Written evidence from Doteveryone – RIS0021

Summary

Changes in approach to the collection and use of evidence, and collaboration with the public around the design of inquiries, can improve the output and efficacy of committee inquiries. Early adopters are employing sophisticated and multi-dimensional platforms in an effort to improve dialogue between government and the public in a way that is of relevance to the work of Parliamentary Committees in the UK.

- Engagement with the public could be improved if people are able to have more influence on the Committees’ agendas. Agendas can be ‘living’ and develop iteratively, allowing questions to be reframed and under-represented groups proactively targeted.
- Two particularly relevant examples are the Brazilian portal “eDemocracia”, and French platform “Parlement et Citoyens”.

Creating Public Forums

- Submitted evidence can be used to enhance engagement if it is communicated in a way that surfaces key information and allows people to reflect on and respond publicly to the content.
- Using social media to publicise, share and discuss submissions is a simple initial step toward developing a national conversation.
- The process of submission and debate could be improved with an online platform that allows access to a consolidated and easily navigable array of the content previously submitted.

Committee effectiveness: Developing institutional memory

- There is potential for AI to identify and analyse specific portions of content within evidence documents, sort them into more narrow-focussed, inquiry-relevant topical categories and perform semantic analysis with regard to the writer’s intent and sentiment.
- The construction of a centralised database of committee work and previous inquiry evidence submitted, accessible to committees across both Houses, would improve knowledge transfer. Via effective sharing mechanisms, a committee could begin its work with the relevant knowledge of previous committees already at its disposal.

Social Media

- Live tweet oral evidence discussion to prompt replies and retweets, and foster conversation via Twitter.
• Use social media as a tool for identifying communities of interest, and guide people towards more in-depth engagement and towards living agenda engagement.
Introduction

1. Doteveryone is a think tank which champions responsible technology for the good of everyone in society. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the House of Lords Liaison Committee review of investigative and scrutiny committees and endorse the remit of the review in helping align the work of the Lords Committees with a changing political and public environment. It is essential that the committees system acknowledges and responds to the role of digital technologies in today’s society and that this review take advantage of the opportunities these technologies present.

2. There is a precursor to any effective adoption of digital means - digital understanding. As our founder, Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho previously moved in the House - parliamentarians, “must ask [themselves] whether [they] have the digital understanding to provide the leadership needed in this time of technological change”, and stressed how vital it is to “absorb and engage with the realities of how digital technologies work”. We urge the committees to lead in this field.

3. Doteveryone’s 2016 Digital MPs project partnered four cross-party MPs with leaders from the digital sector to introduce new digital methods for citizen engagement and improve the effectiveness of the MP’s Parliamentary work. From software for tracking and managing caseload and streamlining work processes, to social media for increasing engagement with constituents, the programme taught MPs how digital technology can allow them and their staff to work more efficiently, and be used to foster a better mutual understanding between them and their constituents (such as through the use of live broadcast tools to interact with constituents).

4. Following this work, the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) approached Doteveryone to review the effectiveness of the current parliamentary committee system in regard to information capture, knowledge transfer and expert and public engagement. This review will also inform the scoping of a digital prototype for use by the European Statutory Instruments Committee to help the Committee address the challenges of scrutinising the statutory instruments arising from the European Repeal Bill, and a report will be published in May 2018. This work is informed by consultations with Committee Clerks and Chairs, civil servants, civil society organisations, journalists and Members of both Houses, and our learnings are relevant to the themes of public engagement and committee effectiveness in this inquiry. This submission distills the key findings from this report and our previous work in building digital understanding and skills in parliament.
5. Changes in approach to the collection and use of evidence, and collaboration with the public around the design of committee inquiries, can improve the efficacy and outputs of committees by tapping into the value of collective intelligence and citizen participation. With this submission, as with our upcoming work with the House of Commons (to examine how best to implement digital ways of working to improve the efficacy of the EU Statutory Instruments Committee), and our previous work to mentor digital MPs, we maintain our thinking that digital is not something that organisations do but something they are. To explicate - to digitalise isn’t merely to adopt particular digital instruments for communication or engagement. These instruments are means, and the increases in efficiency in which they result are the outcome of digitalisation as a change in the thinking and values that underlie how an organisation behaves - the kind of digital values that make organisations responsive, open and efficient.
Engagement with the public: Encouraging a national conversation

Lowering Barriers to participation

6. Efforts are already being made to lower the barriers to participating in consultations. The House of Commons Web and Publications Unit has trialled new digital ways of running external consultations such as Web Forums. But there are early adopters worldwide who are employing sophisticated and multi-dimensional platforms in an effort to improve dialogue between government and the public that are of relevance to the work of Parliamentary Committees in the UK.

7. Public communities of interest vary depending on the subject and remit of the committee or inquiry. When selecting an appropriate public engagement tool, consideration should be given as to how best to encourage these specific stakeholder groups to contribute.

8. Many experts submit evidence, but involvement is open to individual members of the public too, and as those with lived experience of whatever evolving social issue is of concern to the committee, they can offer perspective of great value. Individual, concerned members of the public can commit less time and resources than organisations but their input is valuable, so the aim may be only to understand their surface-level views, have them support a topic for scrutiny during an inquiry or make a short proposal for a policy solution. There are existing tools designed for both quick and in-depth citizen engagement, a selection are covered in the section ‘Living Agendas’ below.

9. The appropriate tool may often not be digital, and part of good digital leadership is recognising when this is the case. In our ongoing work on public engagement (around complex internet issues) we are testing various engagement methodologies to understand the most effective tools for exploring public opinion around modern technology. Would we do better by using modern methods and modern tech to engage around modern technologies? In addition to utilising social media (paragraphs 22-24), we recommend working with the groups who have pre-existing networks and are working to protect the section of the public you wish to engage.

Living Agendas

10. Inquiries are often necessarily framed by questions that are narrow in scope. Whilst many invite participants to submit any other relevant information that is broadly relevant to the terms of the Inquiry, engagement with the public could be improved if they are able to have more influence on the agenda of committees. In this way a Committee’s agenda can be ‘living’ and develop iteratively, whereby questions are
reframed and under-represented groups are proactively targeted in light of gaps identified following the initial engagement.

11. As part of our ongoing work on public engagement around the Internet and associated moral dilemmas, we have conducted research into existing digital tools for public engagement. Two examples that we think are particularly relevant in this context are the Brazilian portal “eDemocracia”, and French platform “Parlement et Citoyens”.

12. The eDemocracia portal, which has been used by the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, has been designed to “broaden social participation in the legislative process and bring citizens and their representatives closer together through digital interaction”. The Audiencias Interativas function enables audiences to live-stream hearings (similar to Lords oral evidence sessions) and participate by submitting questions to be asked live during the session. Online participants are also able to vote for questions submitted by others with the most voted for questions forwarded to the committee to be put to the witnesses. This platform also includes Wikilegis, via which citizens can review draft legal documentation and contribute proposals for redrafting the articles and paragraphs. Citizens can vote in support of or objection to proposals, provide comments, propose amendments and motion for a resolution with respect to any article in the draft law. In 2016, a draft bill for the protection of personal data drew 452 crowdsourced proposals for amendments.

13. The Parlement et Citoyens platform used the French Parliament allows Citizens to participate in lawmaking prior to Bills being laid by contributing arguments and proposals about policy issues. The process typically begins with an explanatory video in which an MP outlines a Bill or policy proposal. Citizens are then able to vote on the actions proposed, contribute to forum discussions on the proposal, add relevant resources for other users, make counter-proposals and also vote on other participant’s contributions. The consultation closes and the various contributions for and against a proposition are synthesised and displayed in a clear array. The relevant MP and public participants (who have been randomly selected or chosen by vote) then participate in a live online debate, during which the MP will explicitly respond to the comments/proposals that have generated the most engagement in earlier phases of the consultation. To conclude the process the MP submits a publicly-accessible video in which they present the relevant final proposal or Bill submitted to the National Assembly or the Senate, explaining their decisions. A recent consultation on data policy attracted 456 participants, who made 569 contributions and 2363 votes.

Creating public forums
14. The @UKHouseofLords Twitter account is relatively active. There are simple ways the platform could be used to increase the volume of and engagement with submitted evidence. Tweeting when evidence is submitted by one organisation, would attract the attention of others in same field and encourage them to submit too. Publishing submissions via social media and allowing them to be shared and discussed is a simple initial step toward encouraging submission and developing a national conversation.

15. The evidence received can be used to enhance public and expert engagement if it is communicated in a way that surfaces the key information and allows people to reflect on and respond publicly to the content. At present, submitted evidence can be accessed, but responding to the points made is difficult - it is not currently possible to gauge the key themes of the issue. To encourage this dialogue it would be useful for the public, those drafting submissions and Committee Staff to be able to see the landscape of evidence submitted on an open and accessible online workspace.

16. The process of submission and debate could be improved by establishing a forum that allows those seeking to engage with the submitted evidence to access a consolidated and easily navigable array of the content previously submitted. Allowing the public and expert contributors to express support, opposition, and provide supplementary evidence to existing submissions would also improve engagement.

**Committee effectiveness: Developing institutional memory**

17. Digital tools have the potential to significantly streamline the evidence review process. Software such as *Nvivo* is currently used by some Committees to filter written evidence based on key themes. But use of this software is also beneficial as a primer for future uptake of more technologically advanced solutions like learning algorithms designed for text analysis. Application of this kind of solution might not be immediately viable because of factors like uptake fatigue, but the technology can be a means to greater increases in efficiency within the medium term future.

18. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used to increase the efficiency of analysing evidence submissions through topic modelling, automated text classification and sentiment analysis. Machine learning algorithms can classify raw text data into broad topics very effectively, but there is potential for AI to identify and analyse specific portions of content within the evidence documents, sort them into more narrow-focussed, inquiry-relevant topical categories and perform semantic analysis with regard to the writer’s intent and sentiment. For example, among the those working in this area, one company has proposed artificial intelligence to monitor public communication over social media and analyse for things such as
panic, with the intention that this could form part of a more effective emergency response system. Sentiment analysis and topic modeling have also been used in political contexts, with the methods applied to tweets in order to read economic positivity and negativity with regard to economic concerns during the 2012 Presidential election in the US.

19. The construction of a centralised database of committee work and previous inquiry evidence submitted, accessible to committees across both Houses would improve knowledge transfer, allowing a committee to begin its work with the relevant knowledge of previous committees already at its disposal.

20. Finally, building on the success of the above changes in approach to collecting and using evidence, it would be valuable to publicise how the evidence, and the public’s engagement with it, has changed the activity of the committees and the subsequent next stages. This would provide an incentive to future respondents.

21. Digital tools can also be used in committee publications to increase engagement and efficacy. With software like Adobe Spark or Shorthand Social (used for a recent publication by the Commons Environmental Audit Committee), the impact of public engagement can be conveyed in a report that is seamlessly navigable, visually beautiful and likely to increase public access and sharing.

Social Media

Communicate opportunities for engagement, and identify communities of interest

22. Live tweeting during oral evidence sessions will result in a brief account of the session online on an accessible platform that millions of people use. Quotes or narrative can be tweeted during the sessions, and after the session videos of significant portions could be uploaded too. At present, tweets just go out as reminders that sessions are about to start and who will be giving evidence. In order to reflect on the content of the session, people who don’t have time to watch the stream only have the transcript to turn to. Tweeting significant excerpts from the discussion will prompt replies and retweets, and thus foster conversation via Twitter.

23. Though Twitter is a communicative platform, in this context its value is as a tool for identifying communities of interest, drawing attention to significant excerpts of the discussion and thereby initiating debate around the content, but not as the digital tool for public engagement to democratise committee work. The aim should be to attract those people active in relevant discussion from Twitter to more purpose built platforms. Twitter is not designed for depth of conversation, this is why the platform
features little in our recommendations around fostering public engagement. Platforms of a similar kind to those mentioned under ‘Living Agendas’ are built to make access inclusive and navigation easy, while accommodating for the citizen contributions that are more in-depth, and reaction can be measured to determine the democratic support that a particular contribution enjoys.

24. The EU Withdrawal Bill video tweeted on February 1st is an example of digital media about a complex process that is clear and accessible. Well-designed digital media offers an alternative way to understand a complex issue or process that doesn’t require time spent wading through documentation. Videos explaining the progression of inquiries along the stages should be tweeted out as they happen, including summaries of each session. Use these videos on social media to present the agendas as ‘living’ and something for which the evolution and final outcome is undetermined and open to influence by the public via digital tools.

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