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# Parliament 2.0 – Harnessing Participatory Media to Counter Disengagement

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by Ross Ferguson

*The study of Parliament is replete with sporting metaphors. Today, as voting rates decline in many countries, it might be described as a spectator sport suffering from massive slump in attendance. This article, focusing on the United Kingdom, deals with the issue of how underperforming Parliaments might be reinvigorated by mobilising information and communications technology, and seeks to answer the question of whether legislators and citizens have the appetite and are prepared for the shifts in political life that contemporary information and communication technology heralds.*

Let us begin by taking the political pulse of citizens. I will take the British electors of the ‘Mother of all Parliaments’ as my test-case subjects. The United Kingdom began to register an interest in the issue of citizen engagement – or more precisely, citizen disengagement – following the 2001 general election. Voter turnout that year was 59% the lowest it had been since 1918. Turnout at the previous general election in 1997 was, in turn, down on 1992. In 2005 the general turnout rose by 2 points, but amongst the youngest voters there was another 2% drop to 37%. Not good for a mature democracy.

Electoral turnout is only one measure of the health of a polity. Another, perhaps a more credible, measure is to look at political awareness and participation between elections. The United Kingdom’s Hansard Society has carried out an annual Audit of Political Engagement since 2004. Amongst the data in the 2007 Audit, it was revealed that only 34% of people are satisfied with the political system in the United Kingdom, and only 29% say that they are satisfied with their elected representatives in general. About 69% of people say they want to play an active part in the politics and policy making. However, only 39% of people believe that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to do so, and only 33% think that when people like them get involved that it has an impact.

So the British picture is of a rather downbeat, but crucially, not apathetic political culture. While the exact numbers vary country to country, observers in other Western democracies will recognise similarities with the trends of citizen engagement in their own political institutions.

Interestingly, at the same time as turnout is dropping in the United Kingdom, access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is increasing in the home and the workplace. There are an estimated 33 million internet users in the UK, and more mobile phones in the country than there are people. Two out of three homes have a digital TV service. The largest demographic group of internet users are 18 - 24 year-olds.

Yet, the online world is not just the domain of the young and male. In its 2007 report on the country’s communications market, the United Kingdom telecommunications regulator, Ofcom, confirmed what had been suspected for a while: women aged 25-34 spend over 20% more time online than their male counterparts. ‘Silver surfers’ also account for an increasing amount of internet usage, with nearly 30% of total time spent on the internet accounted for by people over the age of 50.

Social networking and shopping sites dominate the Top 20 sites most visited by United Kingdom web users. seventeen million people do their banking online, which is two million more than those who do it over the phone. Businesses in Britain have realised the need to quickly adapt to the internet. In 2006, British advertisers spent

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over £2 billion in online advertising; this was double the global average. And, as a provider of information and services, the United Kingdom Government has also gone to lengths to invest in the web. Although the money the government has spent on its service-orientated sites has been criticised by industry experts, the fact that 6 in 10 web users have accessed the sites in the preceding 12 months suggests that the government is doing something right. Again, the numbers differ country to country, but the explosive proliferation of ICT is not unique to the United Kingdom.

The dip in political engagement and the rise in access and use of ICT are coincidental developments. But of course, when we look at the way citizens are using ICT for leisure, commerce and to access public services, it is natural to wonder how the public would respond to opportunities to engage with politics and politicians online.

Between 2005 and 2007, I led a research unit that carried out qualitative and quantitative analysis of 'eDemocracy' websites owned by both the UK Parliament and Government. I was interested in exactly who was using these sites, what they get out of the experience, and what it is they liked or did not like about the sites. In one study called 'Digital Dialogues'<sup>1</sup> we captured 18 case studies, and came across three interesting findings.

Firstly, users consisted of a mix of demographics. They were a range of ages, ethnicities and genders. In general, men were more likely to use the sites than women, but only by a slight percentage. For example, in cases such as a consultation on the European Youth Parliament and one on the family courts system, there were more women than men taking part. In terms of age, those between the ages of 25 - 55 years old were the most active participants, but again only just. The vast majority of users regarded themselves as regular internet users and most accessed the internet from their homes.

The second finding is perhaps the most important. In terms of previous political engagement, some of the users had voted in an election, and some had contacted their Member of Parliament in the past. But efficacy was low and most felt disconnected from central government, saying that 'people like them' were not involved or listened to when the government made decisions. For the majority of users taking part in one of our case studies, it was their first formal interaction with the policy-making process.

Taking just three of the forum-based case studies demonstrates, for example: in the Department for Work and Pensions' 'Welfare Reform Forum', 83% had never participated in a government or parliamentary consultation before; in the Communities and Local Government web forum on its local government White Paper, 82% partici-

pated in a consultation for the first time; and in the Food Standards Agency web forum on the regulation of food businesses, 59% took part in their first consultation.

The catalyst for these individuals - what made them decide to act on a latent interest in sharing their experiences and having a say in the presence of their peers, politicians and civil servants - was that the opportunity to engage was made available online.

The third highlight was that 78% of users said that they would engage with the government online in the future. A similar number said that they would recommend online engagement to others, and in responses to open-ended questioning, many suggested that the rate of their involvement was likely to increase as opportunities to engage online become more widespread and regular in their occurrence.

This is exciting data. It demonstrates an interest in engaging online. It suggests that online engagement can convert passive citizens into active citizens; and it suggests a chink in the armour of political disengagement.

Although it is gathered from government case studies, the data reflects findings from parliamentary case studies. For example, in summer 2006, the United Kingdom Parliament's Defence Select Committee held an online forum as part of its inquiry into the education of children in military families. 90% of the users had never participated in a parliamentary consultation previously, and 75% had never contacted their MP before.

Having covered the interest of citizens, let us now turn to the use of technology-based engagement tools by Parliaments and their Members. Or perhaps not so much their use, as their disposition. For if Parliaments are to improve their performance, they have to be better at communicating. And currently, practice would suggest that bar a few mavericks, the disposition of the common-of-garden parliamentarian is not favourable toward engaging the citizen.

Better communication is partly about a parliament making information more accessible and improving its distribution. A parliament should relate its work to the concerns of those in the 'outside world'; and work with - rather than against - the media to communicate effectively with the public. However, in our contemporary societies effective communications are increasingly moving from a transmission model to one of interaction, in which consumers of information can also be its producers, where viewers become users.

Such a conceptual approach is a departure from the conventional communications methods and policies employed by our parliaments in the last century. What this amounts to is that, in respects of being better at engage-

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ment, Parliaments need to innovate. And unfortunately that is not something Parliaments have been any good at. Reform is a force equivalent to a glacier, rather than a forest fire.

Parliaments have variously approached internet-based ICT as, first, a set of administrative tools that help manage knowledge and staff; second, a means of publishing and distributing information in the public domain; and, finally, as a facilitator of citizen engagement. However, in the UK and other Parliaments these three areas have not been pursued in a coherent, strategic manner.

It would not be true to say that Parliaments have not been innovative around engagement and use of ICT as its facilitator. In the UK you could point to a number of examples: 1996 saw the first website to be launched by an MP; in 2003 an MP held the first online constituency surgery; and in 2006 a select committee became the first to accept inquiry submissions via mobile phone. But again, these practices have never truly progressed in the corporate or Members' minds beyond their value as PR exercises.

At a Member-level, most parliamentarians have not accepted the clear-and-present danger of disengagement. Disengagement has not, by their reading, affected the 'bottom line' of politics: votes are still cast, governments formed and their programmes scrutinised by Parliaments before they go out and become the laws and services of people's everyday lives. Yet, the data is unambiguous: people are not satisfied by this approach to representation. They want something more. Something more tangible and more involved.

There has long been an aspiration that runs: the public – in any parliamentary democracy – have a right to expect a parliament which communicates its work promptly, clearly and usefully, but also one that reaches out to all citizens and invites participation and interaction. Well, today that aspiration can be delivered on through the mobilisation of ICT. It can save Members time, it can make them more visible and less remote. We have known this for a long time, but we have yet to have a Parliament which takes the theory puts it into practice.

Of course, meanwhile, citizens are using the technology to educate themselves, to deliberate and to organise. They use the technology to talk with the media, with businesses, even with government. So why not their parliamentarians? My point is that, today, the parliamentarian who does use ICT is a effective and relevant parliamentarian.

If there is no political leadership for better engagement for the benefit of representation, should it then be a concern for parliamentary officials? Should they promote

engagement for the benefit of more effective and efficient law making and scrutiny? Yes – they should. Very simply: Parliamentary staff, as professionals and public servants should endeavour to advise and support Members as best they can. That is surely why most do the job they do.

It is said that an innovative organisation is one that is adaptive, agile, able to learn quickly about the environment around it, sense opportunities and be in a position to mobilise resources when required. However, such an organisation also needs to have a sense of stability, continuity and purpose. Parliaments have the latter qualities in spades. But on the former qualities they are sorely lacking. That has to change if our Parliaments are to continue to play their pivotal role in representative democracies.

Professor Julian Birkinshaw of the London Business School says there is a spectrum of innovation, with open innovation at one end and closed innovation at the other. Every business, says Birkinshaw, must place itself somewhere on that spectrum but not, he warns, at either extreme. I argue the same for political institutions; some parliamentarians would counter that taking even the first step is far easier said than done.

So in anticipation I will finish with a simple recommendation for a first step that any politician or official can do over the course of next week. That recommendation is look in the mirror and ask 'what kind of Parliament are we?' Are we one of the innovators taking on disengagement by the horns or are we one of those happy to gather dust?

To answer this question first you have to know what your own institution is doing, but you also have to know what your peers are up to. That's easy. Following on from the Conference at which I presented last year, the Global Centre for ICT in Parliaments<sup>2</sup> has released a research report based on the responses and comments provided by 105 assemblies from around the world to a survey on their use of ICT.

This 'first step' is about Parliaments admitting to using ICT poorly, and that their probing and planning of what it might do for them in the future has been defective. The good news is that putting things right is an inexpensive, quick-win waiting to happen. Our Parliaments are certainly beneficiaries of innovation and engagement, but I believe they can and should also be their source.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.digitaldialogues.org.uk>.
2. See <http://www.ictparliament.org>.