

# Impact of transparency on british politics



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## TheyWorkForYou – transparency and its effect on British Politics

The positive benefits of civic tech are well documented and researched. They come in a myriad of forms with one focus being to open up data, increase transparency and to hold those in power to account. TheyWorkForYou promotes these values as its main aim, working to open up British politics and empowering people to hold those who represent them to account. As a civic tech it has had a number of impacts, both positive and negative, however I want to explore further the view of Smith (2018) who wrote in Prospect Magazine ““ TheyWorkForYou is an excellent tool that makes Westminster easier to understand. But it has an unintended dark side: what can open up politics may also slam it shut.” In essence do the negative aspects of transparency outweigh the benefits? Could sites like TheyWorkForYou really shut down British Politics? I will begin by providing a definition of civic tech, before moving on to a brief examination of TheyWorkForYou, exploring how it encourages civic engagement and activity. I will finish by considering how through its aim to be more transparent, it could actually close down politics and have an unintended negative impact on the political process.

Civic tech is an ambiguous term with observers proposing various definitions. Donohue (2014) recently offered a narrow interpretation of civic tech stating that they are used to “ empower citizens or help make government more accessible, efficient and effective.” Some paint a broader picture such as Howard (2015) who thinks of civic tech “ as any tool or process that people as individuals or groups may use to affect the public arena.” Sifry (2015) goes further believing that civic technology “ cannot be neutral,” and only

technology that is “ used for public good and betters the lives of the many, not just the few” can be considered civic (cited in Grodeska, 2015). Schrock (2019) writes that definitions generally fall into two categories – bucket definitions which focus on the technology itself and the outcomes from it and secondly umbrella definitions which look at civic tech in the broader sense, highlighting their shared values. “ Bucket” definitions include the Knight Foundation (2013) who focus on the convergence of different technologies and Omidyar Network’s definition, “ technology that is used to empower citizens or help make government more accessible, efficient, and effective” (cited in Donohue, 2016, p. 3). The definition of civic tech purported by Code for America supports the umbrella view, Whitaker (2015) writing it is “ any technology that intersects public life”. Commentators agree that there are two main similarities – they all operate in the civic sphere (those relationships in the public world that gather us together into communities, cities, states and nations) and the overall goal of the technology is for public good. Schrock (2018) argues that civic technology has two sides. One is using technology to engage citizens in politics and the civil sphere. The other is making technology itself more participatory and ethical. It is not only how the technology is used which is important but the values which are embedded into the technology. An example of a civic tech which fits Shrock’s two part definition is TheyWorkForYou.

TheyWorkForYou is a website that takes open data from the UK Parliament and makes it accessible to citizens, allowing them to follow MP decisions and the development of laws. Users can visit the website and find out who represents them in parliament, how those representatives have voted on

important issues like health, welfare, and taxation, how their MP as voted compared to others and whether they have followed the official party line.

The website was created by MySociety who are a not for profit charity. They facilitate a network of platforms devoted to transparency, city improvement, and democracy. The aim of TheyWorkForYou is to lower the barrier to civic and political participation and to make it easier for citizens to hold politicians to account. They want to make parliament accessible to all and get people involved who have never used the Hansard record or looked at how their MP votes on their behalf. It allows constituents the facts to engage with their representatives with data being immediate and easy to understand and it has increased political communication, connecting citizens and government, and encouraging users to look at their MP's record then to use WriteToThem to let their local representative know how they feel. However it could be argued that it has had a larger impact on MP's than those they represent.

Smith (2018) spoke to MP's about the impact of TheyWorkForYou for Prospect magazine and found that it has encouraged MP's to vote with their conscience rather than party lines Wes Streeting MP stating " It's becoming increasingly important for MPs to remember that every vote is a conscience vote and that ultimately we will be held to account by our constituents." Smith found the site had also had an effect on the way Parliament works Jacob Rees-Mogg explaining that ". . . it's one of the reasons why it was decided not to oppose opposition day debates in this parliament." MP's also use it to provide information to their constituents by providing links to it from their webpages and it has become so engrained and recognisable that it was recently included in the BBC series The Bodyguard , statistics on the fictional <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-transparency-on-british-politics/>

Home Secretary Julia Montague's voting record shown on a mocked up TheyWorkForYou webpage.

TheyWorkForYou was created at a time when governments were looking to release large amounts of data into the public domain. The online publication of structured datasets by governments is seen as playing an important role in driving transparency, enabling new forms of civic engagement and activity, and promoting economic growth. As Davies and Bawa (2012) write opening up government data has “. . . generally been understood as a reaction to long-standing cultures of governmental secrecy, and, more recently, to the limited scope for citizen participation in policy making”. It was hoped through greater transparency and accountability citizens would have an input into the decision-making and resource allocation processes, government developing trust and credibility, whilst promoting technological progress and innovation. TheyWorkForYou is clearly a useful tool however Smith's (2018) assertion that the site has an “ unintended dark side”, points to its limitations and the issues raised by the transparency agenda. Could its transparency and openness have the opposite effect and actually close down politics?

Observers often focus on the benefits of transparency in government, Joyce (2015) for instance writing “ Like motherhood, ice cream and the all-expenses-paid vacation, seemingly everybody should like transparency in government” and Brandeis's famous remark “ that “ sunlight is ... the best of disinfectants” (cited in Lessig (2009). However there are often unintentional impacts of releasing large amounts of data into the public domain. Karpf (2015) in his definition of civic tech writes “ They can have unintended

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consequences. They can be overly idealistic. They can be based upon overly-rosy assumptions about how governments, partisans, and mass publics will behave.” Other commentators, such as Lessig (2009), have started to question the validity of the assertion that being transparent is inherently good. While transparency may promote government accountability and reduce corruption, rules to improve openness in government also can have negative consequences. Joyce (2015) notes that “ freedom of information laws can become excuses for not disclosing information” whilst Karph (2015) notes that one of the aims of civic technology is “ to render government actions practically open and meaningfully accessible.” yet “ most of the “ transparent” data from years past is hidden in filing cabinets, accessible only to the most intrepid investigators”. The government push may be to become more transparent but they can only publish the information available or the data they choose to make public.

Bannister and Connolly (2012) believe another series of potential problems arises from misinterpretation and misunderstanding of information and the ability of the public to understand that data. “ This can lead to some individuals and groups deliberately using transparency as a weapon to promote socially undesirable outcomes.” In turn this can then lead to governments experiencing reputational damage “ a real risk is that transparency will not only hamper their operations, it may possibly damage their reputation” (p24). The way data is opened up to the public often hides the complexity of it and how individuals interpret the data depends on their own social context highlighted by Lessig (2009) who writes “. . . responses to information are inseparable from their interests, desires, resources, cognitive

capacities, and social contexts. Owing to these and other factors, people may ignore information, or misunderstand it, or misuse it”.

This is one of the limitations of TheyWorkForYou. The information provided is basic and diluted – or as one commentator has stated “ an infant school guide to politics”. There is no information given to provide the context to the way an MP has voted or spoken in parliament. Issues such as ill health, maternity leave and whipping can all result in MP’s having a below average score, yet users are not provided this contextual information, which has allowed individuals to misinterpret the data. Mhari Black MP, for example, was abused and trolled online by constituents for her voting record based on the information shown on TheyWorkForYou, yet she has missed votes due to ill health which was not documented on her voting record.

For politicians transparency may lead to excessive caution and conformity. Bannister and Connolly (2012) write that “ This may manifest itself in a number of ways: in political correctness, a lack of willingness to dissent, a diminution of dissent, and self-censorship, all of which will reduce the quality of thinking and of debate. (p. 23)” TheyWorkForYou has encouraged MP’s to speak in parliament to improve numbers rather than because they have an important issue to raise or debate, The Times finding that MP’s were boosting their ratings by “. . . saying very little, very often” and an anonymous MP’s interviewed by Smith (2018) stating “ I have been watching my numbers . . . I do try to speak at a certain frequency simply to make sure that I’m not a below average person in the numerology”. Research by mySociety on the impact of TheyWorkForYou heard from real MP’s

researchers who admitted to being asked to find parliamentary questions to boost their boss's rankings.

Finally I feel Lessig (2009) sums up the notion that transparency will not always have the impact intended writing “ We are not thinking critically enough about where and when transparency works, and where and when it may lead to confusion, or to worse . . .” Opening up data on the voting and speaking record of MP's allows constituents to hold their representative to account, yet does it force any real change or just allow users to see fault with the political system, losing faith and trust in their elected representatives. Lessig's analysis encourages us to question the nature of the data. Is the data presented of real use or is it just open as it's what is available? Have the publishers really considered the impact the data could have?

TheyWorkForYou encourages civic engagement and activity and embodies many of the values of the open government data movement. However it is clear that it is affected by some of the negative elements of transparency, masking the complexity of the data and withholding the context behind the data, potentially leading to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In essence I think Smith's assertion that it is an excellent tool hiding a dark side is correct. It opens up political data in a way which can be easily accessed and understood, yet it exhibits some bad elements of the transparency debate. Could it shut down British Politics? I think it could affect our trust in the political system and encourage users to question the political process. As Lessig concludes transparency “. . . is not going to inspire change. It will simply push any faith in our political system over the cliff”.

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