



Prep for HL evidence session

Tuesday 10th March, 2020

**1. How effective have Parliament and government been at all levels been in using technology to facilitate democracy? Which institutions in the UK are doing it well and which are doing it badly?**

- e-Petitions is nice
- Open data
- Civil servants on twitters
- e-Hansard took what 11 years?
- At the World E-Parliament Congress in Washington D.C. a few years ago, only officials from the library and Hansard came - no politicians. It seems politicians don't take it seriously.
- There was a good local e-democracy programme led by John Prescott. A lot of local councils got involved. They developed good training tools and much better e-consultation, engaging many who did not usually participate in consultations. But once the programme ended, there was no follow-up from the national Government. There has been continuity in Scotland, some councils and outside Government (e.g. The Consultation Institute).

**2. What international examples of technology being used to facilitate democracy should the UK be seeking to learn from? How could their lessons be best and most quickly implemented in the UK?**

- Voter information (Wahl-o-Mat)
- Participatory budgeting (e.g. Paris, on/offline)
- Small scale (BetterRejkavik various icelandic things)
- The Irish Parliament has done two things worth copying.
  - In 2008 the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas ran a pilot e-consultation on an outline of a forthcoming broadcasting bill. 4 times as many people and groups participated than in paper consultations and hearings. It was thoroughly evaluated by the E-Consultation Research Group, made up of academics for universities in Dublin, Belfast and Letterkenny.
  - They vote electronically in both houses. None of the walking through lobbies bullshit and not having time to take every amendment.
- E-voting in Estonia.



- Chile has a virtual senate and Brasil a virtual chamber of deputies. Citizens can join online in the discussions of those bodies, although only the representatives can vote.
- vTaiwan

**3. How could deliberative democracy platforms work in a UK context?  
Would they be more effective at a local level or by forming part of  
national policy making processes?**

- Never seen this (online version of citizens assembly) done well in the UK;
- Might be worth a go at local level?
- Maybe if we added a bit of discussion in run up to elections... but can't see if ending politely / well...
- But the de Borda preferendum has been proven to find consensus between people who hate each other, even in Northern Ireland and Bosnia. See [www.deborda.org](http://www.deborda.org). Meetings lead up to a vote where people rank half a dozen options. A de Borda count finds on which option people are willing to compromise, as something everyone puts second or third beats something that half love and half hate.
- And the [America Speaks](#) 21st Century Town Meetings could now be done entirely online. Have hundreds of groups of 10 people in rooms across the UK with a facilitator and and notetaker. They listen to explanations of a problem, then in each room discuss what they would like to do. Common points from several rooms are collected and synthesised into recommendations.
- Do people want to spend more time on politics... people who are already interested in politics aren't the best people to be coming up with these solutions...

**4. How can technology help empower citizens with better information?  
How can this be done in a way that minimises political bias and that  
will be more readily trusted by citizens?**

- This is where the potential is... and the tragedy that we've not done more
- Tech allows us to build open databases to power information services
  - DemoClub example: aggregation, cleaning, feeding it to big media co's
- Trust: have the citizens build the thing / transparency / editable
- It gets more complicated as you move into less 'factual' more subjective information... but we've got to start somewhere — plenty of other countries in Europe are doing this successfully... UK failing



- Not gonna solve media ownership... not gonna solve lack of democratic oversight of the BBC...

**5. How should technological development be embedded into the relevant institutions? Is there a case for a new public body to oversee this, or should it be given as an additional responsibility to an existing body?**

- Interesting parallel: GDS → PDS → more to democracy than parliament
- EC has
- Not clear what the [this] is ... some sort of digital democracy institution? Some kind of safe space for experimentation...
- Something something BBC
- Making our democratic processes work better is currently a shared concern of the Electoral Commission, the Local Government Association, the Consultation Institute, devolved governments, Parliament and those Government departments that fund elections and associated tasks. Technology should eventually be part of everyone's routine work. But it needs starting with a well-funded independent project - perhaps a Royal Commission.

**6. If Government or Parliament could do one thing to better use technology to support democracy what should it be?**

- Get the resource together to produce, or mandate another body to produce, 'public data for democracy' — that digital infrastructure that could allow a whole host of new approaches to civic information accessibility — not just on elections, but democratic events too — budgets, votes, responsibilities at all levels of govt
- Produce open data on all the things
- Use tech to measure health of democracy, educate for democracy...



## Other notes

### **Democracy Club (that FT article)**

- — digital tech has changed people's expectations... UK not meeting them about election interaction (or democratic interaction more broadly)... problem... who? how?
- — £5bn ear marked for physical infrastructure for democracy... how much for digital infrastructure?
- — 2017 EC poll half of 18-35yr olds said they lacked information necessary to make an informed choice; we had a poll done in the GE campaign — over half of polled — any age — said didn't know enough about candidates; when women alone are asked, 62% say they do not feel informed about their choices'
- — Risk of vacuums in absence of good digital info
- — Risk harming trust
- — A new digital-first public body, responsible for civic data, information and education on all democratic processes could rebuild trust in our democratic system, boost engagement in democratic life and result in better governance.

### **Utopia/Dystopia**

- everyone could publish, best stuff would rise up, most shared
- global public square, a role in Arab Spring
- organising — XR largely organised thru whatsapp and online

- dystopian tech — Orwell vs Huxley; East vs West;
- Shoshana Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism
- the system rewards highly emotive content
- new tech happening fast...hype about AI...who is responsible for / capable of understanding AI's impact upon our democracy?

### **Good bits**

- Petitions — one of the oldest forms of democratic tactics; it's hardly world-changing, but some have been successful, some have clearly indicating public preferences and led to govt action...
- tech can make things open — and open = more easily corrected, share in the benefits of everyone's knowledge; Wikipedia obvs = if knowledge is power, then Wikipedia is a democratising force



- Transparency is important in democracy — both budgets, data, decisions; but also the who — Twitter etc make it easier to find out what's going on, who's in charge, because politicians now have profiles, but so do journalists, so do civil servants, so do business leaders and you can see a bit better what influences them, how they think etc...
- innovation: In Your Area, Reach PLC, trying to beat Facebook / Gumtree etc at own game... think is a shame that none of the massive platforms are British — might they have been different?
- vTaiwan, designed to find agreement; Uber regulation;

### **Random**

- digital training for politicians
- Funding for civic innovation
- Digital infrastructure
- Open address data has been promised for a long time and never arrived
- mySociety; Full Fact; WhoTargetsMe; e-petitions site; 38 Degrees; Delib / Commonplace
- transparency in campaigns (publications, adverts, spending, donations)
- Role of the BBC in 21st C ... the whole point of public broadcaster ... worked for radio/TV age, fulfilled a public purpose... just didn't/couldn't do the same in digital-media era...
- automatic voter reg — technology can help us do the existing stuff better...
- alternative models of funding media co's — not just collapsing local media companies, but look at calls for a coop twitter, owned by its users, so it serves its users not its advertisers... and so on



Response to call for evidence on democracy and technology

Monday 23 Sept, 2019

We are grateful for the invitation to submit a response to this important consultation.

The response below was compiled from the views of staff, board members and volunteers from Democracy Club.

## **General**

### **1. How has digital technology changed the way that democracy works in the UK and has this been a net positive or negative effect?**

This is a broad question. Joe Mitchell, a director at Democracy Club, wrote [this article](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/newe.12123) (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/newe.12123>) to try to briefly present the two sides of this story — digital utopias and dystopias — before trying to plot a way down the middle.

To give one example of a digital ‘positive’ effect, please permit us to explain Democracy Club.

We aim to fill a gap that we believe has opened up because democratic processes have not kept up with the changing societal expectations brought about by digital technology. For example, basic factual data about elections, representatives and decisions is not aggregated nationally online by any official institution. People now expect digital services and information to be fast, accurate and a few taps away. Information about democratic processes has not kept pace.

Democracy Club attempts to partially fill this gap by aggregating national data on elections, candidates, polling locations and results. We’ve started with these because they will help answer the most popular queries at election day.

The aggregation is a significant task, fulfilled by thousands of volunteers and people working well beyond the call of duty at election times — we now serve The Electoral Commission and



several news organisations with this data, reaching millions of voters. However, we, a philanthropically funded non-profit organisation reliant on thousands of volunteers, are probably not a sustainable route to providing this information in the long-term.

Going beyond our own organisation, it is worth noting that it can be difficult to understand the impact technology has had on democracy, because some of the data needed to assess this question is privately owned. For example, some data, e.g. advert libraries, held by Facebook or Google is published, but these do not give us the full picture necessary to make good policy decisions and direct interventions. Nor is the necessary data available from government. For example, it is impossible to track whether 'get out the vote' efforts have any effect, because people's journey through the [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) cannot be tracked to fulfillment.

More broadly still, an accurate answer to this question would require some kind of longitudinal study of the health of UK democracy. We have two to go on: the Audit of Political Engagement and British Election Study; they are not adequate. We are underprepared as a society to understand potential threats to democracy. There is no modelling of threats, no shared understanding of the issues that present the highest risk. Academic research on democracy happens over multi-year research programmes that are rarely open-access and there's no thinktank or institution dedicated to democratic innovation or renewal. Despite democracy's fundamental national importance, there's no equivalent to the way HM Treasury models the risks of financial crises for the economy, or the way Public Health England models pandemic/flu risks for societal health. We urge the committee to consider who should be responsible for measuring the health of democracy — and responding to it.

## **2. How have the design of algorithms used by social media platforms shaped democratic debate? To what extent should there be greater accountability for the design of these algorithms?**

We are confident the committee will receive more expert answers on this, though we would highlight that the algorithm design is in itself employed to serve the business models of those social media platforms.

## Education

### **3. What role should every stage of education play in helping to create a healthy, active, digitally literate democracy?**

Experts in civic education and digital literacy will be able to make a comprehensive case here, but our experience highlights a couple of issues worth highlighting.

Digital technology is useful in that it presents some clues as to the lack of public understanding of democracy and the need for comprehensive civic education at all ages. For example, Google Trends publishes lists of the most searched for things around elections: typically, these are 'who should I vote for', 'how do I vote', 'where do I vote' and 'who are my candidates' come up in the top five.

The question of 'who should I vote for' might be seen as too sensitive to approach, especially by a state body, but we could learn from the German example, where the state regards it as an opportunity to help people understand the differences between parties. The German state — through its Federal Agency for Civic Education — runs an online quiz that helps direct voters' attention to parties that appear to align with their values or positions: Wahl-o-Mat. In the UK, vote quizzes have been left to civil society organisations, but there is an argument for having an official vote quiz that is appropriately resourced and could help educate millions of people before an election. This is also an example of where education should not be assumed to be only necessary at school-level. Civic education must be part of lifelong learning.

The feedback form to Democracy Club's [WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk](http://WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk) website gives an insight into public confusion and lack of knowledge. Many people commented that they expected to see May vs Corbyn on their ballot paper at 2017, partly reflecting news media's failure to provide useful local information to people. All of us, but especially media companies, have a civic duty to help continuously educate people towards a better functioning democracy.

## Online campaigning



#### **4. Would greater transparency in the online spending and campaigning of political groups improve the electoral process in the UK by ensuring accountability, and if so what should this transparency look like?**

Transparency does not ensure accountability. But it probably helps.

Much (most?) election spend reporting occurs after the fact. But there are no good reasons for this to be the case in a digital era. All spending — assuming candidates or parties aren't buying leaflets in cash — is done digitally and therefore could be reported in near real-time. By being able to understand spending in real-time we are more likely to spot misuse before it can affect the outcome of the election.

Voters should be able to see what parties and candidates are campaigning on, how they are campaigning, how much it costs and who they are targeting. Voters should also be able to see what third-parties are doing to support particular parties, candidates or agendas.

Digital technology allows much of this to be tracked and clearly presented in near real-time. By mapping spending and campaigning to parties and candidates via IDs, a clear factual picture can be made available to voters, where they need it, in order to inform their decision-making. This of course relies on good data on candidates.

Monitoring spending and campaigning is the job of The Electoral Commission, making this a good point to make a broader point about the role of The Electoral Commission in a digital era. The digital revolution has not happened overnight: the institution should have been prepared and given the tools necessary to pursue its aims in the digital age. To date the EC still does not have an in-house digital team. We urge the committee to consider how the EC can be urgently supported to better deliver its remit.

#### **5. What effect does online targeted advertising have on the political process, and what effects could it have in the future? Should there be additional regulation of political advertising?**



Like much of advertising, the effects of online targeted advertising aren't always terribly clear. This is why new regulation to ensure transparency is vital.

The committee will be aware of The Electoral Commission's desire to expand the imprint rule to digital ads, something we would support. Adverts should be open to public scrutiny, searchable and machine readable in near real-time (the content, the publisher, the spending and targeting data). Other commentators will no doubt have more to say on 'dark ads'.

Democracy may function better as a shared conversation, with all sides receiving the same information. Hyper-targeted online advertisements make it easier to divide a 'demos' and feed different information to different groups in a way that plays to existing prejudices and could cause harm — again transparency allows citizens to know when they are being set up like this.

One Democracy Club volunteer had concerns about the digital release of the full electoral register and the potential for political parties to (mis)use the data for personally-targeted campaigning purposes rather than the intended transparency and scrutiny purposes. They suggested that party officials could be made to sign pledges to only use the data for limited purposes, and to provide a list of nominated persons who will be given access to this sensitive data who will be held responsible if there is evidence that it has been misused.

## **Privacy and anonymity**

### **6. To what extent does increasing use of encrypted messaging and private groups present a challenge to the democratic process?**

Private peer-to-peer conversations and organising both make up a crucial part of democracy. There are many examples through history of organising that was illegal or socially abnormal at the time: from supporters of an English bible to the Fenwick Weavers Society, society now champions the movements that emerged from these initially private conversations and organisations.



However, the ability to mass-broadcast messages using secretive systems should be of concern to anyone interested in ensuring fairness and transparency in democracy and during elections. Given the nature of these technologies, parties could pledge to abide by some predetermined rules, then penalties could be applied retrospectively if recipients of encrypted messages report them to authorities using a system like the one created by WhoTargetsMe.

## **7. What are the positive or negative effects of anonymity on online democratic discourse?**

We leave this to experts on free speech.

### **Democratic debate**

## **8. To what extent does social media negatively shape public debate, either through encouraging polarisation or through abuse deterring individuals from engaging in public life?**

There are more expert organisations than ours on this subject, suffice it to add that we see anecdotal evidence from our Candidates crowdsourcing platform that election candidates are reluctant to share their contact details (which is not an unreasonable ask of someone seeking election) for fear of abuse.

It's also worth noting that there are many advantages to social media, see the utopian view outlined in Joe Mitchell's article above. Social media can give a voice to the previously voiceless, it allows more easy connections around issue areas and organising for change, in some circumstances it can lead to good conversations and debate, with the potential to restore interest in people who previously felt disenfranchised. Of course, the algorithms that promote certain content to users are not designed to maximise good conversations and debate; they are instead designed to maximise ad revenue.

## **9. To what extent do you think that there are those who are using social media to attempt to undermine trust in the democratic process and in democratic institutions; and what might be the best ways to combat this and strengthen faith in democracy?**



This is not our expertise, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine that there are those who have a significant interest in undermining trust and that therefore, even if it is not already happening on a significant basis, it is wise to defend against it.

However, we believe there are greater threats, such as that of democracy being left behind in terms of how people access information and services in the 21st century. The threat of the democratic process coming to be seen as an anachronism, as not fit-for-purpose. Democracy may be undone by our own negligence and lack of investment before any efforts by external actors.

To combat this and strengthen our democracy, we require better civic education and low barriers to accessible, clear, accurate, transparently produced information on the democratic process.

This threat was faced by West Germany in the immediate postwar years. While it had a new constitution and institutions to protect democracy in a legal, top-down sense, Chancellor Adenauer knew that democracy would ultimately have to be defended by the people from the bottom-up: it would be necessary to embed a strong democratic culture. Part of the approach to this was to establish the BpB — the Federal Agency for Civic Education — as outlined elsewhere in this response. We would urge consideration of a similar UK institution. Joe Mitchell sketched some more detailed notes on the BpB and a UK equivalent, here:

<https://joe-mitchell.com/2016/08/15/germany-has-a-publicly-funded-a-gency-with-a-mission-to-strengthen-democracy-the-uk-needs-one-too/>

## **Misinformation**

### **10. What might be the best ways of reducing the effects of misinformation on social media platforms?**

In terms of misinformation on elections in particular, such as deliberately discouraging participation by pushing false claims about registration or identity or the process of elections, the best way to counteract this may be to provide officially sanctioned, accessible, clear, accurate and transparently produced information — open to all social media platforms. This would give the designers of such



platforms the ability and confidence to easily highlight factual information, meeting what is clearly a strong public demand for such information, closing any information vacuums into which misinformation gets pulled.

More generally, the best defence is an educated citizenry with the ability to think critically about the media they consume — and there is some evidence that citizens are already doing this: information from social media is much less trusted than information from TV news, for example (see Dorothy Byrne's MacTaggart lecture at Edinburgh).

## **Moderation**

### **11. How could the moderation processes of large technology companies be improved to better tackle abuse and misinformation, as well as helping public debate flourish?**

On the assumption that moderation is difficult, it may be better to consider regulating the design of the platforms that currently reward extreme content/opinions or to incentivise change to the platforms' business models, which rely on keeping the attention of users in order to show them adverts.

## **Technology and democratic engagement**

### **12. How could the Government better support the positive work of civil society organisations using technology to facilitate engagement with democratic processes?**

Specifically, the government could take on the work begun by Democracy Club and establish the necessary digital infrastructure (data, APIs) upon which a world of information and education products could be built.

For example, many varied transport apps exist thanks to the open data on buses, trains etc provided by TfL or National Rail. The equivalent data relating to democratic processes — institutions, persons, votes, decisions — would create a thriving new ecosystem of civic apps.



This would involve publishing structured data on all aspects of the democratic processes — or mandating local government to do so where appropriate. Open address data (long-promised) would be part of this vital infrastructure.

More broadly, the government could be more open to new ideas on democratic engagement, could spend its democratic engagement team budget outside government, could provide the space and start-up funds to support civic tech startups (France's Halles Civique might be a model for this).

More ambitiously, government could choose to endow an independent funder to support civic innovation for democracy.

### **13. How can elected representatives use technology to engage with the public in local and national decision making? What can Parliament and Government do to better use technology to support democratic engagement and ensure the efficacy of the democratic process?**

This question assumes that representatives are comfortable using technology. Often, perhaps particularly at local level, representatives could benefit from support and training on understanding digital technology as a whole, as well as the opportunities it presents to them. The organisation DotEveryone has done some work on this.

As above, government could start by providing the vital data infrastructure. Parliament may be needed to legislate on this as necessary.

More ambitiously, parliament or government could create and endow a new, independent, digital-first institution for civic education. This could be lightly modelled on Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education, but could also be required to monitor the health of democracy as well as to strengthen it.

### **14. What positive examples are there of technology being used to enhance democracy?**

As mentioned, Democracy Club is filling in the gaps of basic voting information for aspects of election information that people now expect to find online: when are elections taking place, who are the



candidates, what are their contact details, where is the polling station and what was the result. By making this data open, the data can be used to reach people where they are: largely on facebook or google — or whatever app comes next.

It is worth stating that digital is not only useful for those online. Digital is necessary to build the information databases that can be accessed in other ways, e.g. Mencap use Democracy Club's services to power their call centre on election day; librarians use our services to give face-to-face advice to people who walk in with questions.

We also admire the work of many other organisations working in this space:

- mySociety — a world leader in 'civic tech' : making it easier to follow parliament for 10 years with TheyWorkForYou; making it much easier to engage with representatives via WriteToThem and to report issues to the council at FixMyStreet, and to help Freedom of Information requests via WhatDoTheyKnow.
- Full Fact — particularly their technological efforts on automated fact-checking, and work to improve the quality of debate on facebook etc
- WhoTargetsMe — empowers activists to monitor online advertising in the absence of good regulation on it
- Parliament's e-petitions site can cope with enormous engagement in a short time and is highly accessible. It has to compete with other petition sites, which allow longer-term engagement with the signatories (e.g. Change.org and 38Degrees) — and becomes harder to identify the most pressing public issues when signatures are distributed over several petitioning platforms.
- Delib and Commonplace, for example, are providing a new range of digital tools to make planning, consultations and budgets easier to understand, and preventing councils from all independently trying to develop their own solutions.

### **About Democracy Club**

Our vision is of a country with the digital foundations to support everyone's participation in democratic life.



Our mission is to create those foundations by:

- Identifying areas for improvement in democratic engagement;
- Ensuring everyone has access to quality information on democratic processes, particularly on elections;
- Mobilising a non-partisan movement of volunteers for democracy.

We are non-partisan and we work openly. We're a community of 20,000 volunteers and a small core team.

We don't have a view of 'the perfect democracy'. Instead, we try to make constant iterative improvements based on citizens' needs. We judge those needs based on publicly available research, feedback on our websites and online search data.