Managing your school's online reputation – *If you don't, someone else will*

The internet and social media provide incredible opportunities for schools to share news about events, activities, learning and much more. But it also allows everyone else to offer their opinions about the school – good and bad.

What is ORM and why is it important?

Online Reputation Management (ORM) is about understanding and managing your digital footprint (everything that can be seen or read about your school online). You need to know it all – the positives and the negatives – and to create lots of the positives yourself with a visible and active online presence (including social media).

Few parents will apply for a school place without first 'googling' the school, and the Ofsted pre-inspection check includes monitoring what is being said online (Mumsnet is a favourite). So whether a staff member or an external agency is tasked with monitoring your footprint, you and your colleagues need to know!

Negative coverage could be dismissed as low level or harmless, but almost always causes some level of disruption. Up to half of all cases dealt with by the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH: helpline@saferinternet.org.uk) involve schools' (and staff members') online reputation.

A clear communication strategy needs to be in place <u>before</u> any potentially damaging story is published – making clear how a school will counter, weaken or eliminate any negative material, above all by promoting positive news about the school. And all staff, pupils and parents need to know how they are expected to behave online (LGfL has published template policies and acceptable-use agreements for a range of stakeholders at ospolicies.lgfl.net).

But a strong online presence is about much more than reacting to bad news – it can be a highly effective strategy for engaging and connecting with prospective and current parents, pupils, partners and the community.

* See Part II of this document (pages 3-6) for bite-sized sections on the effective use of a website and various social-media platforms. *

What should we do? Proactive, practical steps

<u>Step 1 – Find out what is being posted about your school</u>

You can't highlight positive comments or challenge negative ones if you don't know about them. So 'google' yourself Step 1 is to carry out a simple Google search on yourself. What results come up / what is being said?

Once you have done that, there are a range of tools available to help you, including:

Google Alerts (google.com/alerts) This is a way to keep track of news about your school without having to search every day. You can set up alerts for any word, phrase or name and receive an e-mail whenever there is new activity using those words. You can limit the time and amount of alerts you receive and set all alerts to be combined into one weekly digest.

Hootsuite (hootsuite.com)This tool for managing all your social-media accounts in one place can also send you notifications whenever you or certain keywords are mentioned on social media. Use Hootsuite to do the searching for you.

There are also paid services to support schools in this area, such as the SWGfL Alerts tool (boost.swgfl.org.uk). It is a 'digital ear to the ground' that suggests whether a posting is positive or negative, and supporting any associated actions.

Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk

Step 2 - Manage negative content

If you find any negative comments online, there are a number of direct or indirect responses you can make. A direct response could be posting a reply to a parent who shared negative comments online. A suitable response might be "We notice you posted this online [link]. We'd really welcome an official complaint, here is our complaints procedure [link]". An indirect comment may refer to the general topic and explain the school's position without referencing the original comment (on the same or different medium).

You should always be very careful when assessing negative comments online. A simple rule is never respond online immediately, but take time to consider a response and to seek advice. Remember that any allegations (online or offline) need to be managed in accordance with the correct procedure: it's important that all staff understand this and know who to contact at any time (NQTs may see social media posts before headteachers).

A social media or engagement strategy will help you manage incidents and operate confidently and safely on these networks. Read the following sections to find out more how this might look in practice.

A case study

"Somebody has set up a fake Twitter account with our school logo pretending to be us. It is sending out abusive tweets and making allegations about school staff. We think it's a student but we can't be 100% certain."*

Advice from POSH

Before reporting this to Twitter, see if a simple investigation leads you to a particular year group/peer group:

- Who follows the account and who does the account follow?
- Who has liked and/ or retweeted any messages?
- Who has tweeted on the account?

Twitter has clear policies: parody accounts are only allowed if this is clearly stated in the 'bio' (description). As this is not the case here, you could report the account for impersonation (against the terms of use), and ask for the account to be closed: support.twitter.com/forms/impersonation

The account is also using a logo without permission, which could be reported as a trademark infringement: support.twitter.com/forms/trademark

Once you have done this, why not take the opportunity to discuss copyright and online reputation at school?

* For other social networks' reporting channels, see reporting.lgfl.net

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Step 3 – Get back to communicating the messages that you want people to hear

At the end of the day, the best approach is to develop a strong, authentic and trusted online presence that can outweigh any negative content.

The following pages give advice for the day-to-day management of your online presence on different channels, but remember that the school website should be at the core of any communications strategy, with all other tools and resources pointing users towards it.

NB – Photos and permissions

Remember to always ensure you have written parental permission to share any photos of children; any images, music, etc. must be copyright free or licensed for educational use.

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Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk

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Part II - effective use of a website and social-media platforms

Website

Whatever social media or other digital channels you use, they should bring users back to your website. If your site is your primary resource, it is the easiest way to find out:

- What content interests users: popular pages, search terms and time spent on each page
- What content site does not: if a page hasn't been viewed in two years, is it worth keeping?
- Who your users are: include 'calls-to-action' for visitors to click and interact with, look for opportunities to collect contact information to help you tailor content to their needs.

How? There are free tools available that tell you all this very simply, e.g. Google Analytics (google.co.uk/analytics).

Accessibility

Your website should meet accessibility standards to ensure it can be read and viewed by as many users as possible. It is good practice anyway, but if you don't your site will be downgraded in search results by Google and others. Your web developer should be able to help with this, but remember:

- Avoid *italics* or flashing text, which are difficult to read, and 'tickers' which scroll across the page.
- Use as much white space as possible to make reading easier. Standard text should be black on white.
- Always include 'alt' and 'title' tags in the html code. Alt stands for alternative text (e.g. "picture of school gates") and is read out loud by screenreaders for partially sighted and blind people.
- You can run an accessibility check on your site, e.g. the Web Accessibility Initiative (w3.org/WAI)

Search Engine Optimisation

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is all about making sure that search engines like Google give you a good rating, which means your webpages are shown higher up on the list of search results (so your news comes first!). If you are not in the top few results, research shows that many users who search for your school will never see your link.

Accessibility (see above) is one way to achieve a better SEO rating, but here are a few more suggestions:

- *Does your website have a sitemap?*
  A sitemap tells users where to find the information they're looking for directly from a search engine, e.g. term dates or school contact details. Search engines generate sitemaps over time, but if you submit them in advance (search on Google or Bing for "submit my sitemap"), it will be much quicker and more accurate.
- *What analytics do you have for your site?*
  Automatic usage statistics known as analytics help you understand which pages are most popular on your site, where users come from (e.g. Facebook or Twitter), and what device they are using (e.g. PC, mobile phone). One popular example is Google Analytics (analytics.google.com).
- *Are the keywords up to date in your website metadata?*
  Metadata is the information that summarises your webpage content; it is read by search engines. Keywords are common words that users search for. Tools such as Keyword Eye (there is a free signup option at keywordeye.com) can help you manage this area.

At the end of the day, remember posting great content is always the most important thing!

Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk

Social Media Strategy

Before engaging with social networks, a school should develop a clear strategy to set out what it will be used for, who is responsible for maintaining it, what is appropriate/inappropriate, and how to engage with other users. And follow the general rule of using all channels to drive traffic back to your website.

- Remember that once something is online, everyone can see it – sometimes even if you delete it. But social media is by nature quick and responsive, so if you have a process to approve posts, give it a realistic timeframe.
- Manage usernames and passwords carefully, and ensure more than one person knows them (so you never lose control). Social media can be accessed from almost anywhere on any device, so a social media strategy should include rules about who can access it, when and where. Use a dedicated school e-mail account to register on social media.

- If your staff have personal social media accounts, you should have clear rules about accessing these on the same devices as your school accounts. It is very easy to post an update to the wrong account.
- Develop a policy for responding to posts and comments and decide whether other users can comment on or reply to your posts (you will change that in the settings). But you can't make it a policy to reply to positive comments but ignore negative ones – that won't work!
- Never enter into an argument online. If you receive adverse comments, politely thank the poster for their opinion and if appropriate invite them into school to discuss their concerns.
- If you think school social media accounts are being trolled (targeted for systematic abuse), quickly
  - o unfriend the troll (if applicable)
  - o remove objectionable comments
  - o report the user to the social network (examples at reporting.lgfl.net
  - o contact the police / law enforcement if comments are significantly threatening or specific
- Set rules around language and tone.
- Keep the details of the UK Safer Internet Centre's 'Professionals Online Safety Helpline' to hand. POSH can help with all safeguarding concerns and even has fast-track access to social networking providers.
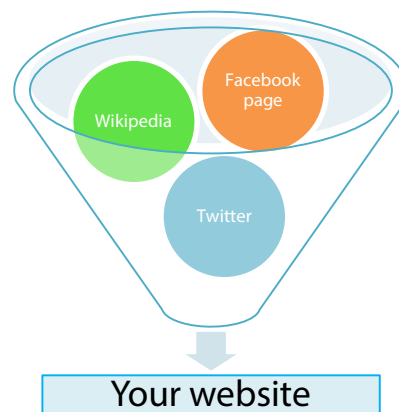
This advice page has helpful guidance specifically regarding online comments from parents, including policy and practice from individual schools, plus legal implications. In a minority of cases, as detailed in this article, legal action can result from inappropriate online behaviour. But as long as you are aware of what is going on and understand the implications, some negative content can even be ignored, and it is certainly better to ignore it than to overreact and cause a PR disaster (as this article shows).

Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk

Facebook page

Creating a Facebook page (facebook.com/help/104002523024878) is an effective way to communicate with parents and the wider school community and a great way of driving traffic back to your school website. Facebook is used by 50 per cent of the UK population, including parents. Some users even use it as a search engine and only trust content that they find there. An example of a school embracing social media is Whitehall Park in Islington facebook.com/whitehallparkschool

Some advice would be:

- Search for existing Facebook pages about your school, e.g. set up by parents or local groups. What does the automatically created page say (these are created as soon as someone 'checks in')?
- Your posts should include snippets of content from your website, e.g. news items, blog posts or updates. Always link back to the relevant page on your website.
- Create a page, not a personal profile. Pages allow you to share content and connect with parents, but are for organisations and businesses, like schools. Profiles are for individuals.
- You need a Facebook profile before you can create a page, so consider who would be most appropriate to do this. Once the page is live, other users should be given access to managing the page, with clear succession planning for when key staff leave the school (several staff should have admin rights).
- Limit posts initially to one per day until you are comfortable with the medium (maybe share a few relevant posts at different times each week as well), but at least one post a week is sufficient to begin with. Quality is far more important than quantity (remember Facebook is not Twitter with a different name!).
- Who will manage the page on a daily basis? The page may receiving comments or posts from visitors – will you allow or disable this function?
- You cannot pre-approve comments before they are posted but you can delete them or block them if they contain certain words. They then won't show up on your page.
- You can also set a profanity filter for your page.
- Be careful what you share from the school account, as inappropriate links will affect your reputation. Staff members with access to the school account should be reminded of this regularly, as it is easy to share a page from the wrong account.
- Regularly check messages sent to your Facebook page, as parents may use it as an opportunity to contact the school.

Twitter

A Twitter account [(business.twitter.com/en/basics/create-a-twitter-business-profile.html)](business.twitter.com/en/basics/create-a-twitter-business-profile.html) is a good way to show that your school is active and engaging. You can follow other local schools and organisations, educators, famous authors and individuals. It is a great way to quickly share stories and events. An example of good practice is https://twitter.com/GraveneySchool

- Is there the capacity to support Twitter? What is your strategy: Who will use it? For what? When? How?
- Remember that like Facebook, Twitter can be used to drive users back to your website.
- Search for Twitter accounts about your school – have any been created by parents or local groups?
- Unlike Facebook, Twitter is all about quantity (aim for 5 posts a day), but it has a much smaller audience.
- Be careful what or who you retweet/follow, as this can affect your reputation.

Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk

- If you blog, seek a wider audience for children's work, e.g. authors might comment on children's writing.
- Use a tool like hootsuite.com to send you notifications for relevant keywords, handles or hashtags
- Have a #hashtag as well as a @handle. LGfL uses #LearnMore and #StaySafeWith, but it could be just your school name. Hashtags aren't just used in the twittersphere anymore though (find hashtag advice at finalsite.com/blog/p/~post/the-school-marketers-guide-to-effectively-using-hashtags).

Google+

Google+ (plus.google.com) is a social network with deep integration into other Google services. It is most closely related to Facebook in terms of functionality. Whilst it does not come close to rivalling Facebook or Twitter for the sheer number of users, there are two key reasons schools may wish to create a Google+ presence: firstly, posts on your profile receive a higher ranking in Google search results, especially for those based on a locality (ideal for a school) and reviews. This makes it easier to shape the conversations that are most visible about your school. Secondly, one of the key demographics involved in Google+ is education – there are many education-based groups on Google+.

Wikipedia

Creating a Wikipedia page (wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Your_first_article) for your school is a quick way to improve the number of results your school returns on a search engine, whilst also pushing other results further down the listings. If you don't create a Wikipedia entry, you run the risk that someone else will! As a minimum, the entry could include information from your school prospectus and then link back to your website.

Google Maps

If you search your school for on Google (maps.google.com), you will probably be offered a map with a pin for your school location. You might be offered:
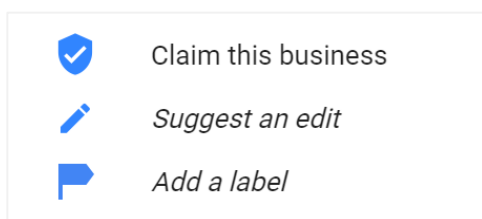
Click on 'claim' and use the opportunity to enter your school's details. If you have a Wikipedia page, the start of your school entry should also be visible under the map.

School-safe video-sharing platform

Remember that YouTube is not just used for educational videos; there are many inappropriate videos available online and it is a challenge to filter them but retain access to those you want to see (LGfL TRUSTnet schools reading this can find specific advice for them at youtube.lgfl.net).

Teachers should always check videos before using them, but the Autoplay function means that tenuously related videos are often played after the one you have chosen. If a video you post/share leads into a highly inappropriate one, you may be associated with it in users' minds. You have no control over linked content or advertising.

So it is best to use a school-safe platform like LGfL TRUSTnet's VideoCentral HD (vchd.lgfl.net), which has no adverts, is designed for use with pupils, and is linked to your school accounts. Plus it is a useful way to link back to your own website.

Lots more online-safety advice at os.lgfl.net and saferinternet.org.uk