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QTube – Citizen-Generated Videos for Questions to the Prime Minister

An idea submitted to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

Prime Minster's Questions (PMQs) is an essential part of British parliamentary democracy's culture. Its relevance derives from the fact that many MPs are present, it is live broadcast on BBC and other media channels throughout the world, comparatively many people watch it, it receives sustained news coverage, and has a distinct and very vivid form of political culture.

PMQs is however not without criticisms. Commons Speaker John Bercow commented that often the "histrionics and cacophony of noise" at PMQs "are so damaging" that a "number of seasoned parliamentarians, who are not shrinking violets, not delicate creatures at all, are saying, 'This is so bad that I am not going to take part, I am not going to come along, I feel embarrassed by it'"[1]. Sarah Champion (MP, Labour), "PMQs – The first time I went it was incredibly overwhelming just 'cause you can't hear anything […] So I am one of those people who unless I have got a question or unless there is a particular issue, I do avoid it"[2]. Glyn Davies (MP, Conservative), "there is so much noise anticipating the arrival of the principal gladiators for their weekly joust that we struggle to hear"[3].

The relative high public interest in and visibility of PMQs shapes how British citizens and the world think about the British Parliament. A study conducted by the Hansard Society published in 2014 (N=1 286)[4] found that 47% of the survey respondents think that PMQs is "too noisy and aggressive", whereas 15% disagree. 20% say PMQs is "exciting to watch", whereas 44% hold that it is not exciting. 16% argue that "MPs behave professionally", whereas PMQs 48% say they do not. 12% hold the opinion that PMQs makes them "proud of our Parliament", whereas 45% say it doesn't. One of the main results of the 14 focus groups (N=153) that were conducted for assessing citizens' opinions of PMQs was that "[f]requently, the analogy of the school child or the theatre was raised. MPs were dismissed in scathing terms as behaving immaturely and childishly, as if they were in a 'big noisy classroom' or a 'comedy-show'. […] There was above all a clear desire that MPs curb their behaviour and conduct themselves in a more serious and mature manner, […] How this might actually be achieved was rather less clear"[5].

The way PMQs has been communicated to the public via the media changed over the years

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[1] *BBC Online*, Female MPs shunning PMQs, says John Bercow. April 17, 2014. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-27062577
[2] Ibid.
[3] Hansard Society. 2014. *Tuned in or Turned off? Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions*. London: Hansard Society. page 14.
[4] Hansard Society. 2014. *Tuned in or Turned off? Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions*. London: Hansard Society.
[5] Ibid., pages 12+32.

since it was introduced on July 18, 1961. The earliest media practice for covering the event was that journalists sat in the audience and took notes by hand. In 1978 a BBC radio broadcast of PMQs was introduced and in 1989 televised coverage began[6]. Today British citizens can also watch PMQs over the Internet on the BBC iPlayer and as live or archived broadcasts on various websites, which gives them more spatio-temporal flexibility and makes PMQs not just a national, but a global political event.

Today we live in the age of social media where Internet platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia shape the way we communicate. Can social media help to change the way PMQs work? Can it help to more engage citizens in parliamentary democracy and parliamentary communication? Can it help to overcome the criticisms that PMQs has faced and strengthen citizen participation in digital democracy?

The system that I have in mind – QTube (Q standing for Questions) – is Parliament's own YouTube that supports Prime Minister's Questions. It could for example work the following way:

- Parliament operates its own video-sharing platform that is specifically designed for PMQs.
- From Wednesday after PMQs ends until Sunday evening citizens can upload user-generated short videos to the platform. Each video asks one question to the Prime Minister. The videos can be generated and uploaded by single citizens or groups of citizens who engage in producing them e.g. as part of community centres, school classes, university modules, political debate clubs, etc.
- Letting users create short-videos for PMQs could not just be a concrete practice in citizen-centred politics and political citizen engagement, but be an incentive for citizens and groups of citizens to be creative: Some of these videos would be quite basic, whereas others would be artistic and again others would use excerpts from videos that show current political events that are re-used and re-mixed in various ways. Images, news bites, sounds, art etc are likely to be used in creative and unpredictable ways. A video submitted to PMQs would not just contain a political question, but would also have a visual and symbolic component that could make producing as well as watching these videos a concrete political practice as well as an expression of human creativity. It could also make politics quite enjoyable.
- There is a fixed maximum duration of each video. Videos that are longer than the maximum time cannot be uploaded and are automatically rejected by the electronic system.
- On Monday and Tuesday the system closes the upload possibility and goes into the voting mode. All uploaded videos are presented in a user-friendly way on QTube and citizens can vote on them. Voting could either work in such a way that each IP address in the UK has one vote and is technically excluded from further votes or that citizens are enabled to vote by registering with their personal data and can log into the system, which allows them to cast one vote each.
- The videos that achieve the highest number of votes win the selection process. There should be a fixed number of user-generated videos per week, e.g. 3-5, that is selected this way.
- The citizens whose videos are selected are invited to be present at PMQs and to sit in one of the front benches.
- There are 2 possible ways of organising the Prime Minister's answering of the selected user-generated questions: Either they are broadcast on a large screen in the House of Commons during PMQs or there are special sessions of PMQs that are dedicated to answering the questions posed in these videos. In my view intermixing the videos each week with the regular questions asked by MPs has the advantage that citizens' questions

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[6] *The Independent Online,* 50 years of PMQs. July 17, 2011. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/50-years-of-pmqs-2314966.html

are not ghettoised and can receive the same attention among the public and among MPs as MPs' questions do.

QTube could be implemented as a pilot and an experiment in political communication by using it in two or three parliamentary sessions in an explorative manner and evaluating it afterwards. This would require conducting social media research along with the experiment. Such research could address the following questions:

- What do citizens think are the pros and cons of the way PMQs works today? Do they think digital media offers new opportunities to improve PMQs and to overcome the current cons? If so, why and how? If not, why not? What advantages and risks of digital media use in PMQs do they see?
- Do QTube participants think this system is an opportunity to enhance citizen participation in parliamentary work and the democratic process? Do they think QTube is an opportunity to enhance citizen engagement and digital democracy? If so, why? If not, why not?
- How was the experience of citizens who generated and submitted videos to QTube and who engaged in voting? What worked well? What could be further improved?
- How do citizens who generated videos that were actually broadcast and answered in PMQs assess QTube and the session of PMQs in which their videos were used?
- How do MPs assess the sessions that used QTube videos? What were the main commonalities and differences they perceived between regular sessions and QTube-supported sessions?

One important question is how to deal with videos that are rude, insulting, off topic or in another way inappropriate (e.g. racist, discriminatory, etc), but are popular among citizens. There are several ways of dealing with this issue:
1) One could either say that if the citizens want to have these questions asked, then they should and will be asked. This means giving full trust to citizens' judgments. Those critical of the current practice of PMQs may say that what citizens submit and vote for cannot be worse than some of the things sometimes happening in PMQs and can only help improving its quality.
2) Specific terms of use could be defined that define exactly what kind of videos are discouraged. A social media expert or a group of experts working for Parliament or a citizen jury with rotating membership could review videos and delete those that are not in line with the terms. Here questions of potential censorship come in, which could make QTube vulnerable. One could e.g. make the filtering transparent by making a video section that contains all videos excluded from voting as well as providing justifications why they were excluded and how they have violated the terms of use. These videos could still be viewed, but would not be open for the voting process. The terms of use could be generated by public consultation and making use of wiki-editing by citizens.
3) One could implement the voting in such a way that each citizen not just has one positive vote ("like"), but also one negative one ("dislike"). The latter could be used for identifying videos that s/he thinks contains a question that should under no circumstances be asked. A specific number of dislikes could disqualify a video. Or likes could be weighted against dislikes, which would mean that the actual filtering would be organised in the form of a citizen vote.
4) Also various combinations of these strategies are possible.

There are a couple of other questions that arise: Should QTube work like the BBC iPlayer that can only be accessed from computers that have a UK IP address? Or can the videos be viewed from everywhere in the world? Is the uploading of videos only possible from within the UK or from anywhere in the world? Are only UK citizens allowed to upload videos? Or can any person living in the UK do so? Or anybody in the world? Or anyone who uses a computer with a UK IP address? How restrictive is the platform in terms of access to the uploading function? Is prior registration required or is uploading without registration possible? Is

uploading anonymous or requires personal identification of at least one involved person? Or should both non-anonymous and anonymous uploading be supported? Is the voting process restricted to UK citizens? Or to computers connected to the Internet in the UK? Or is it possible from everywhere in the world and by any person in the world?

Questions for the scope of parliamentary democracy arise in this context that have to do with the fact that parliamentary democracy tends to operate on the nation state level, whereas the Internet is inherently transnational in scope. If we think of the EU parliament, then it becomes clear that today we are already experiencing the transnationalisation of parliamentary democracy, albeit one that is facing its own problems and that does not and cannot supersede national parliaments. The question that arises is if and to which degree QTube should be a communicative political practice at the national and/or transnational level.

If QTube is an idea that is of interest to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy and Parliament wants to further pursue implementation of a pilot project along with accompanying research, then I would be happy to get involved and to support this work.

With kind regards,

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