

Joe Mitchell – supplementary written evidence (DAD0099)

During our evidence session on Tuesday 10 March 2020, Lord German asked:

"Who deals with the process of getting the information on the ladder that Alan described? Who is going to run it and where is it going to come from? How is it going to arrive, so that you have all this information available in a systematic way that builds audiences?"

We are pleased to include, as requested, further details of our recommendations for the committee's consideration. We have chosen to co-author this response, as our views are closely aligned, and have been joined by Michela Palese as the co-author of *Doing Democracy Better*, the report which established the idea of a hub.

A democratic information hub

Our basic premise is that electoral democracy functions truly effectively only if voters can access the information that they want from sources that they trust. That information should be accurate, balanced, relevant to the issues that matter to people, and accessible to all. Its provision should be independent of government and should draw on input from both experts and members of the public.

We propose that such information should be provided through what we call a 'democratic information hub'. We propose a 'hub' model because coordination is important: voters need a familiar brand that they can trust; and they need ready pathways through different forms of information so that they can find what they want. At the same time, information within the hub should come from a variety of different sources: plurality of voices is vital to maintain vibrant democratic discourse; and the creativity of many providers in developing information in forms attractive to the full range of citizens should be harnessed.

In the following paragraphs, we respond to Lord German's question by highlighting four key features of such an information hub that would be essential to its effective delivery.

1. Governance

There should be a new independent public body to design, research and run the democratic information hub.

Its work should be overseen by a board of directors and a representative panel of citizens. The board of directors would oversee the body's financial and corporate management. The citizens' panel would direct the body as to what content is required.

A new body is necessary because there is no existing public institution that could take on the role. The two most obvious candidates are the UK Electoral Commission and the BBC. The former has repeatedly stated its opposition to an expanded remit in this area. It is primarily a regulatory body and would not be best suited to taking on a large, innovative role in information provision. The latter has an important role to play in elections, but the voter information content that the new body needs to provide is not 'journalistic'. Some of the habits of traditional news reporting – bold headlines, engineered contention, dichotomised complex debates – are inappropriate for voter information.

2. Funding

It is imperative to invest in the health of our democracy. A well-functioning democracy relies upon an educated polity and upon easy access to quality information about democratic processes. The information hub could improve how we engage with each other within society and enhance policy outcomes within government. A relatively small investment in democracy has the capacity to bring significant positive effects.

The new body would require a sophisticated digital resource. It would need to be attractive and intuitive for a wide range of users. Extensive marketing, both on- and off-line would be required. Citizen panels would require support. Teams of experts in policy, facilitation, and communications would need to be recruited.

Funding through civil society and charitable means is inadequate and unsustainable. Some procedural and factual information is provided by Democracy Club, and sporadic attempts have been made by civil society organisations to provide voter advice applications. A public body would be sustainably funded over the long term for the transformative approach to information and discourse that we set out here.

The information hub could be cost neutral, by diverting funding from the delivery of election addresses. Following the 2017 general election, the UK government reported that £42.5 million was spent 'to cover ... the delivery of election addresses at public expense by the Universal Service Provider (Royal Mail) in accordance with legislation' (Cabinet Office 2017). Such figures were barely detectable in the overall scheme of public finances.

Public funding to support information and discourse is also widespread in other democracies. Schemes in Canada, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand are all publicly funded. Without public funding, provision will inevitably remain limited, ad hoc, and uncoordinated.

3. **Content**

The hub would coordinate the aggregation and creation of information content that voters require. In doing the former, it would become a kind of kitemark for quality information, as well as rendering others' information more accessible (e.g. the work of the Institute for Fiscal Studies or Office for Budget Responsibility). The latter would be directed by the citizens' panel and would likely include a voter advice application.

Deliberative panels comprising representative samples of the population could select topics and help formulate statements. This would ensure that the materials are relevant and accessible to the wider population. The body could test new models of information provision, over video, audio, connected speakers and so on.

4. **Marketing**

The hub could be promoted via existing 'democratic touchpoints'. By virtue of being a new *public* body, the information hub would benefit from being linked to from publicly provided materials, such as poll cards or the 'register to vote' service.

It should also have a traditional marketing budget. This would draw users to the hub via digital and traditional media, PR, live events and so on.

By opening up all the hub's information for reuse, the information would reach many more people. This would result in reuse by social media partners, national and local newspapers, independent websites, email newsletters and so on, wherever people get their information from. The hub would encourage reuse by media likely to reach large and diverse audiences, as well as ensuring that information reaches and suits under-represented groups.

This proposal takes seriously the idea that democracy is about empowering voters to make their own choices. We appreciate that it is ambitious. But we think this ambition is important: a major change is needed in how we conceive of information and discourse during election and referendum campaigns.

At the same time, we recognise that it may be best to develop such an information hub gradually, giving time for trust in this approach to information

provision to develop. It may, therefore, be best to start with the relatively simple procedural and factual information at the bottom of the information ladder (see the annex below), before moving to more complex information.

For a realistic next step, the committee might consider proposing a commission to be set up to fully research and outline the design of an information hub such as we have described.

Extensive further information on the international research underlying these recommendations is found in a report by Alan Renwick and Michela Palese published in 2019: *Doing Democracy Better: How Can Information and Discourse in Election and Referendum Campaigns in the UK Be Improved?* We regret that our current home-working arrangements mean we cannot send you a hard copy, but the report can be downloaded here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/elections-and-referendums/improving-discourse-during-election-and-referendum-campaigns> .

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Annex: The Information Ladder, abridged from Renwick & Palese (2019), *Doing Democracy Better* .

1. **Procedural** information on the election: when, where, and how to vote, and what to expect at the polling station.
2. **Factual** information on the election and the election candidates. Election information would cover, for example what position is being filled and what the role and powers of the office-holder will be. Candidate information could be provided by candidates themselves (a statement subject to specified constraints, or a series of answers to specific questions), or the information publisher could generate information such as biographies or summaries of past records itself.
3. **Positional** information that helps voters find and compare parties' and/or candidates' policies on specific issues. Such information can be provided, for example, by a manifesto tracker or a voter advice application (VAA). An advanced VAA would enable users to click through to further layers of information as they wish, leading them through eventually to manifestos, speeches, and other such materials.
4. **Comparative** information would allow voters to see how parties, candidates, or referendum options compare with their own preferences – as provided, for example, by a VAA. Users could choose how much depth to go into and what weight they want to attach to different policy areas. It would also allow them to explore non-policy aspects of their decision, such as their perceptions of different leaders and the state of party competition in their own constituency.
5. **Analytical** information would help voters assess the likely impact of different options, whether these are manifesto proposals in an election or options on the ballot paper in a referendum. The manifesto analyses provided by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example, fall into this category, and several countries now have an official body performing this role.
6. **Evaluative** information would help voters think through their own priorities. A wide range of criteria that voters might like to use in evaluating the options before them are included, and voters can consider which of these matter more or less to them; the analytical information at the fifth rung then allows voters to explore how the options measure up against these criteria. Information of this kind has been provided at most referendums in New Zealand over the last thirty years.