

Contribution from Ian Smith

Hello Commission Team

I am only aware of the Digital Democracy Commission because by chance I came across the Speaker's speech to the Australian Parliament (well, the miserably few members who were there) yesterday on BBC Parliament. I'm usually au fait with political developments, but this one somehow passed me over - and too late, it seems to make comment and a contribution. Maybe, promoting this consultation relied too much on the digital age at the expense of conventional communications.

Therefore, suffice it will have to be, to say that many, many people, often older ones like me and my numerous friends and acquaintances, are not socialites anymore or into so called 'social media' (plus countless who don't access any form of IT). So whatever the outcomes of this initiative will be, please remember those out here who struggle with the new age, but nevertheless welcome it, and who with their longevity effuse common sense; further, folk who on behalf of the younger generation seeking change, argue for awareness, understanding and individual responsibility.

Regards

Ian Smith

[Ian was asked if he would like to make a fuller submission and replied with the following:]

I am very happy for you to include as a contribution any comments I make that might possibly be relevant.

Before retirement, over seven years ago, my work activities in the latter years involved the use of a computer, some word and excel, but particularly email as an effective way to communicate within and external to my organisation. So upon retirement, I fully appreciated the new technology, and with time on my hands (plus being alone) I relished its development. However, I was initially quite nervous of many aspects, but eventually plucked up the courage to - well, even buy on eBay 63 items over the last three years; did that have you smiling? But many of my peers, especially those who did not access IT during their working years, still fear this 'animal', based on negative experiences of using computers (taxing the cars of some friends on line proved impossible for them, so they continue going to the Post Office). At least, we're no longer being accused by our computers as 'performing an illegal operation'. A few friends are members of that 'digitally disengaged' group, who also don't seek help - they reckon that computers have little or no use to them, although one smart phone app that a friend's daughter has, points to the night sky and informs him of individual star and planet detail. He's so pleased with that. Maybe in the digital age, we should recognise a greater need to promote applications by demonstrating their value and potential interest more effectively.

Most, if not all of we older folk have a mobile phone, but usually it's a basic one. Mine is only switched on when I'm not at home. But it's very rarely used; no-one phones (people

will leave a message on my landline), a few texts arrive, but all are ads of no interest. I use it maybe once a week to text my daughter or to send a message to a radio programme in response to a phone-in discussion; occasionally I record some thoughts as I'm wandering around my local parks and fields whilst listening on my pocket DAB radio. Also whilst out and about, I've phoned authorities about gas leaks and some nuisance individuals in the park, or fly tipping. But where is the need for a smart phone? I can wait until at home to use my old laptop. I fervently read fiction, but in books not through a tablet.

Every room in this home has a digital radio - yes, even the loo. I'm an avid current affairs fan, so I listen to radio 4 and 5Live, watch News 24, Sky News, Al Jazeera, BBC Parliament, including its committees (via Freeview as I only have terrestrial), Question Time, Any Questions, This Week, Have I got News for You, etc. Not the typical OAP, but for pure enjoyment, I watch CBeebies (with my young grandsons, by the way).

I access 'They Work for You' and keep up to date with my MP's activities (including his occasional input to parliament debates), mainly through his website. But unfortunately to find that he's always spending time on his international agenda, rather than local needs. I've given up emailing him, because he never replies (maybe he's always on Twitter). However, I do email other politicians, both local and national if I have something to comment upon. Interestingly, the MPs of other constituencies whether local or national always reply, even though I'm not one of theirs. I recently wanted to comment upon a local council matter, but found that council departments only have Facebook or Twitter as contact points, any email addresses were not publicly available. So I emailed four local councillors, none of whom even acknowledged the messages (it was eventually said that my messages were during their holiday period and they later forgot to follow up - all four of 'em too busy tweeting I suppose). After several weeks I then emailed the Council Leader who promptly dealt with the matter.

I'm not at all interested in any form of so called social media, so I don't have Facebook friends, I don't tweet and I'm not LinkedIn. If emailing ever closes down, then I'll stop writing, commenting and generally communicating other than face to face. I view YouTube if I'm made aware of anything that might be interesting. Up to about six months ago, my periodic letters, that usually had a political context, to the Yorkshire Post editor would almost always be published. But due to cost limitations I now only buy a Sunday national, although I receive daily Feeds from both the Yorkshire Post and my local rag. To both, I often place online comments upon articles, news and views. But I haven't continued to write letters to the editor, because I'll not buy a paper to see if it's published and to read of any other respondents or responses. Feeds do not cover all letters. My internet home page is BBC, including settings to provide local weather and news.

I have to say that I have only a little trust in the media. We form our opinions, then make our judgments based entirely upon the information we receive, much of which, in this world of 24/7 communications, is provided by BBC newsreaders and presenters (at various levels of the news reporting spectrum, from News 24 to Radio One bulletins), and echoed by other media reporters and commentators. But misleading or incorrectly analysed reporting of events, commonly based upon assumptions is often provided. There are too many editors, presenters, news readers and commentators who place their own particular emphasis on

issues and stories. There's a tendency to create news, rather than simply report it. Recently, the media's reporting of the Aysha King story changed within days, from implying that her father was imbecilic, to an apparent praise for him a few days later, due entirely to inadequate investigation, interpretation and bias. And let's not bother talking anymore about about Savile, Cliff Richard, Rotherham and 'plebgate'.

Whilst recently driving from main road into a side road, I made an emergency stop because a pedestrian was concentrating on texting/messaging rather than looking for traffic possibly entering the road that he was about to cross. He was very nearly an A&E client. And the number of young drivers and taxi drivers using hand held communications technology is frightening, mainly because no-one seeks to, or perhaps can stop it.

I live in a city where the level of voting fraud is apparently one of the highest in the country. Officials tend not to point fingers because of PC and potential racism calls. But voting fraud is rife amongst some sections of the Asian community, largely through inadequate postal voting controls, or simply that it's too difficult to monitor and manage (especially in an area where 'cheating' is locally said to be a cultural norm). Friends comment that postal voting should be withdrawn. I use the facility.

All this fraud does not bode well for digital voting. We're really not convinced. Two of my digitally disengaged friends have said they would be unlikely to vote online, whether or not in polling stations, and if introduced at the expense of paper based polling booth voting, then they be would turned off politicians (who are not favourites anyway just now). Trust of computer systems is not high, because so many have gone wrong. Isn't it interesting that there are totally secure and trustworthy digital technologies for regular, international trips to and back from space, but not within national administration?

As for democracy - what there is of it. My MP disregards his constituents, even those who voted for him. Councillors have other priorities. Governments can only be changed at general elections, and councils at local elections, once every five years. But today's society seeks and demands change more frequently. We have Police & Crime Commissioners in place following an extremely low voting turnout. Many people would have challenged same sex marriage, but little opportunity was given. I am not a revolutionary, or an extremist in any way, but I see so much that needs changing, including a lack of personal responsibility in this blame society.

You are very welcome to use/quote/edit any of my mutterings and musings, or relevant points. I will understand that they may be seen as the rants of a - growing older granddad however.

Thanks again for this opportunity to vociferate. Regards and best wishes in your endeavours

And so to bed

Ian S