

Digital and e-democracy

The terms digital and e-democracy both refer to the developments on the internet and social media that relate to the way in which democracy, in its broadest sense, operates in the UK. Digital democracy also refers more specifically to the use of social media by groups that seek to spread influence.

Essentially digital and e-democracy achieve the following objectives:

- They help to inform the general public more effectively than traditional media about political issues. This can be done quickly — when a new issue emerges — and more thoroughly, as much more information and opinion is available than has been the case in the past.
- They allow organisations to mount political campaigns and to spread their views even when they have relatively modest financial and administrative resources.
- They allow people to participate more readily and effectively in political action. This may be simply by becoming more informed, but may also lead to them expressing and disseminating political views, participating in polls and referendums or even taking part in direct action.

Box 1 Hillsborough

To date probably the most important e-petition was the one concerning the Hillsborough football disaster. In 1989, 96 Liverpool football supporters were crushed to death at the start of an FA Cup semi-final at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield. For many years campaigners sought to have police files concerning the incident revealed in the belief that the police were largely to blame for the disaster. An e-petition gathered 156,216 signatures and this forced a parliamentary backbench committee to order a debate on the issue. As a result of this and a motion in the House of Commons the files have been released and fresh inquests are now being held to discover the cause of death of the victims.

They have become key channels of communication between the governed and government. Opinion is expressed clearly to government while government itself can also send out information effectively.

Four examples of digital and e-democracy are described and exemplified below.

E-petitions

There are two main ways in which e-petitions are held on the internet:

- One is the government's own site, which allows members of the public to instigate a petition or to place their vote on existing referendums (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk>). Many local authorities also have access to petitions.

The other is through a wide variety of organisations that run their own polls, such as 38 Degrees.

Such petitions are able to put pressure on government and Parliament to consider issues they might otherwise ignore (Box 1). In 2014 some prominent e-petitions included:

- **Cervical smear tests for younger women: 'Sophie's choice'.** This had collected over 300,000 supporters by summer 2014 on the Downing Street site. Young women denied screening for cervical cancer are being put at risk. This petition seeks to extend the right to such screening to younger women.
- **Anti-FGM.** This is also on the Downing Street site. By June 2014 over 100,000 people had supported the idea of making female genital mutilation (female circumcision, known as FGM) illegal.
- **Recall power.** There is a petition on the 38 Degrees site (www.38degrees.org.uk) urging government to make good a party commitment to giving constituency voters the power to 'recall' MPs they feel have behaved badly and to force them to face a by-election. This site had 68,000 supporters by June 2014.

The government's e-petitions website

The screenshot shows the HM Government e-petitions website. At the top, it says 'e-petitions – create and sign petitions online'. Below this is a search bar with the text 'Search for an e-petition to sign' and a 'Search' button. There are links for 'View all e-petitions' and 'View e-petitions by government department'. A purple banner states 'e-petitions will be taking a break on 30 March 2015 as Parliament prepares for the General Election'. Below this is a section titled 'Trending e-petitions' with the subtext 'Most active e-petitions in the last hour. Page last updated 09:20 BST.' There are six cards showing trending petitions:

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| Driver receives maximum sentence of 14 years per person that has been killed. 15,810 total signatures 82 signed in the last hour | Reflux 1,195 total signatures 45 signed in the last hour |
| Ban Surface Dressing roads 10,931 total signatures 42 signed in the last hour | Terminology used when making an Edwards Syndrome / T18 diagnosis 6,027 total signatures 31 signed in the last hour |
| Grain Equal Pay campaign to get Section 78 of the Equality Act enacted 5,839 total signatures 13 signed in the last hour | Chris Grayling should resign from office immediately 225 total signatures 11 signed in the last hour |

At the bottom, there is a link: 'See more trending e-petitions'.

Box 2 Twitter campaigns

Twitter campaigns can backfire. UKIP's 'Why I'm voting Ukip' trended in the wrong direction. Two examples are shown below:

#Why I'm voting Ukip: because a woman's place is in the home, a gay man's place is in the closet and a black man's place is Bongo-Bongo land. (@Lisekit)

#Why I'm voting Ukip: because life is hard when you're a middle class, heterosexual white male in the UK & we need to help this oppressed minority. (@SarahNazH)

Blogs and Twitter

Blogs are regular articles posted on the internet through various media. They are mostly accessed by better informed members of the public (the 'political classes'). Some blogs by prominent commentators are influential. They are a means by which politicians can communicate directly with their party's supporters and by which commentators can help to set the political agenda.

Important political blogs can be found on sites such as:

- Conservative Home (www.conservativehome.com)
- Left Foot Forward (www.leftfootforward.org)
- Liberal Democrat Voice (www.libdemvoice.org)

Twitter is used by politicians, commentators and the public to disseminate rapid reaction to political events. On Twitter, when a particular issue trends, political views can be spread very rapidly (Box 2).

E-campaigns

Prominent pressure groups and other campaign organisations, such as 38 Degrees, can organise political campaigns efficiently and quickly by using the internet. These may

Box 3 Zero-hours contracts

In 2014, 38 Degrees organised an e-mail campaign concerning zero-hours contracts. It asked thousands of concerned people to bombard the employment minister with mail, urging her to consider legislation to control zero-hours contracts that are considered by many to be unfair and against the interests of workers. This campaign is helping to bring the issue of such contracts to the top of the political agenda as the parties prepare for the 2015 general election.

involve direct action (see section on 'Direct action' below), but can also involve thousands of people sending similar protest letters to their MP, mass lobbies of Parliament and mass e-mailing campaigns to members of the central or local government or Parliament (Box 3).

Barack Obama in the USA successfully conducted an e-mail campaign during his presidential campaign in 2012. It seems only a matter of time before this practice comes to the UK. Pressure group campaigns, especially at local level, are already being conducted by e-mail.

Direct action

Social media in particular have increased the ability of campaign groups to organise direct action as a way of mobilising public opinion on an issue. This is because it is now possible to communicate with large numbers of people at short notice. This has led to many examples of demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience emerging as part of the weaponry of various pressure groups. Particular examples have included:

- anti-fracking groups establishing camps at new exploration sites (Box 4)
- local demonstrations against HS2 (the proposal to build a new high speed rail link between London, Birmingham and the north of England)
- the Occupy movement, which campaigns against the excesses of the financial institutions

Such direct action has always been used by 'outsider' pressure groups, but social media and the internet has made the process more extensive and efficient.

Do they enhance or threaten democracy?

Enhance?

Digital and e-democracy enhance democracy in a number of ways:

Box 4 Barton Moss

Near Salford, Manchester, there is an anti-fracking camp in permanent residence. From time to time this local campaign organises larger protests, special demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience which gain considerable publicity. It is able to do this because the organisers can contact many supporters at short notice to meet for such action. In this way, the fracking issue is constantly being brought to the attention of decision makers and the public.

The screenshot shows the 38 Degrees website. At the top, it says '38 Degrees brings you together with other people to take action on the issues that matter to you and bring about real change.' There is a counter for '15,825,351 PETITION SIGNERS' and a 'JOIN ME' button. Below this are several campaign cards, including 'SAVE OUR NHS', 'JEREMY HUNT DON'T CLOSE OUR OP SERVICES', 'STOP TYPING', and 'STOP BILLING MANS TO BRAM'. At the bottom, there is a section titled 'Petitions on the 38 Degrees website, August 2014'.

- They increase democratic participation, bringing in people who may not have the inclination, ability or time to participate in more conventional ways such as party membership or activism in pressure groups.
- They make for a better informed electorate on political issues.
- They communicate directly between government and the governed.
- They enhance pluralism — the wider dispersal of influence and the greater access of groups in society to decision makers. They prevent powerful, elitist groups who have concentrated power from having exclusive access to government.

Threaten?

The uses of the internet and social media may threaten democracy, or be simply undemocratic, in a number of senses:

- They give greater access to the public mind to extremist, anti-democratic groups, such as those that recommend violent resistance, illegal methods or that incite racial or religious intolerance.
- Though they disseminate information, the general public may not be able to distinguish between truths and distortions of the truth, or between fact and opinion.
- Government may be heavily influenced by short-term, 'populist' campaigns that do not reflect wider, national public opinion.

Neil McNaughton is the author of *Edexcel Government and Politics for AS*, 4th edn, 2012, Hodder Education.