours and complicated fonts.

## Writing for digital media

Writing for online media requires a different set of considerations than writing for print publications. Blogs and web pages should be:

**Short, punchy and informal.** Write in first or second person, rather than the more formal third person used in most reporting and academic writing.

**Full of links.** The great thing about the web is the potential to create links to further information. Keep it short and let the links do the explaining for you.

**Fun.** Most people go online for entertainment purposes, so keep it light.

**Up to date.** It soon becomes obvious if a website or social media profile is not kept up to date, and people will stop visiting. Create a plan to update regularly and to monitor contributions.

**Broken up.** Web usability studies show that web users tend to skim read. Also, large blocks of text are difficult to read on screen. Break it up with sub-headings and bullet points, and make sure that the most important information is available to read right away.

**Inclusive.** Be careful of inclusion in the language you use. The web has the potential for a global reach – national and international, young and old, and from a diverse array of backgrounds. Think about who you are writing for, and edit with that audience in mind but be aware that those outside of your target audience may read what you write.

**More than words.** The web lends itself to multimedia formats. Can you include other audio, video or imagery?

## Things to think about

**Adapt to the technology.** Don't expect technology to work the way you want it to work for you – you need to adapt to the way people choose to interact online.

**Grab their attention.** Remember why people use social media - for fun and socialisation. It needs to be fun or to have a social element, or they just won't pay attention.

**Make it interactive.** Make the most of the participative potential of digital technology, and empower your audience, by finding ways for people to interact (e.g. by adding comments, submitting their own contributions, participation in conversations, and forwarding/disseminating.)

**Create the need for a response.** Social media is designed for people to share, thereby spreading ideas to wide audiences rapidly. But you need to give them a reason to share – ask questions, set challenges, request contributions and provide links which they can disseminate to their followers.

**Be wary of heated exchanges and abuse.** People can get very angry and offensive behind the anonymity of a screen name. Monitor comments and be prepared to calm situations.

**Think before you post.** Beware of ambiguity in tone. Sarcasm doesn't always sound like sarcasm when it's written down.

**The web is permanent.** Be careful what you say – everybody can see the comments you make online, and once they are posted, it can be difficult to retract them, so try not to be drawn into conflicts.

**Be aware of the limitations.** Online media will exclude those who do not have access or lack technical skills. Some institutions, such as schools or workplaces, may block the use of certain sites and social networking platforms.

## Top tips

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You're running an engagement project, so you need a website, right? Not so fast, let's think this through:

- **Go to your audiences;** don't expect them to come to you. Your audiences might spend a chunk of their time online, but that doesn't mean they'll find – let alone visit – your project's website. If your audiences already cluster on Facebook or Twitter, maybe you can join them there rather than starting from scratch. Or, perhaps you could approach a popular blog or discussion forum and discuss a tie-up. Explore existing communities before trying to start a new one.
- **Don't reinvent the wheel.** If you do build your own site, look around for the off-the-shelf system that comes closest to what you want, and 'make do' with that. You'll save an awful lot of faffing about, and chances are the twiddly bits you thought you needed will turn out to be not so crucial after all. If you don't know where to start, sign up for a free account at wordpress.com, Tumblr, Posterous, or Wikia.
- **Start conversations.** The joy – and pain – of the web is its two-way nature. So think less about what information you can disseminate, and more in terms of sparking conversations.
- **Continue conversations.** The real value comes in engaging your audience in dialogue – that's where the high-quality impacts are to be had. So once you've started conversations be aware that you're in it for the long run.
- **Keep it short.** Audiences appreciate brevity: you hone your message so they don't waste time reading more than is necessary. Short articles; short films; pithy comment.

- **Regular beats occasional.** Updating your web presence once a term guarantees nobody will pay any attention. Update it three or more times a week and if they like what you post, they'll refresh several times a day to check if there's anything new.
- **Think long-term.** Suppose you're building an education resource: what happens when the project finishes? If you don't know, or you can't say, teachers won't write your resources into their lesson plans, because you might not be there next year. So what's your legacy plan?
- **Be generous.** If you lock everything behind a registration system, or tie it up with restrictive IP licensing, you'll deter people from getting involved in your project. How open can you be?
- **Be human.** Audiences respond to personal, passionate voices. So don't hide behind bland corporate writing, don't put on professional airs if you're making a film: be direct and open. Show your excitement. Be yourself.



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