@: Campaigning by making

A talk for Assemble 2017

Hello, I'm Sym Roe. I'm going to talk a little about campaigning by making, but first let me explain a bit about what Democracy Club does.

Democracy Club

Democracy Club brings people and organisations together to provide tools and services that help people understand elections better.

We do this by providing some simple but important services, like an online polling station finder.

We create a list of every election in the UK, from the 2 by-elections tomorrow in Enfield and North Devon to the general elections.

For each of these elections we create an open, free list of candidates that anyone can use. We turn this list in to a website called WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk, but others also use the data.

We don't have a political or policy position apart from transparency and openness in Democracy with an aim of informing the electorate.

The "club" in the name is where you come in. We think that we can only create high quality information on elections and candidates if a wide range of people work together.

This is because we think the services we offer are a sort of modern commons, where everyone benefits if the information is better. If everyone in this room spent 5 minutes improving the data we have on candidates, everyone else in this room would get more use out of that data.

For example, we collect Twitter usernames of candidates. Adding a few only takes a couple of minutes on Google, but the ability for a voter to see their candidates Tweets is quite powerful. For a campaign to run a 'Tweet your candidate' campaign might be even more powerful. Imagine how much work a single campaign would have to do to get all the candidates Twitter profiles – if you use our data there then a lot of that work will be done for you already.

We've seen a bit of this sort of data linking already, for example, at the general election this year Ed Betts combined our candidate list with the list of company directors published by Companies House. We also combined our data with a dataset from NESTA about candidates' educational background.

This sort of data linking is powerful and I'd like to explore what else we can do with it, especially in the context of campaigns who might have information positions of candidates in relation to the campaign issue.

We're starting to think about how we can support campaigns even more in the future.

Every councillor in London is up for election next May. There are also elections in Manchester, Newcastle, Leeds and Birmingham.

For these elections we're considering creating a "pledge tracker" tool that will let campaigns and their members ask candidates if they support the issues they're campaigning on. The replies would be stored on a website for others to see.

Come and talk to me after if you're interested in this sort of thing!

A few observations

I'd like to talk about a few observations I've made over the last few years of working on some digital projects. None of the projects I'm going to talk about describe themselves as a campaign in a typical sense, but what they all do, along with tens of other tools, products and services, is further an openness and transparency campaign.

I'm going to briefly create an artificial distinction between digital projects and campaigns. I don't want to exaggerate how different they are as they're often made up of the same people or are trying to do the same things, but there seems to be enough differences to make a few observations.

What do I mean by a campaign? They're hard to define, but for this talk I'm going to say that a campaign _tends_ to have a theory of change, some messaging around an issue and some actions for people to take, like signing a petition. There tends to be a heavy focus on communications and messaging.

By contrast digital projects _tend_ to focus on tools or products and don't have a theory of change or other assets that you might look for in a campaign.

To give some example, let me talk through some of the projects I've worked on before Democracy Club:

* FishSubsidy.org aggregated EU fishing subsidy datasets, combined them with details of fines to vessels and made everything accessible via a website. The website got used by journalists and members of the public to see where EU money was going. We did fun things like combining the subsidy data with court cases and fines to vessels and created a list of vessels that got more in subsidies than they got fined. We also looked at vessels that received a subsidy for

modernisation a year before they got a subsidy for being scrapped. The tool helped people understand how the policy was being delivered.

* ScraperWiki made tools to make data and spreadsheets from web pages, maintained by a community. Think of it like Wikipedia for data processing. We tried to make it easier for people to turn websites into data, and in turn get more organisations to open data.

Hidden theory of change
The reason I think these are all interesting is that they have a hidden theory of change. That is, if you make a product that people use, that product will change users' expectations of the world.

It will also help policy makers imagine the world differently.

I'll give another example from a project I didn't work on:

TheyWorkForYou is a website that allows you to search what MPs say in parliament and get email alerts whenever your MP speaks.

The site broke copyright law by taking Hansard (the official transcript) as the source and making it better. The law was changed, in part because the tool got popular. Imagine trying to run a campaign on Hansard copyright _without_ this sort of tool.

As an aside, this is interesting because Hansard started by breaking the law by publishing transcripts of the, then closed, Parliamentary debates.

Of course TheyWorkForYou wasn't a campaign about copyright, but you can think of it as a campaign for better information about MPs. We're starting to see that happen by default, in part because these tools exist.

Sometimes the tool is the message.

Not all campaigns can benefit from tools like these, but I wonder how many could?

Asking this question got me thinking about design and creativity in the tools and campaigns we make, and how new technology influences it all.

I said before that building a tool helps people imagine how things could be.

Getting an email every time your MP speaks might get you thinking "Why don't I get an email every time my councillor speaks, or my MEP? How can I use email notifications to tell people about other things?". It will get you thinking about a design pattern for doing things.

We see this in technology all the time. Think about what the touch screen has done for mobile phones or more recently push notifications in apps or the “like” pattern on almost all comment threads.

Think about what the “email your MP” design pattern has done for campaigning.

Because it’s easy to look at something and say “I want one of them”, making something is often a powerful way of affecting change.

These patterns are powerful in the context of campaigning, so I think we should all spend time thinking of them as things that need designing and testing.

Back to Democracy Club

In 2015 we built a website that showed all the candidates for election. It got used by millions of people and importantly it got noticed by The Electoral Commission. Within a year we were talking to them about adding information on candidates to their website directly, and for the elections this year their website contained candidate information and polling station locations.

I think this happened in part because someone at The Electoral Commission looked at our website and said “I want one of them”.

I think it would have taken a long time to get them to change their website without building a product first.

How can we imagine more tools like this, that in turn help campaigns?