

E-DEMOCRACY

The current proposal for an ePetitions system in the House of Commons¹ is just one example of increasing interest in eDemocracy. Reasons include growing use of the internet, the popularity of web based applications such as social networking, and the trend towards digital convergence. This POSTnote looks at recent UK initiatives, and at challenges faced in their design and implementation. It examines debate over the purpose of eDemocracy and where its future lies.

Background

There is no single definition for eDemocracy: it can broadly be described as the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to increase and enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes. Early attempts involved 2-way cable television (1970s) and Teletext (1980s). However, it was the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s that led to the rise of eDemocracy in its current form. Traditionally, initiatives have been categorised as follows although the boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred:

a) top-down: initiatives by the government, or local authorities, often with the goals of lowered costs, or increased efficiency, transparency and convenience;
b) bottom-up: initiatives by citizens and activists at the grassroots level. These generally aim to increase transparency, accountability or convenience as well as to inform, educate and campaign (see *WriteToThem*, Box 1)

In each category activities can be either:

1) one-way processes: such as dissemination of information from the government to citizen;
2) two-way processes: such as public opinion polls, or consultation on draft bills (see *eConsultations*, Box 1).

There is debate over which activities should be classed as 'eDemocracy'. It is sometimes taken to include *eVoting* (Box 2) or *eCampaigning* (using ICT to publicise, organise, lobby or fundraise). This last interpretation is not discussed in depth in this POSTnote. However, it does not usually include *eGovernment* (using ICT for better delivery of government services).

Box 1. Examples of eDemocracy

1a) www.parliamentlive.tv (top-down, one-way)

This website carries live and archived coverage of all UK Parliament proceedings that are public, including debates and committee meetings of both Houses. The material is then available from an on-demand archive for 28 days. As many as 18 live streams are available simultaneously, and the site has links to background and order papers, and educational videos explaining how Parliament works.

1b) www.writetothem.com (bottom-up)

This project was designed by the non-partisan charitable organisation MySociety. Using their postcode, members of the public can identify any of their elected representatives and contact them via email or fax for free. The site sent some 174,750 messages in 2007, with more than 50% being from people who had never written to an elected representative of any kind.

2a) forums.parliament.uk (top-down, two-way)

Parliament is developing its capacity to run online consultations on behalf of parliamentary select committees and has consulted on nine topics since 2007. Previously they were run on behalf of Parliament by the Hansard Society at www.tellparliament.net. The earliest online consultations in the Houses of Parliament were conducted by POST and the Hansard Society - for example floodforum.net, to inform parliamentary debate on flooding - and commbill.net, Parliament's first online consultation on a draft bill.² The most popular consultation to date was on 'Human Reproductive Technologies and the Law', in 2004, when 627 messages were posted by 333 registered users (59% of whom had never contacted their MP before).³

2b) petitions.number10.gov.uk (top-down, two-way)

This 10 Downing Street website was built to allow members of the public to petition the Prime Minister about whatever issues they see fit. Since its launch, over 29,000 petitions have been submitted, containing 5.8 million signatures from over 3.9 million email addresses. The most popular petition, on road-pricing, received in excess of 1.8 million signatures.

Web2.0 and eDemocracy

A variety of technologies can be used for eDemocracy, such as Interactive Digital Television and mobile phones. However, the most popular is the World Wide Web. In its early days the web focused on delivery of information,

with the user as a passive consumer. However, 'Web 2.0' applications (see Box 3) allow information sharing and peer-to-peer collaboration, for example:

- *Blogs* (or web-logs) which usually take the form of an online diary: such as the House of Lords' 'Lords of the Blog' at lordsoftheblog.wordpress.com. This is a pilot project of the Hansard Society aiming to encourage dialogue with the House of Lords.
- *Social networking sites* like Facebook and YouTube (used by ~11 million UK residents a month, about one third of all UK internet users)⁴ allow users to interact, and share images or audio/video clips. Almost 100 MPs have Facebook pages. Parliament and 10 Downing Street (see Box 3) started their own YouTube channels in 2007. A key feature is the *viral* nature in which information and commentary can propagate rapidly across the network.

eDemocracy in Parliament and Government

In recent years various measures have been taken by Parliament and the government, to exploit opportunities offered by new ICT. Some of these are discussed below.

eDemocracy in Government

There is no single government department responsible for eDemocracy although a range of initiatives is under way (Boxes 1 and 3). Two key developments initiated by the Cabinet Office focus on making better use of public sector data, and on more user-centric government services.

Better Use of Public Sector Data

The independent "Power of Information" (POI) review⁵ commissioned by the Cabinet Office, was published in June 2007. It highlighted the importance of public sector data, ranging from maps to heart surgery mortality statistics. Online tools are emerging to handle this information in new ways. The review recognised that the government has a role to play in maximising the benefits for citizens. A key outcome of the report was the setting up of the POI taskforce, whose work is in two key areas:

- *Exemplars*: projects that will demonstrate the POI principles in action, broadly in the fields of criminal justice, health and education. In a search for 'exemplars' the POI has run a competition for the public to devise better ways to use government data (www.showusabetterway.co.uk). Five ideas will be taken forward. They include a website where users can see the boundaries of school catchment areas and one which helps users find their nearest postbox.
- *Enablers*: for example, the publication of civil service guidelines on the use of social media in June 2008. Before this civil servants were impeded from blogging or joining in online forums in a professional capacity.

More User-centric Government Services

In 2005, the Cabinet Office's eGovernment unit released its *Transformational Government* strategy.⁶ It outlined the need to use technology to give citizens choice, with personalised services designed around their needs, not those of the provider. To this end, a policy of website

rationalisation was introduced. 712 out of 765 central Government websites will close by the end of 2011.

Box 2. eVoting

eVoting (voting electronically) can be done either at a terminal in a polling station, or remotely. The focus here is on the latter. Pilot schemes have been trialled by local authorities around the UK since 2000. The most recent took place in the May 2007 elections. Five local authorities explored remote internet voting (four of these also examined telephone voting). To date, trials have identified concerns over reliability and security, as well as effectiveness.

After evaluating the May 2007 trials, the Electoral Commission recommended there should be "*no more pilots of electronic voting without a system of individual voter registration*" and "*significant improvements in testing and implementation*".⁷ Concerns have also been expressed elsewhere in the world: the Irish Republic, the Netherlands and the Canadian province of Quebec all have moratoria on the further use of eVoting.

The Open Rights Group is a campaigning organisation aiming to raise awareness of digital rights and civil liberties issues. It argues that "*eVoting is a 'black box system', where mechanisms for recording and tabulating the vote are hidden from the voter. This makes public scrutiny impossible, and leaves statutory elections open to error and fraud.*"⁸

Evidence indicates that electronic voting does not increase voter turnout, but proponents of eVoting point to the benefits that it can offer, such as making voting easier and more accessible to many disadvantaged groups in society such as the elderly, disabled, or home-bound. Most critics think that the idea of eVoting should be dropped altogether. Others favour further investigation, arguing that the demand for eVoting is likely to persist as an increasing number of other services become remotely available.

In October 2008, the Minister for Justice told Parliament that the government "*had no plans to trial e-voting in the 2009 European or local elections*". He said the way forward might be informed by "*the possible further testing of e-voting solutions in non-statutory elections*".⁹

Box 3. Examples of Web2.0 eDemocracy

TheyWorkForYou (www.theyworkforyou.com)

Since 2004, this MySociety website has provided a searchable, annotatable version of what is said in Parliament to over 100,000 visitors a month.⁴ It aggregates content from the official Hansard record, and other publicly available data. The site aims to provide that information in a clear and concise way that is specific and relevant to the user. It also provides information on a range of different measures of activities by MPs, such as parliamentary appearances and voting patterns.

10 Downing St. (www.youtube.com/user/downingst)

Since April 2007, Number 10 has had its own YouTube channel which has over 300 videos, half a million channel views and over 6000 subscribers. A regular initiative has been launched, called 'Ask the PM', where members of the public can upload questions for the Prime Minister, who will respond to those that are voted most popular by the YouTube community. The channel also contains hyperlinks to the 10 Downing St webpage and the latest news from Number 10, as well as the new "Number 10 TV" which will feature exclusive video coverage of the prime minister's speeches and media appearances.

eDemocracy in Parliament

The first report by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons in 2004 made several recommendations which triggered changes in the way Parliament uses ICT to interact with the public.¹⁰

- Upgrading Parliament's website (www.parliament.uk). Since the report's publication the website has undergone major changes and now contains information on the structure and history of Parliament, on members and staff of both Houses, business and news, and publications and records. It is now visited by 280,000 people a month.
- Greater use of online consultations and public petitions. Following on from the Committee's report, a House of Commons Procedure Committee inquiry in 2007 recommended introduction of an ePetitioning system to the House of Commons. Much of the detail, such as oversight mechanisms and costs, is still to be decided. The government has endorsed the basic proposal and indicated that further parliamentary debate will take place. Note that e-petitions programmes for the Scottish and Welsh assemblies were launched in 1999 and 2008 respectively.
- The report also recommended that the possibilities offered by digital broadcasting of Parliament be kept under review. The Group on Information for the Public¹¹ is moving forward with various projects such as parliamentlive.tv (which carries live and archived coverage of all public proceedings) and Parliament's own YouTube channel. Video from Parliament is currently prohibited from being unofficially posted on YouTube and other video streaming websites,¹² but negotiations are underway to address this.¹³

Factors Affecting Uptake of eDemocracy

Technological Challenges

Privacy and Personal Data

eDemocracy initiatives can involve the submission, transmission, or storage of personal data. To build and maintain confidence, this must be done in a secure manner. This is particularly an issue when anonymity needs to be preserved. For example, eVoting systems need to be able to link any given vote to a specific person to prevent fraud. Operating in such an auditable and transparent manner, although necessary, conflicts with the need to preserve voters' privacy and anonymity. Privacy is also mentioned in debate over other forms of eDemocracy: some academic papers highlight the potential for privacy to become an issue for eDemocracy initiatives based around social networking websites.¹⁴

Standardisation of Information

Information published in non-standard formats can hinder eDemocracy initiatives. For example, the website TheyWorkForYou.com (Box 3) does not yet cover the work of parliamentary committees because they do not use a standard format to publish their information, which makes it very difficult to process.¹⁵

User-centric Design

This term refers to websites (or other products) whose design is centred on the needs and behaviour patterns of

their users. This covers not just the quality and relevance of a site's content but also how accessible and easy it is to use. Proponents argue that this ethos is behind the success of many eDemocracy initiatives, and that it is one reason why websites such as YouTube and Facebook are visited more often than many official websites.

*Open Source Software (OSS)*¹⁶

This is a software development methodology where a program's source code is made available for modification as users, and other developers, see fit. Through this transparency of process, OSS can provide "*better quality, higher reliability, more flexibility and a lower cost.*"¹⁷

The software engines behind 10 Downing Street's ePetitions site, PublicWhip.org and TheyWorkForYou.com are all OSS and freely available for use by others. This keeps costs down by avoiding 're-inventing the wheel', and allows developers to learn from previous experiences.

The Data 'Mashup'

There is widespread interest in the concept of the data 'mashup', a web application that takes data from multiple sources, and combines them into a single integrated tool such as theyworkforyou.com (Box 3). This aggregates content from the official Hansard records and presents it to a user in a new format. The Cabinet Office Minister for Transformational Government has advocated the use of mashups by all departments.

Social Challenges: the Demographics of eDemocracy

There is debate over whether eDemocracy initiatives risk alienating those who lack either physical access to ICT or the skills to use them. For example, internet usage tends to be dominated by the young, educated, wealthy and able-bodied.¹⁸ Only 36% of disabled people use the internet as opposed to some 77% of those who are non-disabled.¹⁸ Also, although internet use has increased across nearly every income and age bracket in the last 2 years, uptake is levelling off and still only 66% of the population have internet access.¹⁸

Some say this may prevent eDemocracy becoming a useful tool for the whole of society. However others say that even without universal access, there are benefits to society as a whole. For example, the Director of the Oxford Internet Institute argues that one of the key purposes of eDemocracy is to increase accountability, which does not require participation from the whole of society. Providing people with the technology and skills required to participate in eDemocracy will not increase their engagement automatically. Although young people are among the most technologically literate, they are also amongst the least engaged in politics. Tackling this disengagement is often considered more pressing than increasing technological access.

How Effective is eDemocracy?

Evaluation

It is widely argued that more rigorous post-project evaluation is needed for eDemocracy initiatives, so that their impacts can be better understood. One example is

the 10 Downing Street ePetitions initiative. ePetition signatories are identified via their email address, of which they may have many. This can make it hard to judge the true significance of an ePetition as the number of distinct participants is unknown. Also, no data are being collected on the demographics and backgrounds of the ePetition signatories on the Downing Street website, which some argue makes it difficult to learn from the initiative.

Meeting Expectations of Participants

Proponents of eDemocracy say well-designed initiatives can be used to re-engage and interest disenfranchised groups. However there is a risk that even if citizens engage in an initiative, they may be disillusioned if the outcome does not match their expectations. For example, with the 10 Downing Street petition model there is no onus to pursue any particular petition topic further. The director of the eDemocracy programme at the Hansard Society argues that *"this could lead to citizens becoming disillusioned because petitions are not taken further, possibly further detaching themselves from the political process."* One of the main recommendations of the proposed House of Commons petitions system is that some petitions would be chosen for select committee scrutiny or debate in Parliament.

Box 4. Shoreditch TV

Trialled by around 900 users, ShoreditchTV was a Shoreditch Trust funded pilot project to provide interactive content through an IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) setup. The main goal of the project was to investigate new ways to deliver services while helping to build community capacity skills. It was implemented by Digital Bridge (as part of Twofour, the company responsible for parliamentlive.tv and the EU equivalent EuroparTV).

The project offered a 'Community Safety Channel' which gave residents the chance to monitor local CCTV cameras, view a 'usual suspects' ASBO line-up, and receive community safety alerts. Other channels offered the opportunity to report crimes such as dumping, graffiti, and abandoned cars. When surveyed, some 70% of users claimed to have reported incidents while only 8% said they would have normally reported them via other means.

The Future of eDemocracy

eDemocracy is still evolving. Almost all the UK population have mobile phones, 66% have internet access and 98.5% of the UK will receive digital TV services by 2012.¹⁹ The line that divides the functions of these platforms is becoming increasingly blurred. This technological convergence will provide new opportunities for delivering eDemocracy in the coming years.

There is a wide range of views over what eDemocracy is and where its future lies. At its simplest level, it can be seen as a tool to bring democracy and political processes in line with technological developments. Beyond that, it could be seen as a way to strengthen existing political processes, by increasing interaction between citizen and the government. The Institute for Public Policy Research says that eDemocracy is about *"encouraging people to interact on a neighbourhood level to solve their*

problems" (see Box 4). Wherever its future lies, it is widely agreed that eDemocracy should be used to complement other methods of engagement, rather than to replace them.

Overview

- eDemocracy can be described as the use of new ICT to increase and enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes.
- However, even if people have access to the technology and the skills needed to participate in eDemocracy, they will not automatically engage in it. Tackling disengagement is often considered more pressing than increasing technological access.
- More rigorous evaluation is needed for eDemocracy initiatives, so that their impacts can be fully understood. In some cases, identification of participants is necessary to understand the significance of results, but this may raise privacy issues.

Endnotes

- 1 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2007-08, *e-Petitions*, HC 136
- 2 For further information see www.democracyforum.org.uk
- 3 TellParliament.net Evaluation Report, Hansard Society, October 2006
- 4 Nielsen Online data (May 2008)
- 5 *The Power of Information: An Independent Review*, Ed Mayo and Tom Steinberg, June 2007
- 6 *Transformational Government, Enabled by Technology*, CM6683, November 2005
- 7 *Key Issues and Conclusions – May 2007 Electoral Pilot Schemes*, Electoral Commission, August 2007
- 8 *May 2007 Election Report*, Open Rights Group, June 2007
- 9 HC Deb, 23 October 2008, col 559W
- 10 Modernisation Committee, First Report of Session 2003-04, *Modernisation of the House of Commons*
- 11 The Group on Information for the Public (GIP), made up of officials from both Houses of Parliament, is responsible for planning, developing, reviewing and coordinating the provision of information to the public.
- 12 Early Day Motion 159, *Youtube and social responsibility*, 8th November 2007.
- 13 *Engaging the Public: Business Plan 2007-08*, Group on Information for the Public (GIP), May 2007
- 14 David Wills and Stuart Reeves, "Facebook as a political weapon: explicit and implicit information in social networks", In *proceedings of Towards a Social Science of Web 2.0*, September 2007
- 15 *Minutes of Evidence*, Public Administration, 8th March 2007
- 16 *Open Source Software*, POSTnote 242, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, June 2005
- 17 The Open Source Initiative: <http://www.opensource.org>
- 18 *The Internet in Britain 2007*, Oxford Internet Institute, 2007
- 19 *Analogue to Digital TV Switchover*, POSTnote 264, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, June 2006

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