Can Modern Media make Parliament more attractive to a hi-tech generation?

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ABSTRACT

With all the records, information, and statistical data that Parliaments collect during our proceedings, how do we find interesting relevant facts and broadcast them through modern media to engage people with Parliament and the work that we do? Social media has been demonstrated as a useful platform for engagement across multiple industries since its inception. As a modern form of media it has required public institutions, like Parliaments, to engage in a new style of communication which goes beyond communicating through traditional media, which many have become comfortable doing. We will look at examples of how this engagement has been facilitated by public institutions and Members of Parliament and how it has resulted in both positive and negative unintended results. We will then look at a case study from the Department of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory that is running a project to make its Parliamentary documents available online. An unintended consequence of this project may present an opportunity to reuse these records, which on their own may not be very interesting, to make the data fun, relatable and useful to a hi-tech generation.

A VULNERABLE SPACE

Many Parliamentary Institutions have been slow to adopt modern media, namely social media, due to the collective character and decision-making that these modern platforms imply (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013). Social media implies an individual voice that Parliament as an institution does not have. Agreeing to one institutional voice is an issue for Parliamentarians, as is the degree of visibility and implied relationship that Parliaments have

with the public as a result of the engagement that traditionally has been seen as the role of the Members. This is a challenge that Parliaments must face and overcome. Many have made considerable strides in recent years and joined a platform that is still perceived as an unknown and vulnerable space for formal political institutions. The expansion of social media has created an opportunity for engagement like never before (Larsson, 2015). Judging the benefit that social media brings in this area of engagement against the potential risks to Parliaments and their reputation has to be weighed when deciding to play in this vulnerable space.

DIFFERING RESPONSES AND UNINTENDED RESULTS

Media as the so called fourth branch of government, or 'Fourth Estate' (House, 2015), is a key stakeholder in the parliamentary process and has developed its proceedings and processes to adapt to changing times, just as Parliaments have had to. Whether it was the advent of the printed press, the introduction of *Hansard* in the Commons (Rix, 2014), the invention of the television or the launch of Facebook, these vehicles of media were modern for their time and impacted on how the media, Parliaments, and the public engage with each other.

There are three functions of social media that have been identified in the political sphere. Firstly, as a turnout increase tool during elections; secondly, as a tool of increasing the recognition of candidates and parties by the public; and finally, as a tool of informing the public about political and electoral processes in society (Katkina, 2016). It is this third function that is of the greatest importance and benefit to Parliaments, as public institutions, as social media provides a pubic engagement tool between Parliaments, their Members and the public.

The IPU issued a statement that democracy is only as strong as the political participation of the public, and that this participation must be increased to achieve world peace, social cohesion and development (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015). Social media is a vehicle that can increase this participation and achieve greater public engagement, and with the rise of the internet social media has raised the visibility of Parliaments and their Members considerably (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013). We now live in a reality where with a few clicks any member of the public can access information that would have been accessible to only a very few people just decades ago. President Donald Trump may be the highest profile modern example of an elected representative who has used social media (notably Twitter) to convey his message and engage directly with the public (Greenberg, 2017).

A Parliament is not one voice but a collective of many voices representing a larger number of voices, being the constituents that elected them to office. How can the Parliament's voice be engaging enough to connect with the constituency within which the Parliament serves and hold their interest for long enough to build a following? Further, what message can the Parliament send that will reach and engage the public and hi-tech followers in our jurisdictions, the market leaders and first movers of this generation, and make them communicate with us?

Many politicians, political institutions, and members of the public have learned over time when dealing with the media that the outcome of an action does not always go as planned, and can have both positive and negative unintended results. From an institutional perspective, the following tweet from the Australian Senate in 2017 on Star Wars Day, May the Fourth, *"It's a shame there isn't a Galactic House of Representatives"* became an internet sensation and garnered international press (Rannard, 2017). The tweet refers to the belief that legislative decisions in the Star Wars galaxy were made harmoniously in joint meetings of the House and Senate, rather than in separate bi-cameral meetings as is common in Earth's democracies. In what could be commented on as hilarious banter, the Twitter persona of the Australian Senate and the Australian House of Representatives live tweeted a discussion regarding their differences of opinions on the structure of the Galactic Senate, which others then joined in on, in what was a positive unintended result on Star Wars Day.

At an Australian Federal Member level, Ed Husic, the Shadow Minister for the Digital Economy and the Shadow Minister for Employment Services, Workforce Participation and Future of Work and Federal Member for Chifley in the House of Representatives, announced on 19 September 2017 that he was not enjoying Twitter as much as he used to because he was no longer finding it as useful in terms of communicating his message, and he would be quitting Twitter altogether. He stated that this view was formed *"especially when you see how it's become the platform of choice for public figures who want to be controversial or divisive, they're turning it into a bully's pulpit".* His view was that Facebook enabled him to talk to local constituents while LinkedIn connects with people with an interest in his portfolio area (Redrup, 2017).

The vulnerability of this space has been experienced by, and has led to a negative unintended result for the Member for Katherine in the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory, Ms

Sandra Nelson, who is also the Assistant Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence & Women's Policy. Ms Nelson came under fire with her tweet *"Polling for LNP not good. Therefore we now have a 'terrorist attack'. How convenient. #QandA"* while watching the ABC's Q and A program on 31 July 2017 (Cunningham, 2017). The tweet inferred that recent terror raids that had occurred were part of a Federal Government conspiracy to boost its standing in the polls. Ms Nelson later made an official comment to the press that *"I realise now that while it was a throwaway comment, it was a mistake, and insensitive to come across as flippant about an issue that concerns Australians".* What is most intriguing with this unintended consequence is the knock on effect that this one tweet had leading to a series of events that crossed so many forms of media, both traditional and modern. This event started with the ABC's Q and A program, which displays tweets and other social media interactions during the live broadcast. The Member's tweet drew comments from other Twitter followers which then led to an article in the *NT News*, the print media for the Northern Territory. In this article the Member came under fire for the tweet, which led to a statement made to traditional print media. That this one tweet could reach so many people, across so many mediums (Twitter, Free to Air Television, Print Media) demonstrates the power of a tweet and how fast a story can escalate, leading to unintended consequences.

WHAT'S RELEVANT ENOUGH TO MAKE US ENGAGING

The media allows the public to learn about parliamentary business and engage in the proceedings of the legislature (Mahajan, 2016). Social media as a modern form of media allows Parliaments to go beyond a more formalistic approach of issuing information. It facilitates an approach that enables more substantive engagement, lowers the barriers of communication for individuals and groups, and empowers the public to utilise the content they receive (Charalabidis, Loukis, & Androutsopoulou, 2014).

Public engagement is a journey along a path from the receipt of information through to actual public participation in the parliamentary process (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013). As a Parliament, we need to determine what information we have that may be of relevance to this generation, and communicate it in a way that makes those receiving want to participate in the process. Rapidly developing knowledge based and technology driven societies have placed Legislatures under close scrutiny in the areas of transparency, accountability, effectiveness and fairness (Wolffe, 2012). It has been noted by the Worldbank that

Parliaments should provide, as a matter of administrative routine, all necessary access and services to the media to facilitate coverage of their proceedings (Bouchet & Kariithi). This level of access to Parliaments and the subsequent scrutiny that it provides can come in many different forms, demands, and challenges depending upon the size of the Parliament and level of advancement in technology of the society. A set of information we have that is unique to our jurisdictions is our Parliamentary documents, being our tabled papers and Parliamentary Records. Providing access to this information is achievable, but people will not access it and provide scrutiny if they do not know it is there.

CASE STUDY: HOW CAN THE PARLIAMENT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ENGAGE A HI-TECH GENERATION

The Department of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory has been running a project to make its Parliamentary documents available online not only for the current, but also for prior Assemblies of the Parliament. An unintended consequence of this project may be an opportunity to repackage the information to make the data fun, interesting, relatable and useful to a hi-tech generation. We will look at how the project came about and what has been involved in preparing the documents to take them online, as well as some approaches as to how we can make this project interesting on social media and make the information relevant to a hi-tech generation. Projects like this are important because if you use the content correctly you can make it engaging. Otherwise you are just moving paper out of a storeroom to a digital storeroom, never to see the light of a computer screen. We need to make the dry content relatable.

SETTING THE SCENE – THE TOP END

The Northern Territory is a smaller jurisdiction to most in our region. We are unicameral, with a Legislative Assembly consisting of 25 Members elected for a fixed four year term. The population of the Northern Territory at the 2016 Census was 228,833 usual residents, an increase of 8% from 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The 25 electorates each have approximately 5000 constituents in single member electorates. We have a diverse and representative Assembly which can be seen when comparing the demographics of our Members to that of the population of the Northern Territory. In terms of gender diversity and female representation, 12 Members are female, being 48%, and 48.2% of the NT population

is female. Looking at our Chamber from an ethnic diversity and Aboriginal representation perspective, six Members are Aboriginal, being 24%, and 25% of the NT population is Aboriginal. Looking at age diversity and youth representation, four Members are in the age bracket 25 – 34, being 16%, and 18.8% of the NT population is in this age bracket.

We operate under the *Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978,* a Commonwealth law that established the Administrator of the NT and the NT Legislative Assembly to enable the Territory to have a separate political role and control over its own finances. Unlike most jurisdictions in our region, the Department of the Legislative Assembly is answerable to the Chief Minister, and the Clerk is appointed by the Chief Minister on the recommendation of the Speaker for a four year term.

WE'RE ONLINE

The Department of the Legislative Assembly is not a newcomer to social media and regularly tweets the proceedings of the Chamber during meetings of the Assembly and also during Estimates. In 2017 the DLA took a further step and opened a Facebook profile to promote its Education and Public Engagement activities. The success of this engagement can be measured to some extent with questionable accuracy via statistics provided from these media vehicles. In reality, it is hard to determine if anybody is out there listening to what we are sending out, other than ourselves, and there has been minimal two-way engagement on these platforms to date.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The Department of the Legislative Assembly identified the need and opportunity to make our Parliamentary documents available online in 2013 through a resolution of the Assembly which required the DLA to establish electronic tabling of tabled papers, or E-Tabling as it has come to be known. The journey to make this identified dream of E-Tabling a reality has taken quite some time to realise. The Assembly is a small department, operating on a total budget of approximately $31.74 million to cover Members' entitlements, salaries, and repairs and maintenance to ensure the building stays up, the lights stay on, and our Members and staff are paid. Due to this limited budget, implementing great change and introducing new technologies can be challenging. A dollar spent on a new software program means a dollar less spent somewhere else. This does not negate the fact that as chairs break or as software

is no longer supported, money must be spent or creative solutions found to replace them. To realise the E-Tabling project, the scanning of past documents and the development of a platform with which to display the information to the public, had to be achieved within existing budgets and staffing allocations. Like all good projects there have also been a few challenges along the way, and it has taken considerably longer than originally anticipated to see a light at the end of the project's tunnel.

By early 2017 most of the 40 years' worth of Parliamentary documents dating back to the 1st Assembly of the Parliament had been scanned, and the DLA required a solution that offers database functionality to host and allow for advanced searches of both tabled papers and Parliamentary Records for prior and future Assemblies. Through a discussion between staff of the Department of the Legislative Assembly (DLA) and the Northern Territory Library (NTL), an option was floated that the NTL had an existing publically accessible database called Territory Stories which allows members of the public to access library records online with advance search.

Discussion commenced in July 2017 between DLA and NTL staff regarding the possibility of our departments working in collaboration to supply Parliamentary Records and Tabled Papers online through the use of the Territory Stories webpage as the source hub or online database. Test data has been provided by the DLA and uploaded by NTL staff to Territory Stories and retrieved successfully. Whilst we are still in the test phase, trials to date have yielded positive results and we do not foresee any impediments to this collaboration being a success. The approach taken to solve the challenge within both of our existing funding envelopes was an excellent example of the public service delivering a solution for the people of the Territory in a cost effective and sensible manner. Working together, the project team achieved a mutually beneficial outcome that will not only build a stronger connection between our departments, but will facilitate greater access to information for the people of the Northern Territory.

NOW THAT IT'S BUILT, WHAT DO WE DO WITH IT?

Parliaments not only need to provide information, but guide and engage the public in their receipt and understanding. Now that the DLA is at a point where this information will be available and searchable, the challenge will be to promote its existence within our limited budget to make the project a worthwhile exercise. Through E-Tabling the DLA has made a big

step forward in bringing life back to information from the past. We now require a marketing and communications strategy to bring all this information that has been sitting in boxes in store rooms for decades to people's attention. We can do this by repackaging the hard work of the past and making it relevant again today via modern media.

HISTORY REPEATING

We are almost in a position where we will have something to communicate, and now we have an opportunity to breathe new life back into the content and make it something that someone would want to access and engage with. One way we can do this is to go back in the data and look at what happened on this day 10, 20, 30 or even 40 years ago and report on the important decisions and debates that occurred on that day. On special days, we can look at the debates and events that were occurring or reported on such as Territory Day, important head of state visits or the reporting on of public days like Australia Day. Finding relevant dates and decisions of the past and highlighting them creates stories that connect Parliament to the people. This can be a tweet or a Facebook post highlighting the users to the topic utilising popular hashtags of the day, and then link through to the *Parliamentary Record* or tabled paper on Territory Stories. Public institutions like the Smithsonian Museum have already been doing this with success and can be case studies and role models to learn and adapt what they do. This is an opportunity for Parliaments to show the link between events in history, legislation that has passed, and what's happening now.

REPACKAGE THE INFORMATION

We can create our own original content, for example, creating videos about the mace or talking about something in history that references the documents the public can engage with in Territory Stories. In discussing the mace, we can link through to our Parliamentary Records, noting stories about when the mace was gifted to the Territory.

GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT

If the content is there and we want people to look at it then we need a map to get people there. Look through the lens of a parliamentary need: what would someone with an interesting or topical piece of legislation search for to find our information? If there is a big debate happening in the media, either in our jurisdiction or outside of it, we can search Territory Stories and see if our Parliament has debated on that topic in the past so that we

can then post it with the relevant tags to guide someone to the historical records, making them relevant again. If we use popular and relevant social media hashtags we can point back to the material on Territory Stories so people don't have to go and look for it.

BRING BACK THE CHARACTERS

Just like every Parliament, in the Northern Territory we have had many colourful characters who have graced our Chamber that we can highlight to a content hungry, knowledge-based hi-tech generation. We have had Members that were champions for change, who made significant impacts to the lives of Territorians, and who we can shine a spotlight on. There have been many words of wisdom spoken in our Chambers and famous quotes that have been said over time. With Territory Stories we will be able to search, find and post a link to the speeches they gave to give these historical icons a second chance to shine.

OTHERWISE IT'S JUST ONE BIG BLOB

It is commendable that Parliaments like the Northern Territory are going to all of this hard work to make historical records like Parliamentary documents available online, but the hard work does not stop there. No one will know it's there if a plan is not put in place to point out that it's there. It is otherwise just a big blob of information.

CONCLUSION

There's so much information online that we are competing with in trying to engage a hi-tech generation. It may be seen as a simplification to say, "let's find some content and make it engaging and then tweet about how we're making it engaging" but if we do not do that, how else will a social media user find the content if they do not know how to look for it, and how else will that person know to use their network to say, "hey, look at this quote and what happened on this day"? Through projects like E-Tabling in the Northern Territory and work that other Parliaments are also in the process of undertaking or have already completed, we have the opportunity to use social media not only to talk about what is happening in the Chamber and on the precinct now like we have been, but we will be able to point back to what has happened in the past and to make this content engaging and attractive to a hi-tech generation. This is about dedication to doing the work and finding the interesting and compelling stories hidden in our data so all this hard work—not only in delivering projects like

E-Tabling, but the work of the Members and their staff and the staff of the DLA over time—is not forgotten. It is also about taking the unique information we have available to Parliament, repackaging it and using modern media to make it relevant to a hi-tech generation of social media users.

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