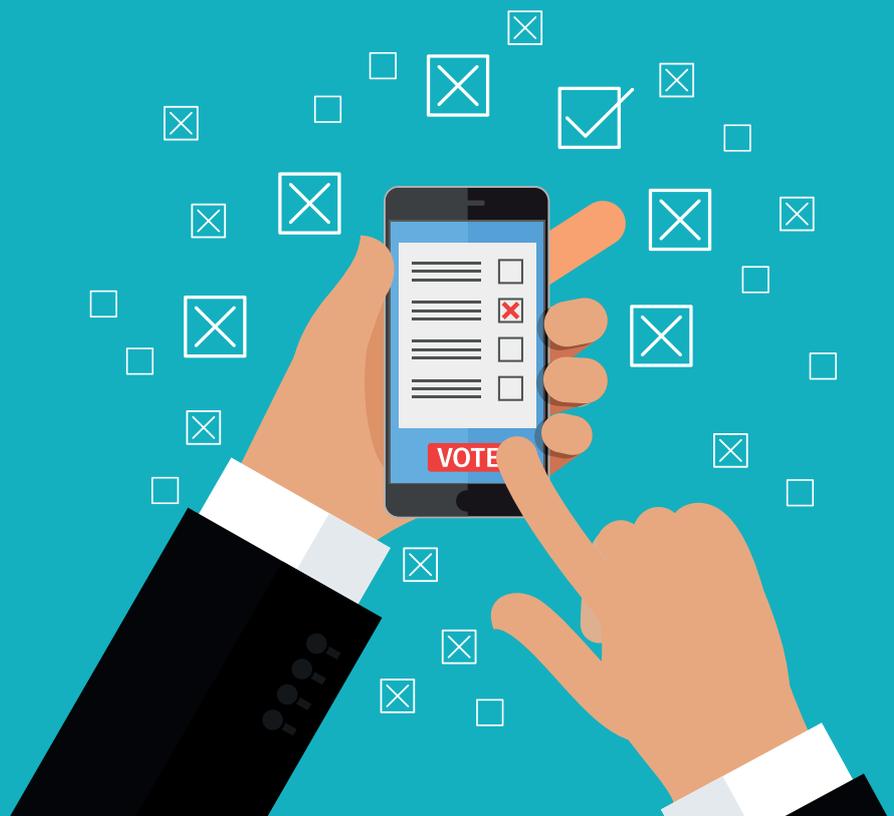


# Civic engagement

How can digital technologies underpin citizen-powered democracy?

Talitha Dubow



An overview of the consultation on civic engagement held as part of the Corsham Institute Thought Leadership Programme 2017

This report was produced following a consultation at St George's House, as part of a programme of events in the Corsham Institute 2017 Thought Leadership Programme.

This report should be read in conjunction with the 'Building our Connected Society' summary report and the perspective papers from the series (which are available at [www.randeurope.org/connectedsociety](http://www.randeurope.org/connectedsociety) and <https://corshaminstitute.org/research>). The consultations in the 2017 programme were:

Digital learning: Digital technology's role in enabling skills development for a connected world – March 2017

Open science: the citizen's role and contribution to research – April 2017

Currency: Redefining the way we transact in a digital world – May 2017

Civic engagement: How can digital technology encourage greater engagement in civil society? – June 2017

This programme hosted at St George's House was developed in partnership by Corsham Institute and RAND Europe.



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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., and Cambridge, UK

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## Foreword

The pervasiveness and ubiquity of all things digital has accelerated over the past 20 years and continues to grow exponentially. Digital technology is becoming increasingly intertwined with everyday life: from schooling and education, to political engagement and even financial and health management. Developments in digital technology, and the speed at which they emerge, drive innovation and new applications that touch our lives in different and often profound ways. While there are numerous opportunities and aspirations associated with digitalisation, there is also a crucial need to understand and mitigate the challenges it presents to society.<sup>1</sup>

In partnership, Corsham Institute and RAND Europe design and deliver an annual programme of Thought Leadership at St

George's House. From its inception in 2016, the aim of the programme has been to explore the opportunities and challenges that digital technologies are creating within different aspects of society.

The Civic Engagement Consultation on 26 and 27 June 2017 was the last of the four consultations that took place as part of the 2017 Thought Leadership Programme. Other events in the series focused on:

- Education and skill
- Open science
- Currency and the future of transacting

'Building our Connected Society', a summary of the key findings identified across the four events in the 2017 Thought Leadership Programme, is published alongside this report.

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1 For more information, visit:  
<https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/corsham-institute-thought-leadership-programme.html> or  
<https://www.corshaminstitute.org/research/>

## Background

The increasing use of digital technologies has transformed the ways in which we interact, relate to others, and access and consume information. In many contexts, 'society' is arguably now more tangibly felt in the digital sphere than in the 'offline' world. Not only do digital technologies provide a way to connect with others across the globe, innovation in this space also offers newly enhanced and expanded opportunities for citizens to directly participate in civil society action and in democratic processes more broadly. Blogs, petition platforms, crowdfunding sites, e-voting and other online forums and tools offer new means for individuals to contribute to shaping political debate and drive 'real-world' change. By strengthening citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-state relationships, digital technologies have the potential to reinvigorate a more 'citizen-powered' democracy; such a democracy might see citizens having a more direct determining influence on democratic processes, underpinned by closer and more responsive citizen–state interactions, and broader public representation in these processes.

However, the use of digital technologies to make progress towards a more effective citizen-powered democracy is not a straightforward innovation. The increasingly digital nature of our interactions and experiences has been accompanied by, and in some cases has catalysed, significant change in the offline sphere. Globalisation, demographic shifts and economic uncertainty can all contribute to the destabilisation of traditional communities and identities, potentially undermining societal cohesion and public trust in, and satisfaction with, political

systems. Concerns have also been raised that the increasing prominence of 'fake facts' and extremist views in the online sphere signals a shift towards a 'post-truth' era, in which the value of robust evidence in decision making processes has been diminished. Moreover, the increasing personalisation of our online experience, shaped by the 'filter bubble' or 'echo chamber', appears to be contributing to the increasing fragmentation of public discourse instead of strengthening our 'imagined community'. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether online activism actually translates into positive social change in the offline world, and whether the increasing use of digital technologies actually facilitates or hinders greater social inclusion: discrepancies in digital access and skills may in fact push some voices to the margins, rather than encourage greater inclusion within society.

With these considerations in mind, the overarching question for the consultation was agreed with participants as follows:

### How can digital technologies underpin citizen-powered democracy?

The consultation was held at St George's House. As is the case for all Thought Leadership consultations, our discussions were held under 'The St George's House Protocol' and 'The Chatham House Rule'.<sup>2</sup> Participants at the event included figures from academia, industry, government and third-sector organisations (for a full list, see page 22).

Ahead of the consultation, a short thought-piece was developed for the participants in order to provide background information on

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See: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule>

some of the issues as well as set the scene for the discussions.<sup>3</sup>

The following report gives an overview of the discussions between the participants over the two-day consultation. It aims to capture preliminary ideas as to how the use of digital technologies might be shaped to create maximum benefit to democratic society, as well as recommendations for further research that may be required. It should also be noted that the views and proposals contained in this report may not necessarily be endorsed by everybody involved in the consultation.

Section 1 of this report focuses on the current situation, providing an overview of the benefits

and challenges that the group identified as central to our discussions of how digital technologies can underpin citizen-powered democracy, and elaborating further on how these challenges might be addressed. Section 2 is future-oriented, presenting the group's vision of what a digitally supported, citizen-powered democracy might look like, and what the key characteristics of such a democracy would be. Section 3 looks more specifically at what kinds of digital tools could support this vision, and we conclude with some overarching reflections on the consultation discussions in section 4.

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3 Talitha Dubow, Axelle Devaux, Catriona Manville. *Civic Engagement: How Can Digital Technology Encourage Greater Engagement in Civil Society?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE253.html>. For a longer discussion of how these technological and social trends interact with political changes, see Stewart, Katherine, Talitha Dubow, Joanna Hofman & Christian Van Stolk. *Social Change and Public Engagement with Policy and Evidence*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1750.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1750.html)

## 1. Digital technologies for citizen-powered democracy: Challenges and opportunities

To begin to address the consultation question, our initial discussions focused on identifying the specific ways in which digital technologies can support democratic processes, and on the challenges that will need to be overcome in order to harness the potential of developments while also minimising risks to society. In considering the benefits that digital technologies can offer, the group emphasised that the greater use of digital technologies should not be considered an end in itself, but, rather, a means to an end. Our discussions therefore focussed on what these ends would be, and on potential strategies for mitigating the risks associated with the use of these technologies.

### Benefits: Tangible and potential

As outlined in the paragraphs below, the key benefits identified through these discussions are as follows:

- Sharing and interpreting data
- Strengthening citizen voices
- Facilitating social cohesion and support
- Supporting direct citizen participation in democratic processes

However, the degree to which digital technologies can strengthen citizen participation in democratic processes was felt to depend on the ability of digital technologies to mobilise higher levels of engagement and action from citizens across a broader spectrum of society. As discussed at the end of this section, participants expressed uncertainty in this regard and called for more evidence to support a better understanding of how civic engagement and participation can be mobilised through digital technologies.

### Sharing and interpreting data

Digital technologies can facilitate the generation and communication of data, often in real time, helping to build knowledge and inform timely decision making and action both by citizens and policymakers. Information shared online may also support political accountability – for example, citizens can easily see how a local political candidate has voted on certain issues, and whistle blowers can connect with global audiences. However, our discussions over the two days frequently returned to what participants called the difference between data and information. The availability of data is not enough on its own to support citizen-powered democracy; it must be analysed and presented in easily digestible formats if it is to serve the needs of citizens and policymakers alike. It was therefore suggested that digital technologies have a crucial role to play in helping to triage and synthesise large volumes or multiple sources of data, in order to provide stakeholders with relevant and useful information.

### Strengthening citizen voices

Digital technologies have brought new ways for individuals to get their voices heard in the public sphere. Our discussions highlighted that online communications are both horizontal and vertical; while social media and other platforms allow Internet users to share their views and connect with others across the globe, digital platforms also allow citizens to communicate directly with politicians and state institutions, as well as offering policymakers new channels to listen to and respond to the wider electorate.

### **Facilitating social cohesion and support**

Citizen-to-citizen online communications and connections, enabled by digital technology, can help to mobilise existing communities, as well as build new ones – unconstrained by size or geographic location. The group felt strongly that better networked communities can be more supportive, resilient and civically active. For example, in the case of a bereavement, the use of digital technologies may mean that members of a community are informed more quickly of the bereavement and may therefore be able to offer support to the bereaved more rapidly than would have been the case in an offline world. Moreover, if geographic remoteness means that an individual is unable to offer support in person, digital technologies, such as email and video conferencing tools, offer valuable alternative ways to connect. In this way, digital technologies can empower individuals to more easily and immediately respond to issues and to the needs of others, whether they choose to do this online or offline.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that mutually supportive online communities need not be based on the physical interactions around which offline communities are traditionally organised. Online communities are more often based on shared interests rather

than geographic co-location, and the anonymity with which individuals can belong to an online community also offers an important degree of freedom from an individual's offline identity. The group highlighted particular benefits that citizens can derive from this freedom to connect with others across the globe. For example, people may feel empowered to seek support from online communities where they might not feel comfortable to do so in their offline interactions with others. Furthermore, the visible growth of online global communities can translate into greater visibility, and public acceptance of, certain communities and interest groups in the offline sphere (as in the case of LGBTQ campaigns, for example).

### **Supporting direct citizen participation in democratic processes**

Participants noted diverse ways in which digital tools may empower citizens to take a more active role in shaping political processes, policymaking and public services. For example, greater state-to-public communication may result in more demand-led, user-driven public services – such as in the case of improvements to the passport application process or voter registration services in the UK, which have now been made much more convenient to use (see box below).

### The delivery of digital government services to the public

The digitisation of government services, such as passport applications and tax returns, which has been led by the Government Digital Service (GDS), has brought significant benefits in terms of efficiency and the accessibility of these services to the public. As different forms of digital technology are more widely adopted across government departments, participants felt this was also bringing additional benefits to civil servants and policymakers in three main areas:

- **Cost savings** can be generated through the automation of tasks, but also through the use of digital tools for remote working and collaboration. Such shifts in working practices may also help to break down silos between government departments.
- **Time-savings** may help to free up civil servants' time and energy for more creative, strategic tasks where they may add greater value to government work.
- Digital technologies – and in particular social media – present an opportunity for **greater interaction with the electorate**, which may in turn inform the improvement of services as citizens are put at the centre of government institutions' work.

Our discussions highlighted significant challenges which will need to be overcome if we are to maximise the potential of digital technologies to deliver the benefits mentioned above:

- The appropriate use of digital technologies to facilitate state-public communication will depend on shifting **mindsets and working cultures** and on upskilling individual civil servants to use these technologies with greater ease and confidence.
- The use of social media and private messaging platforms among civil servants and politicians may call for renewed consideration of the **professional norms and behaviours** that should govern these communications. This will be important both in the context of ensuring government transparency and in the shift towards individual politicians' and civil servants' greater personal engagement with the electorate.
- Building confidence in the use of digital technologies by government will also rely on addressing **security concerns**. It was highlighted that online interactions will rely on the verification of online identities, for which technological solutions, and societal acceptance of these, will be required. Furthermore, the digitalisation of services such as HMRC may expand opportunities to abuse the system – for example, phishing emails which seek to exploit citizens' lack of digital skills or lack of familiarity with e-services for criminal gain. It was therefore argued that the UK government needs to be more active in anticipating threats and in developing adequate responses to counter these threats as they advance and evolve.

The use of digital technologies by grassroots political campaigns was also highlighted as having had a critical impact on the rapid rise of certain political figures to prominence or positions of power. Specific digital tools that can expand and enhance mechanisms for citizen

involvement in democratic processes have also been developed. Such tools include, for example, platforms that involve citizens in the allocation of local government budgets, or that seek citizen views and inputs into policy formulation. We noted, however, that these tools are at present

not widely used and that their impacts on democratic processes are still uncertain.<sup>4</sup>

### Digital technologies for mobilising engagement

Reflecting on the various ways in which digital technologies may support citizen-powered democracy through information sharing, knowledge building, community capacity building, state-to-public communication, and more convenient and enhanced mechanisms for public involvement in democratic processes, our discussions questioned whether digital technologies are actually increasing and broadening citizen participation in democratic life, or whether digital technologies are simply substituting offline engagement practices or facilitating the engagement of individuals who are already civically active.

It was suggested that the community-based nature of social media platforms means that there may be some degree of peer pressure exerted through visible activity within online communities; for example, individuals who sign up to social media platforms in order to feel socially included may then feel more inclined to keep themselves informed about particular political issues that their online peers engage with, because they feel pressure to 'keep up' with the conversation.

Participants wondered whether there may also be a 'second-order effect' associated with the use of digital technologies, namely, whether engagement with information or civic activity online increases the likelihood that citizens

will translate these acquired or strengthened behaviours into their offline activity. Participants were unsure about this and highlighted that, currently, there is very little shared understanding about what motivates citizens to engage civically either digitally or offline, or about what then prompts active participation in democratic processes. Such insight was felt to be essential for the development of digital strategies that can really contribute to a citizen-powered democracy.

We concluded that the potential of digital technologies for citizen-powered democracy can be summarised into two different types of opportunity:

- **Lowering barriers:** Digital technologies have the potential to lower the barriers for civic engagement and action. For example, by making the exchange and provision of information easier and more effective, by strengthening the voice of citizens in the public sphere, and by facilitating community support and cohesion.
- **Transformative disruption:** Digital technologies have the potential to transform democratic processes through the introduction of new mechanisms and practices, for example, by enabling more direct participation in democratic decision making and by mobilising greater participation from people whose political engagement has traditionally been lower.

However, it was acknowledged that the second area of opportunity remains less understood and still untapped.

4 For example, research by RAND Europe which fed in to the World Bank's social protection strategy was highlighted as showing that, where citizens have been given the opportunity to provide input into policymaking processes, they have had little impact on policy outcomes – in this case because the policy discussions were too technical and citizens were therefore disinclined to engage. For the World Bank papers, see Bassett, Lucy, Sarah Giannozzi, Lucian Pop & Dena Ringold. 2012. *Rules, Roles and Controls: Governance in Social Protection with an Application to Social Assistance*. [Social Protection & Labor Discussion Paper 1206.] Washington: World Bank. As of 16 August 2017: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/430578-1331508552354/1206.pdf> ; Ringold, Dena, Alaka Holla, Margaret Koziol & Santhosh Srinivasan. 2011. *Citizens and Service Delivery: Assessing the Use of Social Accountability Approaches in Human Development Sectors*. [Abstract.] Washington: World Bank. As of 16 August 2017: <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/978-0-8213-8980-5>

## Challenges

The case to be made for the value of using digital technologies to support citizen-powered democracy needs to be considered within the context of challenges (both real and potential) that pose significant risks to democratic processes and the strength of our democracy more generally.

In addition to ambiguity surrounding the ability of digital technologies to mobilise greater civic engagement, the following further risks were identified during our discussions:

- **Less inclusivity in democratic life:** Discrepancies in the use of digital technologies by different demographic groups could result in some groups being disproportionately over- or under-represented in public fora.
- **Radicalisation of public discourse and political opinion:** The algorithmic organisation of online content (sometimes termed the ‘filter bubble’ or ‘echo-chamber’ effects), together with the rapid spread of misinformation online, could contribute to isolating Internet users from alternative or divergent perspectives, reinforcing existing ideas or prejudices, inflaming and polarising public discourse, and undermining societal cohesion. These factors could also lead to misinformed decision making and, in some cases, acts of violent extremism.
- **Inappropriate use of digital technologies:** A lack of transparency and public understanding of the way in which digital technologies are developed and used, or could be used, has led to concerns relating to the potential misuse and abuse of digital technologies by different stakeholders

(for example, with the exploitation of personal data, the use of social networks to influence election campaigns and the use of collaborative information sharing sites for propaganda).

- **Low levels of trust in digitalised political processes:** Security concerns, as well as cynicism among citizens that their participation in online political processes will not influence policy outcomes, may undermine the uptake of digital services and democratic tools, thus limiting their potential impacts.

During the two-day consultation period, we paid greater attention to how these challenges might be addressed and by whom. The paragraphs below outline our thinking in this regard.

### Building digital skills

As mentioned previously, participants were particularly concerned about the need to address potential risks to inclusivity in democratic life. This is based on the premise that the youngest and oldest age groups are the least likely to be represented in citizen-powered democracy; young people tend to demonstrate lower rates of participation in democratic processes more generally, and lower rates of digital skills among older generations mean that such groups are less likely to be represented in the digital sphere.

This discussion highlighted, however, that inclusivity in the digital sphere does not only come down to age;<sup>5</sup> it is more complex, and primarily to do with skills, which relates to social demographics, class as well as age. The group therefore argued that, if we are to encourage more inclusive participation in democratic life, educational programmes are needed to give

5 On digital skills, see Grand-Clement, Sarah, Axelle Devaux, Julie Bélanger & Catriona Manville. 2017. *Digital learning: Education and skills in the digital age*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation. As of 12 October 2017: [www.rand.org/t/CF369](http://www.rand.org/t/CF369).

citizens the skills they will require to interact and participate online with confidence and with minimal risk to their safety.

Building on the findings of a previous consultation, on digital learning, we noted that, while upskilling children and young people to effectively engage with digital tools represents the greatest potential for a sea change in terms of citizen-powered democracy, it will also be important to increase parents' and teachers' digital literacy in order to enable them to support this process.

### **Building skills for citizenship**

In addition to requiring efforts to address the 'hard' digital skills gaps discussed above, participants stressed that making progress towards a more citizen-powered democracy will also depend on fostering stronger citizenship skills.

Empathy and critical thinking were highlighted as particularly crucial skills for good citizenship; empathy was considered fundamental to positive social interactions and relationships and a sense of community, whereas critical thinking skills were discussed as a necessary mitigation against misinformation and extreme views. The group therefore advocated the redesign of educational curricula to prioritise the development of both empathy and critical thinking skills as a matter of priority.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to the need for critical thinking skills, participants pointed to the increasing use of algorithms and the current lack of understanding on the part of the public about how these affect personal information feeds as well as the filtering of what information is seen by citizens online. Participants felt that this represents a specific knowledge gap that must be addressed, and that further research

is required in order to understand how to build appropriate education and awareness-raising initiatives.

A further suggestion was that education about algorithms should also be complemented by efforts to build skills in, and facilitate critical engagement with, the design of algorithms, as a means of empowering citizens to influence their design and, consequently, the impact they have on individuals and society more broadly.

As well as the need for further research and the redesign of educational curricula, participants also highlighted the potential opportunity that digital technologies themselves offer in terms of building the skills and capacities required for engaging effectively in democratic processes. Digital technologies are not only more accessible, and potentially more attractive to a wider range of learners, but they can also help to transfer knowledge in new and potentially more effective ways. For example, digital technologies can help to communicate emotional narratives that might otherwise be more difficult to convey; gamification may engage particular learners more effectively; virtual reality tools can offer new means to engage with educational content; and digital technologies can often provide immediate feedback to learners in order to accelerate the development of skills. These are all beneficial in terms of encouraging stronger skills development in support of greater democratic involvement.

Finally, massive open online courses (MOOCs) were also highlighted as offering huge benefits in terms of their accessibility. Moreover, it was noted that they tend to teach the kinds of skills that are necessary for engaging as a member of civil society, for example, by supporting the development of stronger critical thinking and data analysis skills.

6

The report by Grand-Clement et al. (2017) introduces the concept of digital navigation skills, which complement digital skills and facilitate 'navigation' of the digital world.

### **Developing effective narratives to counter the pull of violent and extremist ideologies**

In terms of addressing the challenges posed by the online dissemination of extremist views, participants emphasised that preventative action should be taken to address vulnerability to extremism.

It was suggested that these vulnerabilities may often come down to identity-based issues, but that more research is required to develop a robust understanding of risk factors. Our discussions also emphasised that it will not be enough to provide counter-facts and rational counter-arguments in order to build resilience to extremist worldviews or to de-radicalise individuals; the group felt strongly that misinformed or extremist views and ideologies tend to exploit social vulnerabilities that exert a strong emotional, rather than rational, pull.

It was therefore suggested that understanding vulnerabilities to violent extremism and tailoring counter-narratives to such emotional undercurrents may offer a more effective behavioural theory-based strategy to counter the radicalisation of citizens' views and attitudes. One example cited in relation to behavioural theory being successfully used is the public campaign to encourage greater use of seatbelts or more recently discouraging smoking or drunk driving, where it has changed people's behaviours by focussing on their emotional triggers rather than on rational argument.

### **Online community norms**

The spread of misinformation and extremist ideologies online (sometimes described as the 'post-truth era') points to one area in which

community norms need to be established and promoted, in order to strengthen digitally supported, citizen-powered democracy.

Other examples highlighted in our discussions include the collection and use of Internet users' data in ways that are often neither transparent nor well understood. Participants pointed in particular to the use of such data for online micro-targeting by political campaigners.

There was general acceptance that technology companies and government have a responsibility both to be more transparent about how digital technologies are used and to make such information more accessible to citizens.

It was furthermore argued that a cultural shift in the public and private spheres is required to make Internet users realise that they have a right to have things explained to them in a way that they can understand. The group also felt strongly that research and public dialogue are needed to establish a shared understanding of what our desired norms and standards for digital society are; in other words, government cannot regulate the digital environment effectively if, as a society, we haven't yet decided where our red lines are in terms of what is and what is not acceptable.

### **Technological and regulatory solutions**

Although our discussions emphasised the need for greater public engagement and consensus building around what the norms of a digitally supported society should be, the group acknowledged that adherence to these norms cannot be ensured through self-regulation alone, and that technology companies and government should be more proactive in shaping and regulating the digital environment.

Participants felt, however, that common perceptions of the online environment as a lawless 'Wild West' are not correct. There is legislation in place, for example, to prevent defamation, but citizens may not be aware that these rules apply equally to online forums as they do to other media. Furthermore, it was pointed out that, where legislation or top-down rules exist, enforcement is often lacking, or is applied inconsistently, thus undermining its effectiveness. In the case of inconsistent application of regulation (for example, censorship by social media companies of online content judged to be either 'extreme' or 'obscene' in nature), it was argued that human decision making must be prioritised over artificial intelligence, as the latter can often lack sensitivity to the context in which something is communicated.

Participants had specific ideas on how technology companies might help tackle the misuse of social media platforms. Provider companies could, for example, apply stricter account registration requirements, which would help to prevent the misuse of their platforms when abuse or bullying occurs. Another suggestion with regards to the spread of extremist views was to design algorithms that would trigger the feed of counter-messages if Internet users seek out extremist content online.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of improving the online information environment more generally, some participants argued that more should be done to raise

the availability of relevant quality journalistic content for affected groups: for example, alternative business models should be explored and supported that would avoid the need for paywalls, thereby making the more reliable reporting of information more widely accessible. We also heard how the BBC is adapting to meet the needs of citizens in the Internet age (see box below). Linked to ideas for skills development, it was suggested that, where digital tools are designed to build such skills as empathy and critical thinking, technology developers should do more to capitalise on this potential. Participants argued that digital technologies currently prioritise entertainment over learning for children and young people and that, furthermore, current digital learning tools are not always well designed to meet the needs of their users.

It was acknowledged that, where market forces provide inadequate incentives for technology companies to explore and invest in developing such mechanisms or improving existing tools, the role of government and regulation is crucial to addressing such challenges. As regards the development of standards and legislation that governments can act on, it was suggested that awareness of the law can be different from understanding of the *spirit* of the law, and that therefore priority should be given to develop a more flexible legal framework, based on a shared understanding of our societal norms and values. Such a framework could then be applied to new contexts and situations as the dynamic digital environment continues to evolve.

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7 Google has recently developed such a mechanism, called the Redirect method. See [http://fortune.com/2017/07/22/youtube-redirecting-terrorism-videos/?utm\\_campaign=time&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social&xid=time\\_socialflow\\_twitter](http://fortune.com/2017/07/22/youtube-redirecting-terrorism-videos/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_twitter)

### The BBC

The BBC represents an interesting case study of a public sector organisation with a long history, adapting to an evolving digital environment. In the age of 24/7 news and the multiplicity of information sources, the BBC has to compete with new platforms as well as maintain its position as a highly trusted provider. The BBC has adapted its service delivery to new needs in order to meet these challenges and continue to deliver its public purposes: for instance BBC news online has created a 'live' capability to bring together multiple news sources around a breaking story. It has also emphasised to parents that its online offer is a safe space for children, providing relevant information and entertainment that is free from harmful content, and without the danger of abuse.

Our discussions of the strategic challenges faced by digital society in relation to civic engagement and democratic processes highlighted that the majority of our concerns relate to *social* rather than *technological* issues, which can in many cases be exacerbated or brought to the fore by digital technologies.

The evolving use of digital technologies in the public sphere must therefore be underpinned

by efforts to develop shared societal norms and standards for their use, and be supported by education and capacity-building initiatives that can empower citizens to be effective users of these tools, as well as effective citizens per se. Within this evolution, both technology providers and government have a responsibility to help shape the digital environment in such a way that maximises societal benefits while minimising social risks for all citizens.

## 2. Defining a new aspiration for citizen-powered democracy

Having reflected on the opportunities that digital technologies offer for the strengthening of a citizen-powered democracy and on the challenges that must be addressed to harness this potential, our discussions focussed on developing a global aspiration of what a digitally enabled, citizen-powered democracy might look like, both at the national and the local level.

Through these discussions, three key strategic issues emerged that, participants felt, will need to be addressed if a digitally enabled, citizen-powered democracy is to flourish. These are:

- Ensuring transparency and trust in democratic processes
- Improving the information environment
- Building well-networked, empowered communities

In this section we shall outline the ways in which digital technologies might support delivery of this aspiration for democracy.

### Ensuring transparency and trust in democratic processes

Reflecting on what citizen-powered democracy could look like at the national level, we identified the need to focus on creating the right conditions under which democratic processes might be strengthened.

Participants insisted that any initiatives that invite citizens to contribute to policymaking processes must be based on transparent

communication, guarantees of how the inputs collected will be used and, most crucially, a commitment to provide feedback on what actions or decisions are taken as a result of the inputs given. It was felt that such communication is vital to convincing people that their efforts to participate are worthwhile. Moreover, providing such feedback offers the potential to mobilise greater citizen engagement and participation, creating a 'virtual cycle' such that citizens are more aware of, and have greater confidence in, their ability to influence the policymaking processes. It was suggested that the third sector could also have a role to play in promoting such civic feedback loops, particularly for less digitally literate groups or for groups with lower levels of political engagement.

Internet voting (or i-voting) was raised as another area of technological development that offers significant potential for strengthening citizen-powered democracy.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, a lack of trust and confidence in i-voting solutions that is currently impeding progress. Participants suggested that small i-voting pilots or demonstrations might help to build both public and government buy-in for i-voting solutions, by developing familiarity, and therefore confidence, in these technologies. It was noted, however, that the advancement of the i-voting agenda will rely on the development of robust identity verification mechanisms, which would, in turn, require government efforts to address negative public perceptions of, for example, ID cards (see also box below).

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<sup>8</sup> i-voting is thought to have the potential to increase electoral participation, especially among the elderly, travellers, those with prohibitive working hours, those living abroad and people with disabilities, who might find it easier to vote remotely on electronic platforms relative to voting in person.

### e-Estonia

We heard how digital technology has been utilised to support stronger government services and democratic processes in Estonia. e-Estonia represents the digital transformation of the Estonian state – in terms of the digitalisation both of public services and democratic processes (Estonia is the only country to allow i-voting in national elections). We learned how, through the creation of a comprehensive network of integrated electronic systems, e-Estonia aims to effect a shift away from a model whereby citizens have to actively engage with the state on a periodic basis (for example, as and when they need to request or submit documents through government services), towards a model in which the state provides an invisible infrastructure that citizens interact with as part of their daily activities.

The Estonian case study suggests that building a digitally enabled democracy has less to do with technology than it has with the following:

- **Political will and vision:** The Estonian government took steps towards the digitalisation of state services in the 2000s, when the available technology was not very advanced.
- **Public trust:** Public trust in the system (which, it was recognised, may be easier to achieve in Estonia because of the relatively small size of Estonian society) was highlighted as critical to any potential replication or scaling efforts elsewhere. For example, in the case of the UK, it was suggested that public distrust of identification cards would have to be overcome. It was furthermore suggested that trust in digital government systems can be supported through the use of Blockchain technologies (which create permanent and secure records that cannot be tampered with) and through ensuring inter-operability between services, which helps to make government systems and operations more transparent.
- **Strong engagement:** Citizens need to be persuaded that the digitalisation of public services and democratic processes will, above all, make their own lives easier. Communicating the benefits of digital technologies to older people, in particular, is especially important, given that they may stand to gain the most from digitalisation, but may be less familiar with, or skilled in using, digital tools.

### Improving the information environment

Throughout our discussions on citizen-powered democracy at both the local and the national level, the importance of providing easily accessible information was reiterated as being key to supporting improved decision making and action in the public sphere (as highlighted in section 1). The group's thinking focussed particularly on the importance of better synthesis and analysis of data, presented in a more user-friendly and engaging way. For example, the gamification of decision making processes was suggested as one way to help make the policymaking process clearer

and more interesting for citizens. Another example is the synthesis of geo-located data, such as the initiative being undertaken in certain London boroughs, where digital tools are used to map CO<sub>2</sub> levels or rubbish collection facilities, in order to improve services and develop local policy response.

It was suggested that government services should also consider making it a stated responsibility to analyse the data they collect and to present it in an accessible format that can be interrogated more easily by citizens. The group did, however, recognise that

government cannot be expected to do all the interpretation and visualisation of public data; this would require significant investment in terms of time and money. The development of a standards-driven approach was therefore recommended as a way to enable a wider range of actors to interpret raw, open-source data in a more consistent manner. Such standards would allow for the harmonisation of data across services and according to different uses. As regards the development of improved public datasets, a national data strategy needs to be established with specific, time-bound objectives, and participants emphasised that such a data strategy should be based on a robust understanding of the specific informational needs of different stakeholders.

Finally, it was suggested that the improved use of public data might also help government services to anticipate, rather than react to, the needs of citizens, thus offering further benefits to citizens.

### **Building well-networked, empowered communities**

Returning to the issue of social cohesion and community support highlighted earlier in this report, the group reflected on what a citizen-powered democracy might look like at a local level, and considered how digital technologies might be able to build better-networked communities.

Such communities could be empowered to more effectively connect needs with solutions and to help broker more productive relationships, where relevant opportunities can be identified. For example, it was suggested that a digital platform might be able to connect restaurants or shops with households

experiencing deprivation and who might benefit from any surplus of food or commodities that would otherwise be thrown away.

It was felt that the development of this and similar tools will require citizens to be involved from the start in the design of such tools in order to ensure that they really meet end user needs. Participants also reflected on the need to proactively engage citizens in the use of such tools, for example, by demonstrating new digital services in the community, at sports events or at supermarkets, in order to drive uptake of these tools and help ensure that their potential is realised.

Specific efforts also need to be made in terms of working with harder-to-reach groups. For example, wider benefits could be generated if young people had a forum in which they could help older generations to understand and use digital technologies; equally, the provision of publically accessible IT resources would help lower the barriers to engagement for some community members who may not have the resources to own such technologies themselves, or who have yet to be convinced of their value. On this point, it was highlighted that shared physical spaces for community interactions should complement shared digital spaces, in order to maximise connectedness.

Finally, it was suggested that self-proclaimed 'community leaders' may not always be best placed to drive citizen-powered democracy at a local level, and that greater efforts should be made to involve as wide a range of stakeholders as possible and to promote spontaneous as well as intentional – and physical as well as virtual – connections between different elements of the community to reduce the risk of partial representation.

### 3. Digital tools to deliver on this aspiration

Through our discussions of what a digitally supported, citizen-powered democracy might look like, at both a national and a local level, several ideas emerged about the ways in which digital technologies might be used to underpin the vision outlined above. These are summarised in the list below:

- **Interrogation of information:** Digital tools can help tailor available information to the needs or interests of different users. For example, digital platforms could provide summaries of local spending, or clips of key points of local council meetings that would therefore avoid the need for citizens to watch an entire broadcast or read an entire council meeting transcript in order to be informed. Digital platforms for larger datasets could also be made more flexibly tailored and interactive – to allow citizens to zoom in to the detail of what matters to them, such as local school spending.
- **Analysis and comparison tools:** Digital tools could help users to compare and prioritise their available choices. These could be interactive data visualisation tools allowing both citizens and policymakers to experiment with different choices or scenarios, or to understand the impacts of certain policies on different groups.
- **Use of behavioural insights:** Technologies and artificial intelligence could be leveraged to better inform politicians' responses to public inputs and their decision making. For example, it was pointed out that government can gather a lot of data relating to public needs and inputs without launching formal engagement processes: artificial intelligence could help politicians to interpret citizens' online interactions and behaviours, in order to build an understanding not only of how particular citizens are voting, but also of why they are voting that way, and more generally of what they think about salient issues.
- **Mechanisms to more effectively raise and act on concerns:** A 'safeguarding platform' or 'nagging doubt platform' would be a digital registry that allows local authority representatives to log information that has caused them some degree of concern, but where the evidence to act is limited. Information would be aggregated through this platform, allowing central oversight of the accumulation of these reports in order to monitor where similar or related issues are raised and action may need to be taken. This would help to remove the burden from individual local officers, create a shared and comprehensive record of reported concerns, and ensure informed, timely responses to these concerns, where appropriate.
- **Synthesis and analysis of large and diverse datasets:** The development of an 'agnostic' digital platform that would draw together diverse data sources and would pick up on recurrent or emerging themes in public opinion at local, regional and national levels would benefit three different stakeholder groups: i) citizens would have their voices heard more easily; ii) policymakers would be able to more easily read the temperature of local public opinion and identify the key issues of importance to their constituents; iii) and researchers and academics could benefit from such a resource to advance collective knowledge of public policy issues.
- **Community registries:** The development of a digital registry of local authority and community assets could promote the more effective use of these assets, as

well as a stronger shared ownership and responsibility for managing these assets.<sup>9</sup>

- **Mapping civic activities:** A digital platform that maps civic activity and initiatives within a local area would help to inform and mobilise further participation, as well as helping to share learning and examples
- **Information assurance:** Blockchain could be deployed across government services in order to make operations more transparent and secure, therefore building greater public trust in (digitalised) state processes.<sup>10</sup>

of good practice between local areas and initiatives.

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9 It was mentioned that the e-democracy charity MySociety is currently working with the Plunkett Foundation and the Power to Change Research Institute to develop an online directory of assets of community value.

10 A blockchain is a form of distributed ledger in which 'information is stored on a network of machines, with changes to the ledger reflected simultaneously for all holders of the ledger... [and] authenticated by a cryptographic signature. Together, these systems provide a transparent and verifiable record of transactions.' See Deshpande, Advait, Katherine Stewart, Louise Lepetit & Salil Gunashekar. 2017. *Distributed Ledger Technologies: Challenges, Opportunities and the Prospects for Standards*. London: BSI. As of 16 August 2017: <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/Innovation/dlt/>. For an overview of the use of blockchain technologies by government, see The Economist. 2017. 'Governments May Be Big Backers of the Blockchain.' Economist.com, 1 June. As of 16 August 2017: <https://www.economist.com/news/business/21722869-anti-establishment-technology-faces-ironic-turn-fortune-governments-may-be-big-backers>

## 4. Conclusions

Our discussions over the two-day consultation period highlighted how wide-ranging the benefits of digital technologies can be for democratic society. Digital tools have the potential to empower citizens and policymakers alike. By strengthening community networks and lowering the barriers to participation, digital technologies can enable citizens to more effectively make their voices heard and affect positive social change in the public sphere. Equally, the digital provision of robust and tailored empirical data and citizen inputs can enable policymakers to make more evidence-based decisions for greater social good. The use of digital technologies in these ways may also facilitate collaboration between civil society and government. An improved evidence base for decision making may bring the agendas of these two groups into closer alignment, and enhanced avenues for state–public communication may strengthen public trust in, and engagement with, political processes. This vision, as elaborated in the preceding sections, sets out a clear argument for how digital technologies can be used to reinvigorate a more citizen-powered democracy.

However, we recognise that digital technologies have neither intrinsically good nor bad effects on the extent to which our democracy is citizen powered; rather, it is the way in which we use these technologies that determines the nature and significance of their impacts. Our discussions also underlined how interlinked the challenges and benefits are. For example, the greatly enhanced flow of information between citizens is counterbalanced by the spread of misinformation and extreme views; the growth of strengthened online communities and particular narratives may fragment and polarise public discourse; and the development of digital tools for political participation may risk marginalising certain demographic groups who

are unable or disinclined to engage to the same degree as others who are better represented in the political sphere.

Delivering on our vision for digitally supported, citizen-powered democracy will therefore not just rely on continuing digital innovation and uptake. The complex and close relationship between the opportunities and risks, as two sides of the same coin, underlines the need for urgent and considered intervention. In particular, our discussions highlighted the responsibility that technology companies and government have to more proactively shape the use of digital technologies in order to make the online environment more closely reflect our democratic norms and values, and to equip individuals to use digital technologies as effective citizens.

We acknowledge, however, that direct intervention by individual national governments in the development of digital tools may not be an effective strategy. The feasibility of regulating the digital sphere must be considered; it has, in fact, been widely challenged. Online platforms transcend the geographic boundaries that can limit legislative reach. Moreover, the impact leveraged from digital tools will often depend on their popularity among users, which may be subject to intense competition. Many of the tools with the greatest relevance for democratic processes – for example, social media and online petition and campaigning platforms – are largely dependent on network effects, in that these platforms are of greater value to individual users as more users join them. The critical importance of popularity and network effects therefore raises a key question about the extent to which user preferences align with regulatory aims.

Ideally, user preferences would be broadly in line with regulation, provided they coalesce

around shared societal norms and values. However, in reality, this will not always be the case – as highlighted by those participants who pointed out that video or online games that are made more ‘educational’ for children and young people are less likely to attract interest from their target audiences than more conventional (and popular) games. Policymakers who seek to regulate or determine the impacts of digital technologies therefore face challenges. Recently, we have seen European governments turn to the use of fines as a potential means of obliging social media companies to exercise greater control over the use of their platforms.<sup>11</sup> It remains to be seen whether such developments will have the desired effect on the evolution of the online sphere.

Finally, it should be noted that leveraging impact from new and enhanced digital mechanisms for citizen participation in democratic processes will require the reshaping of existing political processes to interface smoothly with these new tools, and to overcome public cynicism and convince citizens that they do have the power to drive political change through such tools. With regards to progress made, for example in Estonia, it is worth reflecting on the social and political structures that enable digital transformation, and which vary considerably between countries. While digital innovation may be characterised by the rapid pace of developments, lasting social and cultural change with regard to our shared political life will take longer to embed.

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11 See recent legislation by the German Parliament that will impose fines on social media platforms that do not remove offensive content from their platforms within 24 hours of notification: Severin, Thorsten, & Emma Thomasson. 2017. ‘German Parliament Backs Plan to Fine Social Media over Hate Speech.’ *Reuters*, 30 June. As of 16 August 2017: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-hatecrime-idUSKBN19L0WZ> The UK and France are considering similar plans: Elgot, Jessica. 2017. ‘May and Macron Plan Joint Crackdown on Online Terror.’ *The Guardian*, 12 June. As of 16 August 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/12/may-macron-online-terror-radicalisation>

## List of participants

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## Organisations

### Corsham Institute

Corsham Institute (Ci) is a not-for-profit organisation that is working for a fair, inclusive, prosperous and creative society based on trust and security.

Our focus is on education and research, going beyond traditional ideas of knowledge to promote lifelong learning in the digital age. We aim to empower citizens to develop the critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills they need to make the most of the opportunities that our increasingly networked, connected and data-rich society provides.

The Thought Leadership Programme provides an opportunity to explore the potential and impact of digital technology within society today, focusing on shaping a future where citizens are empowered with the knowledge and skills they require to live their lives socially, economically and even politically.

Our wider programme of work encompasses Research, Learning and Enterprise, placing the citizen in control of the creation, acquisition and exploitation of their knowledge.

### RAND Europe

RAND Europe is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to help improve policy and decision making through research and analysis. As part of the RAND Corporation, we were founded in 1992 in Europe to provide quality research and rigorous, fact-based analysis to serve policy needs in EU institutions, governments, charities, foundations, universities and the private sector, where impartial research is required.

Our work lies on the spectrum between that of universities and consultancies, combining academic rigour with a professional, impact-oriented approach. In other words, we operate as a research-focused business, using a

professional services model, within the context of a public good mission.

We combine deep subject knowledge across many policy areas – including health, science, innovation, defence and security, transport, infrastructure, criminal justice, education, employment and social policy – with proven methodological expertise in evaluation, impact measurement and choice modelling. Our clients include European governments and institutions, charities, foundations, universities and private sector firms.

### St George's House, Windsor Castle

St George's House was founded in 1966 by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and the then Dean of Windsor, Robin Woods as a place where people of influence and responsibility can gather to grapple with significant issues facing contemporary society.

The House offers a safe physical and intellectual space set in the narrative of history but focused firmly on the future. You will find here an environment receptive to new ideas, conducive to taking intellectual risks and to thinking through challenging topics in imaginative ways. The House is a sanctuary, removed from the pressures of everyday life, where the topic to hand takes precedence. It is this focus that encourages creative thinking, informed debate and sustained engagement. The emphasis throughout our carefully crafted Consultations is on dialogue and discussion. Participants are in a place where a real contribution to society can be made, where personal enrichment and social progress are mutually compatible, a place where Wisdom is nurtured.

In order to offer a safe and secure intellectual space our Consultations are run on the understanding that all debate and conversation takes place under the House Protocol.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to the lead rapporteur, Talitha Dubow, this report was also co-authored by Axelle Devaux, Christian van Stolk and Catriona Manville, RAND Europe.

Ci and RAND Europe would like to thank all participants for stimulating and contributing to

the discussions that took place. It is through the enthusiastic and forward-looking approach of participants that we have been able to generate new insight and ideas to tackle the challenges faced. We also thank Jess Plumridge for her time and effort in creating the design for this report.