

## **Evidence for Speakers Commission on Digital Democracy**

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One of the most important constituencies that Parliament needs to engage with is young citizens. The well-documented and oft repeated disillusionment of young people with politicians and the institutions of Parliamentary democracy is now incontestable. Not surprisingly, given the very high use of social media by young people, this has been seen as a promising medium by which political representatives can re-engage with young citizens.

Drawing upon original research data from a large-scale survey of UK young citizens (aged 16-29) our findings suggest that, if used in an appropriate manner, social media can indeed enable more effective communication between political representatives and young citizens.

The problem with most previous approaches in this area is that new media has too often been thought of as technological fix for augmenting what Parliament already does. Instead it is more productive to see it as an innovative means for transforming the nature of the citizen-politician relationship. Commensurate with profound social and cultural changes that mark a transformation of citizenship from deferential subject to self-determining critical monitor, future relations between representatives and citizens should be seen as more interactive and facilitative.

Digital technology and its latest generation social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc) are best thought of as disruptive and transforming technologies.

The consequences for politicians are that it may enable them to be more responsive to citizens but not on their own terms.

It is somewhat ironic that for three decades UK politicians have demanded that public service should be more responsive to the profoundly changing social characteristics of citizens through re-engineering, re-structuring and the use of digital technologies. It has hardly ever been suggested that politicians should

subject themselves to the same tests. If they did it seems to me that they may come to recognise four key issues as they relate to digital democracy and future engagement.

1. Top-down one-way communication channels between Parliament and citizens need to be re-assessed. The assumption that young citizens either have to address Parliament or listen to them is out-dated. Young people use social media to connect to each other and not to governments, parties or trades unions or other traditional institutions. Communication channels therefore need to be co-constructed together with citizens if they are to be effective.
2. Young citizens can no longer be regarded as dutiful citizens adopting the prescribed political identities of their elders and betters. They are far less likely to be deferential and far more likely to be critical citizens whose respect and trust needs to be earned. This is not to say that they are without obligations (to the community and to each other) but rather that it is not a one-sided relationship. Again there has to be some kind of recognition of co-dependency.
3. Neither should young people be regarded as a homogenous group. Their experiences as citizens is shaped by a range of factors including social class, gender, race, sexuality, geography and the like. Inclusive democratic relationships need to reflect this in their communication practices.
4. Increased use of social media for surveillance means that young citizens are increasingly sceptical about new media and the state.

So before we attempt to tell young people how they should behave as dutiful citizens, and annoy them even more with attempts to use digital communications to look cool, perhaps instead we should start by asking first whether young citizens use social media to find out about politics, and second how young citizens feel about politicians using social media to communicate with them.

We addressed these issues in a recent research project by the use of an online survey sample of 1,228 UK panel respondents. Taking the two most frequently used social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, we asked our respondents whether they used them to learn about political issues or events.

93% of UK young people aged 16-29 have a Facebook page (slightly more in the younger age range 16-19, 95%; 25-29, 91.2%). 59.3% have a Twitter Account, again slightly more in the younger age range (16-19, 65.8%; 25-29, 56.4%).

Almost all UK young citizens therefore have a Facebook account and nearly half (46%) told us that they either regularly or sometimes learn about political issues or events by seeing what other people post about them. As might be expected, those participants who disclosed a keen interest in politics were much more likely to use Facebook to access such content (64.3%). But perhaps more interestingly 36% of those who said that they learnt about political issues and events from using Facebook declared that they had little or no interest in politics itself. This suggests that Facebook could indeed be a useful space to engage with disaffected young citizens.

Less young people use Twitter compared with Facebook. However, nearly a third of our young respondents (29.2%) told us that they 'followed' a politician or government official. Again, as expected, of those 29.2%, the majority (55%) had an existing interest in politics, but 14.4% stated that they had no interest in politics but still followed a political figure on Twitter.

These findings do therefore suggest that social media could be a valuable space for politicians to re-connect with young citizens. But how do young people themselves feel about politicians using social media to communicate with them? Drawing upon a smaller sample of the survey respondents we asked four focus groups "what do you think about politicians using Facebook and Twitter?" Responses were perhaps unsurprisingly mixed but were certainly not all hostile to the idea. An indication of the responses both positive and negative were as follows:

“It can be good because it gets younger people involved in politics, which means that they can have a say in how the country is run and have a better idea of what is happening.” HP-HS5

“I think it is a very good idea. It makes them far more accessible to the public, especially the younger generation.” LP-HS9

“I think it would get people more interested in politics and debating! It would also be an outlet for people to express concerns about issues facing the UK and to show politicians how they really feel and what they'd like to change” HP-LS3

Negative

“I think that it's usually more of a P.R. stunt than any genuine effort to engage with the public.” LP-LS5

“I don't know if anyone would take notice. Politicians make a lot of promise they don't tend to keep so I don't think I would really take note, that's just me though” LP-LS3

“I think politicians using social media sites in order to appear 'trendy' or approachable only seems to go against them in the current social climate.” HP-LS5

### Conclusion

This suggests that, subject to a will to co-construct digital communications practices, the use of social media could be productively employed.

Young people do access information about politics shared by their peers. They are not apathetic as research and recent events such as the Scottish Referendum demonstrate.

They are not totally against politicians using social media but are suspicious of cynical uses that treat them as fools. Time and again many respondents referred to the appropriate use of social media by politicians.