

SoMeRAD: Guidance for the radiography workforce on the professional use of Social Media

Purpose of the guidelines

The Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR) publishes this document to offer advice and information to the radiography workforce about communicating, sharing and contributing to public commentary online. Given the breadth and ever expanding nature of social media there is the possibility that there will be omissions, however, SCoR believes it is necessary to provide guidance on Social Media (SoMe) platforms and encourage the radiography workforce to consider how and where to promote the profession. Additionally, this document provides an overview of the legal issues. Furthermore, as Cunningham (2014) states “If we recognise that ‘becoming a professional is an interpersonal and complex activity’, then we should aspire to develop guidance on SoMe and professionalism that reflects this”.

While other excellent guidelines on the professional use of SoMe exist (eg the Royal College of General Practitioners’ [Social Media Highway Code](#)) there are a number of issues specific to online communication, which warrant this specific publication:

1. Radiography is not as well understood by the public as other allied health professions (AHPs). However, the advent of SoMe has provided the profession with a medium to address this (Robinson and Oakley, 2014). The radiography workforce can grasp this opportunity to become more visible to the public but need to consider not only the best tools and online spaces but also the impact of their posts on public and other health professions’ perceptions of the profession.
2. Radiographic images as visual and digital objects are ideal for sharing through SoMe networks for teaching and professional development purposes. Indeed, a number of well-respected organisations such as [Radiopaedia](http://radiopaedia.org/) (<http://radiopaedia.org/>) use online images for this purpose. However, it is important to understand the legal and ethical implications of using patient data in this way.

Introduction: What is social media?

SoMe is a generic term for online communication, where the platforms used permit all those participating to upload and share information. According to [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media :

‘Social Media are [computer-mediated](#) tools that allow people to create, share or exchange information, ideas, and pictures/videos in [virtual communities](#) and [networks](#). SoMe is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of [Web 2.0](#), and that allow the creation and exchange of [user-generated content](#) (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).’”

The sorts of platforms which might be familiar are [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Linked-In](#). However, any on-line space that permits sharing of information, for example web-site forums and mobile instant messaging applications or Apps, such as Whatsapp, are also forms of SoMe. [Ofcom](#) (2015) has reported that more than 80% of adults have some form of SoMe profile, it is therefore very likely that most of the radiography workforce will have used SoMe in some aspect of their lives.

Most people are familiar with SoMe in terms of enabling communication between friends and family. However, because SoMe is designed to enable the development of communities of people with a common interest, it is also an excellent means of networking with other health professionals, patients and clients about professional issues related to imaging and oncology. As we are often more familiar with SoMe as an informal means of communicating about non-professional aspects of our lives, professional use of SoMe can seem unfamiliar. Furthermore, because a cornerstone of health care ethical practice is confidentiality, this does not intuitively fit well with sharing information in an online space. Nevertheless, SoMe has been shown to have great potential for enhancing the patient experience, creating professional networks (Periera et al 2015) and facilitating lifelong learning. Furthermore, on-line methods of communication are a fundamental feature of the DoH (2012) [‘Power of Information’](#) strategy.

These guidelines attempt to support the radiography workforce in understanding how to balance the tensions of transparency and confidentiality, and to encourage them to make the best use of SoMe without putting their professional identity at risk.

Where to communicate?

Methods of engagement are dependent on the platform used but more importantly the platform selected to communicate with others on line should be determined by the purpose of that communication. The following list is not exhaustive but covers some of the more commonly used platforms (Ofcom, 2015), and provides examples of how they are employed in the radiography context. The rapid pace of change within IT means that these platforms may be less popular in years to come, and others may replace them; nevertheless the authors of this document believed it was essential to provide examples for the purpose of illustration. This brief overview will also help by giving a starting point to those new to using SoMe for professional purposes.



Twitter allows short (140 character) messages, directing the reader to other links or calling attention to an issue. Twitter tends to be used for professional networking. Searching for a relevant hashtag '#' enables the radiography workforce to join professional discussions on interesting topics; eg #radiography. An '@' sign finds a specific person or community eg @MedRadJclub

Pros: Rapid dissemination across a world-wide audience.

Cons: Takes a while to get used to the short messages and method of networking. 'Emoticons' can be used to decrease word-usage (Skovholt, 2014) however beware of how these may be misinterpreted, especially in cross-cultural interaction (Park et al, 2014).

See also a useful [Twitter explanation](#) (Omar, 2014). Examples in radiography: @MedRadJclub, an international radiography journal club, is used to engage practitioners from medical radiation disciplines across the globe in scheduled 'Tweet chats'. @Radiopaedia is a free online collaborative radiology resource for sharing and learning from interesting cases.

[Facebook](#)

Facebook (FB) is the most popular SoMe site (Ofcom, 2015) with the majority of adults in the UK having a FB profile. It allows sharing of text and media to network with selected 'friends'. Unlike Twitter, users have some control over who can see their page. It allows users to set up open, closed and secret groups where small communities of practice can share information around a common topic.

Pros: Groups are becoming a popular way of forming specific and specialised networks.

Cons: There is a misunderstanding of what privacy is afforded on FB so that users often disclose personal issues that can end up being shared in the public arena.

An example in radiography: The Society and College of Radiographers

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Society-and-College-of-Radiographers/117467811876?fref=photo>

[Pinterest](#)

Pinterest is an image-sharing SoMe site where users 'pin' images, as they would on a notice board or scrapbook. These images contain links to other resources. Its visual nature makes it ideal for displaying radiography-related data such as images and anatomical diagrams. It can therefore be a useful space for students to organise and share their learning materials.

Pros: visual nature means it is more accessible than pages of text.

Cons: with image-sharing SoMe platforms such as Pinterest (and others such as [Snapchat](#) and [Instagram](#)) there is the danger that copyrighted and/or confidential materials might be uploaded without the required permissions. There may also be problems if patients are permitted to take images of themselves during an examination or request to take a photo of their image on a monitor because this is not a controlled situation and it is possible that other patient data may be inadvertently captured on the image.

An example in radiography: <https://www.pinterest.com/lesrob10/breast-screening/>

[ResearchGate](#)

ResearchGate is a space where researchers share their outputs, discuss issues and forge research collaboration. It is therefore an excellent resource for the radiography workforce seeking to evidence their on-line comments or justify their practice. The academic focus of ResearchGate appeals to research active or interested practitioners.

Pros: a serious space for radiographers to share and discuss radiography research.

Cons: those sharing information need to be aware of any publisher copyright issues.

An example from radiography is a profile of the leading radiography researcher Patrick C.

Brennan: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Patrick_Brennan2



YouTube allows users to easily share and comment on video data. Because visual media is easier to process than textual data it is believed that YouTube will soon exceed FB in terms of popularity, especially for providing information and learning resources. There are lots of potential uses within radiography: promoting the profession; marketing private imaging services; helping patients understand what their examination will entail (especially useful for preparing those with verbal communication difficulties); and providing learning materials for students.

Pros: easy to upload videos and provide information to a wide audience.

Cons: concerns about being 'visible' may prevent some from exploring this method of communicating information to the public. Making videos is not easy and some training is required to develop these skills.

The following example of free educational materials is the work of the Diagnostic Imaging Radiography team : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHQg_UgcBR4



LinkedIn is essentially an on-line CV designed for professional networking. Through shared contacts, educational institutions and membership of discussion boards, interesting topics can be discussed and links shared. Through membership of interest groups, the radiography workforce can engage with medical radiation professionals discussing general topics such as modalities and emerging technology.

Pros: useful for establishing a strong on-line professional identity to support professional development.

Cons: Fewer people use linked-in than some of the other platforms previously mentioned.

Examples from radiography: radiography network
<https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid=1950631>

Blogs (eg [Wordpress](#))

Blogs (Web logs) and Vlogs (Video logs) provide anyone with the opportunity to be heard. Unlike traditional sources of publication such as journals, there is no peer review system.

Pros: Freedom to express ideas and be heard in a medium that has the potential to reach a much wider audience than a journal article.

Cons: Bloggers need to be their own censors and consider how their work will be received. Is the information factually correct, written in a style suitable for the audience, grammatically correct without spelling mistakes, likely to portray a good impression of radiography?

How to communicate using social media

Personal digital footprint

Every time someone posts a message in an on-line space they are actively creating their own 'digital footprint'. This footprint may be more or less invisible depending on where they post. With the rise of SoMe, the way in which the radiography workforce can communicate internally

and externally means that they have the potential to create a positive and impressive footprint. Through SoMe, the radiography workforce can create a professional, competent profile: raising awareness of important professional issues; promoting evidence-based practice; alleviating the concerns of the public and sharing and disseminating research.

SCoR encourages the idea of the 'public radiographer': someone willing and able to share their profession-specific knowledge. However, the radiography workforce also has a responsibility to uphold the outstanding reputation of the profession and to exercise good and ethical judgement in any public comment. Furthermore, the radiography workforce has an obligation to respect the confidentiality and privacy of information entrusted to them in the course of their employment. Remember that in commenting on SoMe, you do so as an HCPC registered professional, a representative of the radiography profession and an employee. For instance, if your employer's name appears in your personal profile then any comment you make is deemed to be representing the views of your employer. So while SoMe creates new opportunities for communication and collaboration, it also presents important responsibilities for the radiography workforce. Clearly your digital footprint has the potential to impact on how the public perceive not only the individual but the radiography profession as a whole.

There is a belief that 'private' groups can eliminate these concerns. This is false because written communication is always at risk of exposure and being made public. Instead of hiding behind private groups and pseudonyms, the radiography workforce is encouraged to be transparent and have confidence in their professional ability to communicate with integrity at all times. However, it is still important to think carefully before you send any messages. For example, don't send anything when you are feeling emotional or negative about an issue. As with face-to-face communications, consider the effect your post will have on the recipient and respect their dignity and feelings at all times.

According to Wikipedia, [Internet 'Trolling'](#) is the deliberate posting of inflammatory messages to hurt or disrupt the flow of discussion. Clearly this type of activity would be considered a breach of the HCPC's [Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics](#) and the SCoR [Code of Professional Conduct](#). Furthermore, should you witness trolling you have a professional obligation to point out the inappropriate nature of such behaviour. If you suspect you are a victim of trolling you are advised not to respond further, and withdraw from the discussion and thread. Also, consider the use of 'blocking' and 'reporting' functions found in some SoMe platforms.

Think carefully before engaging in debates related to personal beliefs around sensitive topics as these can cause hurt and upset no matter how unintentional ([Town, 2015](#)).¹ They can also be misinterpreted as being endorsed by your profession or employer. If you do engage in personal discussions you need to state clearly that these are your own beliefs.

Fortunately, unlike face-to-face communication, online media provides a time gap between interactions and you can use this space wisely to think about the purpose and impact of your message. Once you have clicked 'post' it cannot be easily retracted ([Town, 2015](#)).²

In summary, as a professional, members of the radiography workforce need to be mindful of what their digital footprint says about them and their profession. It is a useful exercise to 'Google' your name to see what can be gleaned about you. What does the information say about you and is this identity one you wish to portray? It is a good idea to consider what you would like your on-line identity to be and to always strive to communicate in such a way as to leave a digital footprint that reflects this intention. This goes as far as considering the appropriateness of your usernames and Twitter handle.

Legal requirements and codes of professional conduct

The legal requirements associated with online communication are no different to those with which radiographers are already familiar in their face-to-face professional communications and which are reflected in the HCPC Standard of Conduct, Performance and Ethics.

In particular, the relevant standards for the professional use of SoMe are:

1. You must act in the best interests of service users
For SoMe, this could include ensuring that service-users are treated with respect and dignity on on-line spaces, quashing inappropriate comments made about them by other practitioners and engaging service-users in on-line communication if this supports their role in decision-making.
2. You must respect the confidentiality of service users
For SoMe, this means never uploading service user data or images. Care should be taken about uploading photographs of a department where patients or their data might be displayed. You should also advise others who have done so of their obligation to remove such images. You should discourage patients from taking images in the department.
3. You must keep high standards of personal conduct
For SoMe, this means being mindful of your digital footprint at all times. Even on private or closed group sites it is inadvisable to post messages or other media which presents you in an unprofessional light. On SoMe you should treat others with the dignity and respect that would be expected in normal professional practice.
5. You must keep your professional knowledge and skills up to date
For SoMe, this means ensuring that knowledge you share with others on line, either service-users or other professionals, is informed by current evidence.
6. You must act within the limits of your knowledge, skills and experience and, if necessary, refer the matter to another practitioner
For SoMe, this means ensuring that you do not give advice to service-users or other professionals which is outside of your scope of practice. If you do so, you must declare that you are commenting in a personal, rather than professional, capacity.

7. You must communicate properly and effectively with service-users and other practitioners
For SoMe, this means that you must ensure you are equipped with the relevant skills to engage with service-users and practitioners on line. This would include understanding the nuances of non-visual communication and the way your messages are received (Katz and Moyer, 2004; Grando, Rozenblum and Bates, 2015).

13. You must behave with honesty and integrity and make sure that your behaviour does not damage the public's confidence in you or your profession
For SoMe this means being mindful of your digital footprint at all times. Even on private or closed group sites, it is inadvisable to post messages or other media which might portray the profession in a negative way.

Trust/Employer: additional constraints

In addition to the above the radiography workforce needs to be aware of any local policies imposed by their employer. Where these might prohibit the use of SoMe for service user benefit, the radiography workforce are encouraged to make representations to challenge such policies.

Safeguarding

Notwithstanding standard 2 above, where there appears to be a clear need to safeguard the welfare of a professional and/or his/her family, it may be necessary to contact relevant authorities about a clearly identifiable member and his/her posts on the forum. All radiographers are urged to report to the appropriate authorities anyone disclosing anything that states that they are a danger to themselves or others, and/or seek professional support and advice on the matter.

Disciplinary action

Unfortunately there have been cases where the HCPC has removed radiographers from their register because of inappropriate conduct in online communication ([SoR, 2015](#)). This is a salient point and a warning that online actions are ultimately public. However, it must also be remembered that SoMe itself is not responsible for unprofessional conduct; it is merely the medium through which an unprofessional radiographer might be exposed. A final piece of advice is, therefore, to never post something online that you would not be prepared to state in any public arena. To do so would be unprofessional, whatever the medium.

Updating

The guidance contained in this document was correct at the time of going to press. Employment law is regularly changing, especially in light of how our society's use of SoMe develops. Such changes may require radiographers to modify their behaviour further. The responsibility is on the radiographer to ensure that they are up-to-date with such changes in the law. The guidelines will be reviewed on a regular basis to reflect this rapidly changing area of communication.

Eight tips for staying safe on social media

1. Choose the appropriate platform for the audience/community you want to engage with.
2. Represent your profession with integrity and pride.
3. Know the boundaries of your expertise and be willing to signpost to other sources of information.
4. Speak out when you witness inappropriate online behaviour.
5. Respect confidentiality and dignity of colleagues, employers and service-users.
6. Be professional in your communication at all times.
7. Only say what you would be willing to say face-to-face and in any public arena.
8. Check your employer's policy on SoMe use.

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Useful radiography-related sites and people to follow

Tweeting radiographers

A list of nearly 300 tweeting radiographers compiled by Janice St.John-Matthews

<https://twitter.com/jstjohnmatthews/lists/tweeting-radiographers/members>

SCoR Twitter page

<https://twitter.com/SCoRMembers>

SCoR Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/The-Society-and-College-of-Radiographers-117467811876/timeline/>

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