

Story: When digital goes wrong

Information travels like lightning on social media. As does misinformation. On June 23, 2016 every mind in Britain should have been focused on EU referendum. But quite a few were on stationery instead. A conspiracy theory had gone viral that polling stations were providing voters with pencils, rather than pens, so that any leave votes could be rubbed out and replaced with remain ones. The Electoral Commission politely explained that it was just as possible to cross out a vote made in pen as it was to rub out one made in pencil. Pencils were provided because they are cheaper than pens.

The story shows both the extent of the mistrust some members of the public feel towards the authorities and how volatile the digital climate can be. Managing that climate responsibly is very important for local authorities. You need to try and stop misinformation from spreading and to strike the right balance between creative and provocative. Southern Rail recently provided an example of what not to do. In the face of several worker strikes, they tweeted a poster saying “Let’s strike back. The RMT won’t listen to us. But they may listen to you. #SouthernBackOnTrack”. However, instead of responding with the descriptions of rail-strike misery that Southern Rail wanted to see, customers tweeted their anger: “Hey Southern Rail, you are the WORST. I fully support the union. Fire your social media team too.”

People clearly felt that the leaders of Southern Rail were passing the buck rather than taking their share of responsibility for the strikes. Southern would have been better off tweeting nothing at all. The lesson here is that social media messages designed to promote engagement need to promote the right kind of information. Provocative tweets should also be checked by a variety of people before they are sent live). Pitching messages so that residents feel compelled to reply to them constructively is essential.

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you wearing?

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