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Communications Strategy

Context

In 2012 the Royal Historical Society invested a substantial sum in the modernization of its website. This decision resulted in the creation of a new web platform for publicity and administrative purposes, the expansion of online content, in the Society's participation in social media, and in the creation of a part-time position of Research and Communications Officer, held by Jane Gerson.

This communication strategy builds on this initial work by considering how the Society should maximise its investment in order to enhance its public profile, communicate more effectively with its fellows and members, and increase participation in the work of the Society by the wider community of historians in the medium to long term. It sets out a broad vision for communications, while recognising that specific campaigns will require separate strategies. Much of the initial work on the website is still ongoing. As a result, the communications strategy will need to evolve in line with any developments in the web project and in conjunction with any new initiatives the Society pursues (for example, fundraising campaigns). The objectives associated with the web project are outlined in separate documents (tender documents; briefing papers provided by the working party).

Overall aims and objectives

In broad terms, our aim is to deliver clear, effective and professional communications to our internal and external audiences so that they are fully represented by, engaged with, and supportive of the work of the Society.

Our communications objectives are three-fold:

1. To provide clear, informative, useful, and stimulating 'internal' communications to our 'core' constituents (current or potential fellows and members) in order to assist their work as historians, to promote their engagement with the Society, and to encourage them to support the Society's work;
2. To promote the work of the Society to external audiences and partners (including the media, academic, cultural and heritage organizations, the general public, RCUK, and policy-making bodies), to enhance the public image of the Society, and to ensure that the Society becomes the authority on matters relating to the historical profession;
3. To assist Society officers in the discharge of their duties.

Audiences and partners

Key audiences have been identified as follows (in order of strategic priority):



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existing fellows and members; professional historians (including those not working within the HE sector); postgraduate students and early career researchers; members of cultural and heritage institutions; the media; general public; school students; other history societies in the UK and internationally; humanities based organizations; peers and competitors. While this list suggests certain priorities, it excludes important target audiences, such as RCUK, BIS, and DfE, and our partner institutions (HA, IHR, AHUG, Gresham College, *History Today*), who may serve as intermediaries in the process of communication.

Key messages and values

It is important that the Society agrees the key messages we wish to communicate, who these messages are intended for, and how our messages support and reinforce one another.

The key messages regarding the purpose of the Society can be found in our new promotional leaflet. These are as follows:

We represent history as a discipline and historians as a group.

We promote the vitality of historical scholarship through support for research and publication.

We advocate best practice in history teaching in universities and schools.

We initiate and sponsor events for the scholarly study of history.

We provide a forum at which all historians can meet and disseminate ideas.

We support and encourage early career historians.

Our core values include a commitment to:

- academic rigour and upholding the quality of historical scholarship;
- representing the discipline as a whole (across institutions, regions, organizations, types of historical enquiry);
- partnerships with organizations and associations in order to effect change, support our core activities, and share intelligence;
- the protection of the independence of the profession;
- investing in the future of the discipline;
- the reward and recognition of academic excellence in teaching and research;
- the production of high quality publications stimulating new research in the field;
- raising awareness of issues facing the profession and the importance of the study of the past.

We will consult more widely among Council members and our fellows and



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members as to whether these messages and values are appropriate. The Society should give further consideration as to the benefits and value of fellowship and membership. Having a clear sense of this may assist us in any attempt to expand our numbers.

Outline of approach

The communications strategy needs to respect the fact that the Society places special emphasis on its long-term stability and reliability, and above all its reputation for upholding principles of academic freedom and scholarly quality, which have become ever more valuable to its fellows and members in a period of growing commercialization and bureaucratization in the higher-education sector. In undertaking any publicity exercises, it will be important to reassure our core constituency that the Society is not succumbing to some of the same faddish marketing and PR exercises that have debilitated many British universities.

At the same time, the Society is keen to consider better ways to uphold these enduring values at a time of rapid change, to communicate its values and its activities better not only to the scholarly world but far beyond, and to ensure that it remains nimble enough to grasp and meet new challenges and opportunities as they arise. These principles are reflected in the overall objectives above and in the values the Society seeks to communicate.

General Principles:

All communications should be clear, accurate, jargon-free, distinctive, accessible and timely.

All communications should take into account guidelines concerning disability (colours, type size, use of English) and diversity issues and, where possible, comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.

The RHS is committed to reducing its carbon footprint (for example, by reducing paper communications, including those associated with its publicity activities).

All communications must be subject to rigorous checks on the copyright status of any item used in publicity materials.

Central communications will make use of the new logo and associated graphics (including in email signatures, on letter heads etc.). This is to ensure a consistent image across all media formats. This principle is already in operation in relation to the website and new leaflet.

The website must be regularly updated in order to ensure a steady supply of fresh content and to remove dated material. All members of Council should seek



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out and pass on information to the communications officers in order to provide a good supply for material for publicity and news.

Responses to any communications to the Society should be timely.

We should not be content with reactive communications; we should attempt to be proactive, with a rolling communications plan.

Individual campaigns should have a separate, targeted communications strategy.

Channels of Communication

A major aspect of the web project has been to modernize our channels of communication (recognizing the need to communicate to new audiences in new ways and exploiting social media), while retaining and updating traditional means of communications that both embody the values of the Society and respond to the needs of certain constituencies.

To date, the Society's main channels of communication have been:

- The website;
- The newsletters (distributed to all fellows and members in May and November);
- Email bulletins;
- Events and visits;
- Facebook;
- Twitter;
- Information leaflet;
- Vimeo (for events);
- Direct communication with Departments (letters etc.).

We need to be clearer about the purpose of these different forms of communication and how they interact. It is proposed that we retain a flexible approach to web communications as the main portal for interactions with our audiences (e.g. providing information and news, publicity for core activities, promotion of events, access to documentation, as a repository, as a means of accessing digital resources etc.), while using Twitter for 'immediate' information and publicity and to drive traffic to the website. The 'feel' of the newsletter will be updated in order to better communicate the core activities of the Society and matters of interest to our fellows and members, while retaining its traditional and valued features (such as the 'Card of Session' and the Presidential Letter). We will investigate the possibility of producing an e-newsletter (for delivery to PCs,



tablets and perhaps mobile devices, depending on feasibility and cost) with interactive links to the website. It is proposed that we retain the current weekly e-mail bulletin with news and information, since this provides regular contact with members. The new web system is likely to provide options for fellows and members to tailor communications from the Society. We may wish to consider other uses of the email bulletins beyond conference / scholarship announcements, not least because the new web system allows us to 'sweep up' relevant content in order to automatically produce regular emails to fellows and members. The leaflet has been updated, and Vimeo is our chosen portal for video content (it is cost- and advert-free at present). Our Facebook presence is less successful, and we propose that this should not be retained as a primary means of communication. The Society needs to develop its public communications (via the media) to enhance its public profile and to ensure that the Society becomes the authority on matters relating to the historical profession.

We will need to monitor these channels at timely intervals in order to ensure that they remain 'fit for purpose' and be alive to new opportunities as they arise.

Specific objectives

This section outlines more specific objectives (with associated activities designed to achieve them) linked with the 'high-level' aims identified above, together with possible success indicators. These objectives relate to planned activities over the coming 24 months.

Objective	How will the objective be achieved?	Success indicators and targets
Increased traffic to the new website	Twitter to direct traffic to the website; Focused and enhanced web content; Develop member services; Steady supply of new news, useful policy documents and 'good practice' documents; Regular updates; Remove old material; Development of video content; Monitor search engine optimization;	Acquiring 1000 unique visitors per month; Maintaining a bounce rate of below 40%; Monitoring the return and browsing profiles to identify trends and develop content;



	<p>Follow-up consultation with fellows and members 12 months after launch to ensure that we are meeting their needs and to refine content.</p>	<p>Monthly appraisal of Google Analytics data, with quarterly review against strategic objectives; Feedback from consultation with fellows and members.</p>
<p>Increased attendance at Society events / participation in Society</p>	<p>Targeted invitations; Wider publicity (with reminders as the event approaches); New event calendar on the website; Live Twitter feeds to accompany events; Videos of lectures to ensure wider 'participation' across the UK; Online voting system for election to Council; Wider publicity for positions on Council; Timely updates to all fellows and members following Council meetings.</p>	<p>Increased numbers at lectures and events (e.g. minimum of 75 attendees for lectures); Monthly appraisal Google Analytics data; Increased followers on Twitter after live-feeds (to increase by a minimum of 10 per event); Viewing figures on Vimeo (50 'plays' over 8 week period in the first instance); 25% increase in fellows and members voting.</p>
<p>Raise awareness of opportunities to publish with the RHS to increase the submission of high quality proposals and to increase volume sales</p>	<p>Regular features on web and in newsletter (including 'personal' stories); Increased publicity on Twitter (regular tweets on publications and each time the BBIH is updated); Direct communications with Departmental Directors of</p>	<p>Targets to be set by literary director and the academic editor of the BBIH, where appropriate; Increased sales figures.</p>



	<p>Research and PGR (list to be compiled and maintained); Liaise with publishers' publicity departments; Use RHS visits more proactively for this purpose (including follow-up communications).</p>	
<p>Raise awareness of Society grants</p>	<p>Regular features on web and in newsletter (including 'personal' stories with clear indications as to how the grant assisted research); Increased publicity on Twitter (regular tweets on updates from grant holders); Direct communications with Departmental Directors of Research and PGR; Liaise with HistoryLab+; Use RHS visits more proactively for this purpose (including follow-up communications).</p>	<p>Increased number of applications from a wider range of institutions; Research Support Committee to set appropriate targets.</p>
<p>Enhance the newsletter to ensure that it is attractive and useful; ensure that the newsletter is compliant with aim of reducing our carbon footprint</p>	<p>Design e-format (fellows/ members to opt for format) for multiple platforms; Fresh, lively content, while retaining popular traditional features; Give priority to policy work; Include features on funded projects, publications, policy-work on a regular basis; Ensure design is consistent; Reduce carbon footprint by encouraging fellows and members to opt for e-version.</p>	<p>Monitor the number of downloads of the e-newsletter; Reduction of the number of paper newsletters by 50% in the first year.</p>



<p>Increase the number of 'followers' on Twitter</p>	<p>Timely and fresh content; Balance re-tweets and new material; Live feeds for key events; Timely responses to any Twitter comment (normally on the same day, due to the nature of the medium); Inclusion of more (copyright-free/cleared) visual material in tweets.</p>	<p>To attract 100 new 'followers' per month; Monitoring activity through Twitter analytics on a monthly basis, with quarterly review against strategic objectives.</p>
<p>Increase applications for fellowship and membership</p>	<p>Draw up statement on the benefits and value of fellowship and membership; Enhancement of fellows/ members area of the website; Publicity drive (specific to Departments, web, Twitter, Newsletter); Council members to identify potential fellows and approach directly; Use RHS visits more proactively for this purpose (including follow-up communications).</p>	<p>Council to determine an appropriate target; Google Analytics to track use of members' area.</p>
<p>Raise awareness of RHS activities on behalf of the profession, including involvement in policy initiatives</p>	<p>Where possible: Regular features on web and in newsletter; Increased news on Twitter; Better and more extensive publicity of achievements; Use RHS visits more proactively for this purpose; Timely updates to all fellows and members following Council meetings; Direct communications with Departmental Heads of Department.</p>	<p>Feedback from fellows and members; Monitoring activity through Twitter analytics and Google Analytics on a monthly basis.</p>



<p>To maximize connections with the Press in order to ensure that the Society becomes the authority on matters relating to the historical profession and to cultivate opportunities to publicize the work of the Society and issues facing the profession</p>	<p>Directory of expertise and indication of fellows' willingness to be contacted by the media; Press 'breakfasts'; Draw up a list of contacts in order to 'place' important initiatives or statements on key debates / policies.</p>	<p>Monitor press coverage, where possible; Monitor the use of the directory.</p>
<p>To maximize opportunities to promote the work of the Society through deepening existing partnerships and seeking new ones</p>	<p>Increasing events with partners (especially those with wide reach); Devising joint communications for particular events; Collaborating and intelligence sharing on communications activities.</p>	<p>Monitoring data (such as Vimeo views, attendance) at joint events; Production of joint publicity for shared events.</p>
<p>To raise profile of RHS prizes</p>	<p>Organize awards ceremony with targeted invitations, increased publicity etc.; Enlist the services of professional photographer to document the event; Mobilize press contacts to publicize the work of the winners; Features on the website, newsletter etc.; Follow-up publicity on previous award winners.</p>	<p>Feedback from prize winners; Increased coverage of RHS prizes (small-scale at first, i.e. feature for <i>THES</i>).</p>
<p>To raise the international profile of the Society</p>	<p>Deepen partnerships with other national associations; Explore possibility of reception at high profile international events (such as the AHA) with associated publicity (not a priority and requiring a budget);</p>	<p>Regular appraisal of Google Analytics and Twitter Analytics data to understand the international profile of those visiting the website and engaging with</p>



	Tap into the network of #twitterstorians – attending events at AHA or using hash-tagging more aggressively, for example.	the Society on Twitter.
Ensure that communications are proactive, timely and compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act	Devise rolling communications programme to encompass key developments and events (e.g. release of policy documents, anniversaries and commemorations etc.); All communications to receive a response within 2 working days; Training for key staff in the provisions within and compliance with the DDA.	Production of programme at divided into 3 month, 6 month and 12 month intervals; Monitoring response rates through the website analytic tools; Monitoring communications for DDA compliance.
Sustaining the funding for the Communications Officer role	Fund-raising campaign	Raise sufficient funds to sustain the post in the longer term (Treasurer to advise on specific amount).

In order to ensure that we are achieving these objectives, the communications officers (together with the President and the Honorary Secretary) will review progress every quarter, using various data (feedback from users, record of monthly reports from Google and Twitter analytics, numbers of Twitter followers). This will assist us in understanding the needs of our audiences and in reflecting upon and improving the communications strategy. Quarterly findings will be reported to Council at the February, May, September, and November meetings. Any targets indicated above are provisional and will be revised following an analysis of data collected in each quarter.

Should Council approve this strategy at the July 2014 meeting, an implementation plan will be drawn up, indicating responsibilities and timescales.

It is proposed that the Society conduct a consultation exercise with fellows and members 12 months after the launch of the website and this strategy in order to



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fine-tune our communications and ensure that we are responsible to their needs and desires. The communications strategy will be revised following this exercise, and a new set of priorities and objectives set in line with the feedback we receive. Council will consider any major revisions to the strategy.

Resources, interdependencies, and risks

Clearly, the proposals outlined above have resource implications and are dependent on various factors (such as the continued relationships with our partners).

First and foremost, it is essential that we retain the services of a communications and research officer. Much of the work listed above is dependent on the continuation of this role, and it would be impossible to develop our profile without the services of communications officer. As a priority, we need to devise a plan to fund this. Secondly, we need to construct, with assistance of Holger Westphely and SquareEye, a disaster recovery plan should our web service go down. This should consist of a clear set of steps and contacts in the event of a crash and who will be responsible for putting the recovery plan into operation. Thirdly, we need to ensure full training for all staff associated with the technical aspects of communications. No one person alone should possess the knowledge of how to operate and maintain our essential systems. Finally, we might consider whether we wish to retain the services of an IT and communications adviser. Again, there are financial implications to this.

Although we have discussed this before, communications requires a rough budget, so that decisions about strategic priorities can be taken. A number of the proposals above have resource implications (e.g. photographic and videographic services, receptions, the design of the e-newsletter etc.). At this stage, we need to decide where our priorities lie and how we are to finance any initiatives we wish to pursue.

Jo Fox, November 2014