EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE NOTE

INTERNET RESEARCH

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- Accuracy
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 3 Accuracy
- Privacy
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 7 Privacy

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Legal Issues. Material published on the web may not comply with UK law in such areas as defamation, contempt of court and intellectual property. It may also contain illegal images.

- Hoaxes & Spoofs. Some websites are not what they seem – they are set up to actively mislead readers. Takes steps to verify information.

- Sites run by amateurs or those promoting commercial or other interests. These can be useful, but do not assume they are impartial. Beware, particularly, of the possibility of bias by omission.

- Topicality. Many sites are not updated. Check that information they contain remains current.

- Social Media. Material posted on an individual's personal pages on social media sites, particularly pictures or video, will receive much wider circulation if re-used by the BBC.

- Posting in online communities or emailing potential sources. Transparency is essential. Observe the requirements of the BBC email policy.

- Covert or specialist research. Permission should be sought in advance, and specialist advice taken before undertaking this kind of research

GUIDANCE IN FULL

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Introduction

Great care should be taken when using online sources. Those conducting research should corroborate any information they find and check the identity of any contributor they wish to use.

Legal Issues

The web presents us with a huge array of sources, domestic and international, amateur and professional. It would be a mistake to

assume that all web sites produce content in accordance with UK laws on defamation, contempt of court and intellectual property.

As disputes over web page content can occur, it is advisable to save copies of every website used in BBC output. These can be sent to legal advisers before transmission and referred back to if any issues arise.

Special editorial approval is needed if research involves accessing sites containing obscene material. See here for more details (link only available for internal BBC users).

Certain research tools such as peer-to-peer file sharing software present legal and technical problems. Make sure all software is approved and properly installed before use.

Hoaxes & Spoofs

Many entertainment websites contain bogus information such as spoof news reports. Some campaign and activist sites mimic the domain name and design of an official source for reasons of satire or misinformation. Researchers must take care to perform thorough provenance checks before using material from a Web site. Many sites have an "about us" section revealing information about the site and contact details for its owners. Crosscheck these details with directory enquiries before making contact, as this lessens the chances of involving a hoax Web site. A simple background check is advised for any source or contributor we wish to use. Searching the web for references to a site's domain name may confirm its official status, but it might also reveal it to be a hoax.

Researchers can also conduct a "WHOIS" search to check the registration details of a domain name. This will often reveal the name, address and telephone number of a Web site's owner.

Amateur Sites

Although a Web site may look professional, it may in fact be authored by an amateur enthusiast. Amateurs may be a great source of information and expertise, but may also lack the objectivity, accuracy, copyright ownership and legal awareness of many professional sources.

Biased sources

As with any medium, hidden commercial or political agendas can shape a Web site's content. Researchers should check the links to and from a site as these can often reveal political or commercial affiliations. It is wise to question where the financing for a Web site comes from.

Out of date information

Even trustworthy sources can contain pages that have not been updated in years. Contextual information can provide an idea of the date it was authored, but always use recognised sources to corroborate any information found.

Social media sites

Individuals post material, including pictures, audio and video, which may reveal information about themselves, generally for the benefit of friends and acquaintances. Such material may cause embarrassment or worse if it receives the kind of wider distribution that re-use by the BBC implies. A balance needs to be struck between appropriate use of material that an individual may have unthinkingly put in the public domain and fairness to that individual.

(See Editorial Policy Guidance Note: Material from Social Media)

Best practice when emailing sources or posting in online communities

Transparency is essential when dealing with the public. Use a BBC email address and plainly state that research is being conducted on

behalf of the BBC. See <u>here</u> for the BBC policy on email use (link only available to internal BBC users).

Online communities do not always appreciate media interference. It is often better to privately approach the owner of message board, than to directly post onto a message board.

If participation in online communities is essential, it is advisable to use a departmental email address rather than a personal one.

Best practice when conducting covert or specialist research

In certain limited circumstances special permission can be granted for covert research from appropriate senior managers. Editorial Policy should normally be consulted. When going undercover online, special care should be taken with security. A simple visit to a website can betray BBC interest to its owner. Even emails sent via free Web based services can be traced back to the BBC.
Adequate training can ensure that any potential problems can be identified and overcome. Do not leave such things to chance.