2019 Australasian Study of Parliament Group Annual Conference

Canberra, Australia

2 – 4 October 2019

Taking on digital disruption: what parliamentary committees can learn from other sectors about using social media to harness public engagement

Presented by Lisa Penman (Advisory Officer); Alex Hickman (Advisory Officer (Legal)); and Maddison Evans (Committee Clerk), Committee Office, Legislative Council of Western Australia

Introduction[1]

Traditionally conservative in embracing new technologies, parliaments across the world have made great strides in the past decade in the use of social media.[2] Although parliaments today are using social media effectively to report and inform, arguably many struggle to generate genuine public engagement through these forums.[3]

The reasons for these challenges are valid. The diverse and collective nature of parliaments make developing an individual voice difficult. Some parliamentary processes, such as evidence gathering for committee inquiries, are not built to cope with different means of engagement. For example, comments on a Facebook post might not be acceptable as evidence.

The value of increasing public engagement in parliamentary processes is well established. Broad public engagement can ensure a diverse range of voices are heard, rather than just the 'usual suspects'.[4] It can also increase citizens' awareness of issues that may affect them. We anticipated that parliaments, as relative latecomers, could learn from other sectors who have already harnessed social media to generate public engagement.

This paper first provides a brief review of existing literature. The literature outlines the developments and challenges associated with using social media to increase public participation in parliamentary inquiries. The paper canvasses a number of strategies used by public and private organisations to increase engagement through social media. These include user generated content, online discussion forums and public policy consultation processes. We considered three strategies in detail, asking the organisations responsible about implementation and results.

The purpose of this exercise was to broadly examine what is happening, and some of the examples may not translate well to a committee context. However, for those examples that seem applicable, we discuss how the strategy could be used to increase public participation in committee inquiries.

The results of this project were not as expected. Based on the existing literature, we anticipated that other sectors would be much further ahead than most parliaments in terms of using social media to increase engagement.[5] This was not so for all the strategies we considered. While some of the strategies used social media in a novel way to increase engagement, most used it as a conduit to direct users to an innovative engagement tool that sat elsewhere. Some Australian parliaments who are actively engaging through social media may already be on par with the organisations considered here. In conclusion, although

---

[2] Cristina Leston-Bandeira and David Bender, 'How Deeply are Parliaments Engaging on Social Media?', *Information Polity* 18(4) 2013: pp281-297.
[3] ibid.
[4] ibid.
[5] ibid.

parliaments can certainly learn from strategies used by other sectors, we are probably not as far behind as we may have thought.

Literature review

Improving how parliamentary committees engage with the public when undertaking inquiries by the use of technology has been recognised by various commentators as a key priority for enhancing participatory democracy. This is especially in light of increasing public disengagement with political processes and reduced trust in political systems.[6] Hendriks and Kay have noted the role parliamentary committees can play in reversing this trend by contributing to the 'democratic renewal' of legislative institutions. Social media is one method for enhancing public engagement in parliamentary committee processes.[7]

It has been noted that social media is often used by parliaments as a tool to report on parliamentary activity rather than a platform for engagement with the public. Leston-Bandeira found that 71% of social media activity by six European and United Kingdom parliaments 'aimed to simply report on parliamentary business'.[8] Hendriks and Kay made a similar observation, noting that much online activity showcases the work of legislatures. They argue that 'participatory efforts ought to be engaging citizens in the central task of legislatures – to deliberate and make decisions on collective issues'.[9] They also observe that the following measures could be used more extensively to capture a broader range of community concern:

- online platforms
- discussion boards
- surveys
- opinion polls
- roundtable discussions (to supplement formal hearing processes).[10]

This tendency to report rather than engage is not unique to parliaments. Williamson and Ruming observe that 'for many government agencies, social media operates as a one-way

---

[6] Carolyn M. Hendriks and Adrian Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees', *Government and Opposition*, 2017, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp25-51, p26. See https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/377E3D12A725A450F2C34159ADE3041A/S0017257X17000203a.pdf/from_opening_up_to_democratic_renewal_deepening_public_engagement_in_legislative_committees.pdf. Viewed 20 August 2019. See also Dr Joshua Forkert, 'Parliamentary Committees: Improving public engagement', paper presented at the ASPG Conference, Hobart 2017, p1.

[7] ibid, p25.

[8] Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Parliaments use social media mainly as a reporting tool rather than for public engagement', democraticaudit.com. See: http://www.democraticaudit.com/2014/02/26/parliaments-use-social-media-mainly-as-a-reporting-tool-rather-than-for-public-engagement/. Viewed 20 August 2019.

[9] Carolyn M. Hendriks and Adrian Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees', *Government and Opposition*, 2017, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp25-51, p25.

[10] ibid.

style of information distribution'[11] and that there is a need to have a two-way engagement so that information from the public is taken into account.[12]

Recent research has, however, found increasing examples of the use of online technology to harness public participation in the work of parliamentary committees. For example, the trial of an online questionnaire[13] was highlighted by Painter as an example of a proactive approach to enhancing public participation in the committee process.[14]

A number of challenges presented by the use of new technologies to obtain greater public participation in parliamentary committee inquiries through non-traditional forms of public engagement have been highlighted.[15] One of these challenges is the application of parliamentary privilege, which protects those providing evidence authorised by the relevant committee from being sued or prosecuted for anything written or said in that evidence.

Commentary on social media platforms, including Facebook, may not be considered 'committee evidence' tendered during a proceeding in parliament necessary to attract the protection of privilege.[16] This could expose participants to the risk of legal or disciplinary action and makes evidence gathering using this method potentially problematic. Additionally, such posts are automatically seen by others rather than submitted directly to the committee, removing the option to assign a private status.

In these circumstances, Kurrle and Norris advise that committees should inform participants that parliamentary privilege may not apply.[17] They also canvass other issues associated with the engagement of those located outside the jurisdiction in which the committee operates, questioning whether their contributions can receive the protection of privilege.[18]

Considering that one of the main purposes of the protection of parliamentary privilege is to facilitate and encourage the free flow of information to committees, there is a need to ensure this purpose is not defeated and there is no disincentive to the greater public engagement.

---

[11] Wayne Williamson and Kristian Ruming, 'Can social media support large scale public participation in urban planning? The case of the #MySydney digital engagement campaign', *International Planning Studies, DOI*, p1.
[12] ibid, p5.
[13] Used by the General Purpose Standing Committee No.6 of the Legislative Council of New South Wales.
[14] Pauline Painter, 'New Kids on the Block or the Usual Suspects? Is Public Engagement with Committees Changing or is Participation in Committee Inquiries Still Dominated by a Handful of Organisations and Academics?', *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 31(2) 2016: pp67-83.
[15] See Michelle Kurrle and Jeff Norris, Improving committee processes with technology, paper presented at the ANZACATT Professional Development Seminar, Wellington, 2018, pp 13-14.
[16] In the event this type of evidence is called for and authorised by a committee, it would need to make clear that any defamatory material may be liable to court proceedings.
[17] Michelle Kurrle and Jeff Norris, 'Improving committee processes with technology, paper presented at the ANZACATT Professional Development Seminar', Wellington, 2018, p15.
[18] ibid, p16. See also John Baczynski, 'Opportunities for Greater Consultation?' House Committee Use of Information and Communication Technology', Parliamentary Studies Centre Paper 8, ANU Crawford School of Economics and Government, 2009, pp139-40 who highlighted the importance of a controlled platform and the ability to determine the physical location of those giving evidence in determining whether privilege may apply.

Another challenge, discussed by Hendriks and Kay, is the cultural shift that may be required by committees in moving beyond a conventional level of engagement to understand how to best elicit a broader level of public input into their deliberations.[19]

Concerns about losing control of the message and the difficulties in moderating online participation represent another valid challenge.[20] These challenges will need to be borne in mind when considering applying social media to Parliament in a way that other sectors have used to harness public engagement.

Scope and methods

In the context of committee inquiries, there is a tendency to measure engagement in terms of the evidence collected. However, conceptualising engagement so narrowly might mean opportunities are missed for softer forms of interactions, influence and involvement. Engagement can raise awareness and understanding of an issue, encourage stakeholders to interact with information, and build their capacity for formal involvement in the future. Although we have looked at different types of engagement, we did tend to lean towards examples that could plausibly feed in to committee evidence collection.

Social media broadly includes websites and applications that enable users to communicate, create and share content or to participate in social networking.[21] The scope of this paper includes all social media, from traditional platforms like Facebook and Twitter to specific focus platforms, such as Reddit and Instagram.

The authors conducted a desktop scan as well as consultation with other sectors to identify organisations using social media to engage proactively. The aim was to identify potential case studies from a range of sectors, including charities, public sector agencies, media outlets and private companies. Criteria included that the engagement activity must be finished or currently underway in order to make assessments about its effectiveness.

Seven examples are canvassed, including three detailed case studies. For each case study, we identify and outline the relevant social media activity, how it encouraged engagement and the objectives of that activity. We obtained results from those involved in the development and delivery of those strategies. Finally, the paper assesses whether any elements of the strategies could be appropriate or applicable in the context of a parliamentary committee inquiry process.

User generated content

An innovative way to develop a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship with stakeholders is to provide a role for them to create the organisations content. For example, Tourism Australia aims to stimulate conversations about Australia by posting mainly user-

---

[19] Carolyn M. Hendriks and Adrian Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp 25-51, p43.
[20] Wayne Williamson and Kristian Ruming, 'Can social media support large scale public participation in urban planning? The case of the #MySydney digital engagement campaign', *International Planning Studies, DOI*, p6.
[21] Lexico – Oxford Dictionaries online. https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/social_media. Viewed 16 September 2019.

generated content on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest.[22] Their Instagram page showcases the best pictures of Australia taken by real Australians and travellers on a daily basis. Users who hashtag their travel shots with #seeaustralia give Tourism Australia permission to repost it. There are currently 4.5 million photos tagged with #seeaustralia on Instagram. This is good for users. If their image is reposted, it will reach Tourism Australia's 3.9 million followers and the photographer may gain thousands of likes and followers.

Lush Cosmetics has also relied on user-generated content as a budget-friendly way of engaging their customers. Famous for their colourful exploding bath bombs, Lush began encouraging their customers to post and tag photos and videos of their bath bombs dissolving in water. Lush can have 500,000 hashtag users and Instagram tags every month.[23] By sharing their customers' content, Lush align themselves with that group of users and create a connection between the brand and the customer.

Benefits of user-generated content include that it is free for the organisation. It presents an avenue for genuinely involving clients or stakeholders with the organisation, creating a sense of customer loyalty and ownership. A study found that user generated travel content was associated with trustworthiness and reliability because it represents the real experiences of real people, although others expressed concern about such content being faked.[24]

User generated content has even been used in a committee inquiry setting. In 2016, the National Assembly of Wales Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (Committee) commenced an inquiry into the condition of Welsh roads.[25] Staff from the Welsh Parliament presented on this strategy at the 2019 ANZACATT conference.

To encourage engagement in the inquiry, the Committee hosted a photography competition in addition to a written consultation. Members of the public were asked to capture on camera and submit their depiction of the state of the roads in Wales. The Committee used its dedicated Twitter account to advertise the competition to its 1500 followers, which subsequently generated significant media attention. Photo submissions were open for five weeks and Committee members judged the entries. The winning photograph of a truck driving past a large pothole appeared on the report cover. All entries were on display as part of a public exhibition at the Welsh Parliament.[26]

In addition to generating public attention and awareness of the inquiry, the competition allowed the Committee to hear from a group of people who would not typically engage with parliamentary processes. Furthermore, the Welsh Government proceeded to fix many of the photographed potholes after being informed that they featured in the competition.

---

[22] Tourism Australia website http://www.tourism.australia.com/en. Viewed 23 September 2019.
[23] Stackla. How LUSH cosmetics uses user-generated content to transform customers into an engaged community of brand advocates.
[24] Stephen Burgess et al. User Generated Content (UGC) in Tourism: Benefits and Concerns of Online Consumers.
[25] Wales, National Assembly. Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee, *The State of the Roads in Wales*, October 2018.
[26] National Assembly of Wales, Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee website https://www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/committees/Pages/Committee-Profile.aspx?cid=446. Viewed 23 September 2019.

Participants reported feeling that, for the first time, committee work was something they could get involved in and that their input was taken seriously, especially after the potholes were filled.[27]

Online discussion forums

Forums provide the opportunity to hear a range of perspectives from a broad cross-section of the community in a single sitting. Parliamentary committees sometimes hold face-to-face public forums to connect with the community, particularly in regional and remote areas where the inquiry process seems less accessible.[28] A forum is a more open type of dialogue where participants can build on each other's contributions.

The social media version of a community forum is an online discussion forum. Online discussion boards are a key feature of social media platforms such as Reddit, Whirlpool, Quora and Tumblr. A recent high-profile example is the Reddit Ask Me Anything (AMA) series. Bill Gates, Barrack Obama and Donald Trump have all hosted AMAs. Reddit users have a lead-in window to post questions to the board, and other users will vote those questions up or down to indicate which questions they most want answered. The AMA subject will then come online for a set period and answer as many of those questions as they can in the allotted timeframe. The process operates like an online press conference or a talk-back radio show. Questions will range from matters of policy to their earliest memory to what they eat for breakfast, tapping into people's natural curiosity about the lives of leaders.

Case study 1: an online discussion forum to engage older adults

Researchers at the James Lind Alliance at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom (UK) used an online discussion forum in 2017 to inform research on multiple conditions in later life. In developing a survey interview, the project team became concerned about how to engage the target group (older people aged 65 and over) to take the survey. To develop a fit-for-purpose survey, the project team used an online discussion forum to facilitate public consultation with older adults. This case study was selected because it provides an example of using the views and experiences of members of the public to shape a research project in its development.

Researchers collaborated with Voice North, a publicly funded organisation which runs a digital platform for the public to get involved in research and share ideas and experiences.[29] It is a member-based organisation, and its members across the UK regularly use the platform to connect and interact, contribute their views and participate in online discussions.[30] In addition to gaining insights from the discussion, this process aimed to explore innovative ways of engaging older adults. Voice North advertised the online discussion on Twitter and other forums in the preceding weeks. Researchers posted a two-minute explanatory video to

---

[27] Gareth Price, Engagement, presented at the ANZACATT Professional Development Seminar, Hobart, 2019.
[28] For example, the Select Committee on a Northern Territory Harm Reduction Strategy for Addictive Behaviours held public community forums in addition to hearings.
[29] Dapo Ogunbayo, 'Using an online discussion forum for public engagement with older adults', NIHR School for Primary Care Research, 30 August 2017.
[30] ibid.

help guide the discussion. Members took part in a discussion over a week by responding to questions and sharing their personal experiences. The discussion group was closed, meaning members had to sign up in order to see and post to the board.

According to the project researcher, more people participated in the online discussions than anticipated, given that the target audience was over 65s.[31] While many submitters had been active on the platform in the past, Voice North reported that there was a significant number of new contributors when compared to previous online discussion processes.[32] Although it was sometimes difficult to keep the discussion focussed on the original research question, the result was a broad discussion that raised issues that the researchers had not originally anticipated.

Overall, findings from the consultation process were helpful to refine and focus research questions on areas that were important to the target population.[33] The responses were used to add a real world element to a topic guide that was originally developed from academic literature. Anonymous anecdotes were used to shape interview questions that survey respondents would find relatable.

Application to parliamentary committees

The consultation in this case study informed the development of research, but did not constitute research. In an inquiry context, an online discussion forum could contribute to early inquiry scoping, helping members to understand what the public really cares about. Discussion board postings could potentially also be used as evidence.

To do so, a committee might simply need to ensure that participants were aware of how their information would be used. For example, participants could be required to click a check-box on entering the forum to confirm their understanding that the discussion is committee evidence. A committee may also decide to assign anecdotal evidence from a discussion forum with less weight than other types of evidence, such as data, research or expert opinions.

Confidentiality is a potential issue. Committees are typically able to give evidence a private status. Although a discussion board may be locked to participating members, comments posted could not be given a private status if viewed by other members of the group. A potential solution is to require that posts be moderated before being published on the board. This could detract from the conversational nature of the discussion, unless committee staff were authorised to moderate and able to make publishing decisions on the spot. However, it is an option if a committee thought privacy were likely to be an issue due to sensitive subject matter.

---

[31] Correspondence from Dapo Ogunbayo, 12 September 2019.
[32] Dapo Ogunbayo, 'Using an online discussion forum for public engagement with older adults', NIHR School for Primary Care Research, 30 August 2017.
[33] Correspondence from Dapo Ogunbayo, 12 September 2019.

Case study 2: The 'Your Thoughts' website used by the Town of Victoria Park

A number of local governments in Western Australia use their Facebook pages to direct members of their community to dedicated websites which provide background information on various projects and initiatives and enable feedback to be given. We saw how this practice could be translated across to parliamentary committees, which also have dedicated inquiry webpages.

One local government which engages in this practice is the Town of Victoria Park. The Town uses its Facebook page, which has an average of 153,000 views per month, to both provide information to the local community and engage with them on projects it is undertaking. Information is provided on council initiatives, facilities, community engagement, events and programs. Community sentiment can be gauged by posts on a specific issue or topic and specific questions can be facilitated through the private message space.

The Town carries out local projects such as parking trials and building design concepts and communicates them by providing a link in relevant Facebook posts to its 'Your Thoughts' website. This website, which had 39,800 visits in 2017-18, can be described as an online consultation hub. It was created as a one stop shop to assist with community engagement on projects by providing project updates; FAQs; surveys; forums; quick polls and timelines to enable the community to be kept informed and provide feedback. If a member of the public wants information on a project they simply click on the link and are taken to the relevant webpage. To provide feedback, they can make an online submission or ask a question via this hub.

This method of online engagement is not the only way the Town engages with its community - it also conducts hard copy surveys, workshops and information nights. However, it is an easy way for the community to receive and provide information by encouraging them to engage whenever they are online, in their own time.

A recent example of the Town using the Your Thoughts website to obtain public feedback was for its Urban Forest Implementation Action Plan (Plan). In 2018 the Town developed its first Urban Forest Strategy (Strategy) to achieve a 20% tree canopy coverage in Victoria Park. The Plan, which has a combined project team of community members and Town officers, sets out actions and tasks to be undertaken over the next five years to implement the Strategy.

In August 2019 community feedback, which is currently under review, was sought by way of online submissions and questions.

The Town's Facebook post stated:

> *Your comments are sought on the draft Urban Forest Implementation Action Plan, which sets out actions that the Town and the community will undertake over the next five years to implement the Town's Urban Forest Strategy.*
>
> *Read the draft and provide your comments on our Your Thoughts page by 20 August.*

The dedicated Your Thoughts webpage contains useful information to increase the public's understanding of the Strategy and Plan, including:

- background information about the strategy
- a library with copies of relevant documents
- the next steps the Town will be taking
- Frequently Asked Questions about the Strategy and Plan
- how the community can provide feedback
- contact information on which local government officers are assigned to the project in a 'Who's listening' section.

This information facilitates the engagement process by providing context and resources for those who may wish to comment.

Once the feedback has been reviewed, a report regarding the adoption of the Plan will be presented to the Town Council.

Application to parliamentary committees

This case study demonstrates the use by an organisation of Facebook as an effective tool to both provide and obtain information from members of the community by directing them to an online consultation hub. The information provided to the public by the use of FAQs and an electronic document library gives them sufficient background knowledge of the project to enable informed engagement.

While parliamentary committees are already using social media to provide information on inquiries and seek submissions, including providing links to dedicated webpages, the amount of information about inquiries varies.

For instance, inquiry webpages of committees of the Legislative Council of Western Australia include the following information:

- The inquiry terms of reference
- How to make a submission
- Public submissions and related evidence
- Details of hearings and transcripts.

Background information on the inquiry topic is not provided.

Parliamentary inquires can be complex. Some stakeholders will be familiar with the inquiry process and subject matter. Those who do not regularly engage with parliamentary committees may benefit from accessible background information on the topic.

By providing background information on an inquiry, just as the Town of Victoria Park does for its projects, parliamentary committees will facilitate engagement by giving stakeholders access to material on the relevant issues. This will be especially useful for those they are reaching for the first time, who will have sufficient information to give them more confidence

to engage. This may assist in capturing a broader range of feedback for parliamentary inquiries.

Case study 3: Western Australian Department of Communities "Women's Plan"

This year the Western Australian Department of Communities is developing a Women's Plan as a framework for government, businesses, and the community to drive gender equality in Western Australia. At the time of writing the consultation phase had just been completed.

As in other case studies, social media was used by the Department to direct people to a dedicated website. In this case, a survey on the Department's website. It was also used a tool to recruit and advertise the consultation process.

The consultation utilised a range of engagement strategies to obtain feedback from the community. Key elements of the process included:

- Recruiting community organisations, peak bodies, and business organisations as agents to obtain feedback from their member or client group (who, in some cases, would be reluctant to disclose information to the Department).
- Compiling a consultation toolkit for use by agencies.
- The provision of a social media banner was provided, with agencies encouraged to create their own Facebook posts.
- Advertising the consultation process on Facebook and writing to over 200 of the Department's stakeholders. The team followed up with emails encouraging stakeholders to participate in and share the details of the consultation process.
- Data collection, using two types of surveys.

Tools that the Department used throughout this process included:

- Facebook:
  o Used to recruit agencies
  o Staff and the Minister posted to advertise the consultation process in their own networks
  o Boosted Facebook posts targeted groups who were underrepresented in survey responses.
- An online and hardcopy postcard survey was used to collect key information with one key question and optional demographic data.
- Survey Monkey was used to conduct a more detailed survey with 23 further questions with demographic data.

Anecdotally the Department described the consultation exercise as a successful one, as there were almost 2000 survey monkey respondents and 200 electronic postcards were received. The Department also noted the following results from the consultation period:

- As a result of the consultation toolkit developed by the Department, approximately 30 community agencies carried out consultations.
- Feedback was received from marginalised groups who did not normally make contact with the Department.

- Survey Monkey respondents gave a range of responses when asked how they heard about the consultation. It became apparent that non-targeted agencies shared the survey with their clients.
- Organisations were very responsive and information was shared extensively in a wide range of newsletters, social media, and through email lists.

The Department observed that it may have been worthwhile holding a focus group and using social media more extensively in order to engage with young people as they were slightly underrepresented in the data received.

This case study is provided because it demonstrates the use of a range of engagement strategies to reach a varied audience. The multi-faceted approach taken by the Department of Communities enabled it to reach different demographics at different times. It also facilitated the engagement of marginalised groups who would not normally communicate with the Department.

Application to parliamentary committees

Committees may wish to consider a range of engagement strategies to engage the community in a particular inquiry. Again, as in previous examples, this case study is another example of social media being used to direct the public to the activity, rather than the activity occurring on social media itself. However without the use of social media in the development of the Women's Plan, the Department of Communities would not have been able to reach the variety or amount of people that it did.

When reviewing this case study, two strategies stood out to us and one was the use of external agencies to reach sometimes marginalised groups within the community. This example is unique in its use of social media in that the team also provided tools and content for other organisations to promote its consultation and provided support for external agencies to use social media for its own benefit.

External organisations have pre-existing and established relationships with targeted stakeholders and community groups and that comes with a certain level of trust that traditionally parliaments have not been able to replicate. The benefit of using these relationships to reach a specific demographic was commented on by the Select Committee into Elder Abuse. This committee noted the importance of community legal centres in identifying cases of elder abuse.[34] This is a tool which we think could be utilised more in our committee inquiries.

The other strategy that stood out to us was the use of surveys. Whilst we acknowledge that the use of surveys is certainly not a new idea to parliaments, it is not something regularly utilised by committees of the Legislative Council of Western Australia.

When recently analysing submissions for another committee, we realised that surveys would be a great way to weigh the incoming data from two opposing sides of the community,

---

[34] Legislative Council of Western Australia, Select Committee into Elder Abuse, *'I Never Thought it Would Happen to Me': When Trust is Broken,* September 2018, p57.

rather than having to compare a submission in the form of an academic paper to a two line email. Committees which collect and summarise information regarding the number of people for or against polarising issues would most likely benefit more from surveys than committees which collect qualitative submissions.

If a committee were to use surveys either instead of or as well as submissions, they would need to be adapted in order to fit the parliamentary committee context. Committee initiated surveys are also an alternative to written "free text" submissions for people who are time poor or otherwise unable to submit a substantial submission. They may facilitate the Committee capturing information from a different group of people who may not have otherwise engaged.

Conclusion

This paper has identified a number of strategies that public and private sector organisations are using to engage their communities through social media, including online discussion forums, user generated content and public policy consultation processes. We were surprised to find that in some of the cases we examined, it was not the social media use that was innovative – social media was simply used as a tool to direct people to an interactive tool on a home website. However, in each case the use of social media made the engagement strategy accessible. Other lessons include the value of targeting efforts towards the particular groups you wish to engage and employing strategies make engagement easier for people.

The paper has identified how these strategies could be used to involve people in a committee context, from early inquiry scoping through to evidence collection. Despite assuming that other sectors would be much further ahead than most parliaments, nothing that we looked at was out of reach. In fact, some parliaments are already employing some of the strategies discussed in this paper. In conclusion, parliaments are not necessarily far behind other sectors in using social media to engage.

The authors would appreciate feedback from the conference attendees regarding their experiences with using social media in a parliamentary setting to engage with the public.