



# EVIDENCE TO THE SPEAKER'S COMMISSION ON DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

OCTOBER 2014

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The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity.

We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics.

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## Introduction

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan political research and education organisation, working in the UK and around the world to promote democracy and strengthen parliaments.

The evidence in this submission draws on our own research, including:

- *The Audit of Political Engagement 1-11 (2003-2014)*;
- *#futurenews: The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy in a Digital World*;
- *Making Better Law: Reform of the legislative process from policy to Act*;
- *What next for e-petitions?*;
- and the Sense4us project.<sup>1</sup>

## Political engagement

Public engagement with politics on the internet is not widespread. The 2014 *Audit of Political Engagement 11* found that:

- only 6% of the public say they have contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media; and
- only 14% said they would be willing to do so if they felt strongly about an issue.<sup>2</sup>

When questioned about ideas for holding MPs to account:

- only 7% of the public thought that requiring MPs to be on Facebook or Twitter would be an effective way of holding them to account; and
- only 10% say they would pay attention if they did so.<sup>3</sup>

Audit 10 found that just 10% of the public say they have visited Parliament's website.<sup>4</sup>

While there is plenty that Parliament can and should do to improve its public offering, there is no one technological measure that would substantially increase engagement in the short term.

The problems with political engagement cannot be solved by technology / digital initiatives; they are part of the solution but not *the* solution.

## Law Making and scrutiny

### Technology

Technology is already having a beneficial impact on the processes of law-making and scrutiny for parliamentarians. Providing documents such as the Order Paper and committee papers electronically is an important step forward. As these systems develop and mature, there may be opportunities to actively promote these tools (such as the Order Paper app) to a wider audience of interested stakeholders, journalists and members of the public.

The synergy between the Cabinet Office/Office of the Parliamentary Counsel's Good Law Initiative

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of these publications can be found on the Hansard Society website, [www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk), except for *Making Better Law*, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library. Sense4us is an online project and further details can be found at: <http://www.sense4us.eu/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hansard Society (2014), *Audit of Political Engagement 11*, (London: Hansard Society), p.47.

<sup>3</sup> Hansard Society (2014), *Audit of Political Engagement 11*, (London: Hansard Society), p.78.

<sup>4</sup> Hansard Society (2013), *Audit of Political Engagement 10*, (London: Hansard Society), p.58.

and work on new legislative drafting tools for civil servants and parliamentary officials has considerable promise for making the whole process of legislative drafting, scrutiny and final presentation more accessible and efficient. This work needs to be resourced sufficiently to ensure that the ambitious prototypes that are being developed can genuinely realise the objective of presenting legislative information in a way that meets the needs of the interested amateur as well as the expert user.

As part of this process, there is a compelling need to provide a legislative hub for every Bill and Act, or at least to provide better links between the key documents that exist. Parliament curates most of its materials relating to a bill on its website,<sup>5</sup> however it does not always include important procedural motions and it does not include/link to related delegated legislation.

While Parliament does reproduce the government's Impact Assessment, it does not include any other government papers that may help users understand the policy and the legislation. The government has its own page with various papers,<sup>6</sup> a link to the final Act on [legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk),<sup>7</sup> but does not link to Parliament's resources.

While there are copyright and ownership issues, and an understandable desire to maintain the clear separation of non-partisan parliamentary material and more political government documents, this separation is not helpful for the public. At a minimum, linking between the two with appropriate caveats would be valuable, subject to consideration of long-term archival needs. In a recent discussion group held for the Sense4us project, a House of Commons library researcher explained that since the gov.uk site has been developed it is now harder to find older consultation and policy documents and press releases, with information being lost as web content is moved and rationalised without being properly archived.

Parliament and government are both making good progress in opening up their data to the public through dedicated data portals. However, to minimise the risk of complex datasets being unintelligible or misinterpreted by the public, Parliament should consider providing worked-examples of how its data can be utilised.

### *Procedure*

While there are many areas of parliamentary work that technology can enhance, in many cases the challenges are as much procedural as technological. Procedural tools that would help improve the quality of legislation are already in existence but they are not sufficiently embedded in the day-to-day work of Parliament.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true of the pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills, the experiments with a public reading stage, and post-legislative review. Technology may be able to open up these consultation routes to a wider audience and provide greater engagement in the legislative process. But this will only happen when they become consistent and predictable parts of the process, rather than ad hoc, occasional activities.

Piloting and testing new forms for scrutiny and engagement should be encouraged. Parliament should not be afraid to test, innovate, evaluate, learn and revise to build on the

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<sup>5</sup> Example, Defence Reform Act 2014, <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2013-14/defencereform/documents.html>

<sup>6</sup> Defence Reform Act 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/defence-reform-act-2014>

<sup>7</sup> Defence Reform Act 2014, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/20/enacted>

<sup>8</sup> R. Fox and M. Koris (2009), *Making Better Law: Reform of the Legislative Process from Policy to Act*, (London: Hansard Society) p.7.

piecemeal reforms and practices of the past.<sup>9</sup> However, this should be done with the intention of embedding such changes as a permanent element of the legislative and scrutiny process.

Making these changes requires a cultural and attitudinal shift in thinking in both Whitehall and Westminster in which the public are treated as a core audience in the legislative process.<sup>10</sup>

### *Petitions*

We continue to recommend that ownership of and responsibility for the ePetitions system should rest with Parliament and that a Petitions Committee, supported by staff in a Petitions Office, be established.<sup>11</sup> Taking control of the ePetitions systems would allow Parliament to significantly enhance the experience of petitioners – by providing greater feedback both to petition initiators and signees, highlighting petitions relevant to a debate on the Order Paper, and facilitating a range of possible outcomes, other than debates, when the signature threshold has not been met or when a debate is not the best way to progress an issue.<sup>12</sup>

With only minor changes, the technology behind the ePetitions system could provide greater value both to Members and the public. Members would welcome information about the petitions that are popular amongst their constituents, while the public might find heat maps and other data visualisation an engaging adjunct to the functionality of the petitions site.<sup>13</sup> An improved search facility would help reduce the number of duplicate or similar e-petitions being registered.<sup>14</sup>

### **Connecting with online communities**

Parliament is rightly exploring ways to make its own consultation efforts more effective, for example by developing links between committees and specialist outlets like the Local Government Chronicle and online communities such as MumsNet and MoneySavingExpert.com. However, the value of these collaborations quickly deteriorates if some form of contact is not maintained.

We recommend Parliament should appoint a Community Team (for each House or on a bi-cameral basis) to maintain two-way relationships with these potential community audiences.<sup>15</sup> Parliament should seek to tap into existing communities of interest and seed content and build relationships accordingly.<sup>16</sup>

There have also been engagement efforts on social media, such as the Education Select Committee's #AskGove initiative and the Transport Committee's engagement with the cycling community (#AskCycleMinisters). Engagement in this form is often a resource intensive exercise and Parliament must be careful to calibrate what it can offer: if it

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Hansard Society (2012), *What next for e-petitions?* (London: Hansard Society), p.19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> Hansard Society (2013), *#futurenews: The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy in a Digital World*, (London: Hansard Society) p.35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

stimulates public interest and participation it has a responsibility to be responsive to that interest.

There is also a risk in placing all its engagement apples in the Twitter basket: it has a far smaller reach than Facebook, less news is shared on it (although more news is broken) and in many ways, given the number of politicians, journalists, campaigners and lobbyists on the site, it replicates the traditional Westminster bubble.<sup>17</sup>

## **Presenting the work of Parliament**

Parliament is in a strong position as a trusted information source. Its unique selling point is its authoritative place at the apex of our democracy but at present it does not get a 'hearing' commensurate with its role. Parliament could and should be one of the most trusted sources for high-quality political and public policy information.<sup>18</sup> It can insert itself into public debate in a legitimate and appropriate way, and add value to the political conversation, by creating a useful pathway through what would otherwise be an avalanche of information. It can derive a form of soft power from its communications, by helping people to 'distinguish valuable information from background clutter.'<sup>19</sup>

To achieve this, Parliament needs to establish how to give voice to its multiple identities, mainstream a digital mindset in all areas of its work, and augment and prioritise its resources. It must devolve decision-making and activity, support creativity, initiative, experiment and accept a greater degree of risk in the future.<sup>20</sup>

Parliament's information strategy must be updated to reflect the changing demands of its audience(s). In particular, its work must evolve in response to the developing 'social', 'mobile', 'local', 'data' and 'video' communication trends.<sup>21</sup> To do this it needs to be quicker in its presentation of topical information and provide a greater variety of 'glanceable' content in the form of graphics, pictures and video designed to garner people's attention.<sup>22</sup>

It can be more 'anticipatory' in its approach, providing advance warning and foresight of interesting issues coming up and seeding links to relevant parliamentary content. On the most topical issues of the day more effort should be made to curate material from across Parliament in order to create an essential 'go to' online resource hub for any person or organisation that is interested in it – e.g. phone hacking or House of Lords reform.<sup>23</sup>

What matters most is not the volume of communications and the number of devices and networks on which it is disseminated, but the quality of the content, the targeting of dissemination and the way in which it is packaged so that others can access and re-use it.<sup>24</sup>

It should appoint dedicated audio-visual (AV) media officers tasked with producing and curating rich in-house content to populate the website which can then be disseminated to a variety of audiences. There is much that also could be done to enhance the live broadcast

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

of parliamentary debates and committees and better utilise Parliament's vast video archive so that it can be re-purposed by Parliament and third parties.<sup>25</sup>

Parliament's text materials could also be better displayed using the latest digital tools and standards. Better search functions, improved mark-up on reports and transcripts, a greater use of pictures and hyperlinks in reports, and a more responsive website would all improve the offering to the public and the potential for greater dissemination and engagement.<sup>26</sup>

ENDS

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pp.6-7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.