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## **Improving online political literacy for effective public engagement**



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**Making a difference to policy outcomes locally, nationally and globally**

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**IPPI POLICY BRIEF**

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# Improving online political literacy for effective public engagement

Dr. Mark Shephard

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*This Policy Brief draws on the author's research of online social media discourse during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. It aims to stimulate classroom discussion and awareness of how to improve online literacy for effective political and public engagement. Using examples from research of online discussions of the Scottish independence referendum, it identifies online behaviours that undermine effective public and political engagement (5 F's to avoid), as well as things to be aware of when reading and/or entering into debate with others online (5 F's to consider). This IPPI Policy Brief is aimed at those who teach social media in the classroom as well as for any citizen who reads and/or engages in debate online.*

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## I Introduction and background

Social media use has gone from a small minority activity to a majority activity within a relatively short space of time (Ofcom, 2015) and is particularly popular with younger people (Langford and Baldwin, 2013). Even if you do not use social media you are likely to indirectly consume it as traditional media not only responds to stories that start on social media, but often include extracts in their coverage. As well as the opportunities to share information and to interact with others using social media, the Youth Citizenship Commission (2009) identified a number of concerns with the use and consumption of social media including: selective consumption and interaction; inadequate representation of sides; limited characters with which to communicate; and the capacity of users to know what is valid. Of course, this is not just a problem for youth. The concerns raised by the Citizenship Commission have resonance for anybody directly and/or indirectly trying to make sense of the world around them through online interaction.

Unlike driving a car, there is no licence required for online social media engagement. This means that lots can go wrong that need not, provided that citizens are made aware of a few core behaviours to avoid and things to look out for when engaging online. This is arguably important across all domains of life from interpreting online restaurant reviews to knowing where to book your holiday. In politics this is important because political campaigns now widely employ social media (see for example, Gibson and McAllister, 2011) and we know that social media can alter participation and voter turnout (see for example, Bond et al. 2012) and can set agendas and even alter electoral outcomes (see for example, Hogan and Graham, 2013).

Although our research on social media usage during the Scottish independence referendum suggests that bad behaviour online is very much a minority activity on average (Quinlan, Shephard and Paterson, 2015), news stories illustrating bad practice online and its consequences for both recipients and those posting are commonplace. Those targeted, as well as those targeting, come from all walks of life and the whole point of this brief is to use examples from our research to illustrate some core things to avoid and some key things to look out for online. My goal is to use some of the clangers spotted in the course of our research into online behaviour during the Scottish independence referendum to help create a more informed and capable citizenry more able to effectively engage online.

From our research, I posit 5 core 'Fs' to avoid and 5 core 'Fs' to consider before engaging with online social media.

## II 5 Fs to avoid

- 1) **Foul** - The first 'F' to avoid is the foul. Adding swear words or using threatening words (or even gratuitous smears such as 'Slimeball Salmond' or 'Clown Prince Cameron') against people and/or organisations and/or political viewpoints is likely to be abusive and offensive to those who are targeted, to some who are reading a thread, and even to those posting the foul should the public and/or media and/or their employer turn on them. The same is true of offensive imagery that might accompany any post. Being foul rarely adds to a debate, and often detracts from it. In addition, too much wasted time is used challenging foul posts, thereby eroding the space and time available for serious discussions of points that are being made. Fouling can also close down debate as the side targeted 'spirals into silence' making it difficult to know what is the true balance of online opinion. This can then lead to all manner of misunderstandings about the online balance of opinion, and even inaccurate inferences about the state of public opinion.
- 2) **FLAMING!!!** – The second 'F' to avoid is flaming behaviour (of which 'foul' can be viewed as an extreme subset). Classic examples of flaming behaviour include angry-looking UPPER CASE usage, multiple exclamation and/or question marks (!!! ... ???). Flaming is also associated with dramatic, over-the-top posts, for example: 'please vote YES in the #indyref and close the door on the way out!!!' or 'Do these damn jocks not realise the EU is the REAL problem, not the UK? smh!!! #IndyPlan...' or 'No-one is going to get between me and a Scotland passport - no one!! #indyref' or 'more pandas in the zoo than Tory MPs. LOL!!!'. Like foul posts, these kind of posts add little to the debate of the issues and too often simply serve to wind people up and so needlessly ratchet up tensions.

- 3) **False** – The third ‘F’ to avoid is starting and/or spreading false information. Even if you don’t start false information, it can be very tempting to retweet and/or share posts that you like either because they support what you believe, or more usually because they oppose views, and/or groups and/or people with whom you have no affinity. This ‘F’ can be difficult to correct as it often requires you to research a topic more thoroughly by cross-checking information from a variety of sources. If in any doubt, resist the urge to be first to circulate the information. Think about the damage you could be doing to individuals (and possibly their families and even their employees and associates) who are subsequently found to have been falsely accused. Do you want to be a false accuser?

False posts are also quite easy to commit when resorting to generalisations. For example, if a politician is caught doing something wrong, it is incorrect to infer that all politicians (or all politicians that share the party affiliation) are like this. A common example of a fallacious contribution that cropped up in the online discussions on the independence debate, is when someone claims to know what a whole nationality thinks (either because they think they know this, or they have asked a few friends, neighbours or office colleagues), for example, ‘Having a debate on Scotland’s #indyref in London office. Most English here believe UK subsidises Scotland and that Scots are a drain...’. In fact this comment commits more errors, for instance, failing to spot that Scotland is part of the UK, and a further rather eye-wateringly simplistic assertion that ‘all Scots are a drain’.

Another example of generalisations and fallacious posting evident in the independence referendum online posts was when one English person or one Scottish person said something, and that view was then aggregated up and attributed to all English or all Scottish people, for example, ‘Shows how far the English are removed from democracy when they are incapable of accepting other opinions’. Again, cross-check information, seek out representative public opinion polls and exercise extreme caution when generalising from an individual to a group, or even a group (e.g. a political party policy) to an individual (e.g. a party member who does not support their own party’s policy). False posts often overlap with foul and FLAMING!!

- 4) **Foggy** - The fourth ‘F’ to avoid is being foggy/unclear. If people do not understand what you are saying, this can negate the purpose of your post and it may cause misunderstanding and even tension escalation. Our research provided a few examples of localised phrases which caused confusion to those trying to interpret what the contributor was on about, for example, one of our researchers had no idea that ‘wee Eck’ referred to Alex Salmond. Of course, there is nothing wrong with localised phrases

*per se*, and diversity of languages and dialects has many positives, but if you are communicating across regions and nations, as the person using 'wee Eck' was doing, then it makes sense to use words and phrases that people can more easily understand to avoid misunderstanding.

- 5) **Flannel** - The fifth 'F' to avoid is flannel/repetition. If you have made a point, move on otherwise you risk being ignored when you do make a new point as people will associate your name with the same old view they have read over and over – a bit like the 'cry wolf' fable. Some of the contributors in our data sets repeated points that they had already made and some indeed promised to not repeat themselves and then promptly did so. The reaction from others can be indifference or even hostility.

However, as well as the 5 'Fs' to avoid, my research also pointed to there being:

### III 5 Fs to consider

- 1) **Followers** – The first 'F' to consider is followers/audience. Before you post something online, it is worth thinking about who the potential audience or 'followers' are likely to be. One of the online data sources I studied was the BBC's *Have Your Say* comments sections at the end of online news stories. Assuming proportionate online news consumption (supported by BBC data on consumption patterns by nation) online contributions from those living in Scotland are likely to be outnumbered by comments from those living in England by approximately 10 to one because the population of Scotland is 5.3 million whereas the population of England is 53 million. This population asymmetry can mean that those in the minority (Scotland) can feel that they are not being given the same degree of opportunity to air their opinions as those in the majority (England), when in fact data can reveal that proportionate to population, the minority (Scotland) might actually have a bigger say on average than those in the majority (England). Indeed, we might even expect this given the nature of the news story on Scottish independence.

This perception of bias becomes even more acute when talking about political parties that only stand in Scotland (for example, the SNP) and for whom the 10 to one ratio becomes even smaller due to levels of support versus non-support within the 5.3 million Scottish population. Assuming 50 per cent SNP support in Scotland and 0 per cent SNP support in England<sup>1</sup> (based on the 2015 General Election result), the 10 to one

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, we know from the TV debates that a number of voters in England liked the performance of Nicola Sturgeon and liked many of the party's policies and so the 20 to one ratio is likely to be an overestimate. The underlying point of perceived bias and under-representation is still likely to hold true though.

ratio might become more like a 20 to one ratio of comments against versus for the SNP. This can then look biased even if it is representative of the English and Scottish publics. The point here is that the media may appear biased because of the online public commentary reflecting the hugely divergent population asymmetries in the UK, and not the views of the media outlet *per se* (although that is not to say that the media may or may not be biased as well).

At the disproportionate and unrepresentative end of the spectrum, you might be contributing to an online group pre-disposed towards one view over another (for example: *Yes Scotland*; and #yes; or *Better Together*; and #no). This can lead to dissonance between what happens in a vote and what you thought was going to happen based upon your choice of information sources that you choose to interact and side with. This lack of cross-checking of information can then lead you to more easily slip into the 5 Fs to avoid (see section above).

- 2) **'Facts'** – The second 'F' to consider is the often illusive belief in and demand for 'facts'. Critiquing the opposition for not having facts is common online (e.g. 'Salmond might as well have started his white paper with 'dear Santa' for all the facts that were in it. #indyref'), as is the capacity to believe that your side has all the facts (e.g. '...I have just ordered my #indyref white paper, so I know the facts!'). If you are a partisan, the "once people know 'the facts' they will vote for our side" becomes a lazy mantra. However, in searching for 'facts' you have to be aware of self-selection bias, for example, picking the polls and news stories that suit your argument. Of course, there is nothing wrong with taking a side *per se*, but it is important to cross-check your information across the sides before you do so.

This is not to claim that 'facts' do not exist. We can find out what the current price of oil is and we might know what the current interest rate is, for example. However, it becomes much harder to predict what 'facts' may be in the future as oil prices and interest rates might change. What we think we can achieve today may be even more possible in the future (or indeed less so) and for this we will often require a certain amount of best-case and worse-case scenario predictive modelling based upon what we know about how things work, or how things might work if we change them (drawing upon comparative research for example). Albeit mildly guilty of the foul, this tweet shows an appreciation of just how difficult it is to get facts about the future: 'Don't you just love the daft tweeters seeking post #indyref facts?'. Also, the economy and economic 'facts' are not the whole story.

- 3) **Fashion** – The third ‘F’ to consider is fashion. Just because there is more of one view out there does not mean that this is necessarily ‘right’, ‘true’, or ‘fact’, or indeed, the view of the majority. Our aggregate data of Twitter and Facebook for the Yes and No campaigns illustrated a sharp rise in support for Yes in the closing weeks of the campaign. If you were to conclude that Twitter and Facebook were representative of public opinion, you might have predicted a ‘Yes’ victory. This is not to say that fashion is not important as it might be useful in detecting movement in polls, for example, before it actually takes place as our data seemed to be quite good at doing. The other aspect to ‘fashion’ is that sometimes when one side becomes very fashionable, the other side(s) may stop questioning this ‘fashion’ and either go underground and/or become silent (‘spiral of silence’). This is not because they have been won over, it is more because they feel they have been run over to the point where contributing is pointless given the anticipated counter-barrage.
- 4) **Filtering** – The fourth ‘F’ to consider is filtering. Some social media forums like Twitter are more relaxed about what people can post online, whereas other discussion forums like the BBC *Have Your Say* comments have stricter rules and moderation. If there are rules, you might want to know what these are in the first place before you get into trouble and/or offended at being blocked/removed. Knowing about the rules (or their absence) will also help you make sense of what you are likely to come across on the particular forum you are using. There is also filtering by character length (for example, 140 characters for Twitter) which can mean that some social media forums may be more appropriate than others to convey detail and nuance.
- 5) **Fallout** - The fifth ‘F’ to consider is fallout. What are the likely implications of your post? In short, think, think, and think again before posting. Put yourself in the shoes of any opponents receiving the post. Would you like to receive it? Will there be consequences for your future and/or your family’s future? There are invariably no prizes for being first, so think before posting, or at the very least re-read it.

#### **IV Other common sense considerations**

So you know what to avoid and you know what to consider, and you still mess up! If we are honest I think we all mess up online from time to time, but there are a couple of other things we might also want to consider to help reduce this and increase our capacity to be effective in online engagement. First, it is better to be clear about what you are saying rather than to get the honour of saying it first. Think through the above ‘Fs’ before posting. Second, if you are angry, and/or under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, then you need to think seriously about whether you should even be online. We all know about ‘don’t drink and drive’ and even ‘don’t



drink and dial', and we should probably add to this list: 'don't drink and digit' and 'don't do drugs and digit'. Think of a Twitter traffic light system for your mood or state of mind, for example: Green = Tranquil Tweeting; Amber = Topsy Tweeting; and Red = Tanked Tweeting. After all, you don't want to be known as a 'twit on Twitter'... or indeed worse...

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So, some proposals for educators in the world of online political engagement.

**Proposal 1** – Education Scotland already use my [TEDx talk<sup>2</sup>](#) as a component in classroom teaching. Use this Policy Brief that illustrates and extends the number of Fs of the [TEDx](#) talk to provide more points for discussion in the classroom.

**Proposal 2** - Given the interaction of online users in Scotland and England over heated issues such as the constitutional future – and perhaps soon the UK's constitutional future in the EU – it also makes sense for this Policy Brief to be disseminated and used by teachers in secondary schools in England (and indeed Wales and Northern Ireland) as part of the citizenship component of the National Curriculum.

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier and abridged version of this Policy Brief provided the basis for a TED-Ed lesson developed for the classroom by Education Scotland: <http://ed.ted.com/on/EMKPkQQ1> . The purpose of this Policy Brief is to widen and update the discussion a little, while still being concise.

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