



Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies

Uncorrected oral evidence: Democracy and Digital Technologies

Tuesday 10 March 2020

11.40 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Puttnam (The Chair); Lord Black of Brentwood; Lord German; Lord Harris of Haringey; Lord Holmes of Richmond; Baroness Kidron; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Lipsey; Lord Lucas; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Morris of Yardley.

Evidence Session No. 21

Heard in Public

Questions 267 - 279

Witnesses

I: Dr Rebecca Rumbul, Head of Research, mySociety; Tim Hughes, Director, Involve; Professor Graham Smith, University of Westminster.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is an uncorrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.
2. Any public use of, or reference to, the contents should make clear that neither Members nor witnesses have had the opportunity to correct the record. If in doubt as to the propriety of using the transcript, please contact the Clerk of the Committee.
3. Members and witnesses are asked to send corrections to the Clerk of the Committee within 14 days of receipt.

Examination of Witnesses

Dr Rebecca Rumbul, Tim Hughes and Professor Graham Smith.

Q267 **The Chair:** Welcome. I am sorry you were kept waiting. I have to read out this police warning and then we can crack on. As you will know, this session is open to the public. A webcast of the session goes out live and is subsequently accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of your evidence and put on the parliamentary website. You will have an opportunity to make minor corrections for the purposes of clarification or accuracy. Would you mind introducing yourselves? Then we will go to the first question.

Professor Graham Smith: I am a professor of politics at the University of Westminster and the director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I am the head of research at mySociety.

Tim Hughes: I am the director of Involve.

Q268 **Lord Lipsey:** At least some of you have heard the debate we have been having, which has very much been focused on how technology can help representative democracy as opposed to just creating the maximum amount of noise. I wondered if we could get your observations on that and what examples you would give of best practice from across the United Kingdom.

Professor Graham Smith: Do you want to go first?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: You can go first.

Lord Lipsey: It is not that difficult.

Professor Graham Smith: It is not easy, because digital technology is used for so many different things. Some people are using it as a way of collecting ideas from the community. Other people are using it as a way of trying to develop conversations within communities — we can come back to that later. There are some really difficult challenges there. Other people are using it for making decisions — for voting. It really depends on what aspect you are looking at. Digital can be used in all those different ways. It can also be used to ensure transparency and scrutiny of decision-making. On best practices in the UK, I am probably not the best person to answer that, to be honest. My sense is that in the UK we have not used technology as well as some other countries, but we can come back to that later.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: On representative democracy, it is difficult. We have a lot of tech at the moment that helps leverage citizen expertise into participative democracy models. There is currently a tension between participative democracy models and representative democracy models, which still has not been resolved, so I do not think there is best practice out there at the moment on how to do that. The panel before us and most of the young people who you have spoken to have name-dropped

all sorts of platforms that are very good at bringing in citizens to provide expertise or opinion in one way or another, but I am not sure you can currently quantify how that improves representative democracy.

Tim Hughes: Some of the best uses of digital technology so far have been to make some of the processes of representative democracy easier for people to engage with. I point to mySociety's work on this and to platforms such as TheyWorkForYou and WhatDoTheyKnow, which make it a lot easier for people to be able to engage with representative institutions. We have seen things around elections, such as ways for people to engage with manifestos, quizzes for people to see which political party best fits their view, and polling station finders. The work of the Democracy Club makes local democracy information a lot more accessible to people.

In the UK, we have really good practice around making standard information about democracy much more accessible to people. But as Graham and Rebecca have said, on the next step of involving the public in decision-making through digital technology, we are less well advanced than some other countries.

Q269 **Baroness Kidron:** I suppose this is a subset, about deliberative methodologies and the appetite for citizens' assemblies. Maybe you could explore for us the online and the offline; do we need to have both? Can it work just online? What are the mechanisms and where are the risks?

Professor Graham Smith: I will go for it on a more theoretical level; Tim is much more practically engaged in this. Let us just think about why people are interested in citizens' assemblies. It is for three reasons. First, they bring together a diverse group of participants, which is a really unusual thing to be able to do. Secondly, those participants spend a number of days together, learning and deliberating. Finally, those citizens come to a public judgment together about what should be done. Digital technology is not great at each of those things. It can do other things, but it is not great at ensuring that a diverse group of people can deliberate for days, learn and come to public judgment.

Within citizens' assemblies up to now, technologies have been used in fairly simple but really vital ways. One is ensuring the transparency of the process. For example, if you look at the Climate Assembly UK website, within hours it has all the presentations that have been made. It shows what is happening throughout the day so, if someone wants to follow what is going on, they can see that online. Some citizens' assemblies use digital technology so that members can keep in contact with each other between weekends or between days. Technology has also been used as a way for the general public to offer their views to the assembly. That has been more difficult and challenging, because again, we are never quite sure which groups are offering their views. So it is really being used in those three ways.

Tim Hughes: There is a lot of interest in citizens' assemblies at the moment, but it is one very formalised and specific example of how

deliberation can take place. One of the messages I want to give you is that there are ways that we can probably take the principle of deliberation and apply it to other means of participation so people can have conversations about the issues of the day. Focusing too heavily on citizens' assemblies does not solve the wider problem of politics and how we have a more deliberative rather than a debate-based mode of politics. That is one side.

With citizens' assemblies, as Graham said, there is a certain power to having people together in a room. People build up real relationships and empathy with one another through that process and replicating that online is incredibly difficult. There are some interesting examples of people trying to do deliberation online, and we have done small-scale experiments in it too. You can replicate some aspects of the process and it is certainly cheaper to do it online. You can do certain things with digital technology that you cannot do in the room. But on balance, having people in a room for multiple days to engage in depth with an issue has a real power to it that is hard to get online.

As Graham alluded to, the real opportunity going forward is to look at blended ways of doing this, whether that be having citizens' assemblies that meet both in person and online, to get the benefits of both, or opportunities for the wider community to engage with their work. We have done that with a number of local citizens' assemblies, where residents are able to put forward evidence and ideas, they think the citizens' assembly should consider. We can start to think about lots of ways that we might blend these different approaches.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: Last year felt like the year of the citizens' assembly. It is all that any of us talked about last year, just like the year before, everyone thought participatory budgeting was the new great thing to save democracy and engage all citizens. I do not think either of these things works completely digitally at the moment; I do not think many things do, because, generally, people do not have the right level of civic engagement to meaningfully engage online. Physical citizens' assemblies are so important at the moment because the level of knowledge that people are bringing to them is very low.

We have all been at physical citizens' assemblies where the first day has to be spent just throwing information at people, who are left reeling by the end because there is so much information and so much that they do not understand about how institutions work. This is my opportunity to get in here that, an awful lot of the time, doing digital democracy seems like a really lazy way of trying to solve a very institutional problem with the education levels of general society in terms of how Parliament and government work.

That said, because we are speaking about digital, we have done quite a lot of work over the last year on how to implement digital components in citizens' assemblies. Working for a digital organisation, I find myself saying, more often than not, "No, don't do that digitally" because I want to see only really good-quality digital components being used. A lot of the

time, these kinds of digital activities are used as an excuse to do it on the cheap. Doing it digitally is not just a solution to a budgeting issue. If it is not high quality on a digital level, it is not going to be high-quality engagement for anyone.

Baroness Kidron: Can I pick up on that very important point, which I recognise? There seems to be a binary developing that you have to be either an evangelist, so it is going to solve everything, or a detractor because you criticise. I tried to ask in the last session something about the neutrality or functionality of the technology. I wonder whether you would all speak to what we have to consider as parliamentarians or as government: how to judge the functionality and quality of that experience. What should we be looking for, so we do not make the wrong recommendation? We do not want to make a detractor recommendation, but we do not want to make an evangelist one that has no quality within it.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: Digital is just a tool. Substitute the word “digital” for “on paper”. Digital can do very little other than facilitate really good processes. We can do it at scale but, quite frankly, unless you are providing enough information, incentive and outcomes for people, you cannot expect them to engage digitally or in person. It is the same either way. That cost issue is a very real thing, especially at a local level. Parliament has better resources and a lot more human resources to run these kinds of events but, increasingly, local government is looking at digital platforms as a way to do participation on the cheap. It is not meaningful and it is distorted.

As the previous panel said, you get mass distortions in participation and people think, “What was the point in me participating? I took time out of my life and I have not seen any result. I cannot see a closure of the feedback loop. I cannot see that anything has changed. I do not have enough knowledge about how the system works to know that this is going to take three years, from the point of me giving evidence or submitting a consultation response, to move through any kind of legislation.” It is about supplementing everything with those meaningful pieces of education.

Professor Graham Smith: One recommendation should be that you should to be problem-led rather than technology-led. You look at the challenge you are facing and ask yourself, “What is the best mode of public engagement for responding?” Or rather public engagements — there are different ways of doing it. Start with your challenge, work out what you are trying to achieve through public engagement, and then look to the technologies, whether they are face-to-face or digital, and ask whether they respond to your challenge. As was mentioned during the previous panel I listened to, there is digital solutionism out there. The number of people who come to me each year with the app that is going to solve everything is frightening, and I am sure you all get it as well. Maybe we should have a session on that. The answer is being problem-

focused and challenge-focused. You are likely to find that it needs a blended approach.

Tim Hughes: My experience is that the evangelists or the detractors are always the people who have not experienced these processes in practice. Anybody who has seen a citizens' assembly or digital engagement at work, or any of these methods, knows that it is much more complicated than that. As both Rebecca and Graham have said, the tool is the small part of the equation for what makes public participation work. What is most important is everything around it, particularly thinking about how it feeds into the institution, ensuring that it will have impacts and setting that up from the start. As Graham said, be really clear about the problem it is trying to solve, see the purpose of the engagement and plan everything from that point forward. Have a really good understanding of what makes people engage and where people's incentives come from for engagement and build that into whatever engagement you are doing. Tools are ways to realise some of this, but those design questions, making sure we are focused on issues people care about and the things that can have an impact within institutions, really make the difference.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I would add that tech is very good at putting the user front and centre in any process. As you were saying on design-led processes, it is a really good idea, when trying to design any citizen engagement exercise, to put them at the centre. What is their user journey through this experience? An awful lot of these processes start with saying, "Oh God, we need to ask people about stuff. We need to show we are listening and do a report". None of that speaks to that citizen's experience of going through it and what they get out of it. Especially in physical citizens' assemblies, people are so engaged by the end. It is lovely to see how excited people are once they get into it, but at the end do they say, "Goodbye; thanks" and fall off a cliff? Their journey and their benefit is good to keep in mind when devising any of these processes, digital or not.

Q270 **The Chair:** I live in the Republic of Ireland and followed the abortion debate and the gay marriage debate closely. Two things struck me. First, most of the hard-core evidence in the abortion debate started off being medical and contradictory. The debate quite quickly had the effect of slicing off the extremes. It was very strange. The extremes were almost dissolved and it became a far more nuanced and centrist debate. In a sense, the vote and the resolutions proved that. Is that an odd example or, in your mind, is it rather typical of the outcomes we see from citizens' assemblies?

Tim Hughes: In my experience, it is quite typical. To the point I made earlier about the difference between debates and deliberations, debates set up a conversation in a way to win the argument. Deliberation, which is at the heart of something such as a citizens' assembly, weighs up the evidence and the pros and cons of different scenarios, ultimately looking for places where there are win-wins and everybody can, to some extent, agree. That is hard-baked into how a citizens' assembly works, because a lot of it is about looking for those points of agreement, but also

negotiating differences in a very respectful and constructive way, which often leads to finding other points of agreement.

In my experience of the 15 or so citizens' assemblies we have run in the last couple of years, there is opportunity with the public to find a very nuanced and constructive solution to often very difficult issues. One that we are running at the moment is on hate crime, which could, in some contexts, immediately be a very polarising topic. Through a citizens' assembly, we have managed to have an incredibly constructive and respectful conversation about how to tackle an issue such as hate crime.

Professor Graham Smith: This is an interesting problem for tech design. The keyboard warriors, as they are often referred to, are out there, and they represent extremes. If you spend any time on Twitter or Facebook, they love this kind of environment. Creating an environment in which the most passionate are not in control of things is the challenge. Citizens' assemblies are a particular way of doing that, but other technologies, digital and face to face, do too. There is something about trying to create a political space where the extremes do not dominate. That is as true in Parliament as it is with digital technology or in a citizens' assembly. We know that this space is incredibly different from the space down the road where debates happen. In face-to-face and digital engagement, we create different kinds of spaces. Some of them are dominated by extremes; others are not.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I am going to echo both of these contributions. One of the hardest things is stripping out the extremes. You can create digital environments that do that, but it puts an awful lot on the individual to engage in the way you want them to. It is a question of how you make it worth an individual's time, when it is really easy to throw out an opinion on Twitter. You can do it on the bus on the way home and you do not have to think very much about it—although maybe you should. The more you try to curate a debate or deliberation, the harder it is to engage and the more effort the individual has to put in, so the less likely it is to be universally used. Unfortunately, that is just the way with digital. If people have to jump through hoops, you lose them at every step of the way. It is a difficulty that has not been successfully surmounted yet, but it is something for the future.

Professor Graham Smith: I will add something which fits exactly what you are talking about. There is some wonderfully designed argument-visualisation software out there, which allows you to understand the dimensions of the debate. They are really cleverly put together, but they are not much fun for the user. They are used to Twitter and Facebook, and this is trying to construct the space so that we understand what the arguments are. They are very cleverly done but, as you say, users do not find it as much fun.

Baroness Kidron: Can you send us links to those?

Professor Graham Smith: Yes, and I can send you a bit of research on that as well.

Q271 **Lord Lucas:** Although the official evaluation is not ready yet, can we learn anything from the Government's Innovation in Democracy Programme? Can we learn anything from the way Delib and its international equivalents have been used in the UK to point ways in which we ought to encourage development?

Tim Hughes: My organisation, Involve, led delivery of the Innovation in Democracy programme. We can learn a lot from it. One aspect is the power of combining these different approaches to engaging the public. In all three pilots, citizens' assemblies were at the heart of the process, but there was digital engagement around those processes to ensure that residents and others could feed into them and knew what was happening in the room, so there is a transparency element as well. However, the time pressures and the challenges of a policy process often make that quite difficult to do in a meaningful way. It requires significant political and officer leadership in local government to ensure a really well-structured engagement process.

We have seen — this is a typical experience from many other citizens' assemblies — that people come in feeling very disaffected, either with how they have not been engaged in decisions in the past or with the form of that engagement. They often leave with a bit of fire in the belly, in that they want to be much more engaged in local decision-making in the future. That is incredibly positive but creates challenges. A citizens' assembly is a specific process. It has a moment in time. When local government, Parliament and others commission these processes, it is important to think about how they sustain that level of engagement beyond the citizens' assembly.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: It was a really good process. It is quite nice when people come to you and say, "We really want to do this but we want to talk to you about it first" instead of going straight out to procure something digital for it. It made the outcomes a lot more beneficial than they could have been, to have that deliberative process about how best to go about it, where digital might fit in and that kind of thing.

Tim was being really polite when he just referred to time pressures. It is really difficult to do anything high quality when someone says to you, in November, "We have this money but we have to have it spent by 31 March". I know this will not be news to you, but those time pressures mean you are running around and trying to get things signed off, get things implemented, talk to people and rush through a process that should be better thought out, just for the sake of the money coming out of the door on 31 March. That could definitely be improved on.

Professor Graham Smith: I was on the advisory board for it. I have not seen the evaluation yet but someone at mySociety, the digital partner in the project, wrote a really nice piece about how digital could be used.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: It was Alex.

Professor Graham Smith: It included ideas for using argument-visualisation software. I know everybody would have liked to try them, but the time constraints Rebecca was just talking about meant they were unable to be implemented. There is a lot of enthusiasm out there but, unfortunately, some of the procurement timescales that Governments and local government work on do not help us when we are trying to innovate.

The Chair: Try Committee timescales.

Q272 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** Clearly, you have been heavily engaged in this process. I am interested in the question of who properly engages with it. I rather suspect that there is a social-class bias in this and that, when they have finally been convinced to commit the time, the people who immerse themselves the most will be pushy and middle class. Somebody is shaking their head already. Convince me.

Professor Graham Smith: Those of us involved in this are careful to ensure that does not happen, because we know that, if you just put a general invite out there, there will be a white, middle-class bias to it.

Lord Harris of Haringey: I accept that you socially stratify it, but it goes beyond that. You have socially stratified it and people, however many, have come to the first meeting. It is about the ones who will push themselves forward within that group.

Professor Graham Smith: As a bit of evidence on that, first, this big group of 50 to 100 people break down into smaller tables of between six and 10 people with a facilitator. We did a project just after the Brexit referendum called the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit, where we could do much more research on these than you normally could. The one thing we found, which were quite amazed by, was that the talking time across every differentiation we had selected on was exactly the same. There was no statistical difference on class, gender or any other variable we selected on. That is because these are facilitated spaces, and those facilitators ensure that different voices are heard. If you just put 50 people in a room and let them go, exactly what you say is going to happen.

I would recommend going to one, just for half a day, and seeing what it is like inside. I have yet to see someone who has gone to one and said, "These do not work in the way you are saying". It sounds hard to believe but they really are incredibly well-facilitated spaces.

Lord Harris of Haringey: I can believe you, but it will not work in a digital context.

Professor Graham Smith: It is much harder. People have tried to do digital mini-publics such as this online. They have been much shorter, but they have used Zoom to bring 10 or 15 people together with a facilitator. You can do it, but people will not stay in front of a screen for five days, so it needs to be much more focused. But you can have well-facilitated groups online and there are technologies to do that.

Tim Hughes: The academic evidence Graham presented backs up what we have always felt and experienced through these processes. The personal stories that come out through citizens' assemblies are incredible to see. People can come into those contexts feeling quite timid but, throughout the process, they build up their confidence to speak and, by the end of it, they are presenting their recommendations to the council. They would never have thought or dreamed of doing that when they entered the room. It is built into the process that you build up people's willingness to engage throughout and, as Graham said, equalise those power imbalances.

Q273 **Lord Lucas:** This sounds like quite a high-cost, big-problem solution for little things: "Should the council should be allowed to hold 21 days of late-night rock concerts in our local park?" That is a real example, and not even the local councillors were told about it; it was entirely evolved by the officers. Does digital provide a way of engaging more than the local activist making objections in the system? Is there a way forward there, and a way forward to allow a local community to evolve ideas of what they would like to happen, prior to presenting them to the representative system?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I absolutely think so. It is very easy to design a platform that can be used for contact in specific communities or areas. One of the biggest problems with that kind of issue, for instance, is that those who pile on and protest might not be people who live nearby; it might be people who just like to protest about live music. You get a better quality of engagement if you can limit those interactions and consultations to fairly short bursts with the people you believe will be affected by it.

Again, that still takes some cerebral engagement on the part of the council, for instance, to say, "It might not be just the residents of these streets or these areas who are affected. Does it affect people coming into the area, parking and going to work, for instance? Does it affect these businesses in the night-time economy?" Building a platform and a method of engaging with these people on something that is not big-world life-changing is not difficult. What is difficult is getting them to engage with you and making sure that whatever opinions are sourced through that are representative of the local area.

The Chair: I have a question, but I will withdraw it on the grounds that rock concerts are not within our remit.

Q274 **Lord Holmes of Richmond:** Good afternoon. My friend Lord Lucas has always been less interested the age of rock than the Rock of Ages. I will move on from that. Is it desirable for government or local government to operate new, democratic technology platforms to gain public input, or would it gain more independence as a civil society initiative?

Professor Graham Smith: There is writing on this by Stephen Coleman at Leeds, who argued for what he called a Civic Commons in Cyberspace. He argued that an arm's-length agency, which could be civil-society

based, should be entrusted to run the consultations that government needs, because government is not trusted in these areas. There is a reason why you might want to do that and why will probably be a bit more creative and innovative. Would government take an arm's-length body seriously? I do not know. In short, it is good to explore the idea of a third party. It is a way of potentially ensuring quality and a voice for the consultees in government, because it comes from a third party. There are good reasons to explore the idea of a third party acting here.

Tim Hughes: Let me give you more of a general answer. There is a Venn diagram of forms of participation that work for the public and those that work for institutions. The secret to this is finding the overlap between the two. As Graham said, there are good reasons to think that things driven by civil society are more likely to work for the public but, if we miss out how they work for institutions, they will have no impact and ultimately, therefore, will not work for the public either. We need to find that space in the middle. It might be to have forms of civil society that have roots in institutions or vice versa. There needs to be a form of quasi-arrangement that combines the two.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: Civil society adds legitimacy to the process and provides the critical aspect to government. It is much easier for government and civil society to work together on innovative projects such as this if Parliament or Government are already in a position where the data is in a good way and all the data required is already there. It just needs to be extracted and used to generate a new thing, or it is there to be built upon. It is more difficult when civil society is talking to one person in Parliament or government who wants to do a digital democracy project, but that person has no relationship with the people doing the digital things. With the advent of GDS and the Parliamentary Digital Service, that has got much better over the last five years, but we quite often end up having dual conversations with people from one area who want to do something that requires the expertise and sign-off of people in a completely different place. Unifying the voice that you speak to civil society with before you even go out to a tender like that is really important.

Q275 **Baroness Kidron:** Rebecca, you hinted at this earlier. Is there a danger that, if you consult people well and there is no proper process for that information to be impactful, even if it is rejected ultimately, you might create more problems than you solve? Could you speak to that?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: It is borne out in all the research. People are willing to engage once. If they have a positive interaction, that does not necessarily mean they get what they want but they at least have that positive interaction. That can mean an email once a month saying, "Since you participated, this is happening". "Thank you for your email about X. I cannot solve that problem because I am not in charge of that, but it has been sent on to this person". Whichever level at which people interact with government or Parliament, they mostly just want a meaningful response that shows someone has listened and can do something or

there is a good reason why not. Closing that feedback loop is really important.

The Chair: Would you go along with that, Tim?

Tim Hughes: Yes, absolutely. Our mantra has always been that bad engagement is worse than no engagement at all, for exactly those reasons.

Professor Graham Smith: We have spent a lot of time over the last few months persuading people not to run citizens' assemblies. They come to us saying, "We want to run a citizens' assembly". When we ask why, they say, "It is because we want to run a citizens' assembly". Do not do it unless you have some reason for doing it.

Q276 **Baroness McGregor-Smith:** To what extent is a lack of funding a limitation on the civic technology sector? What could government do to ensure that the sector is sustainable in the long term? Give us three key points, because that is probably quite a long one.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I will step in. I am sure most of you know TheyWorkForYou, which is one of our sites. It is one of the original civic techy-type sites. It is utterly maddening trying to sustain services that we know people want and find useful, and to innovate on the side to develop those services for the future. A lot of the time, we have to choose. We know that a significant amount of traffic to TheyWorkForYou comes from within this building, from this IP, so we know that you guys find it useful, but no one pays us to do it. We get no money at all to run that website, yet hundreds of thousands of people use it every day, especially in the lead-up to elections and that kind of thing. We regularly have the conversation internally: "Should we just shut it down?" It requires a lot of maintenance. It is expensive paying developers, who are highly skilled people, to maintain that site. We cannot just press a button and it is fine until the next election. It is a significant cost running these kinds of technologies that are innovative when they first come out but then become established.

It also means we do not have the human capacity or financial capacity to really innovate at the cutting edge any more, especially when you have to fit in with different procurement activities or whichever thing is sexy at this point, whether it is citizens' assemblies or participatory budgeting. We spoke earlier about the budgeting cycle. Especially if you are working with government, you tend to have a conversation in January with someone saying, "We are going to have this budget sign-off in April". Then that budget sign-off happens in August, and you do not get started until October, so you have three or four months, with Christmas in between, to finish the project. Those kinds of things impact our ability to innovate and continue to exist.

Baroness McGregor-Smith: What is the ask?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: It would be great if budgeting cycles were less egregious in trying to get everything done within a very small window of

time. Core support for organisations that do this kind of work would be enormously helpful. We are not an expensive charity. We do not even have an office; we all work from home — which is great at the moment, with the self-isolating thing.

Professor Graham Smith: Yes, except when you have to come to places like this.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I do not know how that works with government procurement rules but, if you have a pool of 10 charities in these areas that you want doing innovative work for you, you could support them with their core staff to go away and meaningfully think about these things, rather than, every now and again, saying, “Oh, mySociety does digital democracy stuff. Can you come over and help us with XYZ? We need you to do X in three months”. We need a better planning cycle and more appreciation that we are there to help. None of our organisations is here to antagonise the establishment. We want to make things better. Financing for us to exist would be a really good start.

Professor Graham Smith: There is a real problem with the business model here, and you have alluded to it. It is a Cinderella industry. How does the tech industry make its money? It makes its money through advertising and through selling data, neither of which mySociety does. We are expecting civic tech to survive in that kind of business. We have used Facebook for engagement. We were doing a broad engagement and, suddenly, UKIP adverts turned up because of two or three of the people on the site. Everyone thought, “It is not a fair process”. Of course, that was just the algorithms of Facebook. These sites do not appear by magic, and the business model is deeply problematic here for civic tech.

Tim Hughes: This reflects a broader problem that we undervalue and underinvest in our democracy as a whole. Organisations like ours have struggled for a number of years now due to lack of investment. Our democracy as a whole has suffered from a lack of investment and time put into thinking through how we can improve it and make decisions in the most effective way possible.

In relation to civic tech and digital democracy specifically, there is also an issue with where the money that exists goes. Everybody wants the latest innovative, shiny app that gets designed and then nobody uses it. The nuts-and-bolts stuff that people do use suffers from underinvestment, so we have to think a little more about what we value and what will have an impact.

Q277 **Baroness Kidron:** It is arguable that TheyWorkForYou should be a function of the parliamentary website. Were that to be offered, do you see a trust issue as soon as it becomes part of the institution? Is there a sense in which you would like to be a third party but paid for?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: There are arguments for both. My chief executive is not here.

Baroness Kidron: You are not prepared to make either.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: I do not know if he is watching.

Baroness Kidron: He can phone in.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: Ideally, Parliament should be doing most of what TheyWorkForYou does anyway. Most of the data comes from Parliament. You produce it. It is just horrible, the way you present it. It is much easier and much more user-friendly on TheyWorkForYou, especially for people who do not really understand how this institution is structured, which tab they need to drop down on or how to access things. It is a user journey, as we were talking about earlier, that is far better for people on TheyWorkForYou. Yes, a couple of aspects of it would not be good for Parliament to do, such as the algorithms that say, "This person broadly voted in favour of this particular thing". I understand why it would not be appropriate for the Parliamentary Digital Service to do that. Generally, we would be very happy if we were a paid third party for it, although ideally Parliament should be producing a lot of that in a user-friendly way, assuming you want people to use it.

Professor Graham Smith: There is a challenge to thinking that Parliament and local authorities can do so much, because they can be a dead hand on creativity and innovation. It is nothing personal, but yours is quite a nimble organisation and you are keeping up with technology. One reason why Parliament and local government do what they do is a half-dependency on the technology they have in-house. There is a danger of saying, "Parliament should do this". Sometimes, it is Parliament saying, "We will pay for this service from another organisation that is better positioned to do it".

Q278 **The Chair:** That was exactly the question I wanted to ask. The element of "not invented here" creeps in. I spent a fair amount of time, more than a decade ago, trying to help the BBC Parliamentary Unit get better camera positions, and literally persuading the authorities that society would not collapse if we had cutaways. We had some tiny wins, but it is a question that has been asked several times. With Democracy Live, *Hansard* and you, there is a natural coalition here. You are just looking for it to be constantly explored, improved and developed. Possibly the brake on that is Parliament itself. Is that what you are saying, Rebecca?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: It possibly is. We can use only the data that Parliament gives us. For instance, last year, there was controversy because we were not putting on TheyWorkForYou when female MPs were on maternity leave. We would love to do that, but Parliament did not produce that data. We do not have the resources to keep track of every MP and check if or when they are on maternity leave, when they get back or if anyone is doing work for them. There is a limitation on what we can do, based on the data you provide. We can continue to innovate as and when more data becomes available. As Graham said, we are probably better positioned to innovate with that new data than the Parliamentary Digital Service itself.

The Chair: If we were to recommend a convening power used by

Parliament to constantly check with you and other interested parties to make sure the game is raised, would that be useful?

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: That would be very useful, yes.

Professor Graham Smith: Yes, with some cash.

Q279 **The Chair:** The very last question is nice and simple. If Government or Parliament could do one thing to better use technology to support democracy, what, in your view, would it be?

Tim Hughes: My one thing would be not to focus on the technology. It goes back to the earlier point about how you link it to decisions and to problems and make it have impact within the institution.

Dr Rebecca Rumbul: More important than technology itself is civic education at a much earlier point, as well as embedding an understanding and an educational element into any digital tool, so people understand exactly what is going to happen with their input and how it works in a wider institutional context.

Professor Graham Smith: Assuming those two things have been done, there is a really interesting programme or agency to be created that has a focus on blending face to face and digital, which is problem focused. It would say, "If we have this problem, how can we use digital and face-to-face technologies together?" and not just say, "This is a digital programme; this is a face-to-face programme", recognising that these things can be blended.

The Chair: I am very tempted at that point to say you can take the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare.

Professor Graham Smith: Yes, and one digital platform.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed.