

Making laws in a digital age

Some thoughts by David Durant [_____](#)

Please note : I work for the Government Digital Service but speak here absolutely only in a personal capacity.

Precis:

- While there are many issues surrounding how the internet will continue to affect the workings of the UK parliament I believe the first and most crucial one to address is to encourage and simultaneously manage the key facet of digital technology - namely the move to high-volume many-to-many style communication.

Full:

- First and foremost I encourage those within parliament to embrace the digital norms and make this very conversation as open and transparent as possible. The concept of sending individual consultation responses to an authority where they are collected and reviewed in private seems to me to belong in a previous age. I would very much like to see this consultation have an option saying “can we publish your submission?” so that, as well as making a subset available, data can be gathered on the number, quality and variation in authors of responses. I would further like to see a platform be provided online for an open discussion of the fascinating issues that will no doubt be brought to light by these submissions.
- Following on from the above it would be excellent to see a standardised cross-government consultation publication and submission platform created - perhaps by the Government Digital Service. At the moment there is a wide variation from department to department and consultation to consultation as to how submissions are handled. I believe there would be significant value in a system which aligns to the suggestions I made above allowing full multi-way dialogue not only between politicians and citizens but also between individual citizens as well as groups inspired by the proposed legislation.
- A major workstream of any transformation project associated with digital democracy must focus on an honest evaluation of the digital literacy of our current political representatives and a discussion of measures that can be put in place to aid them in dealing with the changing face of the role of an MP. This work takes many forms. Many MPs are completely unfamiliar with working online - leaving such work to researchers or interns. There needs to be an open conversation on how they can be shown the value of new ways of working - perhaps via the GDS Digital Inclusion Team. But, assisting politicians with their individual capabilities is only part of the issue. There is also a major concern with the change in workload brought on by not only individual constituents contacting their MPs by email and social media but also the internet co-ordinated issue-based approaches from civil campaigning groups. The ease with which organisations such as 38 Degrees can quickly organise campaigns which bombard MPs with digital requests will only continue to improve leading to those messages flooding out

genuine high-impact requests from constituents. Both lines of communication are important but they must be a way to sensibly separate the two. This issue is further exacerbated by such groups now being able to easily arrange for groups of members to be co-ordinated on a per-constituency basis with a view to visiting their MPs in person. This is a great sign of invigorated democracy but again we must be wary it doesn't crowd-out crucial meetings with individual constituents.

- At the moment individual MPs are left to handle their the above issues themselves. I would very much like to see a wide-ranging discussion of whether a secure digital platform could be created to support all members of parliament that could record and coordinate issues from individual constituents but also handle citizen expressed interest in specific in-progress legislation as well as national and local campaign-related issues. Such a system would allow an MP to converse with individuals securely in private about specific matters but also speak openly in public with citizens expressing a view about wider issues. As well as allowing individual MPs a chance to air their opinions on a wide variety of subjects such a platform would enable the collection of a significant set of analytics on how many people are interested in which issues. There is also the possibility of communities of interest naturally forming around specific topics - although privacy concerns would need to be addressed before actively contacting any citizen.
- I think it is critical to inspire and grow a community of interest around this very discussion with the intention for it to be a permanent continuous improvement body in which anyone can participate. There are already very good work happening in this area both from civil society organisations such as mySociety and GovCamp but also within Cabinet Office via the Open Policy Making Office. It would be a great step forward if a similar organisation could be created by MPs and parliamentary staff that could work with people from such organisations to be seen to be driving this agenda forward in the political arena to match the work in the civil service and civil society organisations.
- Finally, it is important to consider the substantial number of digitally literate people both within and outside of government who would be willing to volunteer some of their time to assist in education, open and transparent communication, user research and coordinated digital development to assist in the fulfillment of the outputs of this consultation. One of the major tenets of open source software is the “public backlog” - a list of current and planned work that is available for anyone to see and offer feedback on as well as suggestions for additional pieces of work. I think if such a *public* backlog were put in place for the actions of this consultation it would be a major step forwards in parliamentary transparency.