Report for Digital Democracy Commission – Student Forum

Topic: Engagement

Facilitators: Emmanuel Oyeniran, Katie Pearson

Rapporteur: Saga Barnard

Key issues identified;

Language; although the online medium is "especially attractive to the younger generation" (Powell) the language and format of the online discussion between citizens and politicians fail to engage citizens. Part of the reason is because politicians still use political language and jargon that the average citizen cannot process and engage with. It further disenfranchises those who wish to get engage but feel as if they cannot because they cannot understand or express themselves in a political manner.

Enforced barriers; not all citizens are tech-savvy and focusing too much on technology can be a problem in itself. "Parliament doesn't get why people won't come to them, so why doesn't parliament go to the people" (Newman). Technology can at this time perhaps only be secondary for encouraging engagement. About this the discussion was inconclusive.

Too much information; there is a lot of information online and citizens who wish to get engage can be deterred when information relevant to their interests are difficult to find. It also takes time to go through all the information.

Purpose of engagement; do we aim to increase voter turnout or engagement with the political process? A problem identified mid-discussion, most appeared to have viewed it as engagement with the continuous process rather than turnout.

Politics is perceived as boring; this is a key issue that has been brought forward in most discussion treads held. There is little to be done about those who have already been disenchanted (Sara M). Therefore it is very important to show the electorate that they matter in politics, which is currently not being done.

Lack of education; the wider electorate is not educated enough on the political process or how to get involved if they would wish it. Once again, a reoccurring issue, throughout the discussion threads in the forum.

Proposed solutions;

Language; politicians should aim to simplify their online communication without changing their political message. By using the everyday vocabulary of a politician online it will only further disenfranchise the electorate. A balance between informative messages and pedagogical language must be struck in order to use the online forum to encourage wider political engagement. Language equivalent to, that of "town hall meetings" (Sara M) is what should be strived for online as well. A political jargon translation app was briefly discussed, although it would probably only interest those already engaged with politics.

Concentrated information; by providing the electorate with an opportunity to register their interests in politics and then receive information only relating to those topics, citizens might engage more in the areas that interest them, like an rss feed for politics. An example of concise political information can be found at The Lords Digital Chamber. A new political online forum that specifically focuses on political interaction between representatives and their constituents might encourage further engagement (Oyeniran). They might even help to remove the divide between the political classes. http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ was put forwards as an example of such a forum.

Political studies; if there was an element of political study tied to citizenship; more citizens would have the tools to engage with politics. This was a reoccurring feature of all topics discussed in the forum, most agreed that education is essential to an active political society. The internet might be used as a teaching medium as well. "A neutral political education programme that could be put in place for 14-19 year olds - that way we get people at the influencing age who can form opinions greatly and have all had different levels and type of life education and skills" (Griffiths). Reaching out to independent UK educational YouTube channels and ask them to make a feature to explain parliament "might be a potential way of reaching a wider (and younger) audience" (Andrej). Example: http://www.tedxhousesofparliament.com

E-voting; has been implemented in other countries such as Estonia, where ¼ of the votes in 2011 general election were cast using e-ballots. Given e-voting less effort is required by the electorate which might encourage higher turnouts for referenda and elections.

Acknowledgement; via the online medium it is important that the citizens feel heard by their MPs and local representatives. If they feel that their engagement makes a difference they will be more inclined to engage. Thus it is important for MPs to actively work for a good relationship with their electorate, which can be eased through online discussion since it requires less effort from the electorate.

Executive summary:

The discussion focused around easing access and understanding of politics to the electorate via an online medium, preferably one aimed at political interactions. In such a forum it is necessary to use language that the average citizen can understand. This as it is key for engagement to feel that you can engage. Furthermore educating the electorate using the internet will reach a new and younger audience which will hopefully encourage adult engagement. However the internet might not be the best way to increase overall engagement as it is difficult to reach those who are already disenfranchised from politics.