

What is social media?

Social media is internet-based communication, centred on sharing and collaboration where the technologies may include text alongside video, audio and pictures. Examples of social media are wikis, podcasts, forums, blogs and social networks.

Compared to the traditional mass media, they are low-cost and highly accessible technologies which enable anyone to publish and share their information.

Why should I be looking at social media sites as part of my research?

Traditionally we would research companies or new subjects by searching news, professional or industry sources, financial data and market data. However, in addition to these sources, there is now an increasing amount of information to be found in social media sources such as blogs and networking sites.

These sources provide us with a very different perspective to our research, giving an added dimension that was not previously available. Many industry commentators and companies are very active in social media and their online activities can keep you ahead with your knowledge of the latest thinking and sector developments.

Here we will briefly look at four social media sources – blogging, microblogging, Facebook and YouTube.

Blogs

Blog is a contraction of the original term *web log*. Blogs can take many forms, but typically they are an online journal or diary of a person or organisation.

Some blogs are very personal in nature whilst others are related to a subject area, product, company or a person's specific expertise. Most encourage readers to leave comments on the entries that have been posted.

You can find very current information on blogs and get a broader range of opinions (which may need to be read with caution) on a topic or company from customers, employees, journalists, industry observers and suppliers.

Technorati has a [good summary of "blogging basics"](#) and the terms used in the blogging world.

When you find a good blog for the topic, company or person you want to keep up-to-date with, you can subscribe to their RSS feed. This will automatically alert you when new items are posted on the blog. For instructions on how to manage RSS feeds, download our free RSS how-to factsheet from the website.

So how do you find relevant blogs?

[Technorati](#) is the best-known blog search engine. Search on the company or brand names that you want to track or research and you will retrieve a list of the latest blog posts. You may find it easier to manage the results if you refine by *Tags Only* which means that the blog entry has been specifically indexed by the author as referring to that company or brand. Try searching for *Diageo* generally and then with *Tags Only* enabled to see the difference in results. Another tip, if appropriate, would be to add in a company and a brand name to further limit to relevant results – as an example try *Diageo and Smirnoff*.

Example searches – see how the numbers reduce:

- [Diageo general search](#)
- [Diageo with Tags](#)
- [Diageo and Smirnoff](#)

Another useful tip in Technorati is to refine your search using the Authority function, ie select to refine by blogs which have a high level of authority. Technorati assigns authority to a blog based on the number of other blogs that are linking to it. This refinement works well for companies and also for finding blogs to research a particular topic.

You can subscribe to an RSS feed for every search so that you can be alerted when new posts are listed.

You could also look at [Google Blog Search](#) which enables you to search by keyword and time frame in its simple search and there are more detailed search options on the Advanced Search screen. The default display is by relevance but you can change this to date. Again you can set up an RSS alert for your searches.

[Blogpulse](#) is a site dedicated to blogs and trends. It includes a search engine with basic (keyword) and advanced search features such as Boolean and date range. It also enables you to track the popularity of keywords or links over specific time periods and to see these trends represented in graphical format. Blogpulse also includes a beta Profiles section which summarises the activity of a blog in terms of postings, citations, trends and sources.

Micro Blogging / Twitter

Twitter is the micro blogging service which is currently making a lot of headlines for itself, in part due to its famous celebrity users such as Jonathan Ross and Stephen Fry.

[Twitter](#) allows its users to post brief messages (tweets) which must contain less than 140 characters. These messages are then read by your followers, people who have made a decision to follow your messages on Twitter. Twitter has both business and personal applications, but in the business world it is a useful way of finding out news, industry insights, useful articles and networking with a wide group of people. Once you are

following a number of people you may find that the information becomes overwhelming, especially if you are following people who tweet very frequently (and some people really do!)

Use the [search function](#) to find mentions of companies, brands or people in your profession or industry. You may need to look through quite a few irrelevant tweets, depending on how popular or unique the name or brand is. There are also some [advanced search operators](#) if you need to be more specific in your search.

Twitter searches can be saved and the results sent to you via RSS.

If you post relevant and helpful information you can quickly build up a following of people who are interested in who you are and what you say. Through the links created, you will increase the number of people that you follow and your ability to network with other people who are in your industry or area of interest.

CIO magazine published a good [introduction to Twitter](#).. It also includes a guide to getting started on Twitter.

Facebook

[Facebook](#) is the largest social networking website, originally set up for students at Harvard University. It allows users to have 'friends' with whom they can share updates, news, photos, videos, messages, games and other activities.

Many companies now have a presence on Facebook. Company entries are called Pages and may contain information about the company, videos, product information, photographs, news items, user and fan comments, event listings and competitions.

You need to have a Facebook account to search for Pages effectively. However there is a basic [public search](#) function. You do not need an account to view a page from a link (see examples below) but you would need to log in to connect with the companies in any way.

To find a company on Facebook, log in then type the name or brand into the search box. This will probably find many results so you need to click on the Pages tab to just display the company pages. Here are some examples of companies who have a Page on Facebook:

- [Harvey Nichols – includes photographs, links to their newsletter, product and event information](#)
- [Wired – includes links to blog posts, podcasts, videos, articles, events and reviews](#)
- [Coca Cola – one of the largest company presences on Facebook with over two million fans, this page has more user content than corporate content](#)
- [Career Workshop with feeds from the blog and postings of articles relevant to career transitions \(a shameless plug ... but please become a fan if you are a member of Facebook\)](#)

YouTube

YouTube is a social networking and video sharing website. It can be difficult to navigate, find and authenticate relevant content but, that said, it does have its uses in company research. It can be particularly tricky to differentiate between official and unofficial sources – although both are potentially useful!

Some employers are using YouTube to attract people to their company through recruitment presentations or videos which attempt to show the culture and style of their organisation. Often this recruitment activity is aimed at graduates – but even if it is aimed at graduates, the content of the videos may still be relevant. Try searching for the company name plus a keyword such as recruitment, graduate, culture, working for etc.

Take a look at these sample searches and results:

- [PwC Recruitment](#)
- [BAE Systems Recruitment](#)
- [Working for Google \(don't forget, Google owns YouTube\)](#)
- [Aldi Graduate](#)

YouTube is also good for finding product videos and commercials, so it is particularly worth checking if you are researching commercial products and services.

What next - actions to help make social media work for you

- Identify the blogs and bloggers who cover the industry, profession or companies that you are interested in tracking and set up RSS feeds to keep up-to-date with new postings and comments
- Find industry experts, companies and brands who are participating in Twitter and follow their updates. Get involved by posting relevant and helpful content and networking with others in your sector
- Become a Facebook fan of companies or brands that you are targeting, or who are competitors of your target companies
- Find video content about your target companies on YouTube
- Incorporate checking social media into your daily online routines

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