Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. This is, of course, a very important and broad area for consideration. This submission will focus on the potential for the use of digital tools to support and transform the processes of parliamentary engagement. It will do so recognising that digital is just a tool and that its ability to deliver any significant improvement in parliamentary engagement and democratic scrutiny is reliant on a concomitant transformation of the underlying processes and the culture of the institution, it's Members and staff. Digital alone changes little, yet it can act as a powerful catalyst for effective and sustainable change.

Introduction

Digital and social tools create an opportunity to make democracy more relevant, accessible, engaging and visible: to break down the walls and silos and to get ordinary people more involved in the decisions that affect their lives. But for this to happen our institutions must change and undergo significant cultural transformation. Nothing about this is digital but it is made possible by digital acting as a disrupting force. The challenge is significant but the price of failure is extremely high: the public is already more likely to see Parliament and politicians as out of touch and decreasingly relevant.

Digital technology clearly and demonstrably can change the relationship between citizens and their legislators.[1] However, technology is a tool. It is not a solution in its own right. And it is dangerous, naïve and limiting to assume that much can be achieved if the scope of the question relates purely to the digital side of the equation. The New Zealand Government puts it succinctly:

> [it] is not just about technology – it's about the ways in which information and technology are used to deliver better services and enhance trust and confidence in government.[2]

Digital technologies can act as a disrupter or an enabler. They can be revolutionary or evolutionary. However, if one simply applies new digital media to a flawed process the result is most predictably going to be a flawed digital process.[3] It becomes critical to understand how digital integrates into the overall workflow of the parliament. What is the most effective blend of on- and offline tools and processes that can most effectively engage people in creating and sustaining real and active change? Change such that they begin to believe their voice counts and the system is

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[1] Williamson, A. (2011). Disruption and empowerment: Embedding citizens at the heart of democracy. Journal of eDemocracy and Open Government; Williamson, A. & Fallon, F. (2011). Transforming the future parliament through the effective use of digital media. Parliamentary Affairs. 64(4). 781-792.
[2] New Zealand Government (2013). Government ICT strategy and action plan to 2017. Wellington.
[3] Williamson, A. (2014, Jan). Digital Democracy is About Much More Than Digital. Politics First.

taking notice.[4] Above all, the 'technology' must be appropriate for the audience: participatory budgeting can be done online in Reykjavik or Edinburgh but perhaps it's more effective when done in person in Lima. And doing it online should not preclude us from offering offline alternatives.

> Engagement increases when the process is accessible, appropriate and authentic. Whilst digital enables this to happen it does not happen simply because the process is digital.

Parliamentary Context

To put the role, value and evolution of digital tools in a parliamentary setting into context, it is useful to consider some of the findings of the World eParliament Report 2016, which I authored on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The findings show how digital and social technologies have led to and supported deep changes in the operational environment and cultural landscape of parliaments. They show that the digital parliament is a now a living entity, able to be directly linked to those it serves in ways that were hard to imagine when the Scottish Parliament was established, despite its early progress in this area. Through digital tools, social media and open data, parliaments are now more outward facing and more open. We must also consider the internal systems within parliament that support and enable openness and engagement; often these and the processes that support continue to present challenges to progress and innovation.

The successful digital parliament mirrors the world around it and so it is no surprise to see that social networks are now important tools, allowing citizens to connect more often and more easily with members and parliaments. Making more documentation and content more available is a critical trend too, whether this is through web-based technologies or through open data. Yet many parliaments remain hampered by a lack of access to good practices and lack critical skills and resources in new and emerging areas.

Globally, we see that the challenges parliaments face are not simply ones of technology adoption (though these are very real), many are strategic. They need to be addressed at a systemic level, requiring political as well as institutional commitment. This World e-Parliament Report highlights that too few parliaments are fully implementing an end-to-end strategic planning process and, when they do, too few value their senior IT staff in terms of the overall leadership and direction of change for the institution. This is a mistake and limits opportunities for innovation and transformation. Digital is too often (and wrongly) seen as a technical function where ICT management or technical staff pre-dominate, yet the research shows that

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[4] Examples of this include: NHS Citizen (nhscitizen.org.uk), Sciencewise (sciencewise-erc.org.uk) & Betri Reykjavík (betrireykjavik.is)

for digital to be transformative for parliaments, Members must provide political leadership in favour of greater openness and greater citizen participation.

> To retrench citizen-centric web services into a technocratic IT regime would be regressive and regretful, they must remain agile and responsive, delivering quick wins and high-value to the public as well as to Parliament.

This research findings highlight that:

1. Digital is a core-enabler in strengthening and transforming parliaments. Parliaments should do more to engage at the highest political level with the potential for digital transformation.
2. To realise the real benefits of digital, parliaments need to make a commitment to a vision and to strategic change supported at the highest levels of the institution.
3. Lack of funding and insufficient knowledge among staff and members remain as key challenges for parliaments to use digital effectively.
4. There is a continued adoption of document management systems to support the legislative process but this is often hampered by a lack of resources, however, these systems are critical in the future provisioning of open data sets.
5. The uptake of XML for creating parliamentary documents continues along with the adoption of open data standards.
6. Social media has become a key, strategic communication channel for parliaments in a digital world that is now decidedly multi-channel. It can, however, be difficult for parliaments to know how members are using these new tools and how best to provide support to them.
7. Email remains a primary communication channel for members and the parliamentary website remains a core asset in terms of providing information, documentation and data.
8. Open data is increasingly important for parliaments and will continue to grow in importance, however, there is evidence that parliaments are struggling to make this data available and accessible for citizens.
9. Parliaments and members are not yet very innovative in the ways that they engage citizens directly in the legislative process, though an increasing number are experimenting with forms on citizen participation in parliamentary work.

This final point highlights the potential value of new intermediaries, who can take the information and data that parliaments create, whether formally or informally, and make sense of it for and with ordinary citizens.

Open Government Partnership

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a voluntary, multi-stakeholder international initiative that aims to secure concrete and ambitious commitments that relate to the openness and transparency of public services. It is uniquely established

not just as a multi-national platform for governments but with civil society representation at the heart of the process. This 'partnership' is inherent to OGP and lies at the heart of how the mechanisms established by OGP internationally and within nation states can be used to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.[5]

The OGP concept was developed through an emerging realisation of the potential for digital technologies to transform not simply the way governments work but the way they can be held to account by their citizens. It's core principles are to:[6]

- Increase the availability of information about governmental activities.
- Support civic participation.
- Implement the highest standards of professional integrity throughout our administrations.
- Increase access to new technologies for openness and accountability.

There is an increasingly strong and productive parliamentary track within OGP. The Legislative Openness Working Group, coordinated by the Chilean Senate and US-based National Democratic Initiative has engaged several parliaments in developing commitments towards openness and transparency. In addition, Scotland is one 15 'Pioneer' programmes developing their own action plans (others include cities and regions). It would be valuable for the Scottish Parliament to engage with the Pioneer programme, not least because OGP is fundamentally a commitment to working in partnership between government (or parliament) and civil society. It would be a positive step to see the Scottish Parliament engage with OGP.

Framing Digital Engagement

Where parliaments are releasing open data sets, there is evidence that suggests these are not widely used. For example, the Italian Senate, a leading parliament in the open data movement, notes that its open data repositories have only a handful of users. However, what these independent agencies do with that data is important and forms a valuable part of the wider democratic landscape – in other words, this is a matter of quality, accessibility and re-use, not quantity (of data sets or direct users). And it is not enough to release data and expect the public to use it – its value is often specialist and niche. To be of value to a wider audience (and to be a catalyst for greater engagement) citizens must be information literate as well as understand parliamentary process, therefore interpretation, analysis and re-presentation can be critical.

Parliaments must consider how they engage with, support and nurture active and effective partners who can reach audiences that parliament cannot and add value to the democratic process. The digital assets that deliver such a participation strategy

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[5] OGP (2015). Open government partnership: articles of governance.
[6] OGP (2011). Open Government Declaration. Available at opengovpartnership.org/about/open-government-declaration

cover a continuum of engagement practices ranging from the passive to the active. It is logical to say that the methods chosen affect who sees, and how they react to, the information provided and who is likely to become involved in a process, and, therefore, the outcomes of the process. Participation can be considered on a scale that goes from an internal process through to where decision making is fully inclusive and participatory:[7]

- **Inform** the public and other stakeholders, keeping them up to date with what is proposed and/or happening.
- **Consult** directly by going out and seeking public feedback on the proposals or input to the process.
- **Involve** the public directly in the process, ensure they are given a voice and their concerns recognised and acknowledged.
- **Collaborate** by working in partnership with the public.
- **Empower** the public by putting decision making in their hands.

There are several stages in the engagement cycle, relating to both outbound communication and inbound active engagement. Effective engagement must encompass the full participation ecosystem, not just one aspect of it:
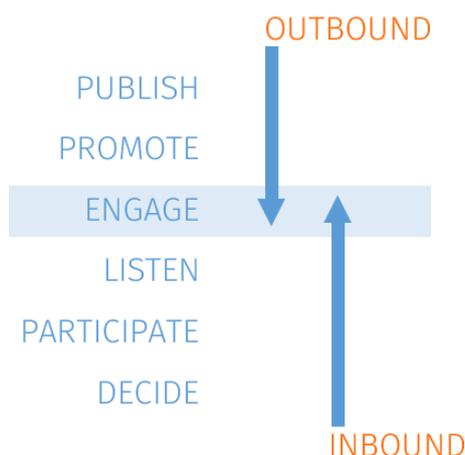
How digital supports a more open parliament

One of the key challenges for those of us who are trying to engage a broader public in parliamentary democracy is that the process often appears closed and opaque. The language is off-putting, the procedures cumbersome and unfriendly and it's often hard to see what's going on. Digital can't fix the first problem (though it can help), it should improve the second (otherwise it's pointless) but it can significantly impact on the third: the internet has created a channel to support a paradigm shift towards the concept of an 'open parliament'. It should now be possible for anyone and everyone to see everything relating to parliamentary business in an easy to access and user friendly way.

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[7] Williamson, A., & Sande, M. (2014). From arrogance to intimacy: A handbook for active democracy (1st ed.). London & Gothenburg: Democratise/Preera and derived from the IAP2 Spectrum of Public of Participation (see: www.iap2.org)

> Digital is a key enabler of public transparency and transparency helps increase trust and limit corruption.

This doesn't simply mean providing digitised versions of existing documents (though this is helpful), it means ensuring that content is machine readable, correctly tagged and indexed so that it can be found, matched, verified and re-used by third-parties: build it open and encourage others to use it, mash it up and repurpose it.

There is and will remain a tension between the need to write legislation in a legally and technically correct way, yet to make it accessible to the public. In a digital environment, it is much easier to conceive of ways to provide better plain-language summaries and commentaries, which are directly linked to original content. It is possible to consider processes that encourage greater public input and connectivity to the process of legislative scrutiny. There are several good examples, including civil society projects for crowd-sourced legislation, such as Open Ministry in Finland and the Peoples' Assembly (Rahvakogu) project in Estonia[8]. There is also innovation within parliaments themselves, such as the eDemocracia and Senado Virtual projects in Brazil and Chile that give citizens the ability to comment on and revise draft legislation.[9]

Examples of how digital is being used to engage citizens with their parliaments

Mainstream social media can be used in novel ways to solicit direct contributions to parliamentary committees or inquiries. It is also becoming increasingly common to integrate mainstream social networks with proprietary websites and content. Websites like that of the Huffington Post[10] allow users to login with Facebook and then have access to a number of tools for sharing and commenting on content. Going further, The Guardian newspaper[11] has an application that makes all its content available directly inside Facebook. The Finnish Parliament's (Eduskunta) 'Committee for the Future' used Facebook[12] as a platform to 'crowdsource' public input on the future of parliament, including the role of technology.

Social media has been adopted by a wider range of parliaments around the world. The UK Parliament has almost 800,000 followers, parliaments in Peru, Mexico and Columbia exceed 200,000 and the Scottish Parliament a respectable 66,000. The European Parliament has in excess of two million 'likes' for its English-language Facebook page and is one of many parliaments using the platform.

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[8] See: openministry.info and rahvakogu.ee
[9] See: edemocracia.camara.gov.br and senadorvirtual.cl
[10] See www.huffingtonpost.com
[11] See www.guardian.co.uk/info/2010/oct/26/find-guardian-on-facebook
[12] See: www.facebook.com/kestavakasvu

The National Assembly of Korea's e-Parliament strategy was designed to addresses the risk of a public perception of a lack of accountability for parliament and parliamentarians when individual social media accounts lapse or are updated infrequently. The Secretariat found that citizens mostly use Twitter and Facebook and so accounts have been set up on both networks. Whilst the stated original aim of using social media was to increase citizen interaction, it has also become a channel for the distribution of parliamentary information with most of the users being government or public organisations interested in parliamentary proceedings. Most users are under 30, suggesting that these social channels are more effective for engaging young people.

The UK Parliament has exploited the capability of Twitter hashtags to broaden input to and engagement with the Committee process. The Brazilian e-Democracia[13] project uses a combination of social media, internal discussion, video and offline events (such as committee hearings) to engage citizens, parliamentarians, civil servants, researchers, non-governmental organisations and interest groups. The programme, described as 'a kind of crowdsourcing for legislative purposes', provides easier access to the decision-making process for citizens who are not associated with interest groups or businesses that usually lobby for change. It allows the public to:

- Share information about a problem that needs to be addressed by law;
- Identify and discuss possible solutions to the problem; and
- Draft the bill itself.

E-Democracia overcomes the barrier between the public and the expert skills involved in drafting legislation by using legislative consultants, who serve as 'technical translators' before responses are passed to legislators.

For parliaments with limited technical or financial resources, partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisations to develop and deploy open-source engagement tools can be a good option. The National Assembly of Serbia has established a partnership with a civil society organisation to publish the parliamentary record of proceedings through the 'Otvoreni Parlament' (opening parliament) website. The Brazilian Congress has gone a step further by creating a 'Hacker lab' designed to involve the public in the co-creation of data-driven applications for democratic accountability and to open up the work of the Congress to greater access and scrutiny. They created a physical space at the Chamber which is "open for access and use by any citizen, especially programmers and software developers, members of parliament and other public workers, where they can utilise public data in a

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[13] See: techpresident.com/user-blog/can-people-help-legislators-make-better-laws-brazil-shows-how for more information.

collaborative fashion for actions that enhance citizenship".[14] One example of innovative engagement solutions to emerge from this is 'Retórica Parlamentar'[15], which uses open data provided by the parliament to create an interactive visualisation of what Members have said in plenary debates.

Working with others builds on their networks and extends parliament's reach. It draws in a new audience, allowing parliaments to hear a wider range of different voices. The UK House of Common's Digital Democracy Commission[16] is a timely example of how to blend on and offline communications. Set up to "explore how Parliament could make better use of digital technology to enhance and improve its work" it used a range of mainstream social media channels (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) to promote the work of the Commission, to solicit contributions and submissions and to share the material that was being submitted to it with a wider audience. Whilst the Commission held hearings within Parliament these were more informal and open than traditional Committees (including encouraging attendees to use social media during the hearings). It also made a concerted effort to take the Commission's hearings beyond Parliament and organised these with civil society organisations around the UK (including one that was held in a 'fish and chip' shop). They also ensured that members of the Commission and Commission staff attended numerous democracy-related events, using these to both share the work of the Commission and to listen to a wider range of perspectives.

Third-party tools can prove beneficial at increasing levels of citizen engagement in the democratic process, particularly where public bodies have had limited success or felt that traditional methods were not effective. 'Better Reykjavik'[17] uses a tool called 'Your Priorities' built by Icelandic NGO Citizens Foundation, and has been used by 40% of Reykjavik's voters. Another example of local government engagement is Wellington City Council in New Zealand, who used Loomio to create an online component to a contentious and challenging consultation exercise to develop an alcohol management strategy for the city centre. Loomio uses a discussion format that allows participants to call for decisions, at which time others can agree or disagree but also abstain or block.

Need to reframe the cost/benefit

There is a cost to digital engagement: where democracy has been poorly served, improving it can rarely cost less. Though relatively easy and therefore tempting to calculate, the short-term operational cost is a simplistic and, indeed, the wrong measure of value if we are considering the true value of new methods to our

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[14] See the Official Resolution of the Chambers of Deputies here:
camara.gov.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra?codteor=1214393&filename=ESP+1+%3D%3E+PRC+228%2F2013
[15] See: retoricaparlamentar.com
[16] See: parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speakers-commission-on-digital-democracy
[17] See: betrireykjavik.is

democracy. The true measure of value is the longer-term cost-benefit of better legislation, better public understanding and greater engagement. Ultimately, and perhaps cumulatively, it becomes an increase in public trust in Parliament.

Increasing public scrutiny and input into the legislative process and widening this process so that it is accessible to people with a wider range of knowledge and experiences can reduce the overall cost of delivery because it can lead to better legislation. And the earlier problems and errors are found, the less it costs to fix. This holds true for legislation as well as civil engineering and IT systems! Ultimately, the cost of poorly drafted legislation can be measured later in terms of legal challenges and re-drafting.

> What must be considered is the opportunity cost of failing to adopt more citizen-facing digital assets and the social return on investment that can result from greater democratic cohesion.

The Official Report makes an interesting example; in written form its use is limited but as an XML product available in machine-readable format new opportunities arise for communities (wanting to monitor their MSPs), activists (wanting to monitor an issue) and to integrate what happens in Parliament into the classroom.[18]

Accessibility and inclusion

Digital is an important and transformative tool for parliaments. But it is not a panacea for many reasons. One critical reason being that it leaves behind those who lack access to it, the ability to use or the skills to be an effective user. There are many reasons for being offline but it is sufficient to point out that you are less likely to have the internet if you are old, poor, poorly educated, have a disability or live in a remote rural area. Beyond this, there appears to be a distinct gender gap in British political life and, of itself, digital does nothing to address this.[19] New engagement methods must not further disadvantage those who are already marginalised and excluded. Parliament must also consider how it can connect with communities and individuals that remain highly dis-engaged from the democratic process; there is no easy answer to this, no one-size-fits-all solution.

New digital channels and active intermediaries create new opportunities, research and experience shows us this but it is no silver bullet. The Parliament needs to develop good processes internally and so that it can work more effectively with and through others. It must learn to let go, not insist on delivering content and

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[18] Williamson, A. (2013). The official report as an engagement tool in the future (Keynote). British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association, Cardiff.
[19] Williamson, A. (2011, Sep 1). The gender imbalance online seems to be the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion. British Politics and Policy at LSE. London School of Economics.

engagement itself.[20] You can't try to own the conversation: To be an active and effective part of the Scottish digital landscape and to remain relevant to the wider needs of citizens Parliament must innovate, it must step outside its comfort zone, engage with people where they are, when they want to talk and it must use the methods that they use. The opportunity is there, the question that must be asked is why is this opportunity not being taken?

Author Profile

Edinburgh-based Dr Andy Williamson is a global leader in democratic innovation and civic participation and an acknowledged expert in parliamentary openness and engagement. He has recently worked with the Scottish Government, Cabinet Office, United Nations, Volvo and the parliaments of the UK, Chile, Moldova and Serbia and is the author of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's World e-Parliament Report and Social Media Guidelines for Parliaments. Andy is a member of the UK Open Government Network Steering Group, the Scottish Open Government Partnership Pioneer Board, the OGP's Legislative Openness Working Group and the Llywydd's Taskforce on Digital Communication in the National Assembly for Wales. A New Zealander, he holds a PhD from Monash University, Melbourne and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Andy was previously the Chair of Do-it UK, Director of Digital Democracy at the Hansard Society and Deputy Chair of the New Zealand Government's Digital Strategy Board, he is now the Founder of Democratise and Governor and Managing Partner at The Democratic Society.

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[20] Williamson, A., M. Korris, et al. (2011). Connecting citizens to Parliament: How Parliament can engage more effectively with hard to reach groups. London, Hansard Society.