

Citizenship education should give young people the skills and knowledge to participate in political debate on social media

By The Author

Young people increasingly interact on social media, including engaging in political debate. **Mark Shephard, Stephen Quinlan, Stephen Tagg and Lindsay Paterson** have studied this form of discussion, and believe it offers potential to increase political literacy and engagement. However, there are important lessons that need to be learned by users of social media platforms, including about the accuracy of information and dealing with inflammatory statements. This post is part of our [series on youth participation](#).



How can social media be used effectively to increase political literacy? Credit: [LoboStudioHamburg](#), CC0 1.0

Social media is now common currency in the daily lives of most people, particularly younger people. It is also more prevalent in politics, being widely employed as a tool of communication by political campaigns. It has an important agenda-setting function, with many news stories now broken via channels such as Twitter. We are also beginning to observe social media having impacts on voter behaviour with research illustrating that receipt of messages on Facebook had an [effect on voter turnout](#) in the 2010 US mid-term elections.

The increasing importance of social media in politics is shifting attention to how these tools can be used more effectively to increase political literacy and engagement in order to create a more informed and critical citizenry who are savvy in their social media interactions. Building on our research of social media platforms of the Scottish independence referendum 2014, a dimension of which has explored the content of over 5,300 social media comments on the BBC's *Have Your Say (HYS)* discussion threads, this article identifies five points that users of social media platforms need to keep in mind when evaluating contributions and information obtained from these channels.

1. Sufficient representation of viewpoints

A common criticism of certain social media forums is that the hosting website has a bias for one side or the other of a political debate. In many cases, this critique is well founded but, in other cases, this perceived bias might be a

consequence of other variables. For example, in our research on the Scottish independence referendum, we would expect to observe differences between the proportions of Scottish and non-Scottish citizens posting on *The Scotsman's* comment forum compared to the BBC *HYS* threads given the audiences they attract. *The Scotsman* is likely to have a disproportionately large number of comments coming from Scottish people while the BBC *HYS* would be expected to feature more English posts than Scottish ones because the BBC attracts a broader British audience.

A further couple of points that need to be considered are that internet and social media usage tends to be the purview of the young and, at least in terms of political discussions, men are more likely to participate than women. Consequently, social media is likely to give a greater representation of views of younger cohorts compared to older cohorts, and in certain circumstances, male voices may be preeminent compared to female. All of the above observations need to be factored in when evaluating the representativeness of opinion that is observed in social media forums.

2. Fallacious contributions

We define fallacious contributions as those comments that infer behaviour observed among some people to the entire population – in other words, generalisations. This is best illustrated by a couple of examples, which cropped up during our analysis of the discussion on Scottish independence:

“Shows how far the English are removed from democracy when they are incapable of accepting other opinions” (BBC [Have Your Say](#))

Or:

“Come every World Cup we have to put up with the usual ‘can’t you take a joke’ comments from Scots wearing ‘anyone [but] England’ shirts. It’s such a shame when the Scots feel so insecure they have to define their sense of Scottishness by their degree of anti-Englishness” (BBC [Have Your Say](#))

A number of issues are pertinent to the above examples: Firstly, who is the ‘we’? Is it a household, a town, a county, a country? Secondly, references to ‘the English’ and ‘the Scots’ infer that it is every English or Scottish person engaging in this type of behaviour, which more often than not is unlikely to be the case. Thirdly, what does it even mean to ‘be’ English or Scottish? Is it about birth, parents’ nationalities, grandparents’ nationalities, accent, tattoos, residency, or support for the national sports teams? Savvy users need to take this into account when reading/contributing to social media.

3. Flaming and inflammatory statements

Flaming behaviour is when online interactions descend into hostility and users resort to online shouting (as illustrated by using CAPITALISATION of words), which can make the comment appear angry), the use of excessive punctuation (for e.g.: ‘!!!’), exchanging insults with one another, and/or use of profanity. While we observed minimum levels of flaming in terms of interactions between individual contributors in online discussion forums on Scottish independence, flaming statements were more likely to be made about political parties and politicians –e.g.: “Slimeball Salmond” or “Clown Prince Cameron” (BBC [Have Your Say](#)). The problem with such inflammatory comments is that they can aggravate other readers, stirring up hostility, and as a consequence, detract from the capacity for serious debate. Moreover, negative comments about parties and leaders (and other politicians) can have unintentional consequences such as fuelling perceptions that a national side is being attacked.

4. Clarity of contributions

Comments with dubious meanings often derive from the usage of slang, which bring into question what the contribution actually means. Meanings are likely to depend upon context, the age of the contributor/reader, the region from which they are from and so on. Consequently, one person may not comprehend what another may understand. Considering that we often do not know the characteristics of the contributor and as such the context of the particular phrases they are using (for instance, whether it is street/pop use of language vs. traditional uses

of certain expressions), it is advisable that care should be taken to communicate clearly and effectively in these forums. To illustrate, we return to the Scottish referendum case that we explored. One of the main players in the debate is the Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond who features prominently in the *HYS* discussions. However, a substantial number of contributors referred to him by the nickname 'Wee Eck':

"Scotland will not be a new Norway whatever Wee Eck think" (BBC [Have Your Say](#))

However, not everyone may be familiar with Salmond's nickname, particularly if you happen to live outside of Scotland. The potential for confusion and ambiguity to take hold is increased, and this can, contribute in some circumstances to a lack of meaningful discussion on the issue.

In addition, we have to be cognisant of implicit and explicit statements on subjects. For example, 'I'll be voting yes to an independent Scotland in the referendum' is an explicit statement whose meaning is not in doubt. However, we cannot assume that someone who says that 'the naivety of the SNP is staggering' is going to vote 'no' in the independence referendum. They might still support independence and not support the SNP, and indeed might even be critical of the SNP but still vote for them and also vote (or not vote) for independence.

5. Accuracy of information

A key element of social media in politics is the information exchange opportunities it provides users. However, we need to keep in mind two things when evaluating information we obtain from these channels. Firstly, many social media forums are constrained by a maximum number of characters (for example, a 140 character maximum for Twitter). As a result, it is arguably harder to convey what one means, and, moreover, character space for substantiation of arguments may be lacking.

Secondly, the accuracy of information being provided also needs to be considered. In our analysis of the Scottish referendum, countless pieces of information and data were exchanged in the discussions, but not all of it was accurate or substantiated by original source material. The implications of the failure to consider the veracity of information from these channels are aptly illustrated by the case of the 2011 Irish presidential election. In this case, information emanating from what subsequently turned out to be a false Twitter account played a key role in shaping the final debate between the candidates. The events arising from this debate were subsequently shown to have a [determining impact](#) on the result of the election. Consequently, it is crucial that users should consider the source of the information and assess if there are any means to substantiate the information they are being provided with (e.g.: are there links provided to the original source of the information?).

Our research suggests that readers and contributors to social media platforms should bear in mind the following:

- Are there problems when there is a limit to the number of characters one can use?
- If a contribution is supplying information, is this information correct and can it be verified, and indeed cross-checked/triangulated?
- Can a contribution ever be balanced or nuanced?
- Does it matter whether the forum one posts in is moderated (such as the BBC threads) or not (such as a Twitter feed)?

Conclusions

Considering the growing popularity of social media and its agenda setting potential, it is evident that citizens would benefit from knowing more about these channels and the way they operate, which would then allow citizens to cast a critical eye over what they read, see, and hear via social media. One means of doing this would be for



citizenship education across the UK to incorporate strategies that provide young people with the skills and knowledge to allow them to approach social media in critical participative ways. Building on the above observations, we have devised a series of social media teaching exercises and materials for Scottish secondary schools that have been distributed with the support of *Education Scotland*. Access to these teaching materials (which also include additional materials on analysing and interpreting survey and polling data), is available through the '[Materials and Resources](#)' section of the Applied Quantitative Methods Network.

However, our findings go beyond Scotland. Many of the comments on the BBC *Have Your Say* reveal that all types of citizens in the UK (and indeed beyond) would benefit from knowing about the issues we explore in this article. As a first step, we propose that schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland find ways to make use of the teaching materials we have devised. We then propose that university research methods courses incorporate examples in their lectures (e.g.: ecological and individual fallacies), and that social media sites use our research to provide a checklist of 'things to think about' before engaging with social media forums.

This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the final report can be downloaded [here](#).

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Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding.

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