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The digital democracy dilemma

Foreword

I have worked for over ten years in the field of digital democracy, mostly at the local level but also on European projects with the European Parliament and Internationally with the World Bank. Digital is fast becoming the channel of choice for next generation Britons yet UK government are laggards. For example, electioneering has been largely missed off the digital by default agenda.

In terms of lessons learned from past projects, it is my view that that innovative initiatives are rarely targeted, endorsed or embraced by elected representatives and too readily fail. The reasons why are numerous but commonly because projects have no associated substance, support or visibility.

One reason that digital solutions cannot be fully harnessed by government is due to a fundamental lack of opportunity – for example, we are behind the majority of member states in Europe in terms of internet voting and there is no modern mechanism for introducing or redacting laws such as a "peoples' initiative".

At the same time, enabling activities are being dismantled. For example, the CORE project (digital register of electorates) was withdrawn due to cost. However, this was a fundamental and essential piece of the jigsaw relating to meaningful eVoting and represented the missing link for verifying signatures in a European Citizens Initiative or an ePetition. It could have also helped to check donations to parties.

Digital democracy opportunities around electioneering are being wasted. There is significant disconnect between democratic service departments and customer insight and engagement functions at all levels. Just imagine the possibilities of being able to overlay election data with a whole subset of other data such as participant segmentation. Not only is this a useful resource for local authorities, it should also be a 'must-have' for elected representatives.

Moreover, digital redress is not well advertised. For example, the ability to start or sign a European Citizens' Initiative is invisible on the DirectGov ePetitions website and there is no monitoring process or visibility for local government ePetitions. With all the commercial noise on the digital channel, government will have to work harder to compete for citizen attention. It is clear that too much communication effort is going into making dialogue bigger, brighter and more colourful whereas effort should be channelled into making this more accurate and effective (e.g. targeting).

Citizens are not engaging with government in the same way that they might any other digital retailer. Public/private opportunities are lost (such as the ability to verify your government identity using your online banking account).   In particular, the workings of Parliament are too far removed from the everyday lives of citizens.

In the absence of mechanisms for direct democracy and a complete overhaul of the system, technology can have little impact other than to disrupt and expose this position.

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Current state analysis

The CLEAR model (Pratchett ,DeMontfort) of citizen engagement is a useful reference for considering the current state.

[C]an Do	Members of Parliament have a website and email address and are usually proficient in responding to citizen online. However, there is variable quality and no standards around this. There are gaps in terms of capabilities and methods.
[L]iked To	One of the weakest areas. Process are not well designed, citizens are disillusioned and there is deep scepticism.
[E]nabled To	There are gaps in terms of capabilities and methods such as internet voting. Otherwise, my view is that the digital divide in terms of access is now a non-issue.
[A]sked To	Another weak area. Citizen are rarely 'called to action'.
[R]esponded To	Feedback loops are well established but there is often a lack of feedback transparency.

Unless there is a revolution, the most potent solutions have hinged on designing new interfaces to existing mechanisms. For example, online websites to extract information about the habits of politicians (www.theyworkforyou.com) or add a layer of transparency (www.electionleaflets.org/) or simply aggregate and redirect requests (http://www.fixmystreet.com/).

The problem with building new interfaces is that there is often disconnect with information standards (e.g. back office systems) of government and any given solution. Likewise, government may refuse to accept intermediaries in the submission and handling of altercations.

Websites that collect information about the views of voters and match candidates are useful but there are no officially recognised technology solutions for the reverse (whereby candidates can adapt their actions by interrogating the views of their constituents). I would be happy to get an SMS poll from my MP regarding a salient local issue.

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<u>The patch</u>

The role of technology in helping Parliament and other agencies to scrutinise the work of government.

Technology has significant potential to help expose and scrutinise the work of government. However, a lack of consistent and coherent data is a drawback. For example, the government created a universal ePetition data standard in 2010 but never adopted them. This would have created intelligence on the performance of redress at all English local authorities.

Official registers of government spending are masked by clever tactics such as spending by sub-contractors and data transparency is still really quite weak. My view is that the only robust solution to total and unbiased insight is the centralisation of key information technology systems. There is no economic benefit in fragmentation yet significant benefits in 'big data'.

The other option is to exploit third part data. There are some excellent civil society examples of where insights are being used to benefit government agencies. For example, PatientOpinion collects stories about patient experiences of both public and private healthcare providers. While sensitive feedback is masked to the general public, the regulator has access to it for the public good. In attempting to launch a similar system to collect feedback about private and social landlords, OurHousing.org has had no support by government despite the data link.

Council league tables were scrapped by this government yet performance data continues to be published, such as Excel tables on information on the speed and quality of decisions on applications for major development (CLG, September 2013). Technology can provide clues and feedback real-time but there is no co-ordinated approach to its interpretation and consumption.

Parliament and other agencies would benefit from visible dashboards to monitor the pulse of the nation – technology can facilitate this but they need to be up on the walls in the wings of Parliament, not sitting on a computer screen in a back-office. The 'real time' nature of this feedback goes some way to address the latency of public opinion.

The role of technology in helping citizens to scrutinise the Government and the work of Parliament

A key aspect for consideration by citizens should be how representative an elected representative, government or Parliament really is. Secondly, if the popular voice of the citizen is given balanced consideration.

Public dialogue is one facet of policymaking and I endorse the work of BIS via ScienceWise for this. However, technology hosted dialogue needs to be strengthened across the policy landscape.

The Referendums aspect of the Localism Bill was an interesting safeguard against stray representatives and sadly withdrawn before becoming an Act. However, during its conception this had no consideration for electronically holding referendums. My view is that binding, snap *electronic* referendums still have a part to play in steering a course of action.

In terms of digital scrutiny, archiving allows citizen to hold individuals to account. Hansard is in a lonely place when it comes to facilitating this role and technology is needed to support new ways to both map and analyse debates (adopting http://sayit.mysociety.org/ would be a good start).

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In terms of accountability, there are opportunities for digital in terms of holding political parties to account on their manifesto promises and scrutiny in terms of their behaviour. For example, online citizen juries could be used in deciding on matters of overview such as MP expenses.

The Open Manifesto project (a crowd-sourced openly adopted manifesto) is an excellent example of how manifestos can be more democratic. The hybrid model whereby party political activity is driven by direct democracy   can only be enabled through technology (e.g. http://directcongress.org/).

Conclusion

Technology can plan an enabling role in democracies but the lack of digitally orientated instruments for both direct democracy and redress means that the resulting opportunities are tokenistic in as much as they can be used to identify and raise issues early yet be no guarantor for action.

- Email to: digitaldemocracy@parliament.uk
- Post comments: Commission on Digital Democracy web forum
- Tweet: @digidemocracyuk