

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to everyone who took part in the Speaker's Commission at Brighton Digital Festival, most especially the young people who made this event possible

- Caroline Lucas MP

Speaker's Commission at Brighton Digital Festival

9.30am-1pm, 17th September

American Express Community Stadium, Brighton

The Speaker's Commission at Brighton Digital Festival was a dynamic workshop for young people that explored how digital technology can help in the exercise of democratic rights. The day was conducted as part of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy¹, and was hosted by Caroline Lucas MP², Wired Sussex³, the Democratic Society⁴ and Albion in the Community⁵, with the Democratic Society facilitating on the day.

This event was specifically designed for young people aged between 15-25, giving them the opportunity to say what digital technology could do for them and how it could help them to become more democratically engaged.

The event took the form of three parts⁶: the first was comprised of talks from our expert speakers, the second involved a participant discussion which set

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speakers-commission-on-digital->

² <http://www.carolinelucas.com>

³ <http://www.wiredsussex.com>

⁴ <http://www.demsoc.org>

⁵ <http://albioninthecommunity.org.uk>

⁶ The full agenda is included as an appendix

the context for the third part, a workshop around innovation in democracy technology.

Expert Speakers

Caroline Lucas MP, The Green Party

Caroline Lucas MP challenged the idea that young people aren't interested in politics - rather they are understandably put off by a political system that seems alien and unaccountable, and a House of Commons which seems remote and incomprehensible. The engagement and turnout of young people during the Scottish Referendum demonstrates that, where people find something about politics that they believe affects them deeply, they then become encouraged and energetically involved in the process.

If the democratic system really wants young people to engage in politics, then it's the system itself that needs to engage with young people. First, Parliament urgently needs reform, so that it reflects much better the diverse society it is meant to represent; and, secondly, we need to understand that democracy isn't just about casting a vote every 5 years - it's about how we hold our politicians to account, and about all the decisions which affect us and our communities.

“Today is about change, it is about democracy and it is about you.”

Michael Edwards, Albion in the Community

Albion in the Community (AitC) tackled childhood obesity, well-being programs, elderly people and support for individuals with disabilities. Michael Edwards spoke about the vulnerable people that AitC engages with and helps through their programs.

[Donna Comerford, Wired Sussex](#)

Donna Comerford said that the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy made her to challenge what she thinks, with the knowledge that she has, saying that Wired Sussex would like to support young people in their actions and the technology they use.

She had 3 tips for young people who want to be involved in the democratic process:

1. Do extra curricular activities
2. Keep up to date with news
3. Be positive

[Emma Mulqueeny – Speaker's Commission](#)

The Internet empowers individuals to do their own research and hear voices other than the mainstream news. Emma Mulqueeny said that her work with the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy has shown her the way that people communicate and share online changes the way they will engage with the Government.

Emma Mulqueeny believed that young people were disengaged from what is happening in Parliament. She considered this vital for the future as democracy depends on people being engaged. Society needs to understand why that disengagement is happening because in the future, the same young people will be running the country, - we need to fix the reasons for disengagement before it is too late.

Emma Mulqueeny also showed a video about the importance of younger people getting involved in digital technology and how learning coding can allow people to solve every day problems.

[Anthony Zacharzewski – Democratic Society](#)

Anthony Zacharzewski said that politics and democracy are how our legal rights are made 'real'. There are many platforms and websites that you can use, at a time that suits you, to get politically involved. Not all of these sites are about making things happen, sometimes they are just place to find out more information.

Anthony brought up a specific example called ipaidabribe.com, which allows citizens to flag up occasions when bribes have been paid to officials. This site shames those who take bribes all over the world, and has even led to the resignation of a leading politician. This is crowd-sourcing used to tackle bribery and corruption.

The issue isn't around creating single platforms, but rather using existing platforms, like Facebook, to get people involved in the democratic process.

[Rt Hon John Bercow MP, The Speaker of the House of Commons](#)

Mr Bercow said that Parliament is on a journey to betterment, trying to bridge the gap between Parliament and the country. The modern disconnect has been exacerbated by the expenses scandal, but it is even more pronounced with younger voters. The Speaker's Commission isn't interested in a group of men in suits discussing this problem and shouting at each other, so MPs are deliberately outnumbered on the Speaker's commission.

Politicians view the Commission with reserve, as they like to be part of things rather than relinquishing control. The Speaker said that he believes Parliament is missing a trick; his aim is to be the Speaker that finally manages to change the situation, bridging the gap between Parliament and the people. He concluded by saying that he is open to young people's ideas and that although many of his colleagues are reticent about change, they are nevertheless open to doing things in a more modern way.

Discussion 1

The Democratic Society then opened up the floor for the first discussion to explore how participants use technology and what they care about.

Participants reported three main uses for technology: shopping, communication and finding information.

Communication:

- Skype (business meetings)
- Facebook (sharing news, videos)
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Whatsapp (group chats – easier to send videos and picture)
- LinkedIn (business)
- Games online – chat rooms (Xbox, PS3)
- Petitions

Finding information

- News apps – local/national news
- Peer shared news through social media
- Health and fitness apps
- National rail (and other service information websites)

Within the room there was a strong reliance on mobile technology; people felt that they wouldn't know how to cope without their phones which were the key avenue for accessing their information.

There were a few very important positives to social media that participants highlighted. First, social media and apps are free and accessible, and so nobody is locked out through a lack of money or education. Secondly, there

was a perception that Facebook is impartial whereas the media is biased – young people trust their peers more than they trust institutions, authority figures and traditional media outlets. People use social media to talk friends and family about broader national issues.

Conversations about digital democracy usually hit a wall over issues of accessibility and the digital divide. Amongst young people this perception is reversed; digital technology is seen as a great leveller, where everyone, regardless of wealth and education, can access information and become involved.

Participants were largely in agreement about what mattered to them:

- Education
- Creating opportunities for young people
 - Youth unemployment
- Equality and social justice
- Homelessness
 - Social housing
- Friends and family

Discussion 2

The second discussion focussed on four questions:

1. How would you like to be able to communicate with politicians?
2. What information do you want to know about Parliament and how?
3. How could Parliament and politicians get young people interested in government using tech?
4. Should young people aged between 16-17 be allowed to vote?

The participants were not enthusiastic about talking to politicians, with one saying that 'Politicians don't care, they just want us to think that they do' and

another describing behaviour in the House of Commons, saying 'How can you have faith in people who are shouting at each other?' Although participants are interested in issues and in politics, they are actively turned off by the behaviour of Parliamentarians.

Participants also felt that they did not know enough about politics and that it should be taught on the national curriculum from a young age. There was a worry this might be too boring and put people off, but that a form of simulation game, like a Parliamentary Sims might help young people get to know the system.

Generally, participants felt uncomfortable with the question "How could Parliament and politicians get young people interested in government using tech?"; they pointed out that they were already using tech and it was Parliament that needed to catch up.

The Speaker asked the participants to give a show of hands on whether they felt lowering the voting age to 16 would be a good idea. The room was completely divided on this, with about 40% believing younger people should have the vote and 60% disagreeing; some believed that people are well developed by fourteen and more than ready to vote at sixteen, and others saying that sixteen year olds were too irresponsible and that we might as well lower the voting age to 3 months.

Participants did suggest that instead of voting 16-17 year olds should be asked their opinion on legislation. Currently, young people are not taken seriously simply because of their age, but they nevertheless have serious enquires about serious topics. Many organisations are already reliant upon young people to volunteer, why aren't volunteers asked their opinions on the issues they are working on?

Workshop

The workshop asked participants 'If you could invent any piece of tech that would help you change things and become active in topics you care about, what would it be?'

They came up with ten pieces, or uses, of technology that they would like to see to improve citizens' relationship with politics:

1. A live legislation app – keeping you updated as a piece of legislation is going through Parliament
2. Updating you on Bills in Parliament
3. Synopsis of each Bill
 - a. Updating you on Bills in Parliament
 - b. Links to news articles about each Bill
 - c. Would enable non-voters to become more aware of the process and to engage them
 - d. Tools to help scrutinise a Bill
 - e. But they felt the site wouldn't aid representation
4. Online voting
5. A youth social media – linking all the digital democracy platforms/apps
6. Jargon buster
7. Sending questions in to Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) via tweeting or instant messenger. People submit and people vote on whether they feel the response was a success.
8. More heavily televised campaigns
9. A local voting app, telling you when people are voting in your area.
10. Democracy day - a couple of National days run at schools via "Democracy Website" that students know politicians will look at
11. How legislation affects you – linking demographics and location to how specific pieces of legislation will affect you personally
12. A system that allows citizens to vote on issues – not for parties

After participants had created their ideas, they were asked to 'vote with their feet' and choose the one that appealed most to them, regardless of whether it was their own invention.

By far and away, voting on issues rather than political parties was the most popular idea, securing nearly more than double the next most popular idea. Participants said that 'representative democracy teeters on the edge' and that 'no-one here cares about the political parties, we care about specific policies, specific legislation'. Open policymaking and open law-making, unknown to participants before the event and re-invented by them during the course of the morning, proved the most popular use of technology among these young people.

Many of the tools that the participants proposed during the course of the morning are platforms that already exist, but are either in the wrong format (i.e. are not compatible with the types of technology young people use the most) or are poorly communicated. Participants preferred mobile technology and apps to websites and desktop computing. Also, the sites presenting democratic information and encouraging participation are not all in one place, or even listed in one place, making it difficult to find and navigate between platforms.

Overall the event was a success, and the participants were honest and increasingly engaged throughout the event. The main messages were that there is a lack of trust, young people think that politicians are going through the motions and do not truly care about communicating with them, secondly that even the technology and information that is currently available is inaccessible, badly communicated, needs to be brought together to a single entry point and must be available as mobile technology and apps.

What next?

This report will be sent on to the Commission, and will also be used by Demsoc in its work on improving access to politics and government.

Contact

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