

Contribution from the Student's Union, University of Nottingham (Making Laws)

- Could technology improve the access to and usability of both legislation and the law-making process for the citizen, representatives and professionals (such as lawyers), and if so do you have any suggestions?

Of our 34,000 students, 50% do not vote or engage generally with local and national politics (How Can We Help Survey, 2012-13; 2013-14). A third of that 50% say it's because they feel disconnected and disengaged with their community. Whilst this is due to a number of reasons not relating directly to parliament, there is a place for law-making to be made more accessible for students to improve the engagement between civil society and government. Students, and the rest of the population, are increasingly becoming a part of the network society (Castells, 1996) which is developing quicker and quicker every day and "'society' is increasingly viewed as a 'network' rather than a 'structure'" (Bauman, 2007: 3). The rise of technological advances has also shaped the way we learn and engage with one another on social and political levels. There is no doubt that technology could improve the access to and usability of the legislation and law-making process for today's generation. We would struggle to find someone whom we know of without a mobile smart phone with access to the internet. Due to this exponentially growing number of individuals with mobile access to global information, more and more apps are being created and developed by companies, businesses, third sector organisations and institutions. Perhaps an app that allows users to follow the steps of the legislative process on a particular bill would be a simple way of bringing parliament to their fingertips. However, this being said, apps can be seen as a shortcut to the internet and it may be a better use of time to concentrate on a more mobile-friendly way of accessing the information from parliament. Webinars are a good use of online, interactive discussions that allow numerous people to be involved remotely in a meeting or discussion. I'd be interested to know when and where webinars and other remote meetings are used to develop consultation processes with regards to Bills from concerned constituents and their representatives.

- Should you need to be a lawyer to understand and use an Act?

Absolutely not. The changes that an Act makes impacts on those who need to understand the most, civil society: teachers, mothers, students, manual labours, the elderly, etc. Organisations such as Parliamentary Outreach do a great job in terms of explaining the complex nature of parliament and government to a lay audience but in an ideal world they would not be needed as it would be as transparent and simple as it could be.

- Should technology be used to integrate citizens' views better into the legislative process? At what stage of the legislative process would this work best? How could the Public Reading Stage be improved?

When asking this question, we need to be sure of what we mean by technology. Technology is *already* in action with live streaming of debates accessible online and on television, there are pictorial diagrams of the legislative process on parliament's website, there are electronic supporting documents with explanatory notes to the Bills' progress, we e-mail MPs, we use Twitter, Facebook

and Youtube to express our concerns – all of which is technology. The reason why many feel disconnected with the process is not necessarily due to the lack of technology used but the overcomplicated nature of the way in which these debates and Bills are presented. For example, when the Transparency and Lobbying Bill was making its way through the Houses, our union was following it constantly online, watching live debates and feeding into the process as a concerned institution. It was nothing to do with the technology available to make it more or less accessible, it was the lengthy documents, the archaic language and the repetitive nature of the debate that made it difficult to understand let alone feed into and have a say. It is therefore difficult to suggest ways technology can help make the legislative process more accessible for the integration of citizens' views when citizens feel the nature of the process is too complicated from the beginning.

The issues that we consistently hear from students (three years of cross-campus surveys totalling 14,000 respondents) are around housing and residency, safety in the city, employment during and after university, social justice, equality and environmental concerns, and a lack of involvement/engagement with their residential communities. If they saw how their issues and every day experiences were being picked up by parliamentary democratic structures and see the impact that it has then this might have an influence on their participation with the process.

With that in mind, our own survey found that out of 1,005 respondents 37.5% owned laptops, 34.6% owned a smartphone, 11.6% owned a tablet, 8.9% owned a E-Reader, 5.2% owned a desk-top computer, 2.4% owned a notebook totally 2,565 of devices owned between the respondents. 43% of respondents owned 2 devices and 34% owned 3 devices. 90% of owners bring their smartphone onto campus every day with 22% bringing their laptop in every day.

Hopefully this is helpful in understanding what kind of digital technology students use regularly and shows a greater move towards mobility (decreasing number own desk-top computer) and how national democracy can access students through their devices.

- Are there any examples from other parliaments/democratic institutions in the UK or elsewhere of using technology to enhance legislation and the legislative process, which the Commission should consider?

I have no such examples. Even students' unions haven't nailed it with technological advances; our focus at UoNSU is on ensuring our democratic processes are accessible and relevant to all 34,000 students.

Bibliography

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castells, M. (1996). *The Rise of the Network Society: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

March 2014