

## GETTING ENGAGED ONLINE: NEW TECHNOLOGY, NEW DEMOCRACY

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The internet clearly offers potential to support a reengagement in democratic processes by citizens who have become increasingly distrusting of political institutions. However, the internet is far from being a panacea, with evidence that much eDemocracy simply speeds-up existing channels and better connects those who are already active. The internet is not the only factor affecting a change to more deliberative and participatory schemes, UK Government policy now promotes direct engagement with civil society at all stages of the policy process. Drawing on the Digital Dialogues project, a three-year evaluation of 25 government eEngagement projects, this paper will describe issues of democratic disengagement, the rise of civil society, new attempts to engage citizens and the role of ICT in doing this.

**Keywords:** eDemocracy, online engagement, democratic deficit.

### INTRODUCTION

Emergent online technologies have combined with a generational shift in social attitudes toward the individual, magnified through processes of globalisation. As a result, Western society is now more individualistic, immediate and issues driven than ever before, yet our democratic systems remain largely rooted in tradition and the collectivist agendas of a party-political and ideologically polarised past.

Models of democratic engagement have traditionally positioned government as the driver and citizens as recipients, unable (and unqualified) to participate in the design of such systems. Yet the use of the internet by citizens and civil society groups demonstrates time and again that this model is no longer effective or even appropriate. The internet broadens the options for democratic engagement to encompass increased diversity, wider participation and more deliberative and participatory tools. Where traditional democracy is monolithic, imposed and managed, eDemocracy becomes temporal, emergent and transient. However, technology of itself will not overturn the democratic deficit and solutions must be developed that transform the underlying processes of government and which address digital disadvantage at both a policy and practice level (Williamson, 2007).

This paper is intended as a reflexive space and attempts to build an understanding of the issues affecting democracy, including public attitudes to politics and a bipolar reinvigoration of civil society. It then goes on contextualise online engagement and, finally, to suggest good practice for eEngagement and some factors that predicate its success, drawing on the findings of the Hansard Society/Ministry of Justice's longitudinal evaluation of eEngagement, Digital Dialogues (Hansard Society, 2007b).

### DEMOCRATIC DRIFT

The Western political system is built on a platform of representative democracy. However, significant fissures have emerged in the systems that govern us. Politicians have never been greatly respected but current levels of distrust and disillusionment are significant, and the arising uncertainty this causes fundamentally challenges the legitimacy of the representative system. While the rhetoric of government values engaged citizens and departments solicit "feedback in

order to develop good policy and services at all levels” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2001, p.1), public involvement should not be assumed. Isolated exceptions exist but engagement remains largely a process of top-down ‘doing-to’, where citizens are expected to conform to the process, protocol and timeframe of the agency ‘in charge’.

Bimber (2004) sees the term ‘citizen’ as problematic in a system of governance that privileges power elites and where, for individuals, there is greater resonance in the term ‘consumer’ – notwithstanding that the concept of ‘consuming’ democracy is of itself problematic for citizens (Prendergrast, 2008). A gap exists between the desire of citizens who wish to engage and the current technocracy of public administration, which places barriers in the way of those interested in democratisation and the revival of representative bodies (Chadwick, 2003). To overcome this, Holman and McGregor (2005) suggest that policy-makers embrace the concept of the internet as a public commons, shifting away from the entrenched mindset of government-centric information delivery and a corporatized mass-media.

### **FAILURE TO ENGAGE**

An individual citizen’s ability to participate effectively is not neutral and is intensified or mitigated by the factors discussed above. Those participating in community decision-making are often a small, inside elite and the systems of democratic engagement remain a barrier to participation for some since they are controlled by government (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2002). Partly as a result of this, political disengagement is widespread in Britain (as it is elsewhere).

Voter turnout at general elections has fallen from a high of 83.9% in 1950 to a low of 59.4% in 2001: in 2005, it rose slightly (to 61.5%) but the number of first-time voters continues to fall. Such trends reflect a growing belief that the government is out of touch (Thompson-Fawcett & Freeman, 2006). Political parties are viewed similarly – their membership is declining, particularly amongst the young – but this does not suggest a disinterest in politics. The emergence of issues-based, activist structures (Stoker, 2006), brings about a different style of participation; petitions are now the most popular form of engagement (Hansard Society, 2007a) despite the fact that their impact on the policy process is low:

[Petitions] are a useful backbench tool of minimal effect (Rt.Hon. Greg Knight MP, cited in Stevenson, 2008, p. 1).

Meanwhile, political processes have become professionalized to the extent that the individual’s stake in them is reduced. Instead of listening to the public via their representatives, the government sub-contracts democracy, relying on experts, pollsters and focus groups (Mälkiä, Anttiroiko, & Savolainen, 2004; Norris, 2001). Political institutions too become more centralised forcing individuals to engage with issues and organisations on the periphery (Chadwick, 2003).

Only 50% of the British population claims to be or is interested in becoming political active (Hansard Society, 2007a). Public distrust is aggravated by a sense that the concerns of well-resourced lobbies are heard above their own (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003; Williamson, 2007) and public expressions of powerlessness are often accompanied by a belief

that they are inadequately informed despite the plethora of news reports discussing policy, many of which appear to the reader as just another attempt to persuade.

### **ATTEMPTING TO RE-ENGAGE**

In response to declining public participation and trust, government momentum has slowly started shifting towards re-engagement. This has been based on an awareness that people want to do more than vote; they want to have a say in decision making or at least understand and believe in it.

Constitutional reforms are ongoing and, alongside these, government is promoting public engagement with the policy process. Moving towards more deliberative and participatory approaches, government departments have carried out an average of 609 consultations per year since 2003. Unfortunately, only 4% of the public has responded to one; a further 14% stating that they would like to have done but did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable (Hansard Society, 2007a).

The rhetoric of connected government promotes (and assumes) an active civil society and that participation by its citizens should be encouraged because it:

- leads to better and more responsive services;
- tackles people's disengagement from politics and the democratic process; and
- builds social capital (Skidmore, Bound, & Lownsborough, 2006, p. 3).

Participation is at the heart of democracy, where "citizens committed to democratic values, mindful of their civic duties and who become involved in political activity are the lifeblood of any democratic system" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). The UK government now actively promotes a civil society-centric approach, devolving decision making to the lowest level by increasingly attempting to involve citizens and their agents in exercises at varying stages of the policy cycle (Blears, 2008). Digital media will necessarily play a part in this.

The government's 'together we can' initiative – launched in 2005 – has been used to coordinate public engagement initiatives across central government, just as the Hansard Society/Ministry of Justice Digital Dialogues project has provided a co-ordinated evaluation of such initiatives. Government has begun to deepen its procedural focus on citizen engagement and representative democracy through projects such as the Power of Information review (Mayo & Steinberg, 2007) and subsequent task force and a number of other new (or pending) initiatives, including the Governance of Britain green paper, Constitutional Renewal white paper (and associated draft bill) and the Community Empowerment white paper.

These latest measures emphasise the government's focus on reformulating the relationship between the individual, community and state so that it is less centralised with decisions being made by those directly affected by them (DCLG, 2008). For this to work, there is an inherent requirement on the part of the citizen to engage actively in the policy process and government is beginning to explore how the interactive aspects of the internet can be used to enable this process. The findings of our own Digital Dialogues project (Hansard Society, 2007b), drawn out

later in this paper, highlight what happens when citizens and government do talk online and why there is a need for a more sustained public deliberation with government.

### **POTENTIAL FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT**

Although internet use is rising, only 57% of UK homes have broadband internet access – up from 45% one year earlier (OFCOM, 2008). Low take-up results in a digital deficit that excludes those already marginalized; citizens who have no access are further excluded from social, cultural or economic activities. For example, failure to acquire basic ICT literacy skills reduces an individual's ability to gain employment and to participate actively in society (Facer & Furlong, 2001).

The 'digital divide' is significant for eDemocracy projects since proximity to the internet is a direct and significant motivating factor for discontinuous adoption (Williamson, 2007). An estimated 60% of residents of Liverpool and Glasgow, for example, lack internet access at home (OFCOM, 2008), meaning that these areas risk being under-represented in online engagement. Part of the problem is that late adopters see the internet as expensive, intrusive or believe that it requires them to develop skills that they do not have; a vicious cycle of exclusion emerges.

Ongoing research into the democratising influence of the internet suggests that online deliberations do not necessarily lead to increased levels of activism (Malina, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Rethemeyer, 2007). Instead they engage those who are already active. In this context, one might posit that online political communication simply speeds up the development of existing networks and shores up existing systems of knowledge and power (Gane, 2003).

The internet facilitates the kinds of single-issue politics that are becoming increasingly popular offline but these do not necessarily link directly back to traditional democratic processes or institutions. Instead, citizen-led online activism tends to be viral and anarchic, leading to a distributed model of political individualism (Williamson, 2008). Indeed, there appears to be a bifurcation emerging between traditional forms of political engagement and organisation and single-issue lifestyle politics. Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) identify competing 'new' and 'old' notions of politics, whereas Beck (1997) and Giddens (1991) see changes in the factors that motivate various forms of political identity which are synonymous with the term 'lifestyle politics.'

It is not necessarily the case that adopting new technologies will lead to an increase in the numbers of people participating in democracy; the internet provides access to a range of (often conflicting) sources of information and the overload arising from this may in fact account for a reduction in participation (Bimber, 1998). Consider also that it appears to be online human-nature to congregate around like-minds, rather than to actively seek out difference (Witschge, 2002).

### **TOWARDS A SOLUTION FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

This discussion highlights a move forward in grass-roots, citizen-led politics that is much more pronounced than any shift in the way government works. The first tentative attempts by political institutions to do so occurred in the 1990s – long after commercial and media outlets had

established interactive sites to engage web-users. Since then, various new models of electronically mediated governance have emerged – each with a slightly different focus. For those concerned with service delivery, the ‘government online’ approach – provided by online agencies such as DirectGov and BusinessLink – has simplified transactions between government and individuals (or businesses) and made information more accessible. While such developments may transform the provision of government services, they turn ‘citizens’ into ‘consumers’, reflecting only one aspect of their identity.

Similarly, approaches that tend towards information transmission (of bills, speeches and government publications) are becoming more prevalent, but this approach is not without criticism either; it works for those who understand government terminology and for those with the know-how to access appropriate information but excludes those who do not. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this approach is less popular than ‘bottom-up’ phenomena such as blogs, social networking and viral campaigns, which suggests that:

- more people are interested in politics than voting figures would suggest (Hansard Society, 2007a);
- new technologies make it easier for those with access to have their say; and
- people are talking about issues in ways that can be meaningful to government and policy makers – if only they would listen (Cabinet Office, 2007).

Government attempts to use online deliberations are emergent. At present they exist like atolls spread across a large ocean. Some are excellent but not all attempts to engage online are successful and the factors affecting this will be explored in the next section.

### **ABOUT DIGITAL DIALOGUES**

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which online communication tools (such as social networking sites and blogs) have been used by central government to support public engagement. Consisting of 25 central government-based case studies, the Digital Dialogues initiative was set up by the Department for Constitutional Affairs (now the Ministry of Justice) and carried out by the Hansard Society between 2006 and 2008; the initiative was launched at a time when the public were already engaging politically online – albeit not with the government. It aimed to:

- raise central government’s awareness of the potential uses of new technology in communications and engagement contexts;
- develop case studies to explore the issues affecting online engagement between government and the public; and
- promote efficacious practices across central government.

The sections that follow will describe the key findings of the project, concluding with some key recommendations for good practice in eEngagement.

## **ADOPTION AND SUCCESS**

Government attempts to use online deliberations are emergent, existing like atolls spread across a large ocean. Whilst there is undoubted potential for eDemocracy, equally strong arguments exist that lead us to adopt a cautious approach. Firstly, we must consider eDemocracy not as something fixed but a contestable discourse (Coleman, 2004) and a continuum stretching from citizen-led to government-led (Williamson, 2007). This means that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that the tools chosen must reflect a variety of conditions; social, economic and cultural more so than technological.

People have different motivations for participating in online deliberations with government. Some want to have their say; others want to find out what other people think and to see how government responds. Online deliberations provide the government with opportunities to enhance public understandings of their work, but they are not a solution to disengagement of themselves. That relies on good practice.

Success depends on the planning of online deliberations, users expect a degree of interaction and this requires a time commitment. At all times, it is necessary to manage expectations about policy impact and ensure that the process is clear to those taking part. Indeed, citizens demand transparency, not just in the process but in the design and the outcomes, yet this is often an anathema to government agencies.

Other factors that must be considered include the stage in the policy cycle and it is important to be clear that the exercise's objectives all generate different styles of online engagement. The picture that emerges is nuanced and those government departments which benefit most from online engagement are the ones that are able to reflect on their experience and approach. Risk aversion, inherent in many government departments, remains a major obstacle to success, as does starting with incorrect assumptions about the nature and purpose of engagement.

Focussing on the process not the technology is vital and government must recognise eEngagement is only a part of the overall engagement strategy. The internet is not ubiquitous and is not necessarily the best tool for engagement in every situation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has described a resilient and reemergent civil society, actively pushing the boundaries of democracy and increasingly recognised as playing a policy development role by government. Yet many citizens remain disconnected, disenfranchised and disinterested – in both democracy and technology. How and when to engage – both online and offline – is, therefore, a challenging question. It is clear that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to online engagement and there are no right answers – what works in one situation proves ineffective in another.

As government increasingly looks to whole-of-government – or at least cross-departmental – consultations and at partnerships with local government and NGOs, this will again affect the way online engagement can be shaped. A centralised model is no longer the only valid way to engage and eDemocracy enables a two-way process led and managed from either or both sides. In

consideration of this, we promote the following conditions as generating a higher probability of success with online engagement:

1. Successful engagement is embedded within the processes and culture of the organisation and cannot happen as an afterthought or on the periphery.
2. The choice of engagement tool is driven by need not by technology.
3. Engagement works when organisations listen. Barriers to good listening include risk aversion and a fear of exposing the organisation to the outside.
4. Organisations that are reflexive – able to listen, reflect, learn, respond and change – are better at engagement.

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