

Report for Digital Democracy Commission: Student Forum

Topic: Dialogue

Facilitator: Jessie Powell

Rapporteur: Katie Wood

Executive Summary

The fact that the dialogue thread in the Student Forum received the smallest amount of discussion perhaps indicates that for many it is not as important as the legislative process. This may be because people feel that dialogue does not produce results and is too exclusive to those who have the time and knowledge to participate. However the Forum recognised that revolutionising the digital means of dialogue can open the door to many who have previously been excluded from that same dialogue. It was pointed out yet again that education is extremely important for long term success, along with informing citizens about how to get involved with the dialogue. On the other hand, digital platform may exclude many who already take part in the dialogue due to limited means and lack of technological understanding. The eventual solution should be a combination of both digital and face to face dialogue.

Key Problems Identified

Lack of communication with MPs

Many in the Forum felt that the only communication between the electorate and MPs is when they are on the election campaign trail. This therefore impedes any communication between MPs and their constituents, with many believing there is often an ulterior motive to the communication. This brings an element of mistrust between the government and the public, which could further be jeopardised by digital communication due to the uncertainty whether it is the MP that is operating or an assistant.

Unwillingness for participation in dialogue from citizens

The Forum highlighted the problem of getting disfranchised voters involved in any part of dialogue – be it digital or not. This issue links back to the idea of education brought up in many of the other discussion threads, as many are not aware of the mediums available to take part in discussions with MPs and their local councils. Further still many are not educated on much to do with the political system and how it works, so it is becoming increasingly clear that for any kind of digital revolution, education will have to be part of a long term plan.

Permitting those who are already involved in dialogue

If dialogue is to take a more digital approach this may exclude many who are already included in dialogue with politics and the government. It must be remembered that whilst internet usage is ever prominent, there are many who do not have easy access to the internet or find it simple to use. Digital dialogues could exclude the poorest and most vulnerable in society from the democratic process and therefore any approach must combine the current system with a new technological one to capitalise properly.

People only engage in dialogue when there is a problem

Online forums or question and answer sessions with MPs will often be a place that people use to complain/moan and raise personal issues, which it has been argued could reduce the quality of the dialogue. However this is positive for the future of British democracy in an online format as it will encourage many to engage in dialogue than would have previously.

Influence of Lobbyists

Online forms of dialogue may give opportunity for lobbyists and pressure groups to heavily influence politicians and push ordinary citizens out of the dialogue without being transparent about their agenda.

Proposed recommendations to enhance dialogue

A Digital Democracy Officer within local communities

The purpose of this role would be to improve the relationship between communities and their local council and MPs by promoting digital dialogue and making many people aware of forums to discuss issues and debate certain agenda. The idea of a digital democracy officer would be to provide impartial assistance and offer an equal level of support across parties to improve online interaction with the public and increase social media use. This will hopefully facilitate the way for a more digital, fast paced and efficient way of communicating and interacting with the British government and Parliament itself.

Formalised expectations of MPs

One repeated theme emerging from the discussions within the Forum is that many people are disengaged from politics because they don't know what it is politicians actually do. The Forum suggests that as part of a wider remit the Digital Democracy Commission (DDC) should look at establishing specific requirements for MPs, one of which to include managing a digital platform element. This could include websites with information about the MPs work in the local community, and forums and twitter question and answer sessions, which would enable the public to engage in closer dialogue with their representatives. The Forum recognises that many MPs are now taking this approach; however members felt that for equal participation across the board it must be made a requirement of their job.

Engaging young people in Political Dialogue

Another common theme throughout the Forum is the lack of political awareness and understanding of many within the population. This awareness is essential for any plans to increase dialogue participation, particularly with young people, who are the emerging social media generation. Therefore there needs to be an increased amount of political education within Schools for long term dialogue especially in respect of online platforms such as social media outlet. This will increase interest and reduce the disengagement which is currently faced by Parliament and therefore in turn increase the amount and quality of political dialogue.