How to set up a reporting chat group

Simple tools and tips to build a reporting community though messenger apps

Overview

An online reporting group is a powerful way to manage reporting as part of a citizen journalism project. Creating an open channel can give access to anyone, anywhere in the world, to report with very simple tools, including SMS messaging.

As well as being very useful for sharing multimedia content such as photos, audio and video, online reporting groups are also great for building a sense of community between reporters who live in different locations (or even continents!), hosting discussions, sharing project updates and allowing peers to support and get to know one other.

This guide will show you how to:

- Set up an open channel on Whatsapp and Signal
- Keeping the community connected
- Best practices for managing reports and community

Tools you will need

- A smartphone and a computer
- A blog or website to advertise the reporting number to the community (see our guide here for building a WordPress site)
- A database for your contacts and messages (Google Sheets)
- A file system for your media files – (Google photos)

Step-by-Step

Step 1 – Install the Apps

Both Whatsapp and Signal are free and very simple to install. Their main use is as a mobile app but they also have desktop apps which are a great way to message and manage replies. You can find the download links for them below.

Download Whatsapp

[Download Signal]

While they are similar apps, there are important differences to be aware of:

Pros for Whatsapp

- Easy to use & widely used across the UK

Cons for Whatsapp

- Cannot accommodate offline users (no SMS messages)
- Poor group moderation options (cannot see past messages)
- Recipients must respond before you can text them again
- Owned by Facebook so data privacy and monetisation concerns
- Group size limit at 256 contacts

Pros for Signal

- Can accommodate offline users through SMS messages
- Better group experience (seeing past messages)
- Managed by a non-profit org with a social mission
- Truly private and does not track you or sell your data
- Group size limit at 1000 contacts

Cons for Signal

- Not widely known in the UK compared to Whatsapp which may lead to a drop off in responses as users are unwilling to install another app

With these in mind, let's continue to the next steps on how to set-up and manage the groups.

Step 2 – Create a New Group

Once you have installed the apps you can create a new group and add contacts from your address book. Make sure you have all the people you want to add saved to your phone as contacts. We have given links to detailed guides here on how to set up your groups:

[Set up a group on Whatsapp]

[Set up a group on Signal]

As the group creator, you will be the Admin and have control over adding and removing contacts. Some basic features to add to your group are:

- A name to clearly represent the organisation

- A profile picture of your organisation logo/identity
- A short description of the group with guidelines and project summary

When adding contacts to a group, it's important that members are aware of the purpose of the group and rules from the start. With many members joining, your role as Admin is to ensure the group runs well.

Step 3 – Managing the group

As the group Admin, your responsibilities are to add new members and moderate the group. As the group grows, having good standards in place will help enormously. We have given some tips below:

Adding new members

You can add members manually yourself, or share an invite link online for members to use to join themselves.

You should have a friendly onboarding process for new members. When you've added a new contact to the group, send them a private message including

- The rules of the group
- A prompt to introduce themselves to the other members of the group
- Your process for reporting

If you need to collect information on anyone before joining, you can set up a free Google or Typeform Survey for new joiners to apply before inviting them.

Moderating the group

For a group to work well, it should have a clear focus on a clear topic and clear instructions on how to submit reports. As the Admin, you should keep the group on topic, otherwise, members might stop engaging or leave the group entirely.

Some parts which stop a group from working well include:

- Personal one-to-one conversations in the main chat
- Off-topic talk
- Too many small and low information messages
- No moderation from Admins

Make sure that the group is useful for members!

In the next section, we'll look at some best practice in the reporting process

Step 4 – Managing and Supporting the Reporting process

As the lead for the group, you also have responsibilities to ensure that the group reporting is clear and effective.

You should make sure that the reports have all the right information you need to act on, this could include times, dates, names, locations, video or audio recordings.

You should also have processes for acknowledging reports, feeding back and asking following questions once the initial report comes in.

As the lead for the group, you should:

- Create a standard format for reporting in the group
- Respond and acknowledge reports when they come in
- Record and collect the reports in a database or filing system
- Keep the group active and updated
- Prompt the group for reports when the group is inactive
- Regularly back-up the group data

Step 5 – Scaling and Innovating for the Future

As the community grows, you may want to scale your ability to manage more messages coming in by:

- Adding and on-boarding new moderators
- Creating new groups on topics or location
- Creating a social media account to share stories and experiences from the group
- Bulk messaging updates and calls to actions
- Creating channels on other platforms like Facebook
- Innovating through tech with virtual numbers and chatbots (see here for our guide on setting up a local number for reporting)