



Library Note

Digital Democracy: Political Participation and Citizen Engagement through the Internet

This Library Note provides an overview of developments around citizens' political engagement and participation through the internet. It has been written in light of the 2015 *Open Up* report by the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, which set five key targets for the House of Commons and made a number of recommendations to the administration and MPs in how to meet them. Reference to the report and its recommendations are referred to within.

The Note provides an overview of recent developments in digital democracy based on the latest academic research. It clarifies how, instead of becoming disengaged, some people are shifting from formal to more informal forms of political participation. It also sets out how the internet affects the interaction between citizens and parliamentarians, and how Select Committee e-consultations and e-petitions have been used in the past. The Note then describes developments in online citizen media, online activism, delegative voting, and the use of the internet for the data-mining of political opinions and trends from Twitter and other forms of online communication.

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I. Introduction

Over the last 20 years the internet has changed society, and it has not left the political landscape untouched either.¹ Changes in communication technology have historically had a great impact. As Haverman and Rider have argued, the printing press helped seed the Reformation and the French Revolution, while the postal system facilitated the growth of trade unions and other membership-based organisations.² Though it remains to be seen whether the internet will make this much of a difference, some effects have been observed. While traditional forms of political participation have trended downwards, the internet has opened new avenues for citizen engagement. Citizens have been using these political opportunities; from sending emails to MPs, to using the internet to initiate social movements, such as the Occupy Movement. In this Library Note some of these opportunities and forms of interaction and engagement will be sketched out and explained. They are: online interactions with MPs and Members of the House of Lords, consultations by Select Committees, e-petitions, citizen media, online activism, deliberative and delegative voting experiments, and the data-mining of online political communication.

There are a few subjects that this Library Note will not discuss. By delineating digital democracy as a term, these will be made clear. Digital democracy is separate from e-government, which is the exercise of government functions and service provision through digital technology. It is also different from e-voting, in this Note at least, as electronic voting in general elections, or in Parliament, will not be discussed. Digital democracy is the enhancement of the democratic and legislative processes, through information technology. Other elements of digital democracy which will not be discussed here are basic information provision and public archiving, because much progress has already been made towards these by Parliament and bodies such as the Hansard Society. The focus of this Note is the internet's effects on citizen engagement and participation, through systems such as e-petitions, e-consultations, e-debates, and e-engagement.³

Key Documents

Several documents provide background information on the recent history of digital democracy in the UK.

Lord Adonis and Lord Freeman published papers for a special issue on digital democracy of the think tank Demos, in 1994 and 1995, in which they proposed more citizen involvement (more information on such thinking in the 1990s can be found in section 8).⁴ Ian Taylor, who was then the Minister for Science and Technology, wrote a pamphlet called *Net-Working*, which was published in May 1996 by the Conservative Political Centre. In it, government was urged to be more open and efficient, and provide more information to citizens.⁵

The Hansard Society published a report in 2002, *Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance*, and published a report in 2008 which was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice: *Digital Dialogues: Third Phase Report*. These reports

¹ Manuel Castells, '[The Impact of the Internet on Society: A Global Perspective](#)', Open Mind, accessed 25 June 2015; Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, 2008.

² H A Haverman and C I Rider, '[Place and Space: The Evolving Impact of Geography and Technological Advances on Organizational Founding](#)', 2011.

³ Cristina Leston-Bandeira, *Parliaments in the Digital Age*, 2008.

⁴ Andrew Adonis, *Lean Democracy*, 1994; Roger Freeman, *Democracy in the Digital Age*, 1997.

⁵ Ian Taylor, *Net-Working*, Conservative Political Centre, 1996.

focused on a number of e-consultations which had been carried out between 1998 and 2008 by the UK government.⁶

A note published by the House of Commons Library provides background information on e-petitions, focusing on the Number 10 petition website.⁷ Also relevant are the report published in 2008 by the House of Commons Procedure Committee, *E-Petitions*, and the report published in 2009 by the House of Commons Reform Committee, *Rebuilding the House*, in the latter of which the e-petitions site was first proposed.⁸ The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) published a note in 2009 on *E-democracy*, which details UK IT initiatives to enhance engagement. A POST note published in 2015 on *Trends in Political Participation* looks at ways in which citizens engage through new media.⁹

Most recently *Open Up!*, the report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, was published in 2015.¹⁰ Among its recommendations were permitting the use of mobile devices in the chambers; proposing that secure electronic voting should be made available for the 2020 election; and proposing a virtual 'Open Chamber', consisting of public discussion fora, to allow citizens to have a say in Commons debates.

2. Disengagement of Voters and Citizens

Voter turnout and other forms of formal political participation have shown a downwards trend over the last few decades. Turnout at the general election went down from 83.9 percent in 1950 to 59 percent in 2001, and was at 66.1 percent in 2015.¹¹ It declined faster among young people and ethnic minorities.¹² Party membership shows an even steeper decline. For the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats combined, it was 1 percent of the electorate in 2015, compared to 3.8 percent in 1983.¹³ In 2003, 72 percent of the British public felt disconnected from their MP.¹⁴

At the same time fewer people felt that voting was a duty. The number of people that felt they had a duty to vote went down from 76 percent in 1987 to 57 percent in 2014.¹⁵ Even though trust and turnout are said to have gone down, people do not believe that the democratic system worked any better in the past (ten years ago), than it does now.¹⁶ At the same time surveys suggest that rather than a perceived worsening of government performance,

⁶ Stephen Coleman, *Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance*, Hansard Society, 2002; Laura Miller, *Digital Dialogues: Third Phase Report*, Hansard Society, 2008; Stephen Coleman, 'Connecting Parliament to the Public via the Internet', *Information, Communication & Society*, March 2004.

⁷ House of Commons Library, *e-Petitions*, 16 February 2015, SN/PC/06450; [UK Government and Parliament Petitions website](#).

⁸ House of Commons Procedure Committee, *e-Petitions*, 6 April 2008, HC 136 of session 2007–08; House of Commons Reform Committee, *Rebuilding the House*, 24 November 2009, HC 1117 of session 2008–09.

⁹ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *E-democracy*, January 2009, PN 321; Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Trends in Political Participation*, June 2015, PN 498.

¹⁰ House of Commons Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, *Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy*, 26 January 2015.

¹¹ House of Commons Library, *Elections: Turnout*, 3 July 2013, SN/SG 1467; House of Commons Library, *General Election 2015*, 18 May 2015, CBP7186.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ House of Commons Library, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, SN/SG/5125, 30 January 2015

¹⁴ Stephen Coleman, 'The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in an Age of Networks', *Political Communication*, 2005, vol 22.

¹⁵ NatCen Social Research, *British Social Attitudes Survey 2014*, 2014; Stephen Coleman, 'The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in an Age of Networks', *Political Communication*, 2005, vol 22.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

expectations may have increased, and/or trust has decreased. Only 17 percent today trust government, as opposed to 38 percent in 1986.¹⁷

Commentators have suggested that this situation of reduced engagement and trust has been exacerbated by political controversies in the news, a generally reduced respect for elites, the issue of the influence of private donors and lobbyists on political parties, and the professionalisation of political communication (sometimes described as ‘spin’), especially during election campaigns.¹⁸

Others have suggested that another force which may be undermining the legitimacy of national democracies is globalisation, which has introduced a number of border-spanning issues such as global warming, nuclear threats, infectious diseases, and the depletion of limited resources.¹⁹ Then there is the regulation of international trade, and the issue of corporations that are externalising costs (such as pollution or moral hazards to domestic and foreign populations).²⁰ A further factor is the internet, which also permeates borders, even if extensive filtering is increasingly happening.²¹ All these mean that our collective fates are no longer shielded by national borders.

International regulation is increasingly introduced as a means to address this growing need for global collective action. Yet it has been suggested that in institutions providing international governance, such as the WTO, the World Bank, EU, and UN, democratic oversight is often absent, weak, or indirect.²² This lack of democratic legitimacy has been described as the ‘democratic deficit’.²³ Patrizia Nanz and Jens Steffek characterise the democratic deficit as follows:

The increasing capacity of international governance regimes to generate law and regulations binding all citizens has come to conflict with this problem of democratic legitimacy. The idea of democratic legitimacy is that the citizens decide for themselves the content of the laws that organize and regulate their political association. Separating the process of rule-making from politically accountable institutions, global governance is argued to suffer a [...] ‘democratic deficit’.²⁴

At the same time, more people have mobilised themselves around single issues, and have engaged in other, more informal forms of participation. Examples include online activism, boycotting products, or purchasing them for political or ethical reasons (such as Fairtrade), and

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ See for example J G Blumler and Stephen Coleman, *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*, 2001; J G Blumler and M Gurevitch, ‘[The New Media and our Political Communication Discontents: Democratizing Cyberspace](#)’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 2001, vol 4, pp 1–13; R Coleman, ‘Public Life and the Internet: If You Build a Better Website, Will Citizens Become Engaged?’, *New Media & Society*, 2008, vol 10; P Dahlgren, ‘[The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation](#)’, *Political Communication*, 2005, vol 22.

¹⁹ See for example George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent*, 2003; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015.

²⁰ George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent*, 2003.

²¹ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?*, 2003; Economist, ‘[How does China censor the Internet](#)’, accessed 25 June 2015.

²² P M Shane, *Democracy Online*, 2004; C Sparks, ‘The Internet and the Global Public Sphere’, in: W Lance Bennett, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, 2000.

²³ J Bohman, ‘[Expanding Dialogue: The internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy](#)’, *The Sociological Review*, 2004, vol 52; Patrizia Nanz and Jens Steffek, ‘[Global Governance, Participation and the Public Sphere](#)’, *Government and Opposition*, 2004, vol 39, pp 314–15.

²⁴ Patrizia Nanz and Jens Steffek, ‘[Global Governance, Participation and the Public Sphere](#)’, *Government and Opposition*, 2004, p 314.

engaging with online political news in Facebook discussions.²⁵ Though still under debate, there are signs that a shift from formal, to more informal forms of political participation is happening.²⁶

3. MPs, Members of the House of Lords, and Citizen Interaction

The internet is a flexible, interactive medium: it is one-to-one, in that it facilitates communication from individual to individual, just like the telephone, but at the same time it allows for one-to-many broadcasting like TV and newspapers, while facilitating every form of many-to-many communication in-between these two models, such as blog-comments, forums and group-chats.²⁷ The internet, coupled with general purpose computers, is also unique in that, as has been suggested by Marshall McLuhan, it is capable of carrying, or simulating, all earlier media. The web ‘carries’ the press, as the press carried writing, writing carried speech, and speech carried thought. It can do the same for TV, telephone, and written correspondence.²⁸

It is thus no surprise that MPs and Members of the House of Lords have used the internet for countless different purposes. Most parliamentarians now receive email—in addition to letters—from citizens. Over a hundred MPs had Facebook pages and Twitter accounts in 2013.²⁹ Though most parliamentarians still mainly use these to broadcast, rather than to interact with their constituents.³⁰ This tendency to broadcast, rather than interact, is something that many citizens reported being unhappy about. It was one of the core findings of the report by the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy.³¹ A reason for this behaviour has been put forward by Matthew Parris. He has said that interacting with citizens using social media can be dangerous for politicians because in instant online communication with the public the “inbuilt restraints” of earlier forms of communication have been removed.³²

Some MPs and Members of the House of Lords also write blogs. One example is Lords of the Blog, a blog which has been hosted by the Hansard Society since 2008, in which Members of the House of Lords from across the political spectrum discuss “life and work in the House of Lords”.³³ Other social media, such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, are also used in a more official capacity. 10 Downing Street has a YouTube channel, for example. In 2007 it was even possible to pose questions to MPs through this channel.³⁴ The House of Lords and House of Commons have Twitter accounts which are used to announce the issues that are coming up for

²⁵ P Wehling, ‘[From Invited to Uninvited Participation \(and Back?\): Rethinking Civil Society Engagement in Technology Assessment and Development](#)’, *Poiesis & Praxis*, 2012, vol 9, pp 43–60; H Wagenaar, ‘The Agonistic Experience: Informality, Hegemony, and the Prospects for Democratic Governance’, in: S Griggs, A J Norval, H Wagenaar (eds) *Practices of Freedom: Decentred Governance, Conflict and Democratic Participation*, 2014.

²⁶ Iasonas Lamprianou, ‘Contemporary Political Participation Research: A Critical Assessment’, in: Kyriakos N Demetriou, *Democracy in Transition*, 2013, pp 21–42; House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Voter Engagement in the UK](#), 10 November 2014, HC 232 of session 2014–15.

²⁷ Linda Peters, ‘The New Interactive Media: One-to-One, but Who to Whom?’, *Market Intelligence & Planning*, 1998, vol 16.

²⁸ M McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2001.

²⁹ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [E-democracy](#), January 2009, PN 321.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ House of Commons Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy, [Open Up! Report of the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy](#), 26 January 2015, p 15.

³² Matthew Parris, ‘[The Virtual Mob that Got Emily Thornberry is Coming for You, Too](#)’, *Spectator*, 29 November 2014; see also: James Walsh, ‘[A British Politician Lost her Job Over a Tweet: How to Explain it to Someone Outside the UK](#)’, *Guardian*, 21 November 2014.

³³ Hansard Society, ‘[Lords of the Blog](#)’, accessed 19 June 2015.

³⁴ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [E-democracy](#), January 2009, PN 321.

debate.³⁵ The House of Lords runs a '[Lords Digital Chamber](#)', a website which extracts and aggregates the social media activity of Members of the House of Lords, political parties and groups in the Lords. It covers Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and blogs.³⁶

NGOs have also created platforms for interacting with MPs and Members of the House of Lords. Several projects are run by the mySociety charity, which was founded by Tom Steinberg in 2003.³⁷ [TheyWorkForYou.com](#), for example, tracks the speeches, questions and voting record of MPs and Peers, and provides an accessible, searchable version of *Hansard*.³⁸ It also covers the devolved parliaments. Another project run by mySociety is [WhatDoTheyKnow.com](#), which helps citizens file and publish Freedom of Information requests.³⁹ Finally there is [WriteToThem.com](#), which allows citizens to easily find contact details for their MPs and MEPs (and Lords by topic of interest), and to write emails to them.⁴⁰ Another example is the Democracy Club NGO, which provides information on electoral candidates at UK elections, including details of events which candidates are attending, election leaflets, and polling-stations.⁴¹

4. E-Consultations

Several dozen e-consultations have been carried out by the UK government since 1998. A study published by the Hansard Society in 2002 found that early e-consultations were on topics as diverse as reproductive technologies, domestic violence, policing, the Communications Bill, and children's engagement with politics.⁴² This latter project created a forum for school children to express and share their political opinions. A similar site was run for all UK citizens. It was called CitizenSpace, and it was part of the UK Online government portal site. It ran for eight months between 2001 and 2002 and came with the promise that a monthly summary would be sent to the prime minister. In total 35,000 people registered, and posted 40,000 messages.⁴³ It was closed because moderating the contributions, and providing real interactivity to citizens, proved too ambitious at the time.⁴⁴

Another study published by the Hansard Society in 2008 provided 25 case studies of e-consultations; several were consultations by Select Committees, others were by executive branches of government, such as the Department of Work and Pensions, and the Commonwealth Office. The Hansard Society found that e-consultations carried out by government departments and agencies served more to inform than to consult.⁴⁵ The Hansard Society concluded that, for e-consultations it was important that the aims (informing, consulting or enquiring) be clear, and clearly communicated to participants, to prevent false expectations and potential apathy resulting from expectations not being met.⁴⁶ Other important considerations reported in the paper, were embedding the consultation into the decision-

³⁵ [House of Lords Twitter page](#), accessed 23 June 2015; [House of Commons Twitter page](#), accessed 23 June 2015; [10 Downing Street YouTube channel](#), accessed 23 June 2015.

³⁶ Parliament website, '[Lords Digital Chamber](#)', accessed 19 June 2015.

³⁷ [mySociety website](#), accessed 19 June 2015.

³⁸ TheyWorkForYou.com, '[About Us](#)', accessed 19 June 2015;

³⁹ WhatDoTheyKnow.com, '[Introduction to WhatDoTheyKnow](#)', accessed 19 June 2015.

⁴⁰ WriteToThem.com, '[Help](#)', accessed 22 June 2015.

⁴¹ [Democracy Club website](#), accessed 22 June 2015.

⁴² Stephen Coleman, [Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance](#), Hansard Society, 2002, pp 6–15.

⁴³ *ibid*, p 16.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p 17.

⁴⁵ Laura Miller, [Digital Dialogues: Third Phase Report](#), Hansard Society, 2008, p ii.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p 30.

making process, not having it as an after-thought, and the importance of listening to input, and reflection on continuously improving the process.⁴⁷

The Hansard Society found that e-consultations were helpful, in that they brought unexpected perspectives to the table. This mostly happened because they were accessible to a wider range of participants than previous consultations may have been.⁴⁸ Thanks to the transcending of time and place, both those who are busy during office hours, as well as people from remote, rural areas, were included. Some groups were underrepresented, however, such as women (especially in the past when internet access was more gender biased⁴⁹), who only made up 16–25 percent of participants in several consultations, and were close to half in only two consultations.⁵⁰

5. E-Petitions

Petitions have been formally offered to Parliament since the 18th century.⁵¹ The Government's e-petitions site was launched in 2011 as a project of the Prime Minister, initially hosted at the Number 10 website (now under direct.gov.uk).⁵² It was a relative novelty as only the German and Scottish parliaments were providing an e-petitions platform at the time.⁵³ The idea was first raised by the Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons chaired by Tony Wright, MP.⁵⁴ The 2010 Conservative Party manifesto pledged that a Conservative government would introduce an official petitions system to the House of Commons:

People have been shut out of Westminster politics for too long. Having a single vote every four or five years is not good enough—we need to give people real control over how they are governed. So, with a Conservative government, any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a Bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament. And we will introduce a new Public Reading Stage for Bills to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online.⁵⁵

A Public Reading Stage for Bills has not been introduced, although the Speaker's Committee on Digital Democracy has expressed its support for something very similar.⁵⁶ Work on e-petitions did move forward, and in June 2010, Sir George Young, the then Leader of the House of Commons, announced in answer to a parliamentary question that the Coalition Government planned to launch an e-petitions system:

The Government will bring forward new proposals for the public to engage with the House by submitting petitions which will be eligible for debate if they obtain 100,000 signatures, with the petition which attracts the most signatures triggering an opportunity

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p 4.

⁴⁸ Stephen Coleman, [Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance](#), Hansard Society, 2002, p 18.

⁴⁹ *ibid*.

⁵⁰ Oxford Internet Surveys, [Cultures of the Internet: The Internet in Britain: Oxford Internet Survey 2013 Report](#), 2013, p 22.

⁵¹ Lex Heerma van Voss, *Petitions in Social History*, 2001, pp 3–4.

⁵² [UK Government and Parliament Petitions website](#).

⁵³ House of Commons Library, [e-Petitions](#), 16 February 2015, SN/PC/06450, p 8.

⁵⁴ *ibid* pp 1–5.

⁵⁵ Conservative Party, [Conservative Party Manifesto 2010: Invitation to Join the Government of Britain](#), 2010, p 66.

⁵⁶ House of Commons Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, [Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy](#), 2015, p 11.

for a Bill to be presented. [...] The final decision about the appropriate mechanism will rest with the House itself and I hope to be able to bring forward proposals soon.⁵⁷

Within one year of its introduction, eleven petitions reached a 100,000 signatures, and in that same year the site collected a total of 6.4 million signatures.⁵⁸ By 2013, 21 petitions had “reached the 100,000 signature threshold and that 20 had either been debated or were scheduled for debate”.⁵⁹ On several occasions the site went down due to the great interest causing a volume of web-traffic that was higher than it could handle. Topics of petitions achieving the required 100,000 signatures ranged quite widely; from dropping the Health and Social Care Bill, to making CCTV mandatory for all slaughterhouses, to full disclosure of all government documents relating to the 1989 Hillsborough disaster.⁶⁰

The effectiveness of, and suitability of e-petitions for giving citizens influence in Parliament, remains to be debated.⁶¹ Some have argued that communication about the process has been misleading, as—for example—not many people know that even with 100,000 signatures, petitions still also need support from a Backbench MP, before being debated. According to the Hansard Society, the effect of petitions on policy has been minimal, or at least hard to establish, as well.⁶²

E-petitions can also be created through other platforms. These include [Avaaz](#), [Change.org](#), and [38 Degrees](#).⁶³ Worldwide, these platforms have 100 million registered users, over 10 million of which are British.⁶⁴ Some petitioners may prefer to use these platforms, because they give campaigners access to contact details, allowing them to stay in touch with signatories for follow-up campaigns. In fact a central feature of such third party platforms is that account holders are automatically alerted to similar, and other, petitions that they might want to sign. This, it is argued, may help to create more lasting movements than the Government’s one-off e-petitions site.⁶⁵

6. Social Media as Citizen Media

In order to understand how social media make a difference, it is important to understand the difference between a weak and a strong public sphere. Academics have suggested that a strong public sphere is one in which there is a direct way for citizens to influence policy, while in a weak one citizens lack this capacity (and cynicism about politics dominates).⁶⁶ As Robert Dahl noted, the public sphere provided by the old broadcast media is weak. He identifies five types of participants in politics: those in office, bureaucrats and lobbyists, informed citizens, habitual voters, and finally, non-participants. He argues that broadcast media allow the first two types to

⁵⁷ HC Hansard, 14 June 2010, [cols 270–1W](#).

⁵⁸ House of Commons Library, [e-Petitions](#), 16 February 2015, SN/PC/06450.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Ruth Fox, [What Next for e-Petitions](#), Hansard Society, 2012.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp 7–14.

⁶² *ibid.*, p 7.

⁶³ Avaaz.org, [‘About Us’](#), accessed 23 June 2015; Change.org, [‘About Change.org’](#), accessed 23 June 2015; 38 Degrees, [‘About’](#), accessed 23 June 2015.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Emma Howard, [‘E-petitions can be Very Effective, but Don’t put them in the Hands of Government’](#), *Guardian*, 24 February 2014.

⁶⁶ N Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, 1990, pp 56–80; C Sparks, ‘The Internet and the Global Public Sphere’, in: W L Bennett and R M Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, 2000, pp 75–98.

influence habitual voters, while removing informed citizens from the equation.⁶⁷ Renita Coleman noted something similar: broadcast media are very good at making people aware of issues, and maybe at working through them in televised debates, but not at allowing citizens to take part in debating and choosing resolutions.⁶⁸

Unlike the old media, the internet and social media—which together form what William Dutton has coined the ‘Fifth Estate’—do facilitate interaction among citizens, and allow them to discuss policies and ideas: anything from email lists; forums; Facebook-discussions; Twitter interactions; and blog-posts. Dutton suggests:

[The] term “Fifth Estate” is intended to draw a parallel with the role of the press. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke identified the press as the Fourth Estate, mediating the relationship between the three feudal estates—clergy, nobility and commons—and the mob. Contemporary counterparts are public intellectuals, business and economic elites and government. But just as printing produced the Fourth Estate, the internet-enabled Fifth Estate can be a force for civil society and more plural democratic accountability.⁶⁹

Arguably, the Fifth Estate shows itself in citizen-journalism.⁷⁰ This consists of anything from blogging about a politician’s visit, to uploading a mobile phone video of police violence during the Arab Spring. PCs and laptops allow normal citizens to easily self-publish, and share ideas. While mobile camera devices allow people to monitor the activities of politicians and the police.⁷¹ The Arab Spring in Egypt was—it has been said—seeded by a photo of Khaled Said, a blogger who was murdered by the police.⁷² The internet decentralises the power of reporting and media, and makes it easier to scrutinise the government and other organisations, such as private corporations, than it was before. Even more extreme examples of scrutiny by citizens are posts on WikiLeaks, such as the ‘Collateral Murder’ video of the 12 July 2007 Baghdad airstrike, in which Iraqi journalists were among those killed by an AH-64 Apache helicopter.⁷³ John Keane dubbed this type of citizen scrutiny the ‘monitory democracy’.⁷⁴

7. Online Activism

Online activism refers to the increasing use of the internet to initiate, organise, and participate in protest; both for traditional and online-only actions.⁷⁵ Much online activism in the western world is about single-issues or identity issues; such as the 2012 protest against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), a piece of legislation which was considered by the United States House of

⁶⁷ R A Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City*, 1989; M Shubik, ‘On Homo Politicus and the Instant Referendum’, *Public Choice*, 1970, vol 9, pp 79–84.

⁶⁸ R Coleman et al, ‘Public Life and the Internet: If you Build a Better Website, Will Citizens Become Engaged?’, *New Media & Society*, 2008, vol 10, p 179; L Dahlberg, ‘[Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation](#)’, *New Media & Society*, 2007, vol 9, p 827.

⁶⁹ William H Dutton, ‘[A Networked World Needs a ‘Fifth Estate’](#)’, *Wired*, 22 October 2011.

⁷⁰ William H Dutton, ‘[The Fifth Estate Emerging Through the Network of Networks](#)’, *Prometheus*, 2009, vol 27, pp 1–15.

⁷¹ Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, 2011.

⁷² Miriyam Aouragh, Anne Alexander, ‘The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution’, *International Journal of Communication*, 2011, vol 5.

⁷³ Barbara Thomaß, ‘WikiLeaks and the Question of Responsibility within a Global Democracy’, *European View*, 2011, vol 10, pp 17–23.

⁷⁴ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 2009.

⁷⁵ Guobin Yang, ‘[Cyber-activism](#)’, *Culture Digitally*, accessed 25 June 2015.

Representatives.⁷⁶ Protests were carried out because the SOPA would, it has been argued, have given law enforcement bodies the right to block a whole blogging platform, hosting millions of blogs, for violations committed by a single blogger. The protest consisted of large websites, such as Wikipedia, blacking themselves out for a day. Allison Powell argues that it raised sufficient awareness to get the Act off the agenda.⁷⁷

Other examples are the Occupy Movement, and the Hong Kong protests, which have at least in part been ignited and carried by social media.⁷⁸ The London riots of 2011 may have spread via smart phones.⁷⁹ The internet has made communication cheaper, easier, more frequent, and 'always on', creating more communicative opportunities. This not only accelerates the spread of information about protest events, but it also reduces coordination costs. Preparing a large protest used to require a large organisation, while now, through social media, a lot of smaller groups can spontaneously coalesce online, around nothing but a place and date. Though views differ on this, online communication seems rich enough to foster political cooperation. Even emotional states were found to spread through social networks. For example, something sad posted by someone made others that had seen it more likely to post something sad in turn.⁸⁰

The internet has not only led to more communication. Social media have brought more qualitative changes as well.⁸¹ On Facebook Event pages, for example, it is possible to see how many other people intend to go to a protest event, and thus if there are many, may expect safety in numbers.⁸² Users of social media, and especially active users on newer platforms such as Instagram, tend to be young, and young people are generally less risk-averse, and more involved in activism.⁸³ This can create enclaves of political activists. A historical precedent of such a youth-shift may be the 1960s, when a greater proportion of the population was young due to the post war baby-boom.⁸⁴ Some social media are also divided by political allegiance. Twitter follower networks, for example, were found to be segregated along political lines in the US.⁸⁵ Studies have shown that extremists tend to reinforce each other's beliefs when they predominantly talk among themselves.⁸⁶ Cass Sunstein called this the 'echo chamber' effect.⁸⁷ It

⁷⁶ Yochai Benkler et al, 'Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA Debate', *Political Communication*, 2015, pp 1–31.

⁷⁷ Alison Powell, 'Assessing the Influence of Online Activism on Internet Policy-Making: The Case of SOPA/PIPA and ACTA', *Social Science Research Network*, 2012.

⁷⁸ N Hamdy and E H Gomaa, 'Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media', *Journal of Communication*, 2012, vol 62, pp 195–211; H Farrell, 'The Consequences of the Internet for Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2012, vol 15, pp 35–52; Philip N Howard et al, 'Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?', *Social Science Research Network*, 2011; L Rainie et al, *Social Media and Political Engagement*, 2012.

⁷⁹ E Tonkin, H D Pfeiffer and G Tourte, '[Twitter, Information Sharing and the London Riots?](#)', *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 2012, vol 38, pp 49–57; Toby P Davies et al, 'A Mathematical Model of the London Riots and their Policing', *Scientific Reports*, 2013, vol 3.

⁸⁰ R M Bond et al, 'A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization', *Nature*, 2012, vol 489, pp 295–8.

⁸¹ G Cormode and B Krishnamurthy, '[Key Differences Between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0](#)', *First Monday*, 2008, vol 13.

⁸² Gerald Marwell, Pamela E. Oliver, and Ralph Prahl, 'Social Networks and Collective Action: A Theory of the Critical Mass', *American Journal of Sociology*, 1988, pp 502–34; Rebecca J Rosen, So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?, *Atlantic*, 3 September 2013.

⁸³ C Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, 2008.

⁸⁴ Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation*, 1997.

⁸⁵ Michael Conover et al, 'Political Polarization on Twitter', International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 2011.

⁸⁶ Cass R Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, 2009.

⁸⁷ Cass R Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, 2009.

is disputed by some studies; it has not been found to happen in the blogosphere, nor on social networks such as Facebook.⁸⁸

It is suggested that social media might catalyse protest by raising awareness. Evidence suggests that under repressive regimes—and to some extent elsewhere—people conform to the status quo even when they are experiencing great political grievances. Such grievances are normally kept private and only discussed with close friends.⁸⁹ Conversations on social media seem private, so grievances are discussed there, but are more public than most people realise, thus a much wider audience may take notice of them. In Egypt, ahead of the popular uprising in 2011 for example, online activists were not taken seriously by censors, and could express things that would have been policed at real meetings. Social media thus helped people realise the widespread nature of the discontent.⁹⁰ On social media it is possible to start protesting in small ways without much investment or risk; thus helping participants get accustomed to seeing themselves as activists. This allows people, it is argued, to be drawn into activism gradually.⁹¹

8. Polling, Deliberative and Delegative Platforms and Experiments

When, in the 1990s, digital democracy became well known as a concept, it was direct democracy, with every citizen e-voting on every bill in real-time, that most people envisaged. James Bohman suggests:

The internet was thought to herald new possibilities for political participation, if not direct democracy, even in large and complex societies, as ‘electronic democracy’ might replace the mass media democracy of sound-bite television.⁹²

Even now there are some who continue to champion direct democracy, such as the Czech Dawn of Direct Democracy Party, which won three seats in the Czech parliament in 2013.⁹³ Yet other forms of citizen input have become more popular since. The most well-known is online polling, which does not require everybody to vote, because random sampling ensures that the outcome of polls is representative. It can also be performed at much lower cost than offline polls. However, some consider it less reliable, due to only being able to sample internet users. The degree of certainty can vary.⁹⁴ It was clear from the discrepancy between the 2015 election polls and the eventual results, that such polls can be misleading.⁹⁵ Besides representing held opinions, there are also polls for finding out what people’s more considered opinions might be. In so called ‘deliberative polls’, the sampled citizens are presented with information and then asked to deliberate about it and report after that; similar to jury service.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ *ibid.* E Bakshy et al, ‘[The Role of Social Networks in Information Diffusion](#)’, in: *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web*, 2012, pp 519–28.

⁸⁹ T Kuran, ‘[Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution](#)’, *Public Choice*, 1989, 61, pp 41–74; D McAdam, S Tarrow and C Tilly, ‘Dynamics of Contention’, *Social Movement Studies*, 2003, vol 2, pp 99–102; J C Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 1990.

⁹⁰ P Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, 2012.

⁹¹ Opp Karl-Dieter, ‘The Dynamics of Political Protest: Feedback Effects and Interdependence in the Explanation of Protest Participation’, *European Sociological Review*, 2010, vol 26, pp 97–109; Doug McAdam, ‘[Recruitment to High-risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer](#)’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1986, pp 64–90.

⁹² James Bohman, ‘[Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy](#)’, *The Sociological Review*, 2004, vol 52.

⁹³ Eastern Approaches, ‘Czech Elections: An Angry Electorate’, *Economist*, 25 October 2013.

⁹⁴ House of Lords Library, [Understanding and Sourcing Political Opinion Polls](#), 8 August 2014, LLN 2014/028.

⁹⁵ Peter Kellner, ‘[We Got it Wrong. Why?](#)’, *YouGov Blog*, 2015.

⁹⁶ Ted Becker, *The Future of Teledemocracy*, 2000.

Experiments have been done with other, more permanent democratic platforms. In the UK, these have included CitizenSpace, a site set up in 2001, which allowed citizens to give feedback to the Government (discussed in section 4 of this Note).⁹⁷ The Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy proposed something more far reaching, though: an informal internet-based third House. The so called 'Open House' would allow citizens to discuss subjects coming up for debate in Westminster Hall.⁹⁸ The Commission's 18th recommendation was:

We believe the public want the opportunity to have their say in House of Commons debates; we also believe that this will provide a useful resource for MPs and help to enhance those debates. We therefore recommend a unique experiment: the use of regular digital public discussion forums to inform debates held in Westminster Hall. This innovation might be known as the "Cyber Chamber" or "Open House". If at the end of the next Parliament it has been successful, it could then be extended to debates in the main House of Commons chamber itself.⁹⁹

On an international level there is a great interest in public forums as well: recent experiments include [Liqd.net](#) (Germany), [Democracy OS](#) (Chile/US), and the EU-funded [DCent project](#).¹⁰⁰ Online public forums have been used by city councils and political parties in Munich, Stockholm, Barcelona and Buenos Aires.¹⁰¹ What they have in common is that they all use Transitive Delegative Democracy (TDD), a voting system that holds the middle-ground between direct and representative democracy. TDD was first proposed by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll), and then extended and formalized by G Tullock in 1967.¹⁰² In TDD, citizens can vote on each bill directly, just like in direct democracy, but they also choose a proxy who will represent them whenever they do not vote, similar to the system used in stockholder voting. It differs from stockholder voting in that delegation is transitive, so the representative can, in turn, select another proxy, thereby creating a tree of influence. It gives informed citizens more influence, while requiring less effort from everyone else, than in direct democracy.¹⁰³ A measure of engagement has been achieved in local experiments, but it remains to be seen whether these systems scale to the national level.¹⁰⁴

9. Data-Mining of Political Trends and Opinions

A relatively new use of the internet for political purposes, is the automated analysis of online conversations to extract political opinions, and trends in them. It can be seen as a big-data alternative to polling that could have the potential to be both more precise (as it reports what

⁹⁷ Laura Miller, [Digital Dialogues: Third Phase Report](#), Hansard Society, 2008.

⁹⁸ House of Commons Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, [Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy](#), 26 January 2015, p 11.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Liquid Democracy e.v., '[About](#)', accessed 23 June 2015; Democracy OS, '[About](#)', accessed 23 June 2015; D-Cent, '[About us](#)', accessed 23 June 2015; Klint Finley, 'Out in the Open: An Open Source Website that Gives Voters a Platform to Influence Politicians', *Wired*, 2014.

¹⁰¹ DemocracyOS.org, '[Democracies](#)', accessed 21 June 2015.

¹⁰² G Tullock, *Toward a Mathematics of Politics*, 1967.

¹⁰³ Michael Allan, 'A Medium of Assent and its Fit with Society', *The ITP News: Newsletter of the Information Technology and Politics Section*, 2008, vol 4; J Green-Armytage, [Voluntary Delegation as the Basis for a Future Political System](#), 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Steve Hardt and Lia C R Lopes, '[Google Votes: A Liquid Democracy Experiment on a Corporate Social Network](#)', *Technical Disclosure Commons*, 5 June 2015; Anna Litvinenko, '[Social Media and Perspectives of Liquid Democracy: The Example of Political Communication in the Pirate Party in Germany](#)', *Proceedings of the 12th European Conference on e-Government*, 2012.

is actually posted by people), and cheaper, than polling, as it is automated.¹⁰⁵ Gianluca Demartini et al suggest:

Public opinion on different topics is usually estimated by professional services conducting surveys on a sample of the population. For instance, opinions about political elections are estimated by interviewing electors on the phone. This is clearly an expensive activity for both the company carrying out the interviews as well as for the sampled electors who have to spend their time answering questions.¹⁰⁶

The data-mining of opinions has already been done by companies to carefully track how people respond to their brand after advertising campaigns, and even for the early detection of product failure, and the monitoring of negative responses during product recall.¹⁰⁷ Twitter messages have also already been successfully used to predict German election outcomes in 2009, though earlier studies which limited themselves to blog-posts did not work as well.¹⁰⁸ Andranik Tumasjan et al studied the accuracy of using Twitter to predict election results in Germany. They found that:

[T]he mere number of messages reflects the election result and even comes close to traditional election polls. This finding is in contrast to previous studies of political deliberation online. The share of campaign weblogs prior to the 2005 federal election in Germany was by no means representative of the relative strength of the parties showing an overrepresentation of the small parties in the blogosphere.¹⁰⁹

Data-mining has been used to fine-tune political campaigns as well, most notably by the Obama campaign.¹¹⁰ More recently Facebook has partnered with ABC News, and an online news-site to analyse and report on American's political opinions.¹¹¹ It remains to be seen how representative such analysis is. There might be moral issues with political statements that have been data-mined not being explicitly issued for such aggregation. Oversight over the correctness of the algorithms used might be a problem as well, if results are published or used for serious purposes; this is something that already is seen by some as an issue with election polls.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Gianluca Demartini et al, '[Analyzing Political Trends in the Blogosphere](#)', *Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2011, pp 466–9.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ M Ghiassi, J Skinner and D Zimbra, 'Twitter Brand Sentiment Analysis: A Hybrid System Using N-Gram Analysis and Dynamic Artificial Neural Network', *Expert Systems with Applications*, 2013; Vindu Goel, '[GM Uses Social Media to Manage Customers and Its Reputation](#)', *New York Times*, 23 March 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Andranik Tumasjan et al, '[Predicting Elections with Twitter: What 140 Characters Reveal about Political Sentiment](#)', *Expert Systems with Applications*, 2013, pp 178–85.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ John Nicholls, '[Not Just the NSA: Politicians are Data Mining the American Electorate](#)', *The Nation*, 11 June 2013.

¹¹¹ Hadas Gold, '[Facebook Data Mining for Political Views](#)', *Politico*, 30 November 2014.

¹¹² Mark Leftly, '[Pollsters Would be Curbed by Peer's New Regulation Bill](#)', *Independent*, 11 January 2015.