

## Contribution from Susan Hedley

### Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy: Representation in a Digital Age - Supplementary Points (highlighted in yellow) to my Original Submission

Digital Democracy is excellent:

it can allow more robust and timely scrutiny, participation, gathering of information about current situations and current and possible future demands, and suggestions and dialogue about innovative ideas and developments. (see e.g.1)

#### **BUT**

**it should not be pursued without ensuring that people who do not or cannot use digital means are not excluded from equal access to all democratic forums.**

If they are allowed to be disadvantaged and excluded from democracy in any way, they will not be able to have their voice heard properly, and so they will become increasingly disregarded and excluded from our society. If democracy is one person one voice, then *every* voice should be heard, by whatever means it takes. We are all liable to be assessed to pay tax, and so we should all be able to say how we think that that should be done and how it should be used in our society.

I think that I am already seeing a use of digital democracy *instead of face-to-face*, out and about in the real world interaction and enlightenment, rather than what digital democracy should be, i.e. a tool to enhance such interactions. (see e.g. 1a) At present, there do not seem to be nearly enough discussions and procedures to guard against the tail wagging the dog. If these do not happen, it will be too late, and our democracy will have degenerated into a pale travesty of what it should be, with increased susceptibility to large vested interests who have the resources to manipulate it, and no effective mechanisms in place to stand up to them.

#### **SUGGESTIONS**

1) Before anything goes much further, we need an audit of the current state of *everyone's* present and desired access to digital democracy. It is no use just asking the people who already respond to consultations and surveys, because that way doesn't identify the people who are already being left out.

If it was every year instead of 10 years, and if it wasn't already so involved that it couldn't accommodate enough extra detail to be useful, the census would be ideal.

However, **every household has to be assessed annually for the Community Charge, and so has at least one annual communication from their local Council.**

**Could the government pay the Councils to gather the information for such an audit?**

(Maybe even use an incentive such as the government paying for a Community Charge rebate for those who respond? After all, most people are probably agreed that we need more people to participate in our democracy if it is to work properly, so how much is it worth?) (see e.g.2 ) It really is getting very urgent indeed for those areas which do not yet have Broadband, or access to a decent signal for ordinary mobile phones, let alone smartphones. (e.g. 2a)

These areas are often remote from their local seats of power, let alone regional and national seats of power, without even public transport to get to them, and so are increasingly *out of sight and out of mind*.

**It is not just a question of cables and signals.**

- There are people who might simply be too frail or sick to contemplate learning to use the computer at all, let alone use it for complex surveys and consultations.

- Even if they have the money to learn, install, and maintain a computer, it is unlikely that the first thing they do when they switch it on will be to turn to local or national government sites to find out which of the hundreds of consultations and surveys which are current are relevant to them, let alone have time to go through the usually very large consultation documents before responding. **(If out elected representatives were really doing the job which they are paid to do , which is to go out and meet their electorate and find out about their lives so that they can truly represent them, rather than squabbling about the minutiae of party dogma, then the electorate would not need to spend so much of their precious time on responding to consultations if they want their voice to have a chance of being heard).** Most people are far too busy looking after their families and using their computers to help them to keep in touch and make ends meet, or to grab a few minutes of precious relaxation, to have time left to respond to consultations. If consultations are designed in a way which is so complex that they are really too cumbersome for most people to have time to deal with, this leaves the way free for vested interests and well-staffed organisations to monopolise the consultation process on issues which have great bearing on the lives of ordinary citizens. (e.g. the Northumberland County Council Core Strategy Issues and Options Consultation in 2012, an excellent consultation document and questionnaire, but virtually all of the ordinary people who I spoke to had not heard of it, and a very high proportion of the responses were from businesses and organisations, some of whom have no particular commitment to Northumberland, though every section of this strategy is likely to have a bearing on the quality of life and the future prospects of *all* Northumberland residents.)

(Also, some consultations, which take the form of a link to a Snap Survey, only put the respondent's name and identification details as optional. I don't know how this works. Maybe it is possible to identify if someone is making multiple responses from their own computer, but is it possible to identify someone making multiple responses from a library computer?

**Maybe everyone on the electoral register should have a login if they are going to respond to consultations and the consultations are going to be accurate and safe from manipulation?)**

Maybe all consultations should have a clearly identified and quantifiable distinction between organisations and individual citizens.

Also, many consultations are outsourced, possibly with the numbers being analysed by the contracting company, and the final reports written by civil servants or council officers, so the results are likely to come through at least one if not two or more filters before they reach the elected representatives, i.e the information might well be produced by someone who has little or no direct knowledge about the area , and so **this should not end up being used as an alternative to the elected representative making the effort to go out and about in *all* the areas of their constituency to find out how matters are.** (e.g.3)

- People in more isolated areas might not have affordable access to maintenance and support services even if they exist at all in their area.
- Many people might not want to use a computer for anything, let alone for government surveys, because government IT systems have had some appalling security and operational disasters, and are therefore nowhere near 100% trustworthy. We don't all have the time or money to learn how to keep one step ahead of IT fraudsters, and so have to be very selective about how we use computers, particularly if identity theft could cause more disruption in our lives than we have the means to cope with.

- Computer use simply doesn't fit into the lifestyle of everyone, any more than reading fits into the lifestyle of everyone, and our government should **serve** our needs rather than dictating them.

2) Every IT or paper form should have a suggestions/comments button or box with effective monitoring so that matters can be improved. They might enable very small and cheap but effective improvements **initiated by the users, not the designers.**

3) **Have a list of consultations on local and national government websites which can be ordered by subject or deadline date, so that** we have a more realistic prospect of being able to find and repond to the ones which are relevant to us before it is too late, and we only hear about it by chance in the media after it has closed.

The conventional media can no longer be relied upon to keep us informed about such things in a timely or consistent manner.

### **The excellance of digital democracy**

#### **e.g. 1**

Now I can go to the Northumberland County Council website, which I believe has won awards for digital democracy and

- check the news/press release page - very useful now that I have cut down on my media spending, and do not run a TV or buy national or local daily papers
- check the place, time, and date of forthcoming County and Parish Council meetings, see what is on the agenda and who is on which committee, something which I previously would have had to do on the phone with access to less detail, or struggled to do at the library in time to go to observe a meeting.
- check the minutes and supporting documents of previous meetings
- find out something about the interests and other positions of the people on the committees
- find out about the more obscure committees which are open to observe, but which I wouldn't have know to look for without having access to the website
- send emails to all sorts of interested parties, which I couldn't have afforded to do by post
- send emails to councillors between morning and afternoon meetings where the same subject is being discussed
- **email the excellent County Council Democratic Services department to ask for information and help and get an almost instant reply**

Do the same with national government on the excellant Parliamentary website.

### **The use of digital democracy *instead of face-to-face***

#### **e.g. 1a**

Using digital consultations as **an easy way of ticking the box to say that the required consultation has been carried out, and then disregarding the results.**

Such as the recent Northumberland County Council consultation on charging for transport to post 16 education, which had 600 responses and a petition of 900 signatures, mostly against the proposal, but the County Council Policy Board voted to procede with the substance of the proposal. Off the top of my head, the budget consultation in the spring had only 59 responses,

and the one on the combined authority had not much more than 300, and although members of the Policy Board commented on the low response, I did not hear them questioning the value of the substance of the responses on the grounds that the people who replied would have something to lose by the policy, as they suggested about the much more numerous responses to the post 16 transport consultation.

### Access Audit

#### e.g. 2

Should include not just who has IT in their home, what type it is, and whether they can or wish to use it, and if not, why not,

but for those without it, where the nearest public computer is, how effective their access is to it, and whether they have access to effective tuition.

e.g. I rely on using the computer at my public library 10 miles away when my workshifts allow. I am luckier than the people in most parts of rural Northumberland, because my village does have fairly decent public transport to get there, and I use a weekly bus pass instead of paying per journey, but the last bus home leaves half an hour before the library closes, and if I was working 9 to 5 instead of shifts, this would not allow me time to use the library between the end of work and the last bus.

When people have a computer at home and it breaks down, they often come to use the **library computers** instead. When the library computers break down, **those of us who rely on them have no backup**. This was the case with the Northumberland library public computers for at least 3 weeks this February, when they worked so slowly and intermittently that it was a **rare occurrence if users managed to log in at all, let alone access emails or fill in consultations**.

#### e.g. 2a

extract from Northumberland County council website:

#### **People's Panel Refresh 2014**

The current People's Panel has been in operation for three years. The County Council is currently seeking to refresh membership of the panel and increase the number of residents on the panel to 2,200 members. **The aim is to move away from postal forms of consultation to online or e-mail surveys** which is more efficient and provides better value for money. The County Council is using a market research company called SMSR to recruit the new panel.

#### e.g. 3

The lack of a response **must not** be assumed to indicate acceptance and satisfaction with the status quo, as a Fire Officer recently implied at a Northumberland County Council Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27th May, or apathy, as members of the Northumberland County Council Policy Board have implied about the recent County Council consultations on the council budget and the new North East Combined Authority. The reasons for the lack of response **MUST** be properly investigated and addressed, and not simply dismissed as apathy, **otherwise digital democracy will actually become a distortion of democracy**.

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