

Social media and forestry: a scoping review

Over the last eight years, the use of social media by individuals and organisations as a means by which to communicate has risen dramatically. This has significant implications for the way in which the Forestry Commission (FC) communicates with stakeholders and the wider public. There is a need to identify and better understand how the FC can maintain and improve the effectiveness of its communications through the use of, and engagement with social media.



A tongue-in-cheek overview of various social media channels and their functions.

Background

Originally, users of the Internet were limited to passive viewing of websites. However, over time came a change in perceptions about how the web could be used in a more interactive and collaborative manner. As a result, social media were borne allowing virtually instant access to, and exchange of information. They can be described as a collection of internet-based applications that facilitate social interaction via the creation and exchange of user-generated content (e.g. social networks like Facebook, media-sharing sites like YouTube and micro-blogging sites like Twitter). Growth in their use has significant implications for the way in which the FC is able to, and needs to communicate with stakeholders, not least because conversations will take place about the FC on social media sites regardless of whether the FC chooses to engage with them or not, and because some sectors of society now communicate predominantly using such digital means. To make effective use of social media it is important that the FC understands the way in which people are using them in their daily lives and keeps up-to-date with new developments. There is also a need to better understand for what purposes social media might be used to best effect, such as for gathering information, changing behaviour, or for empowering the public.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Describe current social media channels of importance to the FC;
- Review the literature for evidence on the potential application of social media to support information gathering, empowerment and democratisation, and behaviour change;
- Explore the challenges associated with the use of social media by public bodies;
- Identify potential future research topics and questions.

Methods

The methods employed for this study focused on a literature review using four document search tools: Science Direct, Scirus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. This resulted in a reference library of 175 citations. After a coding and sifting process for relevance, a total of 79 documents were thoroughly reviewed.

Findings

- 1) **Gathering information:** Social media and GPS-enabled devices have potential for: improving spatial decision-making processes; gathering data from the public through Volunteered Geographic Information; and facilitating technology-mediated citizen science monitoring.
- 2) **Empowerment and democratisation:** The use of social media to facilitate empowerment and democracy has in general produced weak results in terms of interaction between the public and public bodies. Information provision has been more successful, and there is a low but growing level of transactional behaviour (e.g. where the public is able to access services or make complaints). Evidence suggests that only 30-40% of the population can be reached by government using online techniques, although this figure is likely to continue to rise.
- 3) **Behaviour change:** Social media could be useful to facilitate profiling of users and their information preferences, and because they allow for social learning and collective identity formation. However, although social media campaigns can increase reach, as yet there is little robust evidence to support their positive impact on behaviour change.
- 4) **Challenges in using social media for public bodies:** These include a) quality and security of, and control over content and data; b) bureaucratic processes, procedures and institutional norms; c) access, representation and digital literacy; d) meeting the needs of different audiences; e) resourcing and managing ongoing interactive relationships via social media.

Potential future research questions

- How far and under what circumstances can social media encourage more active relationships with stakeholder groups, citizens and partners?
- Are there stakeholders that are better served or disadvantaged by the use of social media?
- What are the risks associated with different forms of social media use?
- What types of social media best suit the needs associated with different projects, site-based objectives and strategic policy issues?
- What types of public input via social media could be most useful to the FC in terms of land management and forest governance, and what kinds of social media would best support this?
- How far can these public inputs be used as legitimate or representative opinion?
- What do the public and key stakeholder groups want in terms of social media use by the FC?
- How can the FC's use of different social media types be evaluated and how can we ensure that evaluation informs the effective use of social media going forwards?
- What has the FC and the wider forestry sector learnt about best practice around the use of social media, and how can this learning be shared?

Partners

Forest Research and the Forestry Commission

For further information contact: Amy.Stewart@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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Reports and Publications

Stewart, A., Ambrose-Oji, B. and Morris, J. 2012. Social media and forestry: A scoping report. Forest Research, Edinburgh.