

Response to Hansard society brief “P4tF”

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Introduction

This document is a response to the P4tF project brief sent to the Open Rights Group on behalf of the Hansard Society.

The Open Rights Group is an independent, non-profit advocacy group, campaigning for the digital civil rights of British citizens. Founded in 2005, it is a supporter-led grassroots organisation that seeks to inject technological expertise into public debate.

Response

In its P4tF brief, the Hansard Society considers three scenarios, and asks for respondents to contribute a technology-led solution to one of them. The three scenarios are summarised as: representation – using IT to strengthen democratic connections; information – using ICT to improve communications; and legislation – using ICT to coordinate and enhance scrutiny.

The Open Rights Group does not believe these scenarios are anything but facets of a single issue.

The effective communication of information is critical to representation and to enhancing the scrutiny of legislation. The process of strengthening democratic connections occurs through effective scrutiny by the public of the activities of parliament (such as creating legislation) and the effective communication of concerns from the public to their representative. Therefore the Open Rights Group believes that providing good quality information flows from and to the public is an important step in ensuring the effective scrutiny of parliamentary process.

Provision of Parliamentary Data For Public Use

First, we must ask a fundamental question. Is the role of parliamentary interaction with the people most effectively served by parliament providing services directly to the public in the form of web sites and tools? Or is the role of parliament better served in the provision of data?

Sites such as “WriteToThem.com” and “TheyWorkForYou.com” have demonstrated that the public is capable of making effective use of data. The provision of data in open formats under an effective and flexible copyright regime allows the public to process the data in an innumerable number of innovative ways. Even if parliament does choose to provide actual web based services to the public, it should also provide raw data. This cannot be overstated.

Existing Technology

The fundamental purpose of parliament is not the development of software, nor does parliament or the state have a good record generally on this process. The Open Rights Group therefore considers it important to draw attention to the large overlap between the problems parliament needs to solve and existing business and community solutions to much the same problems.

This represents a huge opportunity to leverage existing tools and technologies. Although we should emphasise that the techniques might need to be applied in a manner that is sensitive to the differences in the relationship between an MP and their constituents and that between a business and its customers.

Appropriate Tools And Technologies

The Open Rights Group does not believe that selecting technologies based upon the tools themselves is an appropriate manner in which to improve parliament. This is the same process which has led to numerous government IT failures. The focus should instead be upon standards and open data formats that can be effectively processed by all software suppliers.

Imagine the scenario where two systems are proposed for the tracking of legal bills and the two major parties adopt different incompatible systems. This would not in any way further the activities of parliament and would make the ICT system effectively useless, or worse, a tool for exclusion.

A similar problem occurs if a single expensive solution is chosen – it becomes a tool by which major parties can exclude the minor parties or indeed the public from easy use of processes. It removes the ability of individual parliamentarians and parties to select tools

best suited to their needs.

The long term use of ICT for collaborative projects by its very nature requires that parliament places its emphasis on formats and on tools which use these formats. This has been proven again and again in the commercial world, and in successful healthcare ICT deployments in Europe.

Examples Of Standards Based Tools

In order to understand the benefit of open standards and the need for interoperability, take the current trend for parliamentary blogging.

Right now, Members use a variety of blogging or blog creation tools. Some use hosted solutions provided by service providers, others run their own systems, or have a system run by their local party or party activists. Various members have differing facilities. They select a solution that suits their requirements and can switch or update if they find a problem or need new features such as blogging notes by SMS from a phone, or Welsh language support.

But all of these blogs can be read using a single web browser, via a single standard data transfer mechanism over the internet. None of this would have been viable had a single software solution been selected centrally, nor could a single solution have been sufficiently accurately specified in advance.

Most of these blogs are hosted or run with software which also supports the XML-based standard for aggregation and monitoring of web content. This allows other standard tools to be used to monitor the latest entries from the parties and their members. It allows numerous pieces of software on arbitrary computer systems to do interesting things with the data on MPs' blogs.

It can be used to see all the parliamentarians' blog entries together in one place using tools like planetplanet (www.planetplanet.org). It can be used with numerous RSS readers (including those now shipped by default with new operating system products such as Windows Vista). It can be used to do searches and with RSS monitoring tools which can for example mail someone when a keyword or phrase is mentioned in a new entry.

This huge choice in software and this huge flexibility in tools is driven by standards adoption, not by a selection process. The initial choice of software program is not the primary driver. The Open Rights Group believes that a process that starts by the proposal of tools is flawed. That recommendation (proprietary, open or bespoke) can only come after relevant effective open standards for interoperability have been identified.

Consider email. Email is fast becoming a vital resource in the relationship between Parliamentarians and the public. The public use numerous mail applications on numerous computer operating systems. They continue to evolve their use and send mail from new technologies like Blackberry. Likewise Parliamentarians and their aides handle this email with many systems in many places. They can buy, write or download all sorts of tools to do things like virus/spam filtering, keyword sorting, automatic responses. There is no need for a common system, nor would one be viable across the entire represented population.

Conclusion: Standards Are The Key

The Open Rights Group believes that effective scrutiny with the public starts with access to information. Information is most valuable when the represented bodies can process it effectively and flexibly. This process starts with the provision of data in standard and open formats from parliament to the people. It continues when the people are allowed to reprocess that data and to provide their own tools and views of parts of the data.

Hansard itself was born from the need for the public to receive information and to scrutinise parliamentary activity. It was provided in a format that at the time was the most useful format for all. Before deciding that tools matter more than open standard formats it is worth contemplating how effective Hansard would have been originally had it been written in Ancient Greek or only usable by someone in possession of a special Hansard reading machine.