You can't say politics on the internet?
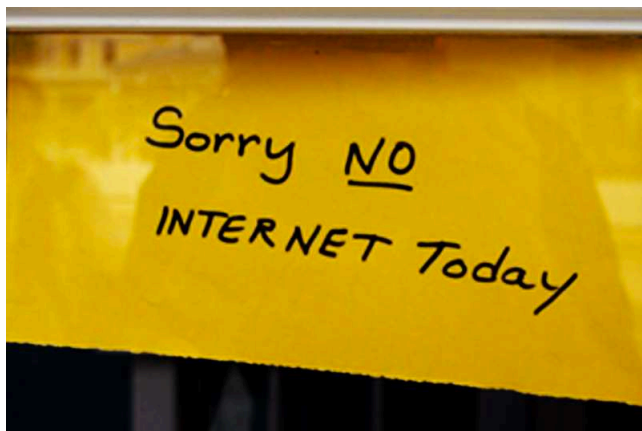Published on June 17, 2015 by Bruce Ryan

I have been interested in how governments use the Internet to engage with citizens for a few years now. Of course, I'm very late to this party – e-democracy was 'invented' over 20 years ago[1]. I didn't start from there – I stumbled into researching how poorly Scotland's most local democracies (Community Councils) use the internet[2] during a career-changing MSc[3]. More

Image: Marcello Graciolli

research[4] just confirmed this gloomy picture. I currently aim to contribute practically (I'm webmaster and minutes secretary for three Edinburgh Community Councils) and to academic research around (hyper)local democracy. A recent successful workshop about digital engagement for Community Councils[5] has led to commissions for more[6] – these will contribute to both practical action and academic research.

Of course, as well as finding out what's going on, and working towards improving matters, it's necessary to ask **WHY**? That is:
- **Why** do fewer than 25% of Scotland's Community Councils (CCs) use the internet?

- **Why** are the CC digital channels that actually exist generally so poor? Some don't say who the 'elected' members are, others don't enable contact with the CC – not even a phone number, let alone an email address or contact form.
- **Why**, of the 1100 existing CCs[7] do only around 150 use Facebook and only around 60 use Twitter[8], which could host multi-way conversations about local issues.

There are many potential reasons: for example, CCs are under-funded[9] so they cannot afford professional services; CC membership is unpaid, so members tend to be retired and to not have time to do more than meet[10]. Such people are also more likely to be trapped behind the digital divide. But reading Scotland's Digital Future: A Strategy for Scotland[11] (2011) led me to suspect another possibility – the *Scottish Government does not support digital **political** engagement*! *Scotland's Digital Future* describes many very valid, positive digital aims. But it's all about 'provision of public services', 'growing a digital economy', 'building digital connectivity' and 'governance'. The chapter on 'digital participation' does not mention political participation via the internet at all. Instead participation here means simply accessing the internet, or learning via digital channels such as Glow[12]. That is, there is no mention that we can influence our political representatives and systems via digital channels, or take part in online political discussions.

This felt somewhat paradoxical – after all, Scotland's own 'cyberNats' may have helped deliver the 2007 and 2011 SNP victories[13]. Similarly, the battle for Scottish independence was fought online[14], even though it may[15] (or may not[16]) have been lost on printed media. So, was *Scotland's Digital Future* simply an ignorable anomaly?

Possibly not. The same things were said by the Scottish Government in 2013[17]. The Scottish Government's current *Digital Scotland* web page[18], dated 31 March 2015, centres on 'connectivity', 'digital public services', 'digital economy' and 'digital participation'. The 'digital participation' page[19] links to
- an archived web-page about the Digital Participation Charter[20], so presumably this Charter has expired. The Charter page again does not show that people can participate in politics via digital channels.
- *Digital Scotland – let's get on*[21] (April 2014). This document, while embracing the unarguably laudable vision that 'a world class Digital Scotland is a Scotland for everyone', again is silent on digital political participation.
- Information about a National Movement spearheaded by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations[22], but this is again about helping up to a 'million people in Scotland [who] are missing the basic digital skills to get things done online'. While the digital projects this programme supports[23] all seem worthwhile and necessary, again calls to be politically digitally engaged are conspicuously absent.

So is the Scottish Government (and, by implication, other governments) entirely ignoring e-participation (Wikipedia definition)[24]? Fortunately not. To start with, I know that the Scottish Government has a digital engagement unit[25]. Albeit a small unit, the people I know there are highly capable, intelligent and dedicated – they live and breath digital engagement in all its forms. This unit has contributed to the Scottish Government's very recent Participation Week[26], which aimed to discuss the full spectrum of what participation could be, 'from **citizen engagement and decision making in policy making** and democratic renewal to **digital participation** and inclusion to internal communication and collaboration but all with a focus on making the business of government more efficient, more transparent, more inclusive and creating policies and services that are useful and usable.' I'd like to add **via** between the two phrases I've emphasised in the quotation, but I can't quite be sure this meme wasn't ignored.

Further, the digital engagement unit is actively seeking ideas on how to use open data[27]. There's lots that can be done to visualise and hence understand what's going on – here's my small proof-of-concept contribution[28] to this field.

And of course I am very grateful to the Scottish Government for funding the forthcoming workshops on Digital Engagement for Community Councils. I know from conversations with SG officials that the Scottish Government, from the First Minister downwards want, and will support, practical ways of advancing digital engagement, including digital *political* engagement.

So is that it? Is everything at least in the starting blocks for the race towards digitally connected government? Not quite, as I see it. For a start, there will always be those who cannot directly participate digitally – and so a need to include them in other ways[29]. But for now, I think the Scottish Government needs to unmix its messages – it needs to abandon the documents that are silent on digital political participation and properly publicise its existing, very positive commitment to doing politics online.

This piece is necessarily limited to Scotland – my practical experience of political engagement and hyperlocal government is there, and my research so far has been Scotland-centric. Further, other European governments have radically different models of hyperlocal and local governments[30]. However, reading about English parish councils[31] suggests that similar issues affect engagement and hyperlocal government in the rest of the UK.

(Thanks to Stiff Little Fingers (NSFW)[32] for inspiring the title of this piece)

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[1] http://stevenclift.com/
[2] http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/publications/publicationid/13373555
http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/imperia/md/content/department/gpa/zeg/bilder/cedem/cedem14/cedem14_proceedings_1st_edition.pdf
[3] https://brucemartinryan.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/bm-ryan-40070877-msc-dissertation.pdf
[4] http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/publications/publicationid/13373555
http://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/scot.2014.0045

http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/downloads/downloadid/13381970

[5] http://bruceryan.info/2015/02/04/digital-engagement-workshop-for-community-councillors-30-january-2015

[6] http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/news/newsid/133828

[7] The fact that around 25% of CCs are missing is beyond this post – and beyond my ken.

[8] https://twitter.com/spartakan/lists/community-councils

[9] http://reidfoundation.org/portfolio/the-silent-crisis-failure-and-revival-in-local-democracy-in-scotland

[10] To be fair, this is not the full story: there are many CC members who spend long, unpaid and unthanked hours on local matters. But in my experience, these are in the minority.

[11] http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/981/0114237.pdf

[12] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/approaches/ictineducation/glow/index.asp

[13] http://www.betternation.org/2012/01/prediction-2012-death-of-the-cybernat

[14] It continues to be fought online. See, for example, http://wingsoverscotland.com.

[15] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2758565/Tories-warn-Cameron-bloodbath-extra-cash-Scotland-Pledge-maintain-controversial-public-spending-formula-branded-minute-bribe.html

[16] http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/scottish-politics/the-vow-did-not-sway-the-referendum-result-new-research-shows.121704244

[17] http://www.scotlandsdigitalfuture.org
http://www.scotlandsdigitalfuture.org/digital-scotland-performs

[18] http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Economy/digital

[19] http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Economy/digital/Digital-Participation

[20] http://wayback.archive-it.org/3011/20130201201833/http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/11/07133415

[21] http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00448804.pdf

[22] http://www.scvo.org.uk/news-campaigns-policy/campaigns/digital-participation

[23] http://digital.scvo.org.uk/projects

[24] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-participation

[25] http://blogs.scotland.gov.uk/digitalengagement

[26] http://blogs.scotland.gov.uk/digitalengagement/2015/06/09/social-reporting-training-at-participation-week/

[27] http://ideas.scotland.gov.uk/Open Data

[28] http://socprojects.napier.ac.uk/edincc

[29] http://digitalbydefaultmanifesto.com/2015/06/15/digital-proxies-your-online-representatives/

[30] See, for example, http://gemeindebund.at

[31] http://www.cpalc.org.uk/

[32] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lsOYSNPJTY