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Evolving Digital Engagement

From Participation to Partnership

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Introduction

The internet transforms us from passive receivers of goods, services and information to active creators of content. This changes the focus and balance of power in relationships. It causes us to reconstruct what we mean by democracy and politics too. Let's put this in context: We don't like politics. We like politicians even less. And it's been getting worse for a long time: Trust in politicians is low and falling:

- Only 30% of Britons believe national politics and government works well;
- Only 30% believe that getting involved in democracy can make a difference to their lives; and
- 27% are satisfied with what Parliament does.¹

These statistics are a clear and damning indictment of trust and the gap between democratic systems and British society. And, give or take, they are repeated around the developed world. When over three quarters of us are dissatisfied with the key tenets of our democratic heritage there is clearly a problem of confidence in democracy itself. Contrast this with the more than 30 million Facebook users in the UK and over 900 million worldwide. If Facebook were a country, it would be third largest in terms of population. More than half of all members (483 million) are active on a daily basis² and Facebook statuses get 2.7 billion 'likes' per day. There are also 465 million twitter accounts, 70 million Wordpress blogs and 39 million Tumblr blogs.³ The direction of travel seems clear.

A Context for Engagement

Despite an internet-driven social and information revolution, our democratic systems have remained entrenched in the traditional agendas of an increasingly alien party-political and ideologically polarised past. Models of democratic engagement 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, appropriate or acceptable. The internet broadens the opportunities for democratic engagement beyond the old-world fortresses of power to encompass increased diversity, wider participation and more deliberative and participatory tools. Where traditional democracy is monolithic, imposed and carefully managed, digital democracy is temporal, emergent and viral.

This should not be taken to mean that technology will overturn the democratic deficit, it won't. There is no 'silver bullet'. Solutions must be developed that transform the underlying processes of governance and communication and which address socio-educational as well as digital disadvantage at both a policy and practice level.

An example of this problem is how we engage within the traditional policy cycle, providing as it does only a small window for public consultation and engagement. Usually this occurs at a point in the process where most of the key decisions have already been made and on the terms of those who control the engagement process (that is, government).

¹ Hansard Society (2011). Audit of Political Engagement 8. London: Hansard Society.

² See: newsroom.fb.com

³ See: thesocialskinny.com/100-more-social-media-statistics-for-2012

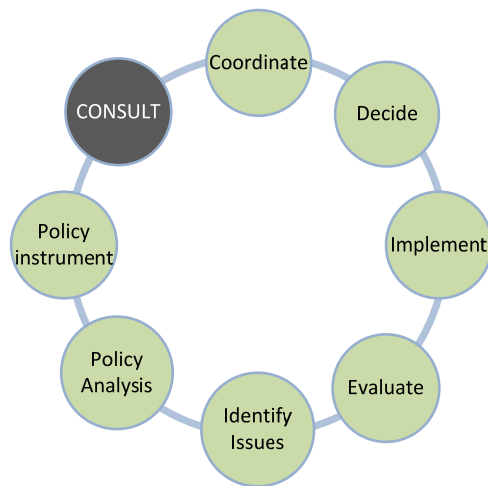


Figure 1: Traditional (outdated) policy cycle

This 'old' model of engagement is based on a restricted public-government interface. There are limited points of contact, information flows are top down and often filtered through the media:

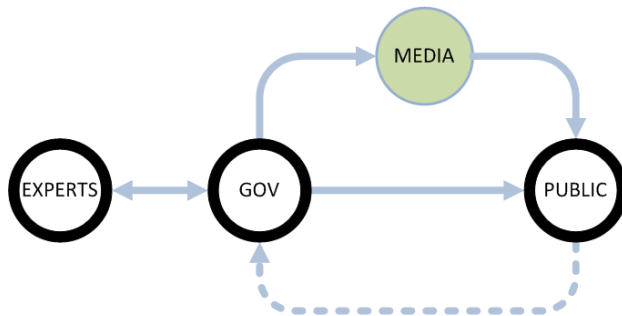


Figure 2: Traditional public-government interfaces and information flows

When we revisit this model and update it to reflect how today's internet-enabled networked society functions, we clearly see that the number of channels, the quantity of information and, ultimately, the power balance between government and citizens has changed significantly:

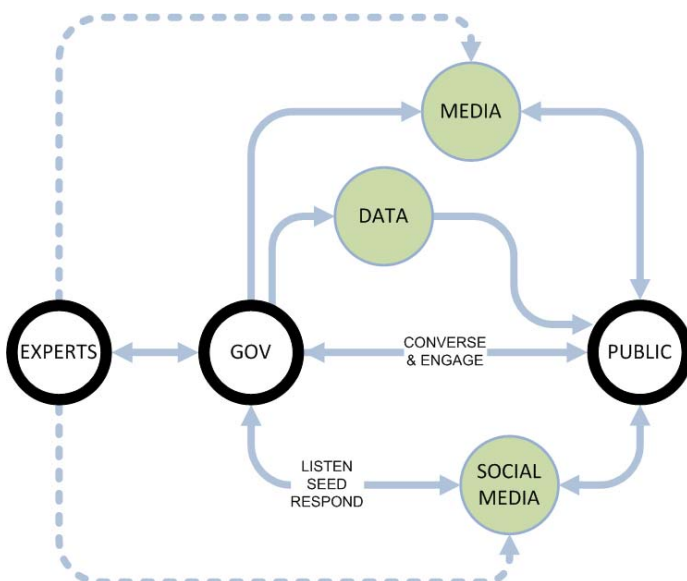


Figure 3: Revised public-government interfaces and information flows

Digital media creates many new opportunities to introduce more open and dynamic processes of engagement. These can better represent the structure and expectations of our modern society. This is not a technological argument, as has already been argued, it requires a fundamental change in the underlying processes of democracy. The traditional policy cycle is strongly sequential and extremely rigid, when looking at this in a digital context, it can be seen as cumbersome and ineffective. Just as newer application development methodologies have evolved to suit the more user-centric online world, policy needs to adapt too. Introducing concepts such as those drawn from agile methodologies, for example, provides a far more iterative and collaborative process. Users, designers and developers must collaborate, or in a (slightly idealised) policy context:

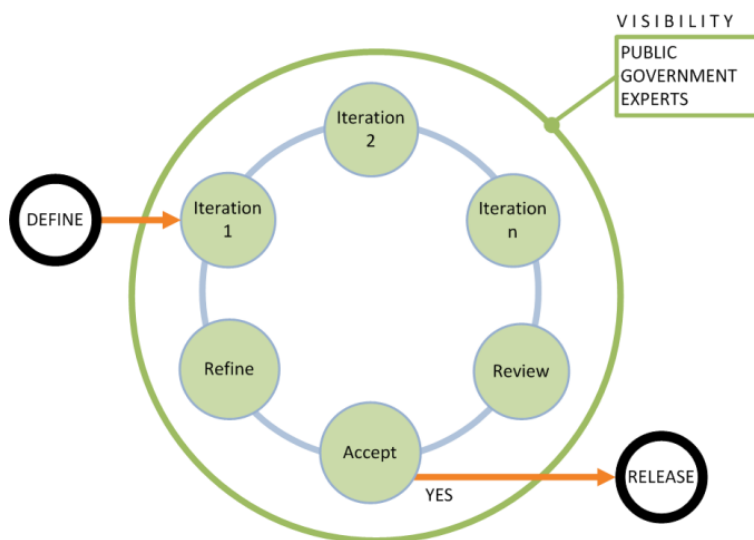


Figure 4: Alternative (agile) policy cycle.

Evolution of Digital Engagement

As our democratic and cultural landscapes have changed, the range of tools now available to governments and citizens has grown significantly over the last fifteen years. Engagement can now occur in many different ways and any number of different stages in the policy process. This offers the potential to engage and retain citizen participation throughout the lifecycle of policy development, service implementation and review. When we look back over the (actually quite long) history of the civic internet, we can see that there are three distinct evolutionary phases, or ages, of digital engagement:

The first age started with discussion boards. Mostly these were community based and led, governments rarely if ever got directly involved. They were useful for co-ordinating and sharing, for raising public consciousness around an issue but little else. Government agencies at this time rarely undertook any direct digital engagement and the internet was limited to publishing documents (often as large and inaccessible PDFs).

This early model of digital democracy moved into government-owned and managed platforms for engagement and consultations. These sites were usually bespoke and localised and include such things as e-Petitions. The rise in this model of digital democracy parallels the rise in digital government (or e-government). However, where the digitisation of transactional services offers clear economic benefits and process improvements, the democratic benefits are less obvious and often more intangible, leading to a more piecemeal and inconsistent uptake.

The second age of digital democracy has been overtaken and enhanced by two key factors. First is the advent of social media and second is the increasing trend towards the publication of open data repositories. In this model, citizens, government and third party agents can create 'mash-ups' and dynamic digital resources for communities to become more active citizens, linking these directly to government processes. Open data has the benefit of increasing the transparency of government, providing better opportunities for public scrutiny of government transactions and outcomes. However, it is only effective if civic actors have the skills to analyse and manage the data. Data for data's sake is not a panacea. Both open data and engagement through social media suffer from the primary restriction of earlier phases of digital engagement, namely ownership and control.

Defining Engagement Opportunities

As discussed above, the variety and quantity of digital tools has blossomed, offering many new ways to bring together government and the public for the purposes of information, engagement and participation. Some are more effective than others and will be appropriate for different stages of the policy or legislative cycle and unhelpful for others. It is, therefore, important that, before selecting a tool, the purpose and nature of the engagement process is clearly understood. To assist with this, it is possible to group digital engagement tools into four broad categories:

Discover	Research and information gathering, using available digital and off-line sources to frame an issue and to scope problem statements.
Discuss	Using a continuum of on- and off-line tools, source input to the problem statement and frame responses, actions and alternatives. This phase has three critical sub-components; Listen, Ask, Respond. This phase ranges from the passive to the active, including monitoring and sentiment analysis of social media as well as running interactive dialogues.
Decide	Participatory tools allow stakeholders to make open, transparent decisions based on the evidence available. This can include tools for polling through to deliberate fora.
Deliver	Providing open data and the co-creation of relevant and useful interfaces into this data, new applications, campaigns and service design and delivery that result from the engagement cycle. Tools, data and applications created or exposed during this phase feedback into future discovery cycles.

The UK-based 'Digital Engagement Cookbook'⁴ identifies 67 different sub-categories of digital engagement tool, which can be mapped into the categories above (this website uses slightly different descriptors but they are inherently similar):

⁴ See: www.digitalengagement.org

Discover	Discuss	Decide	Deliver
Augmented Reality	Blogging	Comparators	Commodity Exchange
Content Hosting	Collaborative Editing	Crowdfunding	Data Harvesting
Debate or argument visualisation	Digital back channel	Direct Democracy	eActivism
Digital Dashboards	eClinics	Electronic Citizen Jury	Effort Distributors
Electronic Poll	Electronic Mailing List	eMarketplace	End user database
Enhanced Translucence	Instant Messaging	ePanels	File Sharing
eSatisfaction	Media Streaming	eParticipatory Budgeting	Group Discounting
Experience Sharing	Networking by place	ePetitions	Informed Investment Networks
Idea Sourcing	Online Chat	Interactive Surface	Interactive Voice Response (IVR)
Online Memo	Online Forums	Interactive TV	Live Co-Creation
Online Quizzes	Social Networking	Online Consultation	Online Pledges
Opinion Sourcing	Status Updates	Online Prediction Markets	Positive Influence
Rating systems	Video Views	Online Survey	Proximity Networking
Resource Sharing	Virtual Meetings	Open Contest	Social Alerting
Serious Games	Webinar	Ranking	Social Reporting
Simulations		Recommendation Systems	Software as a service
Virtual Environments		Scheduling	Time Banking
		Spatially Enhanced Consultation	

It is also important at this stage to consider not simply the tool itself but the implications of using that tool. The selection that you make is going to be further influenced by the cost and the resource implications, as the table below shows⁵:

Tool	Resourcing implications			Inter-activity
	Platform cost	Content production	Response time	
Blog	Low	High	High	Medium
Forum	Low	Medium	High	High
Online chat	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Social Networking	Low	High	Medium	High
Wikis & Structured Iterative Platforms	Low	Medium	Low	Low
e-Petitions & Polls	Medium	Low	Medium	High
Budget/Policy Simulators & Games	Medium	High	Low	High

⁵ Miller, L. and A. Williamson (2008). Digital Dialogues Third Phase Report. London, Hansard Society/ Ministry of Justice.

Benefits of Engagement

The clearest benefits of digital engagement are better policy outcomes and better service design and delivery, through to more engaged and empowered citizens. Research shows many clear benefits to digital engagement when it is well planned and executed. Digital communication deepens engagement with those who are already interested in the issues being addressed and it offers the potential to reach new audiences who might otherwise not contribute. Digital and social media allows both government agencies and civil society to break the stranglehold of the mainstream media. Indeed, the media is increasingly seen to be following and responding to issues that become visible first on social networks. There is a practical value to this for engagement in that it means strategies can be more targeted and direct and that the delivery cost is lowered. Using digital media effectively gives you greater control over the information and communication agenda.

Digital media provide significant opportunities not just to distribute information and to seek responses but also to listen. Listening to social media and informal channels, such as Twitter streams and blogs, allows engagement and communication strategies to be more effectively targeted and provides a deeper understanding of public sentiment. There is an opportunity for two-way learning that did not exist before.

Digital media changes the news cycle dramatically. This can work in your favour if you are focussed and responsive, allowing government to be focussed, topical and responsive. Of course, this can quickly backfire if the engagement strategy is too focussed on 'old-world' assumptions of top-down information delivery.

In summary, the benefits that digital engagement offers include:

- Scalable engagement done in short timeframes
- Strengthening existing relationships
- Reaching new audiences
- Tailored to the situation and audience
- An enabling process for citizens, giving them a greater sense of civic connectedness
- Cost savings, such as having applications created and data analysed by third-parties, better targeting of engagement and more efficient and effective policy outcomes.⁶

Strategies for Effective Engagement

There are numerous key strategies that can lead to a greater probability of success in online engagement. Ensuring that engagement is embedded within the processes and culture of the organisation matters. Engagement does not just happen as an afterthought or on the periphery, it works when it is fully integrated and this includes being open and listening. The biggest risk to organisational deafness is the inherent risk aversion of government agencies and a fear of exposing the organisation to the outside world. In fact, it is important to go beyond listening and become reflexive and responsive to internal and external feedback on the process itself so that it can be constantly refined and improved. A clear part of this is ensuring transparency and feedback. In other words, when you engage.⁷

⁶ However actual unit cost of engagement can be higher because greater resources are required, particularly where the engagement exercise is multi-media or more extensive than traditional approaches.

⁷ Miller, L. and A. Williamson (2008). Digital Dialogues Third Phase Report. London: Hansard Society/ Ministry of Justice.

Be Credible	Ensure the whole team is committed to engagement throughout the policy cycle. Encourage participation from enthusiastic individuals and teams; showcase their work internally to build commitment and awareness.
Be Consistent	Encourage a range of people to get involved in discussions and ensure that you respond promptly to all questions or suggestions, providing feedback and information. Focus on developing good content; do not let the medium become the message.
Be Responsive	Play a role in the discussions taking place, outlining how participants' perspectives are feeding in to government deliberations. Diffuse conflicts and provide signposts to information, steering the discussion to focus on important topics. Allow audiences to use your content creatively, where possible.
Be Integrated	Combine online and offline engagement, making sure that your approach and language suits the needs of the target communities. Decide whether you require large- or small-scale projects to get the best result, and make sure that staff time is properly allocated.
Be Transparent	Explain your position to people where relevant and update stakeholders about how decisions are being made. Be honest about what can be achieved, what is up for discussion and what is 'off topic'.

With the prevalence of social media and networked communities it is important to model the existing behaviour amongst your target audience. You can't force people to engage on your terms, especially when they are distrusting of you and disengaged from the process. Consider ways to incentivise engagement. This can range from being appreciative and responsive of people giving their time and energy and making it clear what is in it for participants through to adopting some principles of gaming theory and gameplay that can provide direct incentives, rewards and even competitions for participants. Be yourself, remain authentic and be honest about your weaknesses and mistakes. People expect a certain voice and gravitas from a government agency, it is part of your brand, but that does not mean you can't be approachable and human! Finally, target your audience proactively. Don't assume they will be interested and come to you. A key value of networks is the ability to create viral messages, leveraging this and the people you do engage with to spread the word and engage further.

Looking Ahead

Digital engagement works when there are clear objectives, careful planning, appropriate marketing and reflexive strategies for responding, managing and evaluating. Policy benefits, government departments see enhanced profiles and the public report greater trust in the political process and better understanding of government.

Thinking ahead, there is the potential to create new digital public commons which are co-managed by communities and governments as partnership models for information, engagement and discussion.

The key to this new phase of engagement platforms is in shared ownership and an effective orbit strategy. This refers to the need to make government (and democracy) 'sticky', to give people a reason to connect and stay connected. This can range from creating community to motivational tools such as competitions and league tables. The value of social media lies in this very approach but it's not original. This is what successful commercial brands have long been out to achieve: Nike, McDonalds, Amazon to name but three all build their offering

around a direct relationship with you and one that you, the consumer aspire to maintain. Through this they build community and trust.

This is of course easy for a desirable consumer brand, it is a lot harder for government, particularly at a time when trust in public services and politicians remains low. The challenge therefore is to reverse this decline in interest and trust by using the strategies that clearly work elsewhere. Trust, for example, is about who you know: your level of trust is in large part determined by the recommendations of those in your social network (consider the power of ranking systems such as those at the core of eBay, Amazon and LastMinute.com).

Add to this landscape the development of cloud-based services, which are ideally suited for hosting shareable applications and data repositories, the increased interest in 'smart' cities and regions and the growth of gamification in social media spaces and we can see that the engagement landscape will continue to evolve.

Conclusion

Digital media can and does facilitate and mediate the creation of digital public spheres. E-participation is a formal relationship between citizens and government but social media enhances this by creating new, informal relationships amongst and between citizens and between citizens and government. Done well, this creates the space for us to 'do with' government. But this requires new thinking and new ways of engaging. Otherwise the old-world 'doing to' mind set will persist within government and any green shoots of nascent democratic renewal will wither. Effective engagement is not simple. Social media creates opportunities for new democratic as well as social spaces but trust must be earned through our actions, not assumed or pre-ordained through traditional hegemonies.

Social media and the digital opportunities now in front of us can support transformation into a more citizen-centric, two-way society. But only if civil society is an active participant. We all need to be resourced to become active partners in our own future. Where government was a high-walled garden, the internet has built itself around people and their networks. Top down is not an effective model for effective engagement, nor is it an effective model for building trust.

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