An invitation to be part of a life-changing digital project

from   Jon Foster-Smith   Shine Design Ltd   July 2015

Time for a change?

True Democracy proposes to harness the internet to improve democracy, towards a fairer, happier, Greater Britain. It aims...

- To connect society, raising issues and cultivating a vast pool of potential solutions
- To measure opinion and priority
- To float the most important issues and their best solutions to the surface
- To connect society and authority in realtime, educating both worlds
- To help the Government make best possible decisions

A voice for the people,
an earpiece for authority...

Digital politics is coming.
The only question is '*When*?'

'*Democracy*' comes from the Greek for '*people rule*' - a country run by the people for the people. In the UK, democracy happens every 5 years.

Our vote is a wild guess. We build a picture of who to support, from the past, promises, newsworthy items and media, and from others We elect and then totally relinquish control for another 5 years, without commitment to promises or any agreed direction. Inexplicable decisions are being made, a great distance from public interest.

Since the Civil War, Cromwell's average of 12,000 constituents to one MP has risen to 100,000. One individual cannot be expected to represent so many. A referendum costs £75M.

In 2010, just 6 out of 10 of us voted. Up to 800,000 young people are not even registered. 78% of us cannot name their representative in Parliament. Trust in Government has fallen to an all time low. Politics is a source of tension and frustration or we bury our heads, because we have no voice. We are disconnected from the system and disillusioned by the choices available.

"A study into the state of democracy in Britain over the last decade warns it is in 'long-term terminal decline' as the power of corporations keeps growing, politicians become less representative of their constituencies and disillusioned citizens stop voting or even discussing current affairs." The Guardian, July 2012, Democratic Audit study.

We need a voice. Some control, some connection, some engagement. If we take part, we will be more aware, more educated, more in touch, more understanding and sympathetic to the issues and different viewpoints. Engagement contributes to a happier, healthier society.

True Democracy
The Bright Future of Politics

"Democracy is the most valued and also the vaguest of political terms in the modern world."

D Robertson, 1986

The digital future of politics

The technology now exists to give that voice.
True Democracy offers continuous referendum
- a realtime, live connection between society and
authority.

Connecting society could harness brainpower... More ideas, more
experience, more opinions, more solutions. These are filtered and
promoted by '*Agree*' and '*Important*' buttons, to identify burning
issues and float the best solutions to the surface.

Contribution to True Democracy is based on the existing electoral
registration system. The system is also '*outcome verifiable*' - so
results can be broken down to see that votes matched the outcome.

We're aiming towards :

• Quick reactions and getting things done

• Accountability and good reasons
  for doing things

• People and environment first

• A better, happier quality of life

• A balanced economy

• World peace!

"The biggest impact [*of the internet*] on the world
will be universal access to all human knowledge.
The smartest person in the world currently, could
well be stuck behind a plow in India or China.
Enabling that person - and the millions like him or her
- will have a profound impact on the development
of the human race. Cheap mobile devices will
be available worldwide, and educational tools…
available to everyone. This will have a huge impact
on literacy and numeracy and will lead to a more
informed and more educated world population."
Hal Varian, Chief Economist for Google

How True Democracy Works

True Democracy is an app. A social media platform. A think tank. A tool for the MP to know and represent constituents. A snapshot to compare personal and party politics, to help decide who to vote for next.

True Democracy delivers direct democracy, to assist our representative democracy.

Through progressive, user-focussed design, the interface will be easy and intuitive to use.

The layouts on the following pages give further insight. Concepts are conceptual at this stage. We welcome all ideas and input.

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Users are known as *Democrats*. Anyone can set up an account and link to other social media accounts, but their opinions only count when they enter a code received by post at their electoral address.

Democrats create *Proposals* - short, simple statements of up to 140 characters. Any manifesto or belief can be broken into *proposals*. The format keeps the debate quantitative, inclusive, straight-talking and compatible with other social media.

For each proposal, Democrats indicate if they *agree*, and if it is *important*. This floats popular, important proposals to the surface.

Proposals sit in one or more places on a complex, moderated, evolving *tree* diagram of every *subject* or *issue*. Each *subject* wiki-references relevant statistics, facts, articles, discussion, to appreciate background and points of view. Discussion generates more *Proposals*.
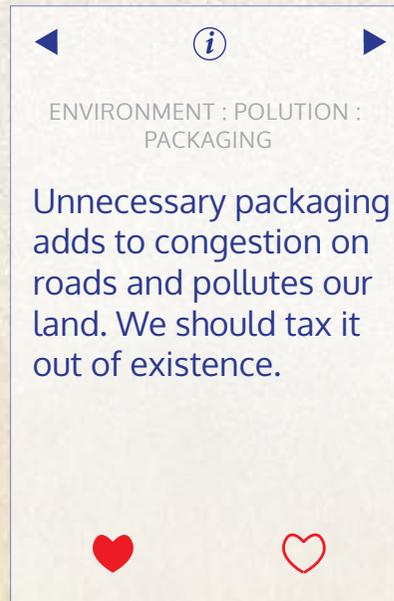
Common ground is a point where *X*% of people agree. It is the foundation for further discussion. By descending the tree from any divided issue, we expect to find common ground. With more discussion, common ground can progress outwards on the tree. *X* itself is open to debate. It might vary according to Issue. Common ground needs checking periodically.

For example, if everyone agrees we need better communication, we then question if this means better internet, or a new train line. Conversely, if I must sacrifice my garden for a train line, then I look back down the tree and see why.

MPs and parties input their policies by raising and addressing proposals. Democrats can compare their own profile to see a fit.

True Democracy is non-political, unbiased and not-for-profit, with endless, fascinating potential to improve our country in the 21st Century. This is only the beginning.
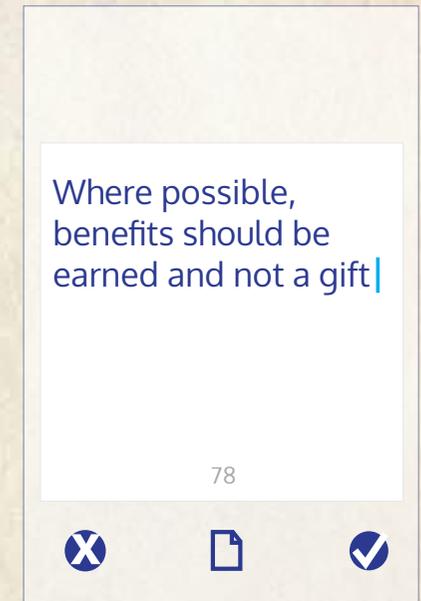
Proposals >>>

◄   ⓘ   ►

ENVIRONMENT : POLUTION : PACKAGING

Unnecessary packaging adds to congestion on roads and pollutes our land. We should tax it out of existence.

◄   ⓘ   ►

TRANSPORT : RAIL : HS2

A new London - Scotland train line is better than 35 flights daily

Where possible, benefits should be earned and not a gift|

78

❌   📄   ✅

agree / disagree

important / not important

edit / new then select subject

Root menu

sort   🔑 (key)
♡ (heart)

EDUCATION
ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH
INTERNATIONAL
SOCIAL
TRANSPORT
EDUCATION
ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH
DEFENSE

Start menu

◀

✉️ My vote   👤 My MP   🔍 Search

☰ My opinions   ☰ My proposals

Recent

TRANSPORT : ROADS : MOTORWAYS

ENVIRONMENT : POLLUTION : PACKAGING

HEALTH : NHS : END OF LIFE

INTERNATIONAL : EU : EURO

DEFENSE : WAR :

<<< *Getting around*

Seeing the picture >>>

Subject menu

♡   ⓘ   🔑   sort

TRANSPORT : ROADS : MOTORWAYS

Lorries should only use the outside lane, except near junctions, where special lane markings allow them to use the middle lane

67 ♥ 33   67 🔑 33

Signs on motorway bridges would remind middle lane hoggers to '< keep left '

50 ♥ 50   50 🔑 50

We should grow more food locally to reduce pollution and congestion on our roads

91 ♥   50 🔑 50

We should grow more food locally

common ground

My Vote

◀   ✉️

Party alignment

You are currently most closely aligned to the **Conservative Party**. Of **50** proposals, you addressed **83%** the same.

Labour 80% the same

Green 75% the same

Liberal Democrat 73% the same

Address more proposals to improve alignment. Click a Party to see their proposals

Initial layouts and ideas - your input is welcome

Who is involved?

At time of writing, the project is in the planning stage.

5 political parties have been invited to take part - see Funding and Timing, next section.

We are in discussion with **5 red-brick Universities**, looking for best ways to work together, to optimise benefit to the University, students and the project itself.

A young and enthusiastic, tech-savvy input is welcomed on a blank canvas of juicy, ground-breaking, engaging research projects, with the opportunity to benefit country and humanity. This is brand new, unexplored territory!

Without limit, topics could include >>>

Internships would benefit students and progress the project. Good minds are needed to create and continually improve the various algorithms that support and develop data functions, or to ensure the project remains publicly beneficial and completely unbiased. We'll need to connect and promote through social media, to ensure uptake in public and political circles. We need to plan, prioritise and measure.

We would appreciate guidance and input from academic staff, in student projects and involvement, in direction and planning the system, in understanding the current system and what has gone before.

More specific requirements and interaction will unfold as the project unfolds, and with University guidance.

Ideas for research topics

- Is UK democracy working? The effect of direct democracy

- Quantifiable, digital debate and the concept of common ground

- Direct or representative democracy - does it have to be one or the other?

- A stab in the dark? : Voting habits and public political knowledge

- Social responsibility and the dangers of direct democracy

- How politically engaged are we? How much do we know? What effect would engagement have?

- Designing and building a system of direct democracy

- Future proofing and collaboration over a new social media platform

- Does anything ever get done? Modern politics beyond the eye of the media

- Public and authority acceptance and adoption of a direct democracy mechanism

- How has True Democracy helped, and how can it be improved?

- One word changes everything - a study of the language of tweet-length proposals

- Daily democracy : would people engage and would it help?

True Democracy is led by **Jon Foster-Smith**, a designer and digital entrepreneur. Jon has created online communities and solutions commercially since 2002. He works with individual and teams of highly skilled coders in the UK and abroad.

"It's just not working. Perhaps it's because I turned 40, but it feels like the country is in spiraling decline.

There are inexplicables in education, environment, economy, healthcare, transport, war. If there are valid reasons for seemingly crazy decisions, I want to know what they are. But all I have is what the media tell me.

I've created web applications for over a decade and watched in fascination as enterprises harness the internet. I believe we can run our country better.

The technology is now in place for collective responsibility. No need to go on leaving life-changing decisions to a small group with limited perspective. I have ideas, but there is no one to tell. My MP is a well-meaning, hard-working man, but he looks blankly at me. What can he do? He is just one man, with his own ideas and not enough hours in the day to take mine on too.

A teacher is likely to know more about schools and education than a politician. A doctor knows more than the health secretary.

I want to know what others think. If it floats, if there's no good reason why *not*, it should happen. That's my idea of democracy.

A single word can change a statement entirely. A single sentence can be enough to educate, to change a mind, or understand a point of view.

For example, I am horrified by HS2, but I when I heard about the 35 bays at Heathrow for daily flights to Scotland, I could see a need. Not for a new train line to Birmingham or Manchester, but to Edinburgh or Glasgow. The wrong questions have been asked.

Jennifer Pathika's TED talk inspired me. She talks about an open source app with which, the local authority solved an impossible task with community help. The open-source app was then reused by other organisations.

TED talks : Jennifer Pahlka - Coding a better Government

The Mayor of Reykyavîk's story is compelling. The size of Iceland's population means quick change and experimental, radical politics a reality, but not always successful.

Reykjavík's radical mayor blazes a trail for the revolution in digital democracy

The Icelandic experience challenges the view that constitutional process must be exclusionary and secretive

But this isn't about my politics or beliefs. It's about everyone's. It's about a channel to air your views. If they are popular and feasible, and there's no greater reason why not, then it's about making them a reality.

I am upset when things are done badly. I'm frustrated because I have ideas but no voice.

I am passionate about the idea of running our country with ingenious precision, accountability, efficiency and fairness."

Funding and timing

A working testbed will be ready one month from funding. This will test the concept, identify and address weaknesses and establish whether people would use it. Full build costs will be less than 1% of the £75M cost of a referendum.

£100k has just been requested from the major political parties. We need £25k to design and build a testbed, the rest for research and contingency.

Funding may also be sought from organisations, such as The Hansard Society and other benefiting organisations such as local Government.

Parties that embrace and commit to True Democracy may use it in their manifesto, and as an excellent doorstep demonstration.

We will be live online for registration, with at least with a doorstep demo in time for the General Election in April 2015. Continuous development carries on from there.
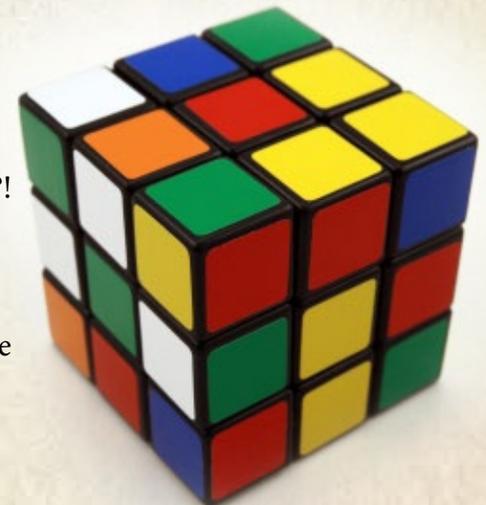
Further timeline to be fleshed out with stakeholders.

University funding is not requested for development, but contributions may be considered to help meet educative costs such as internships.

Weaknesses, questions, challenges

• Is average opinion useful? Design by committee returns results that blight every modern town. Could a mass-generated solution be so bland it has no effect?

• Engaging those not online, eg technophobic, poor, elderly. A solution to this has the added benefit of engaging people who wouldn't otherwise do so, with each other.

• What about the things people don't want? Like taxes, parking fines, smoking ban or speeding tickets? When it came to power in 2010, the coalition commissioned 'yourfreedom.hmg.gov.uk' to canvas public opinion. The Government promised to respond. People demanded the reinstatement of smoking in public places, the Coalition would not entertain this, and the website was folded.

Can a digital solution instill public responsibility? It could demonstrate rough costs of proposals.

• Can we ensure enough people take part to represent every view, not just those who feel strongly about certain issues.

• Is the people's rule more important than Euro rules?

• Is the public interest more important than the Development Plan or Party Agenda?

• Are people too stupid? Should Democrats be tested?!

• Is one opinion more important than another? eg A teacher vs a politician on an issue of education

• Should it reflect on a Democrat if lots of others agree with his proposals or think they are important?

• What if MPs won't take part?

• Chicken and egg : we need rapid take-up. The concept only works if people are using it.

Further reading and sources

General election results 2010

Hansard Society : Audit of Political Engagement 2013

Reykjavík's radical mayor blazes a trail for the revolution in digital democracy

The Icelandic experience challenges the view that constitutional process must be exclusionary and secretive

TED talks : Jennifer Pahlka - Coding a better Government

Daily Telegraph : Young people giving up on democracy

The Independent : Young Britons missing from voters register

YourFreedom.org : All that remains of a popular Lib Dem election promise

The Daily Opinion : Why Britain is not a democracy

History learning site : Democracy

www.democraticaudit.com

The Guardian : British democracy decline report

Democratic audit : Connecting knowledge to power: the future of digital democracy in the UK

The Guardian : How much do we trust the Government?

Wikimedia : Connecting knowledge to power : the future of digital democracy in the UK

Debatewise.org : Direct vs. Representative Democracy

Gov.uk: How Geeks opened up Government

True Democracy discussion on Facebook

Loomio : Collaborative working solution from New Zealand

Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, particularly the contributions page

True Democracy
The Bright Future of Politics