Contribution to Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy: Engagement theme

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My research is concerned with how digital media might enhance local democracy and in doing so make localities more resilient and enable a better local government. However, I will underline Tip O'Neill's claim that 'all politics is local' and maintain that lessons learnt from the local online sphere of engagement are generally applicable at the national level.

What are the downsides of technology for MPs and how can they be overcome?

There are at least two challenges, if not downsides, to elected representatives using digital technologies to engage with constituents. Firstly, as with all initiatives to involve citizens in the democratic decision-making process consideration must be given as to the purpose of the engagement activity. Here Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation is instructive as it categorises citizen's participation initiatives on a spectrum ranging from consultation to power sharing and consideration of it enables a shared clarity around expectations to be achieved from the outset.

However, the particular affordance of digital technologies for MPs, I would argue, lies not in their capacity for speedy and global connectivity but rather in their potential for building relationships. In an age of widespread disaffection with representative democracy, but crucially not democratic politics per se, (there is much academic evidence supporting this distinction see, for example, the British Social Attitudes Survey, 2013) this relational quality of social media in particular may be part of the answer to making elected representatives more 'accessible', 'less remote' and, possibly more 'trustworthy' but more on this later.

Building successful relationships online requires similar attributes for building relationships in other walks of life namely: time; integrity and a certain amount of emotional intelligence. Let us be generous and assume that time is the problematic factor here. This may well be an area, alongside training in how best to use the various social media, that requires institutional resourcing. Maintaining a continual presence online is important and this would meet the reasonable expectation that the MP will have something to say on the relevant issues of the day but also in terms of relationship building recent research suggests that posting regular messages that mix the political with the human can also be effective (Hepburn et al, 2014).

Of equal importance is the timely response to online queries. Research has shown (Hepburn,2013) that failure to provide timely responses to online queries was a factor in stoking political mistrust in elected representatives and their governance institutions. The case in point here was an institutional

failure by a local authority to provide its online interlocutor with speedy access to relevant information to enable him to answer queries in an online forum. It took this person a number of hours to find the information to answer the question by which time the damage had been done as the conclusion drawn by the online audience was that failure to provide a timely answer was really about evasion and duplicity. This does illustrate the wider institutional context for online engagement and query the capacity of governmental institutions both locally and nationally to properly support elected representatives in their online engagement. A pressing issue here is the modernisation of government institutions both locally and nationally that includes the interoperability of government information systems; the 'de-siloisation' of departmental information; and, more data open and accessible to the public.

This vexatious but important issue of trust is the second challenge I believe MPs face in using digital technologies. Lack of trust amongst citizens in their political representatives is well documented (see for example: Tolberg and Mossberger 2006) and I will come onto this but first of all I want to address the related but less covered lack of trust elected representatives have in online engagement. This is provoked by a potent mixture of anonymity, incivility and territorial unboundedness that characterises much online discourse (Hepburn, 2013). Consequently elected representatives are hesitant in assigning much political value to this exchange. However, the reality, and difficulty for elected representatives, is that regardless of their levels of civility, fluidity of identity and geography people engaging online around political issues are by definition politically interested actors (Hepburn, 2012). Failure to engage with these participants only serves to feed perceptions of a remote polity.   The problem here is a disjuncture between normative conceptions of citizenship generally held by elected representatives and the diversity of local populations and how this population may choose to enact their citizenship online. Leaving aside issues of multiple identities potentially claimed by transient and migratory workers, there are those – 3.5 million in the UK according to the House of Commons Library (Stratton 2010) – who simply choose, for a variety of reasons, not to claim one dimension of this normative view of citizenship by not completing the electoral register.

Reconceptualising citizenship is undoubtedly a complex task and, from a governance perspective, the extent of this re-conceptualisation will probably depend upon how it wishes to engage with its population. This brings us back to Arnstein's ladder of participation and turns upon the difficult question of power.

If it is the case that elected representatives are participating in these virtual spaces with a view to inform and consult, then they may be able to afford a broader conception of citizenship. If, however, they are intent on meaningfully engaging these communities in the policy-making process then issues of identity and place must come to the fore and be reconciled with the need, in some cases, for individual anonymity. This could be a facilitated by a third party provider, an NGO for example.

This solution has been forcefully argued by Wright and Coleman (2012), which is now empirically underwritten by Hepburn (2012, 2013). Such a provider might act as an intermediary between residents and government validating participation in an online space on production of some proof of local residence and agreement on minimum standards of discourse. On this basis, the participants could then remain anonymous online. This is not an easy task, but is one that needs to be resolved in such a manner that acknowledges the diverse and often transient nature of twenty-first century local populations but nevertheless preserves the integrity of a physical attachment to the locality. This is because localities, even in a globalised network society, remain significant, at least to the people who live there.

Facilitating dialogue amongst citizens

Addressing this question is related to my response above. My view is that Government should seek ways to enable online spaces to flourish that facilitate a dialogue not only between elected representatives, both local and national, but also between citizens. The ambition here is not to re-create, online, the public sphere as described by Habermas(1989) but more to help nourish the online sphere of political influence as envisaged by Dutton(2009). Such a public space is important as, regardless of prevailing disenchantment with representative democracy, it is fundamental to a healthy democracy, as first observed by De Tocqueville in eighteenth-century America (2003) and more recently by Putnam (2000), for local people to be able to congregate – online or off- and collectively discuss and attempt to resolve local problems. In other words this should be seen as a mechanism for empowering communities and helping to create a more vibrant, resilient and independent civil society.

In my opinion this is unlikely to work if any such space is seen as a government sponsored 'top down' initiative because of the aforementioned problems around 'trust'. Rather lessons should be learnt from past e-democracy initiatives in the UK (see Wright, 2006 and Pratchett, 2005) and from contemporary non-governmental organisations such as e-democracy.org (http://forums.e-democracy.org/) who have helped establish successful online forums in the USA at Minneapolis-St Pauls (http://forums.e-democracy.org/twincities). Here in the UK, mysociety (https://www.mysociety.org/) has a successful record in helping build civic websites and running civic coding initiatives.

A further consideration here is that citizens require accurate information to hold a meaningful and equal dialogue. As data is described as the new oil, fuel for the new economy it must also help re-invigorate our democracy.   One route to securing a better informed citizenry is via more open and transparent government, one that places more and more government data in the public domain. This has undoubtedly been mentioned under the digital scrutiny theme but is of equal relevance here.

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