

# Response to the Digital Democracy Commission’s open call for evidence on the topic of ‘Digital Scrutiny’

Submission from Lucy Denton, Digital Outreach Team, Public Information and Outreach Service, Houses of Parliament

## Table of Contents

Summary .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	1
Public engagement .....	2
Working with external partners.....	2
Case Study 1 – Science and Technology Select Committee and The Student Room.....	2
Case Study 2 – Defence Select Committee and Army Rumour Service .....	2
Case Study 3 – Health Select Committee and WeNurses .....	3
Case Study 4 - Westminster Hall debate and OurDiabetes .....	4
Case Study 5 – Commons Chamber work and MoneySaving Expert.....	5
Concluding remarks .....	6

## Summary

This submission aims to outline the current and previous work undertaken by the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) working in partnership with online communities to promote productive public engagement with the work of the House of Commons.

## Introduction

The key themes which we will be contributing our experiences on are:

- Scrutinising the work and performance of government
  - *The role of technology in helping citizens to scrutinise the Government and the work of Parliament*
- Encouraging citizens to engage with democracy
- Facilitating dialogue amongst citizens

## Background

Public Information and Outreach (PIO) is responsible for encouraging greater awareness of the work and relevance of the institution of Parliament, and promoting productive engagement between the public and the House of Commons and House of Lords.

Within PIO, the Digital Outreach team is responsible for publishing real-time information on the work of the House of Commons, developing explanatory content on the Parliament website and forging productive working relationships with influential external websites and web forums.

## Public engagement

### Working with external partners

Research has revealed that the vast majority of the country does not engage with Parliament, with many unsure about the role or responsibilities of their elected representatives<sup>1</sup>. However people are extremely passionate about what can affect them and impact on their lives.

There is a wide range of very active digital communities on the internet with memberships ranging from 5,000 people to 1.8 million and more. As such, DOT has adopted a position that we must “go where the people are” and ensure that the public have the knowledge to allow them to pursue change through the work of Parliament.

The case studies below demonstrate just a few examples of the work DOT has done to link the work of Parliament with relevant online communities.

### Case Study 1 – Science and Technology Select Committee and The Student Room

Background:

In 2011, the Science and Technology Committee conducted an inquiry into the value of practical science experiments for young people in schools. The Committee gave students the opportunity to contribute to its inquiry via The Student Room (TSR) (an online forum with more than 500,000 registered members), posing three questions in threads on the TSR forums and asking for relevant opinions and examples.

Response:

- Across the three question discussion threads, 179 forum members contributed 277 posts to the discussion by the submission deadline. By 18 July 2011, contributions to the discussions had been viewed 6,588 times.

Result:

- In its report the Committee noted that the forum exercise had *“the advantage that we could hear from much wider ranges of students than could be heard at an oral evidence session and it filled a gap in the written material evidence as we received no written submission from students at school.”*<sup>2</sup>
- The Committee’s report included an Annex section that summarised the contributions received over the duration of the forum. Links to the final report were included at the end of the discussion threads, for the attention of TSR contributors.

### Case Study 2 – Defence Select Committee and Army Rumour Service

Background:

As part of the Defence Committee’s inquiry into Future Army 2020, the Committee agreed to host a series of threads on the Army Rumour Service forum (an unofficial forum for soldiers, veterans and interested others) to hear the experiences of Reservist and full-time troops who usually wouldn’t have an opportunity to have their voices heard as part of a Committee inquiry

---

<sup>1</sup> “55% of the public agree that politics and government seems so complicated that ‘a person like me’ cannot really understand what is going on.” Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement, 10 (2014, p.4): <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-10-2013.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> – Report Annex; Para 1. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/1060/106009.htm>

Response:

Across 23 threads on the Army Rumour Service which discussed aspects of the Committee's inquiry, we received 45,614 views, 494 comments and calculated that there were a total of 171 individual contributors.

Result:

The forum was referenced a number of times in the oral evidence sessions and in the report itself:

*"During the course of our inquiry, the Army Rumour Service hosted a web forum to enable us to hear the views of interested parties on the Army 2020 plan which we used to inform our questioning of witnesses. The forum received 494 comments from 171 contributors. We are grateful to the Army Rumour Service for hosting this forum for us and to all those who contributed."*<sup>3</sup>

Feedback from the forum users themselves was predominantly positive, with one commenting:

***Sarastro:** I would suggest that the value of contributions here (and there is some) is that it offers MPs another source which helps them develop the deeper knowledge mentioned above, so that they might ask the difficult questions successfully.*

### Case Study 3 – Health Select Committee and WeNurses

Background:

As part of the Health Committee's inquiry into Management of Long-term Conditions, it was decided to collaborate with online communities to highlight the work of the Committee amongst interested groups and to broadcast the Committee's work to new audiences in a positive and meaningful way. The Committee worked alongside a twitter community called WeNurses, to invite nurses from the community to live-tweet the evidence sessions.

Response:

During the evidence sessions, 4 invited nurses took part in tweeting the proceedings using the hashtag #NursesatHOC.

Analysis of the hashtag #nursesatHOC on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013 using TweetReach.com demonstrated:

- Roughly 50 tweets were made during the evidence session
- 15,706 accounts were reached<sup>4</sup>
- 69,647 impressions were made<sup>5</sup>
- 15 users contributed to the twitter discussion using #nursesathoc

Result:

Although the 'reach' and 'impression' are difficult to truly measure, the response from those nurses who attended was extremely positive. All of them wrote a blog after attending which demonstrated just how much of an impact a greater awareness of Parliamentary processes can have<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> - Introduction, para 5: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/576/576.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Reach is the total number of **unique** Twitter users that tweets about the search term were delivered to.

<sup>5</sup> When we say "impression", we mean that a Tweet has been delivered to the Twitter **stream** of a particular account. Not everyone who receives a tweet will read it.

<sup>6</sup> #WeNurses blogpost: <http://www.wenurses.com/blog/SelectCommittee.php>

One nurse (Francesca/@childnursestdnt) commented:

*“Despite my small difficulties, it was an experience I would whole heartedly recommend. You don't need to be massively passionate about politics or have a huge knowledge base about it, because depending what sort of session you attend, it invariably affects Nurses in the long run- and as I learnt today, in the short run. Today I learnt how incredibly relevant politics is to our profession- it's something we should all have a basic knowledge of, which is why I now appreciate the politics module I am finishing next week.*

*Politics of health is no matter how you view it, directly running alongside nursing, providing structure and affecting our jobs. Getting involved like I did today is so important- we need to continue to take charge of what our ideas about health politics are so that we as a profession can collate and pool all these ideas and opinions, giving us a strong voice and with larger numbers, providing a set of common values- what we, want, need, and recommend.”*

## Case Study 4 - Westminster Hall debate and OurDiabetes

Background:

MP Adrian Sanders proposed a debate on the Melbourne Declaration on Diabetes on Wednesday 18 June 2014. DOT has a strong working relationship with the @OurDiabetes twitter community who we approached to ask if they would like to trial live tweeting a Westminster Hall debate using the hashtag #ParliChat to increase awareness among a group with a specific interest in the subject of the debate.

Response:

During the course of the one and a half hour debate, analysis of the #ParliChat hashtag showed:

- 315 tweets were made during the debate
- 55 contributors took part using #ParliChat
- 961,681 impacts were made<sup>7</sup>
- 372,734 accounts were reached<sup>8</sup>
- 160 tweets were retweets

Result:

Following on from the live tweeting session, colleagues in Parliament's Web and Intranet Service trialled a new way of delivering the debate content<sup>9</sup> to members of the @OurDiabetes community to help to inform a follow-up twitter chat<sup>10</sup> around the debate which took place on Tuesday 24 June between 8-9pm BST

During this twitter chat, the final question was:

*@OurDiabetes: Would it be useful for @OurDiabetes to highlight more of the diabetes debates that go on in Parliament and Assemblies? #ourd*

---

Blogpost of @AgencyNurse (Teresa Chinn – founder of WeNurses): <http://teresachinn.co.uk/597/>

<sup>7</sup> **Impact** in this sense refers to: The potential number of times somebody could have seen the hashtag

<sup>8</sup> **Reach** in this sense refers to: The number of unique users that could have seen the hashtag

<sup>9</sup> Westminster Hall Digital Debates: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/westminster-hall-digital-debates/melbourne-declaration-on-diabetes/>

<sup>10</sup> Our Diabetes Parliament Tweetchat: <http://www.our-diabetes.org.uk/2014/06/diabetes-parliament-tweetchat/>

Responses from the community included:

*@vickisnotebook: @OurDiabetes I think so. I'm always interested to hear what goes on in Parliament #ourd*

*@kat0302: @vickisnotebook after all it's the parliamentarians that initiate debates&vote on budgets ;) #ourd*

One of the people who took part in the live tweeting (@DavidCragg) also wrote a summary of his experiences on his blog<sup>11</sup>. He commented on his experience:

*Overall I came away with a much greater understanding of how many MPs are "blessed" (as Jamie Reed MP put it) by diabetes who have a real passion and commitment to tackling the issues around diabetes as well as how much work goes unnoticed by the public.*

From the proposing MP, feedback has come back suggesting that the initiative was extremely useful in finding new contacts with whom he could discuss and engage on this topic thereby opening up the public's opportunity to engage with Parliament's work on this topic.

## Case Study 5 – Commons Chamber work and MoneySaving Expert

Background:

Moneysaving Expert is a very large website with a forum with over 1.2 million members focussing on consumer issues. DOT has had a presence as an official House of Commons representative on the forum since June 2013. Our role is to post up information on work undertaken in the House of Commons that has a consumer focus but which may not be highlighted elsewhere.

Information about our role and opportunities for people to get involved with Parliament's work have also been highlighted a number of times in Moneysaving Expert's online newsletter which is emailed weekly to more than 9 million people.

Response:

We have worked over the course of a year to build a strong and respected presence on the MoneySaving Expert forum and as such we have aimed to become a trusted presence on the forum, with people feeling comfortable asking us questions and responding to us.

Result:

In the time since we have started on the forum, we have helped to inform many who were previously unsure about the differences between parliament and government. We have also been able to demonstrate the breadth of parliamentary work and opportunities for engagement which previously would have gone undetected through mainstream media routes such as an Opposition Day debate on Food Banks<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup>Blog post of @Davidcragg (Founder of @OurDiabetes): T1 Ramblings-'Diabetes in Parliament': <http://t1ramblings.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/diabetes-in-parliament.html>

<sup>12</sup> Food Banks Debate, 18 December c.4.00pm: <http://forums.moneysavingexpert.com/showthread.php?t=4849050&highlight=>

## Concluding remarks

Through our work alongside external partners we have come across a few commonalities when testing engagement with members of the public, some stemming from an inherent confusion in the differences between the roles of the government and parliament (being seen by the public as interchangeable entities) and secondly a suspicion about our motivations for engagement.

However we have seen that sustained engagement can help to inform and encourage people to take part in conversations around debates and also provides a link between the work of Parliament and peoples' personal interests or concerns.

This can be an extremely positive and empowering experience for the public and provide robust evidence for Select Committees from sources that are usually either overlooked or unreachable. For Chamber work it can demonstrate the relevance of Parliamentary business and provide a stepping stone to encourage members of the public to take part in the parliamentary process either through lobbying, petitions or other means.